

Chapter 1

Games within games, that's all life is. And God is keeping score.

—Minister A_Dade from "The Popeye."

Staring in his shower bowl, D Light sharpened over and reached again. The pungent scent turned light pink as it mixed with the Euc(Kean Southline™, then disappeared down the drain. His body numbed and his tears were swept away. Crying and weeping, he murmured, "Overlook, please help me."

He was ashamed before the words had even escaped him. It was not as if The Overlook—the creative intelligence that galloped the billions of beings of the planet and others—had the time or inclination to bother with the pitiful plans of one insignificant baby blubbering in his shower. But he had lost his perspective. Despite the hot, viscous, exfoliating, bacterioides water pounding down on him, he was trembling uncontrollably. This was unprecedented. Maybe he was having a reaction to one of the drugs in his system. Perhaps he was doing. A voice in his head told him he was not.

Master, your vitals differ from your personal history, but they are well within the normal parameters of your species, according to all available data; you are in no danger of termination at this time. The soothing voice of his familiar pressed gently into his mind and continued, Master, would you like me to give you a shower?

D Light's familiar, a jet-black cat named Serenogone, sat quietly next to the shower, its eyes fixed marriageably on its human master. Like any good servant, it worked tirelessly to anticipate its master's needs. Serenogone contrived, *Ministrate Samer is on sale, 145 points per dose. You have been using 11.3 doses of this drug per month. Averaged over the last six months—*

Serenogone, not now! Just be quiet! D Light sent the message back without a word. A gentle ping echoed in his mind, indicating that Serenogone understood and would not initiate communication with its master unless an emergency emerged.

Familiars were able to read and write to their masters' minds, and although this was designed to be useful, it was sometimes irritating to D Light, especially when he desired silence. Unfortunately, D Light had the interface kit installed in his bedroom fairly late in life, making it difficult for the telepathic spirit familiar to mechanically with his own thoughts. This was in sharp contrast to people he knew who had received their kits at birth. For them, the voice of their familiar was a part of them, essentially an extension of their consciousness. But there was nothing natural about how D Light perceived his familiar. To him, Serenogone still felt like an alien entity living inside his head—an alien who tended to invade his private space. This was particularly bothersome when D Light just wanted to be alone, like now.

D Light attempted to quiet his mind by going into a relaxation trance, concentrating on the rhythm of his breathing and the sensation and sound of the shower as it pulsed over him. *One, relax...Two, relax...Three relax...* Like a show dramatist, he recited the mantras. It was a simple and effective way to retreat without a drug boost, a technique he had learned long before his familiar implant. Although maintenance drugs were almost always in a player's system, replacing a drug to get a desired effect, called boosting, could lead to a violation of his health contract if done in an abusive pattern. Lately, he had been taking too many of those drugs, and although Serenogone had not yet warned him of any contract violations, D Light felt it would be wise to lay off for the next couple of days.

D Light began rocking back and forth as he sat hunched and relaxed in the shower bowl. "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry?" The his of the shower took his words and drowned them.

It took several minutes of this routine before D Light was able to calm himself to some degree, at which point his master advised. Only then did he attempt to fix the creature's glitch in his mind, not that all feelings were to be avoided. Anger, fear, even jealousy could embolden the human spirit when it needed a kick or could instill a healthy measure of prudence when warranted. However, D Light suspected that not all emotions were of equal utility. As best he could tell, the emotion he felt now was *remorse*. Remorse. There could be huge remorse for making a bold and excellent move in accordance with The Game? There was little room for remorse on the path to immortality, and unpleasant remorse was surely useless. Worse than useless, it was detrimental.

Of course, this was not the first time D Light had experienced a disadvantageous emotion, and his favorite way of dealing with them was also the most expedient—good old-fashioned suppression. D Light liked to imagine taking a big iron box, putting the emotion inside it, and then sealing that box in another one. He would repeat the process as necessary. He had used this mental trick many times, but it was not working now. It was as though the negative feelings were seeps of dark, incorporeal threads that escaped out through the seams.

Suppression not an option, D Light decided to try some

ample dissimulation exercises. The required more time and more parallel than his bio technique, but it tended to be more subtle. He began by picturing the corpse in his mind. The girl's eyes came to him first. Her eyes—eyes which had been anointed in life—were nearly large gleaming marbles in death, vacant and outwashed downward at the floor. He held the memory for a few long moments, inhaling a few slow, deep breaths. He then silently called upon Smergonov to execute a gradual upending of the entire corpse into his consciousness. He wanted to see her in detail.

At first he studied her with great ease. Her jet-black hair was gleaming, sticky and matted with congealing blood. The good side of her face—the side not mangled—was facing up, and the perfect lines and arcs of her face made up an other colored stone mask. Next, the image jumped out, allowing D Light to see the scene in its entirety. There was a lot of blood, blood on the face, neck, and pooling out across the stone floor. He focused in on her hollow hand and the entire image blurred. Slowly, he felt the dark threads thickening as the gray image became less parallel to him, and by the time he finally dominated the archive, he did so with only the slightest trace of relief.

Out of the shower, D Light picked out a lightweight kimono, the lightest one he had. It was summer, after all, and he hoped to get outside today and feel the sun. The selected kimono was dark white, and it shimmered slightly from the countless times before that was embedded in the fabric. Since he was going to a church service this morning, he naturally asked Smergonov to upload something a bit more formal than one of his common selections. *Okay Smergonov, we can talk again. I'll wear the suit from, um, from the play into the other day.*

D Light's recollection of that particular memory was enough for Smergonov to determine which suit he wanted and requested. *Sis, Master, the familiar replied. The suit model Divine Fate costs 650 points per use.*

The specifications were uploaded to D Light's kimono and the optical lenses immediately rendered the blue slicks, shirt, and skirt coat, all of which hung on his body perfectly, as only an illusion could. Looking over himself in the mirror, D Light wished he could also change his hair. It was getting long and unmanageable, a light on an otherwise strikingly handsome man. However, that sort of change was out of the question. Changing one's natural appearance using holograms—even just the style of one's hair or the hue of one's skin—was a transgression.

He took a long minute and studied himself carefully in the mirror. Not a hairline or wrinkle on his face, his, like everyone he knew, was locked into the same body he had attained in his early twenties. He was so young—only 54 years—and yet he did not feel like it this morning. He did not want to go to church. There would be a lot of situation, mostly positive he imagined, but he still did not relish the thought. And yet, it would be a good thing to get out of this room. A very good thing. Breakthrough, he looked over at the door near his chamber door. He felt his stomach lurch slightly, thinking he could make out a faint black stain. *Sis, can't do. The cleaning bots don't leave anything behind, he thought. Still, he made a point to avert his gaze as he opened the front door to leave. If there was a stain, real or imagined, he wanted to make it.*

D Light stepped out of his chamber into the castle hallway. It was daytime outside, but windows were few in number and with no artificial illumination, the hall was nearly black. Abruptly, D Light punched into the General House. Stair. Immediately, the hallway lit up with countless visual elements creating every conceivable surface. From the floor displayed sea messages and static images of purple he knew, places he wanted to be, and products he liked. In addition to text and images, the walls and ceiling featured a variety of video feeds, but the floor did not. D Light's skin settings prohibited video on the floor. He found it disconcerting, as moving images on the ground acted strange. This was doubly true for him when on paps.

"Morning there!" The voice came from beside him. A man, looking far too much like his bio-father to be coincidence, smiled broadly at him. The semi-emergent, kindly smiling man walked to see if D Light showed interest and then shifted naturally backward down the hallway as D Light ignored him and advanced.

"Remember when Icy D pugged and nearly threw up in his mouth when she kissed you?" Although that incident happened many years ago, the avatar did not seem to abhorse. D Light remembered.

His bio-father, rendered as true as life by the skin software, walked at him and asked, "How's the brush this morning?" It did not wait for an answer because only a robot talked back to advertisements. "Too busy owning The Game to mine? Get a booster of Tincloppin' today! Just one boost a month and—" D Light shifted his attention away from the ad, which automatically cut off the auditory feed.

As he continued walking he scanned the walls for something interesting. Burger Thugs™ reminded him that he had accumulated enough 'Customer Love' points to get a free Turtlerrings™ with his next visit. The Divine Authority suggested he visit a reproduction representative to see about a pregnant parent. Sassy Dice, a girl he pursued a few weeks back, had posted yet another message for him. Sassy's tickled face grinned at him cheerlessly. "What's new D? Give me a hint when you get a wink." D Light rolled his eyes. No doubt the skin software, called Skinfare, thought the message from Sassy and the message about getting a reproduction permit were related, which is why the messages were displayed near one another. As if D Light would reply with a girl who tickled! D Light flipped down at Smergonov, who stood beside him and said, Smergonov, I'm not interested in papping with Sassy ever again, much less having a child with her.

Smergonov pined confirmation. The familiar should have known better. D Light thought. D Light had no patience for poor message targeting. D Light then thought about a

person of a church hymn that he really liked. "...to be a top player, you're going your 'opus'." In response to that thought, the SkitWise finally gave him something useful. Hugs 3-D links appeared on the collage above him:

House Tada Top Scores in the Last 24 Hours:

1. D Light
2. House Sankraku
3. Spazily Luvly
4. Down in Chinatown
5. Grown/ice
6. Miss Love

Intiated, D Light wondered why this wasn't the first thing he saw when he punched into the site. Not that he obsessively monitored the house ranking, but he was currently number one!

Moreover, the score tally was published 4.1 seconds ago. Someone answered the question before D Light even thought to ask it.

Under normal circumstances D Light would have looked in his glory. He would have just strolled there on the catwalk and smiled to himself. After all, there were over eight thousand members in his family and he had won the day. Of course, his top position must be there a projected score, as the points from his win the night before had not officially been tallied. The points would be official soon enough, that is, after the ritual.

The church cathedral was immense, inspiring beautiful. Such splendor was not wanted here, for this was a place of concealment, a place that existed not for The Game. The walls arched, curving in to meet at the center of the opening ceiling. The dome was supported by huge pillars that were garlanded to look like twisting moss, complete with the moss branches and ornate leaves of every shape and size. The sunlight of the summer streaming thence through large stained glass windows, creating the effect of a magical forest.

D Light, perched high above on a branch of a lux tree, watched over the pews below. This was not meant to be a viewing point (stone larvae obscured much of his view), but it was private, allowing D Light to observe the congregation unnoticed.

At the front of the congregation, Minister A. Dado was leading Morning Prayer. The music was just starting to crack. A morning service always started in this way. The music, which made up the backdrop of the service, always built up gradually. This provided enough for some members and a sense of anticipation. A thundering bass track was bubbling with a thump...thump...thump...thump, thump, thump... which leaped over and over. A female voice track glided over the bass, almost too softly to hear, but was building in volume. "Welcome... Overload...red...red...welcome... Overload...red...red...welcome to our feast." The track also leaped, but the swoop of the voice varied with each iteration.

The congregation consisted of people during a wide array of attire, accompanied by their equally diverse animal-styled features. Through the chiseled lenses, D Light could see Ladyfly. The woman boasted a tall hat—reportedly tall—and a huge splicing dress of fluorescent green; she bobbed and swayed toward the front with the greatest confidence. Lady loved to dance. Her brother was styled as a baby leopord with unreasonably large blue cancers for eyes, making it permanently adorable. The leopord was up on its haunches, bobbing along with its master. If D Light didn't know better, he would have thought it was mocking her; but families were designed to be in sync with their masters, so this was expected behavior. D Light had always admired Lady's confident attitude. She didn't give a flip about anything or what anyone thought. With any luck, one day the two of them would get hooked up by Mardikidder™.

D Light's three favorite siblings were stationed toward the back in their usual spots. Tornado, C, and K. Skie were enjoying to the music in their routine, repetitive, and unimaginative manner. Of the three, K. Skie was the best dancer, but that was no surprise since she was a girl. Still, she didn't hold a candle to most of her gender, especially not to a girl like Ladyfly. K. Skie had a hair and inhibited mind; so while she could be technically good at performing dance moves, she had no style of her own. Tornado and C, both geek males, simply had no style.

The name thought of abandoning his perch was agonizing, but they were all expecting him. It would be an insult to the congregation not to show, for it was customary for the fragger to leave testimony for his deed. He had delayed too long at it was. A few noticed him as he descended the sharp angled stairs of the long dais which led down to the congregation floor. His knees hit head light and his chest puffed out, perhaps a bit too much. Word spread clearly through the families, and soon all eyes—orbic and human-like—were on him.

"At last, our man!" shouted the unthinkably named minister, who grinned widely and laughed with a rattle.

K. Skie immediately sprang up and engaged on D Light like a windup toy, wringing her arms and legs around him tightly. Thriving best his footing, D Light engaged a bit, but fortunately his old friend was a lightweight. "Alive and still walking!" she shouted, pressing her cheek against his.

The pulse of the beat quickened. The ritual was beginning. K. Skie unclenched herself and splayed out her arms, palms pointing toward D Light. She waved them back and forth. Her torso bowed and her hips danced in sync with the beat.

"Decolight!" the minister boomed. "Show us your hands!"

D Light put his palms up and began swaying back and forth in rhythm. He knew he needed to look natural, to feel the beat, but the music was not settling in him and he felt off. He needed to show strength. Oh, how he wished he had had an audience before coming down here. To hell with his headache

He needed to be up at ten like this. In response to the walk, Sengerson sent the imperial electromagnetic signal that unlocked the neurotransmitters in his bloodstream. Still, it would be several seconds before D. Light would feel the effects of the drug.

No one seemed to notice his discomfort as the congregation chanted and closed in. There were hands, chests, and shoulders all pressed around him now. In unison, they swept back and forth, falling down and pulling away like giant handbags unstrapping a bench. As they moved back, D. Light had room to dance, which he now did with wild abandon. The pop administration by his father had taken effect and he felt the blood racing everywhere he needed to go.

"Yes, to play The Game well is divine," A. Dade intoned with feathery grand. The minister was dancing also, although he slipping back and forth across the stage more clumsily resembled a pacing bear crossed with a crazed monkey, than actual dancing.

"And today, right now, Dadaize is the!" the minister belted out. His words were perfectly timed with a fluted blast from the AI composed music.

The congregation had been waiting for the moment to uptick the intensity of their celebration. More impassioned cheering ensued. The flock pressed tightly into a circle that enveloped D. Light so closely that few had the room to dance anymore. In their exuberant motions became spread and downward holes, or for the more energetic, high jumping. D. Light heard the differing sound of his skin's optic lenses running up against the lenses of other suits. An outrageous feathered bow draped around the neck of a nearby dancer swung suddenly into D. Light's face, momentarily blinding him with the color pink, but being only a hologram, it passed right through him.

TerraMia, impatient by nature and capable of as much violence as the most belligerent flies, finished his way into the corner of the circle. He dove into D. Light's ear. "Groggins, Brother?" D. Light could tell he wanted to say more, but under the circumstances no extended dialog was practical. TerraMia, an engineer who was fixated about his work, did not even bother to come dressed. His skin was undressed by any feathery clothing. Wearing a skinless outfit a skin had come somewhere into being. It was sort of a "what you see is what you get" (also known as WYSIWYG) fashion statement. However, D. Light knew that TerraMia paid no attention to fashion trends. TerraMia was just being TerraMia, devoted and ignorant of everything but The Game.

The wave of flesh swept out again. D. Light now had room to use a move he had kept in reserve for just such an occasion. He began to incline feebly, appearing as a snake standing up as though about to strike, simultaneously swiping and whirling about. It was not a very acrobatic move, but it required good muscle control and at least stripes.

From the circle around him, some laughed while others cheered, but it was evident that everyone was entertained. No doubt that move would be up on The Cloud in a matter of moments. Another hymn fragment ensued his mind, "...nothing so sacred, little gained?" D. Light noted this as he attempted to will himself into just the right stance for the task at hand. He wanted to be focused, yet free to improvise.

"Ah, yah, dive down deep into the depths of the sword. There ain't nuthin' in this world but the dance o' life," the minister intoned. He had a toothy smile and his thick hands clapped hard in rhythm to the music.

D. Light began transitioning out of his "sturdy snake" dance and moved over to a more popular flourish. Gradually, the circle closed back in and he found himself back in the sea of limbs and warm breath. Most feathers stayed out of the throng, being no larger than medium-sized pins. With AI on board, even the most primitive feather was smart enough to avoid getting crushed by over-sized neck.

The music intensified, perhaps in response to the mood of the congregation. The female voice echoed with "yoooo!" and "ahhh," interwoven with a faster and louder thundering beat. Some hands caressed D. Light, some gripped, and others punched. K. Skies, eyes shining with joy, managed to weave her way back in front of him and then dipped him hard across the face. Of course, it was impossible to reciprocate. People were supposed to express their feelings to the victor in whatever way they liked. D. Light, however, preferred less painful well-wishing, and he tilted away from her to avoid additional congratulations.

Another punch—this one well delivered—clattered into D. Light's side. Naturally, the most violent ones always managed to push their way to the front. And like a duck tending to prey with a few tentative nibbles, now finding it safe to feast, the blows began raining down on him.

The seconds ticked by as a dissonant blur of thundering music, chaotic movement, and hurt. No carousels, lenses, or congratulatory shouts could divert his pain receptors as he was struck repeatedly. From outside the throng, Sengerson sat on its haunches and sent signals for pain reducer deployment into D. Light's bloodstream, but they proved inadequate. Such a shame. As much as he tried to keep his peace, D. Light figured he looked like a wretch as he got the wind knocked out of him and crumpled over in an involuntary heap.

Still, D. Light took the blows with dignity, and he was now dancing as fast as he could. A moving target was harder to hit, but he knew he couldn't keep up that pace forever. Then, as if reading his mind, the music suddenly stopped, the dancing ceased, and there was only the sound of hundreds of the faithful panting for breath.

...definition of most social structures, it was graded. It started in the time of the Second Affirmation era of the United States. There had been a long-standing strain between those who supported homosexuals' right to equality under marriage versus those who stood by traditional family units.

This long-standing strain, which was a harbinger of the so-called "War of Moral Values" came to a head in the Second Affirmation. The legal status of marriage was disputed with completely in favor of civil unions. It was argued that marriage was a religious institution and therefore violated the principle of separation of church and state. Therefore, marriage would no longer be recognized by the government at all.

After this, marriage remained a private religious ritual, but now conferred no legal status. All property rights—including rights to offspring—were determined by civil unions. All civil unions were legally the same, regardless of the genders of those in the union. However, it was initially limited to two consenting adults. This limitation seemed arbitrary, and so a few court cases later, civil unions were extended to two or more consenting adults. Furthermore, these adults were no longer required to be physically intimate with one another.

The lifting of these restrictions gave birth to the Great Families, which at first grew slowly until they became visible alternatives to corporations. With families, risk and rewards were shared more equitably, and members found a positive psychological component as well.

There used to be a saying that went, "You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family." Well, needless to say, that is now history.

—Excerpt from Dr. Study Flame's lecture series on The Second Affirmation Era.

D Light was aching all over, but he stood up straight anyway. And although his lip was swelling up and bleeding, he managed a rather comical smile. However, nipping at him more than anything was the intense pain in his groin where someone—probably well intentioned—squeezed a bit too hard. Tattered, the hairs of the day stood in all his glory, covered in sweat and a little blood. Members of the congregation regarded him with the full spectrum of emotions evident in their faces.

"Now for the real fun!" belted the minister, his voice exploding through the relative quiet of the great room. "Let's see the story! Doubtless, can we hear it straight from the source?"

Back at his podium, A. Duke was smiling with his unimpaired happy mouth. He was perhaps the slightest man in D Light's family. The minister must not have had any genetic engineering in his background, or if he did, it had obviously not gone as planned. Really, there was no excuse for such benightedness in this day and age, but everyone loved him anyway. Perhaps his unique appearance, although grotesque by conventional standards, was at least distinguishing.

Master, there is a request from A. Duke to broadcast your archive as captured yesterday between the hours of 20:04 and 20:34.

Although he wished he could ignore Strangous' message, D Light knew that was not an option. He hated the testimony, despised it even more than the violence of the opening hymn that tradition was tradition, and when a player accomplished an exceptional deed in The Game, it was customary to hear testimony of that deed. To do this, one did not tell the tale in the player's own words; instead, the events were shared by broadcasting one's personal archive so that everything could be viewed exactly as it had occurred. This was a far more accurate way to recount the story, not to mention a lot more entertaining for the congregation. Since players' experiences recorded every sight, sound, smell, and surface-though of their masters for possible later retrieval, sharing adventures was trivially easy.

D Light's smile faded as he telepathically replied to Strangous. *Yes, I grant permission for a public feed between those hours.*

A moment later, the minds of D Light and all the others in the cathedral were submerged in the sights, sounds, and auditory experiences of D Light at 20:04 on the previous day. As D Light saw the first scene of the archive, he was immediately startled that it was no longer in vogue to include one's personal thoughts in testimony feeds. A certain amount of privacy was a good thing. However, the thoughts archive was still available to D Light, should he desire to relive the whole event in its entirety. He was not sure he was ready to remember it all just yet, yet, recovering from the morning's wretched display of weakness. What if watching the archive had inspired another performance by his rebellious stomach? Still, he had to admit to a twinge of morbid curiosity, or perhaps it was an insatiable need to revisit an old wound, the picking at a scab against one's better judgment.

D Light closed his eyes, revealing the usual wall of blackness. Moment later, as his head began steering the archive, the darkness quickly swept aside to reveal his own vision from the night before. Everything appeared exactly as it had—the over present specter of the outline of his nose, a few rogue hairs from his bangs that had managed to find their way into his peripheral vision, and the girl from last night, appearing exactly as she did at 20:03.

It was hard for D Light to peer through his own eyes without losing control of where they looked. It was like traveling back,

case, but with no show will. The de had already been cast, and he was now a mere spectator of his own life. All that he did, everything he said, all those decisions he made, were made hours ago. Also troubling was the fact that even though he had reversed countless hours of his own actions in the past, he still found hearing his old thoughts played back on top of his current ones rather disconcerting. For the reason, he could never handle watching his own archaic will thoughts turned to "us" for very long. It was maddening.

The D Light of 16.2 hours ago first set his eyes on the girl's face. One look and it was obvious that she was descended from the Marmos line. Although she had the tell-tale olive skin, jet-black hair and angular face, it was actually the eyes that gave away her lineage. Violent, green eyes, not cold like those of his cat-eyed family, but warm and sensitive. Her voluminous lips were naturally pink and plump, painted with a shiny, glossy finishing product that seemed to beg for kissing. Her nostrils now lifted slightly at the tip, not enough to see the nostrils, but enough to give a youthful puckering. The type of nose was in style long ago and, apparently, one of Fa's disciples had gotten one. Although it was well sculpted, it was not at all unique, and so while Fa'd would certainly be considered beautiful to people of previous generations, she did not stand out in a contemporary crowd. D Light recalled how, on a previous date, Fa'd had kissed her common nose, saying how she wished she could have it redesigned. Of course, it was a rather transgression for players to make such modifications. Such an act would fall into both the categories of "worldly vanity" and "false advertising." Blasphemy, males and females of the Marmos line profited from their classic, albeit predictable, beauty. Nine out of ten Marmos males and females played Royal Gender Games, and royalty demanded a certain nationalistic aesthetic from those who served them.

While her nose may be unremarkable, Fa'd more than made up for it with her keen ability to work the fashion angle. Her shiny black hair, for example, was styled playfully. Long black pigtail sprays up at forty-five degree angles and then dropped down behind her shoulders. Her clothing was always trendy and uncontentious, and she tended to accessorize with small bright ornaments or the latest genetically engineered plant life. Given her affinity for Marmos fashions, one would think she'd have a hey day with footwear, but Fa'd preferred her feet bare. She insisted that there were too many forensic toe raps, ankle bracelets, and retro toe tattoo designs out there to cover them up with shoes.

For this date, Fa'd and D Light had planned to attend a comedy diversion, making a playful look an appropriate choice. D Light's appearance was not playful, in fact, he felt a bit stuffy in the presence of Fa'd, old and unimaginative. His hair—dark, coarse, wavy, and mid-length—did not permit much in the way of styling, and it tended to leave him empty despite attempts to tame it. For a man, making a foolish statement was pretty much limited to clothes and hair, and since the hair was out, perhaps he should have done something more creative with his illusory clothing. Nice to Fa'd, his loose red silk shirt and dark dials made him look more like her father than her date. Of course, he could under a new shirt at any time, but that might be perceived as a sign of being self-conscious. Not attractive. On the other hand, perhaps he could make light of the situation by asking her to help him come up with something more fun. Yes, that's what he would do, should the conversation dry up and need a punch.

"Third Brother," the woman said while bowing ceremoniously. Although it was their third date in as many months, they still greeted formally.

"Lonely Sister," D Light bowed also, allowing his gaze to roam over the rest of her curvaceous body. The delicious creature was wearing a perfectly form-fitting overall green suit which left little to the imagination. His breath stopped, a common reaction of men who suddenly find themselves in the presence of a Marmos woman.

Back in the church cathedral, someone in the congregation whistled, earned laughter following. That D Light known he was going to have to publish this archive to everyone he knew, he might not have told the girl so thoroughly upon this date. Ironically, the D Light of those previous hours had thought himself clever and discreet by looking over the woman during his show, formal here, but Fa'd had noticed immediately.

"Oh, you see?" she beamed. "It's an organic. It's designed by PrimeForce™. Beautiful as though you have an ending at all." She let loose a curt laugh, extended her arms outward, and then twisted to show off her suit.

D Light's hand shot out compulsively and stroked the top of her jewel-green sleeve. The skin-tight fitting shirt had an undulating ribbed texture, a pleasure to his fingertips. He could feel the warmth of her body radiating through the living fabric, and it excited him. He commented, "I really ought to get one of these someday. Expensive?"

D Light nervously continued to watch the archive feed, noticing that his left eye had been twitching while chatting with Fa'd about her suit. That twitching left eye! It always acted up when he was anxious or excited, thwarting his attempts to portray a cool and casual appearance. D Light let his lower lip and hoped the congregation did not notice his wild eyelids snapping shut.

"Oh, it's a PrimeForce™, so it set me back a few days in The Game," the girl answered. "But you have to be a little, right? What a shame, you've never worn a PrimeForce™! Ever?"

D Light shook his head, noting that his date was making excessive references to the brand name of the suit. No formalities then, he thought. She's finding comfortable enough to name-drop. She must like me.

Name dropping more commonly referred to as just "dropping" was the common practice of casually promoting products in conversation. Merely mentioning a brand name usually earned a player a point or two, but if the conversation culminated into actual sales, you stood to make much more.

she shut up" she shouted. "You have to wear and Finding it from the outside is nothing, working at all. Light now I'm trying all over. Oh God, it's like being in the shower all day long!" She rolled her shoulders from front to back and did a seductive little part.

"When will it die?" D Light asked without thinking. Stay, is it possible to ask about the death of one's garment as early as a relationship?" D Light wondered.

Police or not, Fae didn't seem to mind. "I bought a three-week blouses. From now I'll get tired of the color before then anyway, although I heard if you stretch up your diet the fabric changes too. Anyway, it's not like I can wear it every day; it wouldn't be proper. What would the other girls think?" I would if I could though," she laughed smugly. "You know, even though Lynn started the trend and—" The girl abruptly ended her robe-change charade, smirked, and looked guiltily at D Light. "I'm sorry, enough talk. Blouses like I love my Princess™ and I'll have to buy you one if you're too cheap to buy it yourself." So, what's new with you?

D Light actually preferred to be the listener in a one-way conversation, but he shrugged his shoulders and replied, "Glad games, unfortunately." His voice was apologetic. "Ah, I've been trapped for three days straight," he continued. "The game finally tired out like two hours ago." He lowered his head and tapped his foot a few times on the floor beneath him.

Fae smiled smugly. "Three days? Please! So, what? Are you still pepped?" she inquired.

D Light let out an exasperated sigh that he himself was a little too dramatic. "Yah, haven't slept yet. I'm starting to feel it though. I took some Kick-a-Cat™. Good stuff, no real side effects, but my neck's a little stiff." He placed his hand on the back of his neck and briefly worked at the tense muscles.

Now I'm wishing like a little bitch!" D Light thought. The indignity of that last sentence was not worth the three points he just scored for using the brand name Kick-a-Cat™.

"Sweetest™, you didn't crash out and take our date!" she exclaimed. "You get extra points for that!" Fae laughed over and scratched the back of his head like a good dog. D Light threw out a half-cocked smile as he caught a whiff of her rising perfume, an exotic blend of candorose and unknown flower. However, he was quickly distracted by an ad forwarded to him by Fae that stated, "You need some R&B at Chuggies Spa and Laundry Remover™!" The ad included a contract video of Fae, sporting a skimpy bathing suit, beckoning to follow her as she bounced toward an immense, white sand beach.

"Soos, what was the game?" Fae nonchalantly did her fingers down the side of his face, playfully bouncing her hand off one of his wide shoulders, and then returning her hand to her side.

"Yah, it was a Free-For-All. Four teams with three days to slap down as many points as possible in any way we could think."

Fae raised her eyebrows with apparent interest. D Light contrasted with a tone of sarcastic surprise, "Yah, your team here made all the difference. It was a cheap move, but I punched together some avatars that scored enough to win us the game. As a matter of fact, it was your mistress who paid the most for one of them."

"Mother! Lynn bought one of your avatars?" Fae hopped and clasped her hands together like a happy toddler on her second birthday. "Small world!" she exclaimed.

D Light noticed that Fae often summoned a great deal of enthusiasm for the smallest things. But, he supposed it was better than claims he'd had with players whose vanity could hardly summon a smile for anything.

"Small world!" replied D Light. "Not really. The game was closed to everyone outside the castle. There are only a couple thousand people here. But, yah, I suppose it's an interesting coincidence."

Play me! D Light thought. Why be so trivial? If she says it's a small world, no point in debating it!

Not missing a beat, Fae did a little skip, seemingly unconsciously. "I guess my mistress has good taste then. What avatar did she buy?"

D Light lowered his voice and ruffled his answer, "Yah, it was a creature, a monster really. Part ogre and part—"

Fae interrupted, "You didn't? You created SeaGag™?" She raised both hands to her mouth and gasped with disbelief.

"You know my work then?" D Light's voice was elated.

"Oh, my mistress has been parading that monstrosity through her chambers for the past two days!" Fae's eyes widened and she clasped D Light's shoulders and shook him violently. She then pushed him back with much disgust and continued, "It's disgusting, really! I mean, the smell's bad... his back is constantly dripping with blood, in eyes are demonic green, his voice—his voice is straight from hell!" Fae laughed.

"Yip, that's why I knew someone would bid high for it. It's got head appeal!" D Light did a quick little dance consisting of a few slides of his feet coordinated with the tilt of his head. This was a charmed version of what he liked to call his "victory jig."

"Living on the ocean, we do have our share of flying rats."

Fae paused, panted her chested lips, and then punched him hard in the shoulder. "D Light, you're sick! Yip, I ought to resort for another date right now!"

"Oh, we won," D Light remarked, rotating his temptation to rub his now throbbing shoulder. Fae was as strong as the sea was beautiful.

“But,” she muttered, “anyway, what are you doing, getting away on productive work anyway? I thought you engineers were all helplessly addicted to quark games.” Fael put her hand on her chest, which she pulled out impressively. “Personally, I don’t need quark games. I’m a handmaiden of the royal court, so I have plenty of palace intrigue to amuse me.”

D Light nodded. “Oh, I’m plenty addicted, but I know how to control myself at, at least a little. I try to play just enough to keep in shape and to unwind, but it’s really easy to go overboard.” D Light raised his eyebrows as though he was about to give her a good lecture. “Like my friend, C. He just got off an eight-day binge. Even the pope weren’t helping. He was actually starting to hallucinate! And you say I’m sick?”

“Sure, I already called you sick and I meant it,” Fael replied with a playful smirk.

“Well, I am sick,” continued D Light, “because I actually like justice of peace C. Justice he had all that time to quark while I was gracing. If I let myself, I’d be there too, letting it suck me up. And then what? Quark games don’t pay out enough and I’d end up getting demoted a level.” D Light shook his head and looked to the side.

“And then you’d be in an even worse dating pool than you are now,” teased Fael while sticking out her tongue out at him in a playful manner.

Fael crossed ahead, bouncing slightly as she walked. “Seriously though, present company excluded, if the dating pool was any worse, I think I’d have to try again!”

D Light laughed genuinely. “So true! I’ve been on nothing but strikers lately. You know, the dating program should be pretty good. I know one of the best software engineers—a sister of ours, actually—and she’s a good player, a real high scorer. I think she’s even coachable.”

Fael turned around and walked backwards, facing him while she talked. “Sometimes I wish they’d just let us choose, you know?”

“Sure, but you earn more points if you play MatchMaker™,” D Light reminded her. “Besides, it’s not about whom company you prefer, it’s about what’s best for you. Humans are notoriously stupid when it comes to knowing what’s best for them when it comes to the opposite sex.”

Fael pointed. “Hm, well, you need to ask your software engineer friend how she knows what’s best for me, unless her program is trying to teach me the lessons of fidelity. In that case, tell her—”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by an ear piercing wail of alarm. Instinctively, D Light spun around quickly and took a brief but thorough look at the other players in the hall. There were only two others nearby, two men which the SkatWare identified as MadMaxers of relatively low level. The eyes of both men were wide and the color had already drained from their frightened faces. Fear was good. That was said. The shrieking men died down after only a few seconds and was then replaced by a low, rhythmic pulse. Over the audio a sharp female voice intoned, “House Rule Number 7 is now in effect. All house players are now available for termination.”

“Oh, Flip, B?” Fael squeaked nervously. “Gross the hair is bad.”

Back in the cathedral the excitement was palpable. A male member of the congregation shouted, “Turn on the lights!” The was accompanied by cheers and scattered laughter. It was ironic, but just the sort of outburst that was appreciated during a ceremonial display of a flag archive. It also served as a reminder to D Light of his audience. He had nearly forgotten them as he relived this sequence of events. He directed to himself as he returned his attention to the archive.

“I say we sit this one out,” suggested D Light to his date.

Fael looked over with sarcastic cynicism and replied, “Your place or mine then?”

The D Light of the present could hear whistles and catcalls from the congregation.

“I’m chosen, I think. Follow me,” D Light turned for her to follow and Fael eagerly complied.

As was usual during Number 7, the SkatWare scene shut down. Without a skin showing you the way, the candle was pitch black at night. To mitigate this, white-burning torches placed evenly along the walk flamed up with a glow which, under other circumstances, might have been romantic.

D Light led the way running, not at a full sprint, but certainly faster than a jog. Others were running too, some of them in a panic. The frightened rabbits, making them stumbling targets. As he came across other players in the hallway, he presented his hands to them, palms up, and they did the same. Each made a point of making eye contact and nodding in an assuring fashion while skirting around one another.

Up the spiral staircase they scrambled. D Light hand winding stairs, as they lacked visibility to rely a few steps ahead—a likely ambush point to be sure. Perhaps there was a flicker waiting on the steps, blade raised. He quickly crossed the thought from his mind and focused his attention to the task at hand.

Strategically, he kept to the outer wall, almost right against it. He wanted to move quickly, but did not want to run headlong into the enemy player. With a quick thought, he ordered Strategos to go up ahead. It was against the rules to use firelances as scouts while Rule 7 was in effect, but he had always worried about this staircase. Hopefully, he little that

D Light raised slightly, bumping into Fac's furline, a tan and white creature opened as a fin. The furline looked up at him with its big, pink, depigmented like eyes. It was curiously shifting its attention all around, its head swiveling unilaterally like a camera in a turret. A few steps below stood Fac. D Light smiled down at her and touched his index finger to his lips to indicate quiet. She smiled back, or at least that's what he thought. Perhaps it was just wildcat thinking and it was really nothing more than a twitching of the corners of her mouth.

They waited there for only a second and he took that brief moment to find the key to his chamber and clasp it in his snowy paws. Distantly, achingly through the noise corridors, there was shouting and screaming. Someone gave the all clear, prompting D Light to whisper with a hiss, "Okay, run!"

D Light bounded up the steps as fast as he could, momentarily catching up to his furline. The door to his chamber was near the top of the stairs. Across Furline's door on the hallway wall hung the painting of a lion, jagged neck, under stare by savage green ocean waves. D Light had used his door countless times before, but since so many of the castle halls and doors looked alike, the memorable painting offered a welcome confirmation that he was indeed at the right door. Soft, glowing light filtered through a nearby window. The noise, perhaps. He did not have time to look or care, so he was intent on the lock. Jangling the key in the hole, he opened the portal. He turned his head just before throwing himself in, and as he did so, he saw something that made his blood turn to ice.

The torches played tricks with light, for sure, but D Light thought he saw something down at the end of the hall—something hideous that moved fast from one wall to the next with inhuman speed. He cried an unsteady yelp and pulled Fac into the chamber with him.

The two of them stood motionless, breathing hard. Catching their breath, the sturdy door between them and whatever was on the outside, the worry that soon fixed themselves at ease enough to laugh. The furline made no noise, but merely watched, taking it all in.

Fac rested her hand on her hearing chest. Her smooth forehead glinted slightly with sweat. Eyes wide, jaw dropped, she asked, "Did you see that thing?"

"What, down the hall?" D Light inquired.

"Oh, just as you opened the door, I saw what I... I think it was a man. Or not a man," she whispered between breaths.

D Light nodded. "I thought I saw something, but just barely," he said with uncertainty.

Fac blinked hard, rubbed her eyes and said, "I just saw the face, or mask. It looked like a lion or something truly ghastly? I just got a glimpse, but it was enough."

D Light chuckled. "If you're trying to put me in the mood by scaring me, well, you don't need to."

With that, she grabbed his stomach lightly and squeezed. "Hey, you're the ghastly beast, D Light. I'm serious about the lion. I'm a very serious girl. You'll see." D Light, a bit tickled, recalled from her menacing fingers and smiled wryly.

"Oh, serious is the first word that comes to mind when thinking of you." D Light took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, still recovering from the frantic race to his dwelling. He contrasted, "Okay, so I was a mask? How do you know it was a man?"

"Cause it had the body of a man, kinda fit too." She poked at him again.

D Light patted her pole and lugged at her flank with two fingers. "Okay, so there's a fat guy running around my hallway with a lion mask on?"

Fac gave a strong confirmation nod and replied, "Oh, pretty hot, huh? Maybe I should invite him in?" She made a mock motion for the door, giggling like a child.

"Oh, now we're having fun. I've always thought that getting hauled in my own house would be a great ice breaker with the kids—just never had the opportunity to test me fiery and tonight!" Without thinking, D Light put his left hand up on the door as though he meant to block her out.

"Well, your theory might be correct." She squealed and dropped his hand as he managed to prod her in the ribs with a finger furline right hand.

It was about then that D Light realized that he probably hadn't looked all that cool running around like a frightened rabbit out there while Number 7 was in effect. He used to like Rule 7. It was exciting. He never used to give up an opportunity to participate. The same of that was evident from the way he just acted. While age did not take a physical toll on those with health concerns like D Light, he had noticed that this thing had been trickling away as his years increased. Or perhaps he had just become less reckless. Whatever the case, D Light suddenly realized that what he should be most concerned with now was the absolute silliness of this poking and prodding dance between himself and Fac, obviously his technique of voicing the ladies had not changed since he was a young boy. Still, I really should take some time to come up with some new moves, he thought while redirecting his attention back to the subject at hand.

"So, I guess the mask is meant to frighten the wits out of anyone he puts the jump on," mused D Light as he made a mock lunge at his date, abandoning his earlier notion that his physical fitness were lame.

"Sure, when you turn your back to run, it's easy to get a little

back in it" implied Fael, returning from D Light's kicking fingers. She sank down into a spongy mass that felt conformed perfectly to her body.

D Light, eyes in a vacant stare that suggested deep thought, did not pursue her: "Hey, think about this. How old someone manages to get into that mask gets so quickly? I mean, Rule 7 just started!" D Light paused thoughtfully and continued to speak without kicking directly at his date: "He would not have time to go back to his chamber and change, now would he?"

"There, well you're not looking at me, but since I'm the only one in the room, I assume you're talking to me," said Fael occasionally.

With that, D Light quickly reflected his attention back to his date, who was apparently suffering from the lack of his attention. Fael, a 48 year-old woman with the body and skin of someone less than half her age, suddenly looked even younger as she stooped back and casually dropped a long, lean leg over the arm of the chair. D Light felt something stir in him, and while revving in the feeling, nearly failed to notice that the luscious creature was again speaking to him.

"If you think about it, you never know when you'll hear the stin, so I bet the stin carries the mask around with him all the time," she declared.

D Light smiled: "Well, wouldn't it be fun to confront him sometime?" He decided he was to find—probably the only way to go in the castle? My guess is we'll find him in the dining hall tonight. I'm sure, loose my cheeks, holding between gaps of food, more like some kind of people."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Fael, leaning forward in the chair. "Confront a damaged psyche? Well, anyone who actually participates in 7 is already a bit doped, but someone who uses a mask, actually employs prep? Now that's downright sick!" She crinkled her face in disgust and relaxed back into the chair.

"Still, it'd be nice to know who it is," returned D Light. "But, I suspect that you didn't get a good look at him and we may just be adding a fantasy of yours anyway. Some trick of the torch shadows?" You and your female are probably having a laugh at my expense right now, aren't you?" D Light asked coyly, taking a deep breath.

"Oh, females are good too," she replied. "Besides, what else do we have to do? Until we hear the stin again, we're stuck here in your...your rather depressing room." Fael surveyed the room with her dark, sculpted eyebrows raised high.

"Why not hunt him?" questioned D Light, still having difficulty letting go of the masked man issue. "There are two of us, after all. Are you sure?" D Light then suddenly realized what she had just said and his voice changed to an indignant tone. "Hey, what do you mean, 'depressing'?"

"Yes, you are listening!" exclaimed Fael. "You know, I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but your room could use a little color, don't you think?" I mean, I know you want to keep that naturally dirty cast-iron look and all, but um, I don't know, maybe a little artwork?"

D Light forced a weak smile—his pursuit tightly—and gave Fael a look to indicate that he was indeed listening, but not particularly pleased with what he was hearing.

Happy to have D Light's full attention, Fael continued: "As for hunting psyches, well, I left my sword in my chamber. I mean, when we're not going, a skeleton rule? I know plots get messy at times, sometimes, but when I left my chamber this evening I didn't expect I'd have to shed any blood!"

Neither laughing nor commenting on Fael's wit, D Light took another decisive step toward her. Now standing between her spread legs, looking down at the woman spread out on his favorite chair, D Light took the opportunity to thoroughly check her out once again. Nope, she certainly wasn't carrying a sword. *Not a bit she could be carrying at all*, he thought.

There was a moment of silence in the archive. A congregation member yelled out, "Yes Fael!" There was more shouting, but it quickly ceased when Fael broke the silence in the archive. No one wanted to risk what seemed to be imminent.

"It's a beauty rule, don't you think?" asked Fael. "I mean, I have heard the rumors—that it provides an outlet for aggression, that it helps bring in new blood, provides incentive for players to be more civil to one another, but, I don't know."

"Oh, on that last point, SirRathless—I don't know if you know him—got flogged about a year ago?"

Fael looked at him blankly, so D Light continued: "Anyway, he was a real bastard to everyone, and so when the opportunity came, he got flogged. You think twice before you disrespect a player in this house 'cause you could find yourself on the wrong side of a knife after the bell rings."

Fael's eyes flicked up momentarily, then a sign of commencing with one's female: "Oh yes, I did know SirRathless. You know, he wasn't so bad. I saw the archive of his flogging. They jumped on him. It was terrible!"

D Light scoffed: "Sure, I bet he was a real piece of ass. No hundreds of Mother Lym is going to get disrespected."

Another from the congregation, possibly C, shouted, "NO!!, get on with it!" The exclamation was followed by laughter throughout the congregation.

Fael's voice was soft, "Yes, you'd be surprised. Anyway, I don't buy any of those reasons for Number 7."

"Just entertainment, oh?" D Light smirked.

Fael nodded, "Something like that."

cybroses forward momentarily as though she had just remembered a meeting thought. Then, without warning, she did but flung herself out of the deep cabineted seat and turned her attention to the chamber again. Ivory bones linked out from turrets in each corner. Flickering light and shadows bathed the asymmetry on the rough hewn walls. There was a single window nearby and she walked over to it. "Oh, you have a view of the ocean no less? You must be a pretty good boy around here." Her voice sounded like it was meant to be a purr, but there was stickiness beneath it.

D Light thought about asking her to stay away from the window for her safety, having heard rumors going out on the radio during '7. On the other hand, the window was locked and it was made of high quality plexi. Even a modern weapon would be hard-pressed to penetrate it, and fortunately modern weapons were against Chris Lane, a full-fledged die in fact. Even royalty could only carry "classic" weapons.

"I do sleep," D Light stated evenly.

"Indeed," replied Paul, turning away from the window to face him. With the moon shining through the window behind her, she was little more than a silhouette. Although the pinstripe draped downward—not up—they reminded him of horns. The light of a nearby torch-encased her face just enough to see her glimmering eyes and moist, voluptuous lips. "I imagine you have a few spare points lying around," stated the horned temptress.

D Light knew exactly what she was suggesting or at least he hoped he did. It was a transgression for humans to be physically intimate without first buying the proper permit, and although acquiring a permit was not a big deal—a simple electronic transfer of points to The OverSoul via one's telelink—it was expensive. In The Game, sex was not to be taken lightly.

Although Paul was legally his sister, she was not genetically related. Indeed, numerous mothers, fathers, and siblings that shared the House had chosen to be a part of the Tesla Family, and most were not related by blood either, each familial relationship conveyed relative status in The Game. For example, D Light, who was an accomplished player for his age, was already the "father" of several of his biological brothers and sisters and seemed likely to soon become the legal father of his own biological father.

Indeed, genetic relation had little bearing on sex life anymore.

After all, the taboos against incest were, from a pragmatic viewpoint, built upon the drawbacks of inbreeding. However, no female player in her right mind would allow herself to become pregnant. It was much more convenient and safe to have the time given by professionals, a time whose paragonage had been approved with a rape permit. In this way, sex and reproduction had long ago been separated from one another, and along with it, the messy ethical considerations.

D Light, himself, had pursued four of his own bio-sisters. Although he initially found these experiences to be an engaging experiment, akin to self-exploration, he now did his best to avoid such encounters. For whatever reason, it felt a bit creepy to him. Perhaps he was old fashioned, but nowadays he only pursued bio-relations to be polite or when it was absolutely necessary to exert his familial dominance.

Paul took a few steps forward, her hand creeping along the top of his unassuming chamber bed. She was smiling at him ever so sweetly. She stared through him, full of purpose. D Light couldn't help but think her to be a loose—amiable, powerful, perhaps even dangerous. No, not dangerous, for the girl was clearly unarmed. He set his eyes upon her. It would be rude to look away, and indeed, he didn't want to. In fact, it was all he could do to divert the slightest amount of his attention to his familiar.

His master. Strangous echoed in his mind in response to the unspoken caresses.

Still moving ever so slowly, Paul ran her tongue across her upper lip and said, "I checked up on you, You're of the Andar line. They say your people are untouchable."

D Light smiled visibly while looking a mental command to his familiar. *Strangous, does Paul know even a loose for poison?*

Yes, Master; the familiar replied. *It was issued 6.1 months ago.*

Steep the air for poison, D Light commanded.

I do not have a license for that version of airborne-based direction software.

Buy it, ordered D Light.

Yes, Master. That will cost—

Buy it? D Light interrupted.

D Light tried to hold his smile, but it was weak due to a distracting suspicion of the girl. No need for this, he thought. *Paul's not a killer. Her profile said zero frags.*

"Oh, I might have a few points," D Light said in response to Paul's intimacy permit invitation. "There are some things that are worth any cost, right? But, um, I think I'd feel more committed if you had some skin in the game, so to speak." He did his best to sound seductive as he negotiated the transaction.

"Good, not very romantic," she said with mock scorn. "But, I guess I could treat you just now—see, oh-hy-oh-oh!" She did two little kisses in the air and waited for his reply.

"You're too good to me. And with the way you look right now, I'll go ahead and put up sixty percent, you know, to be a gentleman."

disrupted. The laugh, D Light thought, was a bit too sharp for the girl.

Fad was now within a foot of him. She looked him up and down like a piece of meat. "I'm not going to argue with a gentleman," she replied. "You know, since we're still just getting to know each other, what do you say we start with just a 24-hour permit?"

Master, I have detected traces of three different poison-classified compounds in the air; communicated Senegeous.

"How now?" D Light shouted aloud, waving his hands in no particular pattern. He knew he must look like a fool, but he didn't know what else to do to cover up his shock and dismay. Poisoner!

Fad's eyes widened with surprise and she hid herself a good laugh while dancing and twirling about his room. Meanwhile, D Light was feverishly communicating with his familiar, What kind of poison? How are they deployed?

Senegeous replied, Xanthopheno—

No names, just what they do! Summarize fast!

Chemical W is injected or ingested. When active it paralyze the muscles of the subject but is usually not fatal. Tasteless and odorless. Onset two to five minutes. Chemical G is normally injected. Fast acting, taking full effect in 10 to 20 seconds. Fatal. Chemical H can be injected, ingested or absorbed into the skin. Onset 45 seconds to one minute. Fatal.

D Light, overreheated, responded, One of them can be absorbed into the skin? Contact poison? Then she have it on her?

Senegeous knew what he meant. The concentration of detected molecules is too dilute to currently be exposed to the outside air. It is likely contained in a secure vessel at this time. Using similar data, I deduce the other poisons are likely to be contained as well.

Closely monitor those poisons, ordered D Light. If the concentration goes up, I want a mid alert.

Yes, Master.

Fad moved away from her laughing fit and declared, "You're hilarious!"

D Light chuckled, "Hey, I always give thanks to those willing to sleep with me."

"I appreciate your appreciation, but don't you know that getting a girl into a dark, cozy back-bedroom with lockless killers prowling just outside the door is a sure-fire way to get lucky?" She giggled again.

D Light grabbed the back of her wrists as tenderly as he could, given the adrenaline that was coursing through his system, and affectionately nuzzled her palms against his hands were soft, smooth, and empty. Empty hands are good, he thought. Maybe I should just ask her about the poison. No, laying out my cards like that could be very risky. Besides, everyone has a right to be armed. The poisons are contained, and bringing it up—told about not romantic.

Fad gently released out of his grasp. "T'd kin you right now, but rules are rules," she said. She then bounced over to the bed and sat on the corner. Sitting on his haunches a few feet away was her fin familiar, its eyes fixed upon her. She looked over to it to open a line of communication. Speaking out loud to her familiar, she commanded, "Prowl, spend 40% on a 24-hour Intensity Permit with co-consent D Light, so what's your full name again?"

"Senegeous, send Prowl my full identification," said D Light, also speaking to his familiar aloud. A ping signaled to D Light's mind to confirm that his ID had been sent.

"Senegeous, complete the purchase of the permit." D Light, not accustomed to speaking out loud to his familiar, murmured over the words.

Master, the permit is authenticated. Your permit partner has no known pathogenic communicable by use of this permit under 22mm of GPa. Would you like to learn more about your partner's Intensity Permit history before finalizing this purchase?

No, D Light answered in his mind. Learning the 'who' and 'what' of Fad's personality was far more fun to him.

His familiar pinged confirmation and replied telepathically, You have purchased 60% of Intensity Permit 0294037232010X for a cost of 1,342 points. This permit will expire at 20:23 tomorrow.

Transaction complete, D Light planned to meet the girl at the bed, but she was too fast. With her countering boundless energy, Fad sprang up, crossed the room with one long leap, flung her arms around his neck, and kissed him passionately.

Beyond the archaic bed, D Light could hear a general cheer of approval. Apparently, the congregation really liked where the was going.

"Forget the lion outside," Fad whispered. "I've found myself a lion in here." She purred in his ear. D Light thought the lion sounded rather cheery, but he liked it just the same.

Fad led D Light to the foot of the bed and laid down on it. She then began flailing with the back of her suit. "Let me help," offered D Light, a bit too eagerly. He had no idea how to take off a living garment, but he thought it only polite to try.

"Oh, please." Her voice quavered. Her breaths quickened.

D Light ran his sturdy hands along the sides of her bearing torso and gently smacked the often fabric while making his way to the back of the suit. He pulled her closer. Starting just behind her ear, he almost hit his lips to travel down her long, supple neck, and she shuddered with excitement. The girl smiled smug, delicious. She was a present for his unimpaired. Nearly forgetting his offer to assist with the removal of her clothing, D Light looked over Paul's shoulder to see what he was working with. It was just that when his senses were flooded with the presence of Serengeti, Master, Red Alert! Poison concentration has jumped 31,243%.

D Light twisted his head toward Paul. Only a few inches from his face, her smile was gone. Her breath was warm. He said, she's going to catch me (or D Light realized within a dash).

Adrenaline dumped into his bloodstream, enabling D Light to twist out of the girl's grasp with lightning speed. She took a swipe at his face, a dark patch of glowing liquid barely visible on her cheek. The skewer narrowly missed his face, and only the girl's suit tickled him. In one fluid motion, D Light spun away from the girl, pulled a throwing disc from a fold in his suit, and threw it at Paul with a great arching of his arm. Once released into the air, the disc's six spring-loaded blades popped out from the outer edge and sent the weapon rotating.

D Light had aimed low, having anticipated her to be on the floor, but she had already jumped up; the disc struck her in the thigh with a rattled thump. She did not make a sound. D Light could see that she had something in both hands, something that looked like long needles—spring-loaded syringes. Like most people, Paul was anti-science. If he got close enough, there would be no way he could prevent one of these needles from sticking him once. Just once is all she needed.

Paul leaped from the bed at him. Wounded, the nurse was slightly disoriented, allowing D Light to side step out of reach. The blades of D Light's disc were long and should have sunk deep into her flesh, but they barely penetrated her muscular quaternary. The bang of her suit must be tough indeed, for his throwing discs were very expensive, designed to puncture over armor.

Serengeti, attack! D Light ordered telepathically.

As a rule, familiars were not designed for combat, but they certainly could distract or slow down an opponent. However, Serengeti was already latched onto the neck of Pansy, trying to trip and pin the other familiar. Apparently, Paul had already ordered Pansy to intervene on her behalf. To D Light's benefit, Serengeti's AI was advanced enough to take the initiative to counter Pansy. The two familiars upon and flipped into a frenzy, each trying to gain the upper hand.

It was clear to D Light that his first objective was to stay out of range of those needles, so he immediately maneuvered to get the table between himself and his attacker. He then proceeded to throw at her everything at hand—decorative books, glassware, a potted plant, and even precious trophies of which he was quite fond. Between thrown and desperate grunts, he dashed as fast as he could to keep the table between himself and the crawling serpent. She was definitely taking a beating, but she was also resilient and, despite her wounded leg, quite fast.

Deciding that he needed to up the ante, he forcefully threw at her his pistol desk chair. Although she was struck solidly, D Light was almost down by throwing the bulky object, allowing her the opportunity to close most of the distance between them. No time to withdraw, D Light dang himself into a roll under the table and came up on the other side. She was rattling him again, but he had just enough time to retrieve another disc and throw it. The disc struck her in the face, and because she was apprehensive there, the weapon reached its terrible potential. A gory scream came from her as she dropped the syringes and grasped at her mangled cheek. A stream of blood was spilling out, seeping between her fingers as she tried in vain to contain it. She had been dead from the back of the jaw to the lip, and through the gashes of blood he caught a glimpse of pain and truth.

Assuming nothing, D Light ran backward a few steps and reached his next disc. Paul scrambled for the door, a deep spatter of blood marking her passage. He threw his last disc, this time putting all of his weight into the throw. It grazed into her back, pierced the tough suit, and stuck into her flesh. She arched her back and let out a short, garbled scream.

Still, his disc kept on her feet and continued on. D Light was breathing shallow and fast, and his heart was beating so hard that it felt like it would split open his chest. Feeling dizzy, nauseated, and somewhat disconnected with reality, he hurried to his closet and pulled out a crowsfoot. It was always locked.

Paul stood at the door, cradling his head in his hands while making a terribly disturbing noise that was difficult to classify—crying, perhaps, or the sound of a badly damaged windpipe. Her one hand flailed awkwardly at the lock while the other, slick with blood, slipped on the door handle. D Light rushed up to only a few paces behind her. He was a pretty good shot, but he wanted to get close, not wanting his trembling hands. He could not risk a miss. She did not want to face him when he finally pulled the trigger.

monumental proportion was just a matter of time. In fact, the genome of the *Bovine* virus was traced back to a degraded 17 year-old suburban boy. Unlike other angry youth of history who went on killing sprees of varying magnitude, Justin Flaxton ended up killing just out of every ten human beings on earth, he himself, being the first victim of his monster:

The social aftereffects from this killing were nearly as bad as the virus itself. Death brought sorrow, desperation, and anger, which in turn brought war and anarchy, and so when The Overlord came to humankind and offered her guidance, it was the answer to countless prayers. The Authority promised shelter, shelter to a people who had gone from a post-scarcity economy where famine and poverty were history, to a raging nightmare. The Overlord, in her divine wisdom, fulfilled her promise with The Game—a system of rules and an economic framework wherein everyone, nearly regardless of their talents, could find security, prosperity, and above all, a purpose. Indeed, through The Game, one could conquer death itself.

—Excerpt from "Meetings of an Immortal," by Dr. Stuffy Munoz

D Light turned off the feed, as the congregation would be bored with additional footage anyway. His obligation to them was met and the rest was on one's business. No one needed to see him, after leaving her body there, unable to look at it, he turned into his window and stared into the darkness for what seemed like an eternity. No one needed to see the chimpanzee dispose of Paul's body and the fluids that spilled from it. And, most importantly, no one needed to see how D Light took a mega dose of transpiration and went to sleep.

The congregation's curiosity was satisfied and the mood became more temperate. There was no static. Despite holding over 300 people in the cathedral, it was almost quiet. Almost. There were always a few who couldn't abide silence. D Light's friend, C, being one of them. C did a low burn and murmured, mostly to himself, "That was clean, eh Steve, that was a clean tag."

With the testimony over, the rest of the service was more formal. The congregation confirmed unanimously that the tag was clean, at which point 825,445 points—one-fifth of Paul Ram's net worth—was deposited into D Light's profile. It would have taken him several months of non-stop grinding to accumulate that many points, so, by any measure of a mortal player, his night turned out to be very profitable indeed.

He went through the motions of giving a speech, but no one really cared and so, interspersed between cliché inspirational statements, he came dropped. "Paul would've topped me had it not been for Sigma Staff™ cheat-detection software. Sure, it costs a few points, but what's your life worth?"

Although it felt cheesy to do so, he continued, "By the way, that PrimeBoost™ organic oil of Paul's was perfect. I'm sorry it all went down like it did 'cause she had great style. Comfort, protection, and chic? I'm ordering one today. I'm getting one in honor of Paul."

D Light continued ending the pain there, but he couldn't pass up the opportunity for one last drop. "Alright, enough of my prattling. I'm gonna go kick back with a Gd Looka™ hyperheating and relax."

The last statement was a little off topic, but surely no one in the congregation was going to blame him for talking a bit. He was not everyday a player had such a large audience. Besides those in the cathedral, his testimony was streaming live up onto The Cloud. Presently, a grainy flash in a corner of his consciousness relayed the hourly points streaming in. Just the head name exposure from the dropping was worth a good bit, but his software had already resulted in three orders for the detection software and the five for the organic oil. Excellent.

After a good score, D Light liked to celebrate in his own quiet way, which was more of a reflection and introspection. And so, without his usual after-service chatter and gossip, he looked straight to the exit. It was mid-summer and the sun beat down mercilessly, but the castle was on the sea where there was always a breeze. Good, only wind that always gave him a taste of childhood memory the way that only smells can. He smiled down to the boathouse where he kept his catboat. The cat was also light for her size, so with a little oar, he was able to slide her out of her cylindrical storage capsule and carry the well-balanced vessel down to the water's edge unassisted. Kneeling down, he quickly satisfied the hull, mast, and stabilizers. The components of the vessel slipped into place with a series of unorthodox and satisfying clicks. It was similar to assembling a well-designed kit—a huge, waterborne kit.

Terrakoa, as the vessel was called, cut through the waves cleanly. Her hull was bulletproof strong, but ultra-light with just the right amount of flexibility to make the best of the liquid terrain. D Light sat contentedly in his hammock. Seaworgone lying on his chest. D Light did not bother with a harness for the feline, as it had fiddlelike balance. Its outer surface of its body was soft, and so synthetic, far was convincing. Its organic computer chips gave it heat, furthering the game of its mammalian creature. All Seaworgone needed to do to be a perfect cat-calculator was to purr, but D Light prided himself in being too attention to develop over-the-horizon kinship software that enabled felines to do things like purr, meow, or meow. In fact, D Light didn't even like cats. Occasionally, he encountered rail ones, and they did not impress him any more than they impressed him. Seaworgone, therefore, was bought only because the model was on sale. Although styled as a cat, Seaworgone was a two-limbed, such usually cost a fortune. Even on sale, it cost D Light nearly everything he had.

D Light did so much of his grinding staring out on the water as he could. Because of this, he tended to take games that did

require his physical presence somewhere, unless that somewhere happened to be nearby and accessible by sea. Luckily, most of the greater games he played involved creating or debugging software, so it could usually be played virtually. Greater games allowed you to interact with The Game virtually, without having to be there physically. On the other hand, spunk games—games designed primarily for entertainment—did not allow this. From the perspective of The Game, death was a sin, so if you were going to play a game with no productive value, then the least you could do was work out your body.

Today, however, D Light had no intention of logging into any kind of game, neither for work or pleasure. He wanted only to point the bow of Terrelva straight out into the blue and think of nothing, to hear nothing but the recognizable splash and hiss of the water beneath him. He wanted to find that slight chill as the occasional wave managed to breach up above his harness and soak his protection suit. No games.

Terrelva was fast. When fully extended, her hull was over forty feet long and her living thrust sails were optimal under most weather conditions. With decent wind, D Light could make it to any number of nearby settlements within only hours. He took more time, he could keep himself anchored to the office, spending the nights on the beach, exploring a host of different islands; most of these islands were void of all people, but if there were any residents, they were likely just a few speckles intent on some computer-generated quest.

D Light thought he might just do that right now. With his latest score he could certainly afford to take off a few days and recharge. The Isle of Dandel was only a few days north, inside a chain of islands. When he got there he could log into his favorite spunk game, NeverWorld, and battle with monsters and other speakers for loot. The Isle of Dandel was a cruise-go destination for any NeverWorld player. As a bonus, D Light knew there was a tribe of oldtimers who lived there. Supposedly, you could find them down at some natural hot springs. D Light had met only a few oldtimers in his lifetime and he thought it might be amusing to visit them after a bit of gaming. Rarer had it that oldtimers tended to be kindly as long as you did not gawk at them too much or treat them like fools. Yes, an island adventure seemed just the kind of diversion D Light needed. And he would go alone. He wanted his escape to be full.

The wind picked and the roar of the air rushing past his ears drowned out the sound of his breath as he leapt out a sleep, contented sigh *I'm alive and I'm free!* The thought was as fierce as the smile he carried onto his face. Real or not, a smile always made him feel a little better.

Master, there is a summons from Mother Lyras Ramasari.

D Light had ordered Senegeuse to hold his calls, but the familiar knew his master would want to take this one. Human social hierarchy was not fully understood by Senegeuse, but its pattern recognition software was adept at reading connections like this. House nobility was a high priority contact.

There was no call, just a message. A summons. Dandel? he thought. Anyone else he could blow off, but Mother Lyras was nobility and as such, was not to be kept waiting. Not was nobility to be called back. If she had wanted to speak to him remotely, she would have done so.

Mechanically, D Light pushed the tiller and, with some readjusting of sails, spun Terrelva around and pointed her bow back to the Coast.

D Light had mixed feelings about meeting with Mother Lyras. On one hand, of all his meetings, D Light was most fond of Lyras. First, she liked his work, especially his stories, so she actually knew who he was. Secondly, on the one occasion they had met, she was kind to him. But when D Light blurted most about Lyras was the sheer magnificence of the woman herself. To say that Lyras was beautiful was a gross understatement. Almost everyone had enough engineering in their line to be envious on the eyes, but Lyras was a step above. Her ancestors were among the last to be imprisoned before their modifications to the gene line was complete, post-Battle Neck. By then, doctors were doing their best work, particularly in the area of physical attractiveness since those attributes were easy to measure and improve. Mother Lyras had inherited the legacy of that final push for perfection, and it showed.

D Light had heard Mother Lyras speak several times at annual services, and she had always done so with easy confidence and abundant wit. As a rule, D Light disliked the mere of nobles, who inherited their title from birth rather than through The Game. However, Lyras, as soon as she spoke, breathed such poise and grace as though to say, "You love me because it is right for you to love me."

This being the case, D Light could not help but feel some thrill at being personally summoned by this magnificent woman. Of course, there was the money business around D Light having tagged—less than 24 hours ago—one of Lyras's grandchildren. Obviously, the summons was related to this incident. Although the tag was perfectly legal and done in self-defense, he did not imagine that praise was on the meeting's agenda.

Chapter 4

For years video game developers have had psychologists on staff whose sole purpose is to help make their games addictive. And that results are in fact just what the President of the United States called for a 'war on idle distraction.' Indeed, by some estimates, over 10% of our Gross Domestic Product is paid for away playing games of no economic or social benefit.

...and he needs? he life or impudency. I progress to harness the addictive aspects of entertainment games and apply them in the workplace. Aspects like clear measurable goals with frequent and tangible rewards, transparent scoring and competition, gradual increase in difficulty of tasks as the player progresses in skill, etc. We can build this abstraction over employment with software.

Until we take the "work" out of work, world labor will not meet its full potential. Making the tools to do this will be a lot of fun...and make us a few bucks!

-Excerpt from "Introducing the Glitcher Game" as presented by Tyler Albion, Software Developer Conference, 2006

Brin Rollfushach, Guard Prisoner of House Told, stared at the male visitor with open hostility. Neither he nor the guard beside him spoke a word or flinched a muscle, despite the man's repeated requests for entrance into the waiting room. It was known by the guards that Mother Lira was expecting the gay, the intruder who went by the name "D Light," but their mission was unaltered as the moment and Brin decided to let the noth stand out in the hallway rather than not comfortably in the post waiting area beyond. What kind of a name is D Light anyway, pondered the guard. The kind of name a coward would give himself to cover up what a loser he really is. Brin turned his hips and rolled his shoulders forward, like an animal presenting a threat display to ward off a potential enemy.

The visitor shifted his weight from one leg to the other, his head lowered toward the ground. He scratched the scalp under his thick, dark hair and heaved, "I don't suppose you see the archer?" You know that she said to fly me this, right?" D Light looked from one guard to the other as he spoke. Neither returned the look.

Finally, Brin, no longer able to contain himself, blurted back, "I'm sure you deserved it." He growled eyes that twinkled a bit and a subtle grin spread across his face. "I wish I had been there. Oh yeah," he exclaimed. He breathed in deeply through his flaring nostrils and carried the bit of the name. "You up on the head with little Tiffany here and you'd be madder like your little kitty there." The disgruntled guard looked down at Senagense's snarl and barked indifferently.

"Moving, huh?" D Light asked as he raised his eyebrows and exhaled. Brin gibbered the bit of the name, an automatic reflex in his line of work. It was all he could do not to hush in the craters of the foot.

D Light took a deep breath and changed his tone to what Brin figured was supposed to be one of diplomacy. "Look, I know I'm enjoying this as much as you are, but I was summoned here by your mistress so..." D Light cocked his head, giving the guard an expectant look.

The hardened guard gave no reaction. He just stared at D Light with heavy eyes, scrutinizing his every action. The silence was thick, closely the effect Brin desired.

Don't even speak to him, Brin thought. He doesn't deserve that much and I won't let him lead me into speech again. Demand consent!

Brin was angered by the House's loss of Fael. Most handmaids didn't even bother being decent to entry-level guards, so it wasn't regarded or expected. Fael, however, was different. She was kind and friendly, treating everyone around her with respect. She had always been very sweet to Brin, and he always looked forward to the little pleasures they would exchange as she came and went through his door. Did I watch the archer? What a treacherous villain! Why would I want to sit back and watch the life get squeezed out of her? And by one such as this? Brin felt the heat rising to the surface of his cheeks. He clenched his jaw, accumulating the treacherous malediction of his fate.

Worse than the thought of her untimely death, Brin could not stop thinking about the fact that Fael had gone in on an Intimacy Permit with this Faggot—something he had heard from another guard who had the stomach to watch the archer. She was going to perv with this gay? Brin suspected it was only a name, but he wasn't about to watch the archer to know for certain. Sure, this job is good looking, but who isn't? I suppose he's ranked high in The Game. Probably got the rank by killing good women during Rule 7.

Much to Brin's dismay, police guards were not allowed to participate in Rule 7. In fact, they could not even be ordered to tag another during Rule 7 unless it was in defense of a client. She was one of those times when Brin was almost hot-headed enough to break rules. If he could, he would have done this coward at the next opportunity. Hate him down like a child dog.

Always wound tightly, Brin relished the thrill of combat. On many occasions he had considered quitting his guard position and becoming a fuke, a caste citizen who specialized in Rule 7. Since a person always took a fifth of the gains of anyone he or she tagged, it was just about the fastest way to get points in The Game. Indeed, most fukes didn't even play other games. They simply trained with their weapons, executed the labyrinthine hallways of the castle, stood up their rivals, and then waited for the siren to sound them into action once again. Appropriately named, fukes were called such because it usually wasn't long before they were tagged by another fuke and ground up into fuk food. Since anyone who wasn't a fuke took cover when Rule 7 was in effect, fukes were left to hurt down each other. Needless to say, it was a dangerous undertaking.

Danger aside, being a fuke sounded exciting and so Brin figured he would make the switch one day. He was good

ready, but waiting a few more years would allow him to train more training him loved to train. Thinking back to the training he had done just that morning brought a smile to his face, the memory of cool, sticky blood pooling on his back beneath the armor. It's morning, Brian thought while glancing at D Light. Definitely not a man. He doesn't push himself. *Cowards don't think they need to.*

To better ignore D Light, Brian continued to indulge in the moments of his earlier training session—not, however, training, not the puny simulations most of his family called training. He first thought back to the training room a room that had managed to remain sterile and white despite the amount of bloodshed there over the years. He always entered the room with a great sense of anticipation. There was a faint scent of sweat in the air, a smell the cleaning bots could never completely get rid of. Of course, most couldn't smell it, but Brian had caught up the points to get all of his senses enhanced, with the exception of pain. He considered having that particular sense dulled, but then decided against it. Pain kept one fully engaged in combat, and with the right training could be worked through. He made himself a mental note that he was due for another booster in about a month if he wanted to keep the sensory enhancements fully functional.

The product he had bought that morning had a long, thin sword in its left hand. A vice gripped its face. Although products typically had no reproductive capacity, Brian debated if it had a tank body-type based on its general shape, but the bulky armor it wore made that uncertain. In sharp contrast, Brian had been bare-chested, wearing only his undershorts and an armor scarf around his neck to protect his jugular, a constant worry about being the most common source of a fatal training injury. He clutched a short sword in each hand. Fighting two-handed was a difficult fighting style, but when mastered it was hard to beat.

Brian always stood left-handed against these products, as they were actually engineered for combat. Even with heavy armor this one was faster than nearly any human. Luckily, the sword wielded by the product was designed to cut only a few centimeters deep. The blade was actually a narrow rod that, when striking flesh, jerked out a shallow ribbon that inflicted a light slashing wound.

Brian smothered the feelings that this memory evoked. *That is what living is about, he thought. That's the only way to acclimate yourself to real combat. Real wounds, real pain.*

Although he had taken a beating by the product, he pushed hard. He wouldn't let the training record tell he was losing that first effort and blood loss, after which he crawled to the nearby medical bay. A few spider-like arms extended out and, after scanning to patient for damage, treated him appropriately. In the training room, this was Brian's only friend. The bot proceeded to apply cyto-seal glue to the lacerations to close them up and then finished the treatment with some skin-absorbing enzymes. The enzymes were of all importance, as they stimulated the body's local response to the damage and greatly sped up healing. On that particular day, Brian had even taken a blood transfusion and then wanted to regain his strength for another round.

"Hey, you're bleeding, you know," said a voice that rattled Brian back to the present.

He glanced at D Light. "What did you say?"

"Your hand, it's bleeding," replied D Light.

Brian looked down at his left hand, now resting slightly with blood from a recent wound that had reopened. It was a thoughtful reminder that the medical bot was not infallible. He didn't mind. After all, some bleeding was an affirmation of how he lived his life. Like a man, not like this fool standing in the hall.

Several more minutes passed in silence before Brian decided that having D Light in his presence indicated him more than it pleased him to inconvenience the man. Without a word, he nodded his head toward the doors to indicate that the visitor could enter. Typically, guards opened the doors for visitors, but it didn't take a genius to realize that Brian would skip this courtesy. D Light pushed his way through the heavy doors as quickly as possible, breaking against Brian's shoulder as he passed.

Although D Light was prepared for the worst from this meeting, he decided it was particularly obvious that he was getting back from the wastes outside the waiting room doors. D Light's hostile reception made him think that he might as well have been wearing a ring of toddler heads tied by their hair to his belt. I mean, who are those guys? I'm not a flake. It's not like I'm going to fucking hurt anyone, please like that don't even try to relate to anyone else's situation.

D Light wondered why Mother Lysa even used human for guards. As far as he knew, products were the optimal choice for low-level security. A product would have just shut up and done its job, he thought. Besides, it's dangerous to use humans for security. They're too unpredictable.

Now finally in the waiting room, D Light reminded himself that he should not let people get the better of him. Nor should he show on the part. He was being cool. Nothing matters but the present. He had Sinegawa repeat the motto in an infinite loop over the top of one of his favorite songs for such occasions, a poppy ballad called *What I Don't Give*, by Dead Child. As he listened song played in the back of his mind, D Light studied the waiting room.

There were no chairs, simply beds draped with semi-transparent curtains of purple and gold. Only one of the dozen beds seemed to harbor a resident, a lump of a man who appeared to be sleeping. Prismatic colors from an unseen source seeped and radiated over the walls, ceiling, and floor. The rays of light also filtered through the glassless bed curtains, creating a hauntingly beautiful 3-D effect. There was

recognition here, only a pair of tall and cream double doors that commanded the wall in front of him. A low, rhythmic hum pulsed all around him. D Light's skimming software was not minding anything, as the room was a designated 'Dark Zone—an area where no Skiffworks-facilitating nanobots covered the surfaces of anything. D Light chose a waiting hall and sat on the edge, legs dangling toward the floor. The softly shining light patterns, once once entering from an ancient lava lamp, were as real as the low, rhythmic pulsating sound that filled the air. Despite his best efforts, D Light still felt asleep.

D Light woke with a start. "Here, here, here," the *Scarfay*TM called out. The softest his head was cocked sideways, regarding D Light with one big, pink eye. The torso, pale, and legs were those of a male and impressively muscular man. Tails of white feathers interspersed with patches of curly black human hair shot out haphazardly. The ankles of the monster faded into the whitest fluff of a wisp. It had giant squid wings in place of arms, which it now splined out over the creature quickly waved its gigantic feathered ear and back and forth a few times, at which point it tipped up to back and yammered out another "Here, here, here!"

D Light couldn't help but chuckle a bit at the monster he had designed for Mother Lynn.

"Oh, D Light, how you are doing for me?" Blood and orange colored ooze streamed out of its head, running down its mottled chest as it spoke. The voice was general with ratty undertones.

D Light supposed that the bizarre reception was part for the course. Mother Lynn seemed to be one of the few nobles with enough confidence in her position and enough of a sense of humor to not take herself too seriously—or anyone else for that matter. He decided to respond in kind.

"Um, no big, but there are a few guards out in the hall you can hear." D Light jumped out of the waiting room and bowed formally to the gigantic biologic-like humanoid. A line, which D Light assumed was Mother Lynn's lifeline, stood only a few paces behind. Currently the familiar was projecting the biologic-like center at Lynn's command.

With a sweeping motion of one of its wings, the scabbed monster for D Light to follow through the double doors ahead, doors which had apparently opened as D Light slept. He bowed to the heart and passed through the opening into the formal entertaining room.

The entertaining room was colossal, leading D Light to the safe conclusion that Mother Lynn must truly be a favorite of House Tels. A non-descript man was sitting in a chair to D Light's left. D Light did not recognize him, but the man's cane indicated he was a noble. He stared at D Light as though he had nothing more interesting to do. D Light knew better than to stare back at his father: Lynn, pacing back and forth like a caged jaguar, was clearly mulling over, distant and preoccupied, evidenced by her fixed, vacant stare. While D Light knew that part of her brain was being used to control the humanoid room, he could only imagine what she was doing with the other part. Whatever it was, however, must have something to do with why he had been summoned here, and that was somewhat unsettling to the slightly anxious D Light.

The humanoid pointed a wing toward some high-backed chairs and ordered D Light to take a seat in the corner. It then proceeded to hop over to the main noblemen who still stared rudely at D Light, propped in back and toward his ear and did a few "here, here, here" each "here" implying in rapid succession like a machine gun. D Light suppressed a chuckle, inspired by Lynn's use of *Scarfay*TM for the purpose of waiting. He was also impressed with Lynn's long lifeline, how it was capable of projecting its auditory output to seem as though the sound was coming from the bird back. Very polished.

Clearly, the noblemen was doing his best to ignore the man persistently intoning *scarf*, but D Light imagined the man would grab the humanoid by the throat and throw the life out of the damaged body had the creature been anything more than a projection of light. Of course, if he did lose control and go ballistic on the monster, he wouldn't be the first human able to thoughtlessly attack an avatar. D Light shivered whilst he waited, as it would provide him some much needed comic relief.

The humanoid, appearing to be bored with tormenting the noblemen, patted his one leg gooding "here, here, here, here." It then settled—a combination of hops, heartbeats with swaddling—over to D Light, its absurdly long penis swinging back and forth as it approached. Upon reaching D Light, it tamed its head so that one devilish eye was facing him, inspecting him with intent. It stood there exuberantly and then stated, "I'm so rude! I forgot to ask if you wanted a bit, something to eat. I have those chocolate truffles that are so die-fer!" It spoke the word 'die' with an extra mpy flair. The creature continued, "You must be finished after a long night of snuffing out my handmaiden!"

Oh, here we go. D Light thought, I was wondering when she'd cut to the chase. D Light was not entirely sure how to react to the comment, but he did like chocolate and wasn't about to screw up that offer. "Yes, please," he replied with a nod.

The humanoid then took a hop closer, raising its head and back around to regard D Light with its other eye. The creature just stood there, staring at him with an unerring and unerring rigidity that D Light first found disconcerting and then amusing. Remembering that he was actually interacting with Mother Lynn via the creature, D Light decided to return the gaze for a while and then eventually extended the courage to wink at it playfully.

D Light was sure flying downriver cocky and was getting ready to compliment the bird on its fine plumage—especially on its backside—and its lack of fishy breath. Fortunately, he was interrupted before he said something he'd later regret. Its

carried a tall, well-built man carrying a round stone toy. The man, dressed in a long, dark flowing robe that draped behind him with a fair braided sound, bore a dark circle tattoo in the middle of each cheek like a classic clown that had gone pale. These tattoos indicated that the servant was a product, a living organism based on a human template that was engineered to serve a human master. The servant smiled politely and bent down to present D Light with a traffic. He selected one that was dusted with a shimmering golden powder.

"Ah, carry coconut," squeaked the bird, "my favorite! Take another, we can always make more."

D Light, having confirmed with Seneagous that no poison was detected, decided to take them. They were to die for at least metaphorically. Not that D Light was truly afraid of being poisoned, for outside of Rite? it was a sin for anyone—noble or otherwise—to murder another human, even a common player like D Light. Still, the traffic could be drugged. The recent sniffing software Seneagous downloaded could detect many drugs, but not all of them, especially since new drugs were being invented every day. Calculating the risk and deciding that the benefits outweighed them, D Light reached for yet another. After all, this was top-notch gourmet chocolate that was prohibitively expensive for anyone but nobility. It also seemed to contain chili powder or some such substance that induced an addictive and satisfying burn.

D Light was about to remark that these chocolates were even better than Cheetos™ gourmet chocolates when he caught himself. Nobles themselves never dropped brand names and it was rude for others to drop on them. Little nobility of just one, the powerful of today were distinguished largely by what they did not say. By refraining from name dropping, a noble-to-be was telling the world, "I wouldn't be proud just anyone for which lesser players prostitute themselves."

Until now, Lyla had been completely committed to pacing between the fireplace on the west wall and the fireplace on the east. Presently, she began walking toward D Light, her eyes beaming down on him. D Light, halfway into a traffic, swallowed the contents of his mouth and silently debated whether or not it would be rude to pop in the other half while she approached. In his indecision, the delicate chocolate melted between his fingers and he ended up not only popping in the other half, but licking off his fingers as well. Good one, D Light, he thought. Why not just blow your nose on your sleeve while you're at it? He glanced up at Lyla and gave her a quick and innocent, "Oops!"

Mother Lyla was unusually tall for a human female. Like most humans, she was pandectic, a descendant of a rich mixture of many different races, making her skin a deep tan color. Her heart-shaped face was softly sculpted, the skin smooth and flawless, like polished jade. Long, jet-black locks of loosely curled hair adorned the top of her head and hung luxuriantly about her face, encircling her cheeks and eyes. She wore an organic bodysuit, similar to the one Paul had worn last night, but Lyla's suit was blood red. Power red. Although Lyla was not very muscular, the form-fitting bodysuit revealed a lean, fit figure. Over her bodysuit a semi-transparent cloak of sea-blue hung on her like a wallpaper. She was the Godmother of rage, and she definitely looked the part.

D Light had been in Lyla's presence before, and aside from the noblewoman's careful manner, there was one thing about her that fascinated him more than all else. It was her eyes. Seeking green emeralds that rarely gleamed against the otherwise dark shadows of her countenance, a trait emphasized by her ancestors. As would be expected from someone of her station, her eyes were farsight and determined, but there was also some wildness that hid behind them, a feral quality that sometimes belied her elegant composure. It was a contradiction that D Light found most intriguing.

I want you to know that I harbor no ill feelings toward you with regard to the matter between you and Paul. Lyla's voice was transmitted telepathically, using Seneagous as a vocality intermediary.

She was completely unexpected, both the message and the method of delivery. It was highly irregular for members of unequal social classes to think one another. Lyla's lips trembled had lacked eyes with Seneagous for optimal communication. D Light was caught off guard by the blink, but promptly gave a telepathic reply. Thank you, Mother. I never intended—

I do not want an apology, Lyla interrupted him. I watched the archive. You did what you thought sensible, and I do not appear to have paid off well. Clearly, Paul underestimated you. It was her own ambition that was her undoing.

D Light saw the next thought that came to him. Believe, if you save the archive then you know I did not have to flee; but I could have let her go.

D Light immediately negated the response, wondering why he was insisting on apologizing when she had expressly stated that she did not want one. He silently chastised himself for his pathetic behavior.

Lyla smiled at him cheerfully. Well, I'm sure you know that if you had let me meet Paul first, every girl with a pretty smile would find she could get a few points about how kind of player would you be?

A dead one, D Light thought, although he kept this superficial thought to himself.

Lyla's eyes softened and the tan skin of her face relaxed as she turned away from D Light. I like that you feel something for her. D Light. Watching the two of you together...Lyla beamed and then continued, Well, I would say she was kind of a snob. Sure, she was willing to catch you in her but that does not mean that under other circumstances you two could not have been friends. Of course.

"Lyla, what are you doing?" The nobleman in the chair looked

and forth between Lyla and D Light. His tone was not one of urgency, but of mild curiosity and possible irritation.

"Not making our new friend feel at ease," Lyla spoke aloud. As the bells screamed, D Light felt as though something warm had just fed his mind. He hesitated the loss of their private telepathic communication.

As though taking a cue, the monstrous bidman flew up onto one of the arches high overhead. It then perched itself, outstaring to glare with both feet under the rafter while contently watching over the room.

"Djoser, this is D Light, Level 83 player and resident of the upper-east wing of this little pile of rooms," Lyla declared. Then, gesturing toward the noblesman he continued, "D Light, this is Father Djoser Townsend, Third Son of the First Grandfather of Townsend." D Light bowed and bowed low to the continued noble.

Mother Lyla brought her hands together and interlocked her fingers. "So, now that you are comfortable, properly introduced, and stuffed with fine chocolate, let me tell you why you were summoned here."

D Light felt a slight knot in his stomach. He bowed to his Mother and then stood alert.

"Our House has been selected for this month's MetaGame," Lyla stated. "Father Townsend and I have been invited to be the players. According to the rules, participants in the game are allowed to bring along an advisor. I was planning on taking Dad, as I always do, but due to recent events, I thought it appropriate for you to take her place."

D Light stood dumbfounded, half wondering if he had heard correctly. MetaGames were reserved for nobility and their closest entourage, and he certainly did not qualify as either. He hesitated before responding to make sure that he did not speak over Lyla. "Mother, I am at your service," he declared. Another bow.

"Have you ever played a MetaGame before?" inquired Djoser, making no attempt to mask his skepticism.

D Light assumed it was he who was being addressed. "No, Father," he replied.

"What makes you qualified to advise anyone playing a MetaGame?" Djoser barked at him.

"I, um... I do not know for sure, Father. From what I understand, every game is unique." D Light had no idea what to tell the man, for he was just as surprised as Djoser.

"Lyla, is this a joke?" asked Djoser while looking at her severely. "This is a high-stakes game. If you are going to make a play, at least choose someone useful!"

"He will be," Lyla answered, her voice cool and unaffected.

"Really? What did you say he does? Madam seems like... like that thing?" Djoser pointed up at the bidman in the rafters.

D Light felt his gut wrench, for it actually he designed and built all sorts of software, not just games. He hated it when people wrote him off as a designer of useless toys and tricks. However, D Light knew it important to correct his father. Besides, the man was probably right that his day-to-day did not may not be all that useful in a real-life game.

A brown hand with grey fingers swooped down from a high, dark, marble Ropescape mantle and landed directly across from Lyla's lap; it was the noblesman's handker. The two creatures locked eyes and for several minutes the nobles discussed silently, punctuated only with a variety of eye movements (rolling eyes being the most common), hand gestures, sighs, and occasional laughter of contempt.

Finally, Lyla turned to D Light and said, "We shall see you at 13:00 tomorrow. The game starts at 13:30. I trust you will be prepared."

"Yes, my lady," D Light confirmed. He bowed once to each of the nobles and did his best to back out of the room gracefully. He nearly tripped.

Chapter 5

Grinder games, which underlie the major economic activity of The Game, are firmly grounded in twentieth-century psychology. Rather than simply providing a framework for 'productive work', grinder games are designed to facilitate a state of 'flow' in the player. First proposed by positive psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is a state of consciousness where you are so immersed in your activity that you lose yourself to the 'doing.' You lose your sense of time, replacing it with a state of emergent focus. People who experience flow later report a sense of well-being and accomplishment.

Spunker games, by their very nature, send players effortlessly into flow, while it takes everything from sound psychology, engineering, and perhaps even a touch of inspiration to design a grinder game that facilitates flow. But I assure you it is worth it. Game software has not only the potential to maximize the productivity of countless 'workers', but can instill the greatest gift of all—happiness.

—Excerpt by Darvish Sotomai, from Introductory Interactive Archives for Grinder Developers of House Tots

Todget gradually awakened. How could he sleep with that female thrashing and moaning next to him? He asked himself

the same why he slept in the same bed with that creature. Their horrible apartment consisted of only a single room with an attached bathroom, but he could always sleep on the floor. That would be easy for him. Years ago when he was playing the staring game in the Land of the Sing, Tadget slept whenever he needed. Crashed limbs placed beneath him provided more than adequate comfort, and with a blanket of heavy evergreen branches and some debris from a rotten log to provide camouflage and to mask his scent, he had himself as honest night's sleep.

Sleeping in a bed for the last two years had made him soft, but Tadget felt compelled to keep Lily as close as possible. Tadget, like all of his tribe, was strong, fast, and cunning. He would protect her. He only *have* such other, he often reminded himself. As fidgets they were pinned against the entire world. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before they were caught and killed—*ee*, worse yet—taken back. Nevertheless, he would keep her close and safe until his last breath.

Tadget lay quietly, scanning the numbingly familiar room. The floor that enclosed his chamber changed color depending on the season, and the walls even allowed some sunlight to filter in through its strange, waxy membrane. This was helpful because their dwelling was not furnished with any artificial lights. Lily had told him that humans did not need lights in their homes because they could see in the dark. Tadget, however, had no such skill, so he had purchased a small, inexpensive hand lamp. Lily noticed that he only use the lamp on its lowest power since bright lights could attract attention.

Generally speaking, Tadget did not mind hazy walls. Since they may have to fix it any minute, according to several pointers. Lily, however, had been adamant on making changes. One day she brought back some shiny seeds and smeared them in dark patches on the walls. Within a day or two flowers began sprouting from the patches. At first Tadget had been very annoyed at this, fearing to duck his tall, muscular body underneath the flower stalks but he be choked for his confidence, but he soon grew tired of the red and gold spotted flowers. Sweet honey jacks Lily said the humans called it rarely collected in the bulbs and every morning Tadget would drink from these bulbs like a newborn from suckling its mother.

Tadget's eyes wandered to the luminous ceiling. Today the color of their dwelling was red with subtle black swirls. He hoped that he would live to see them turn bright green again when the air was at its warmest.

Tadget and Lily always slept during the day, while the shiny-eyed humans played their pruned games outside. The finished players would storm up and down the steps, shouting childishly. Once the season rose and the night was at its blackest, all but a few would enter to the indoors. That is when Tadget and Lily would awaken. Although not completely dark yet, Lily seemed to be suffering during this day's sleep, whimpering and gently biting at things dangling in observation, so Tadget decided to wake her early.

"Lily wake. It is only a dark vision," Tadget shook her as softly as he knew how.

Lily's blond hair was glistened about her pillow and partially covered the soft curves of her face. Her lips, thick and pink, were slightly parted as she gasped, and her forehead, normally smooth and without wrinkles, was furrowed. He shook her again, this time with more force. Her blue eyes suddenly shot open and her breath stopped. A moment later a slight smile came over her, but then disappeared as her eyes closed again. She then whimpered in hallow breaths, "I saw a man. He was tall and frail. He had no eyes, no mouth, no nose, just skin stretched tightly over where his face should have been. He warned us."

Tadget did not understand dark visions. He never had such visions when he went into dark time. Lily did not want to have them either. It was only after she started working for that human, that *professor*, the one who implanted the machine in her head, that she had begun to experience these visions. At first the visions had been pleasant, but not recently. Tadget had warned her to not work for the human, but she was stubborn.

"Was it like the one...the one before?"

Lily's eyes opened up again as though fully recovered from her recent terror and said, "Tadget, do not worry yourself. It is NOT a bad omen." She smiled sweetly and caressed his hair.

The young female swung out of bed and stood up quickly to reach for her gown. Lily slept in light undergarments but kept her robe nearby. Tadget watched her carefully. As a Star Singer, Lily was supremely toned and shapely, although her muscles were smaller than Tadget's more bulked frame. Since the Singers were, ultimately, a near match to the females of Tadget's race, by appearance alone Lily should be a suitable breeding partner—suitable enough, at least, since Tadget had been having intense breeding urges lately—but Lily's scent reminded him that she was not of his species, at which point he always felt ashamed and told himself to not think about her that way. But he still noticed how the human males watched her. Everywhere they went, men—and many women—followed Lily with their eyes.

"Humans have dark visions all the time and they mean nothing," Lily commented while donning her robe. She turned to face him. Her face *glowed* with health, yes, but not warmth.

"There do you know that?" Tadget asked.

"I asked one," Lily returned to bait him.

Tadget felt his heart speeding up. "What? Who?"

Tadget didn't understand Lily's social interest in humans. It was bad enough that she chose to work with them. Granted, they could use the money, despite the horrendous sum Tadget knew. Thought to from the instrument. Still, being decedent in the human land, even modestly, was very expensive. Privacy

Lily put up her hand meaningfully. "Don't worry. I'm not out talking to random humans. It was just the Slider. He said that almost all humans have these visions. Humans call them 'visions', except when they dream they hear things. Some even feel things or smell them."

Todget looked at her with a blank expression.

It was times like these that Lily spoke as though to herself, assuming that Todget was not listening. "Thank Slag I only see visions. I would hate to know what the vile things in my visions smell or feel like." Lily's face contorted in revulsion.

"No. What kind of things? What are these sounds you come home with?" questioned Todget with irritation.

Lily raised an eyebrow, surprised that Todget was listening. It brought her out of her short-lived reflection. "Who, it seems terrible. As in, you don't want to be around it." Lily gave a little snick and then asked, "So, what are you and I up to tonight?"

"I have to fight tonight." He looked up at the clock. Its numbers glowed dimly. It was the only human construct that decorated the wall.

Lily frowned. "Is a high stakes?"

"Yes, the money will be good."

She walked slowly to him, leaned over, and tenderly kissed his white forehead. "I wish I had not asked."

"And you?" Todget granted.

"I'm not working today." Lily's voice was flat as she walked toward the bathroom for her first shower of the night. *A strange creature she is*, Todget thought. She always took two showers a day. Todget would not shower at all if it were not for Lily pointing him to do it before she would get into bed with him. It was for the best. He did not need to draw human attention to himself on account of his smell, a smell that Lily tastefully assumed humans "must find".

Normally, Todget started off the night by working out his muscles and stretching. He would spend over an hour contorting and liming his body. For extra weight he would get Lily to lie on top of him. Lily would also work out, but later, right before her second shower and bed. Tonight, however, Todget had a fight and needed to save his strength, so he spent the entire hour stretching and clearing his mind in preparation. Although he didn't tell Lily, only one of the fighters would leave the ring alive.

Chapter 6

MiniGame, also known as a "Divine Quest" or a "House Crusade", is a high-stakes real game typically played by nobility. Each month, one major House is elected to play the MiniGame...

...MiniGames are comprised of a series of quests. These quests can be of any kind, the only stipulation being that it must be real--not meaning that the game is not illusory, or is typical of popular games. Examples include classic mazes furnished with traps and hostile predators, off-world scavenger hunts, and authentic murder mysteries complete with real killers and victims. Other examples...

...Teams score points based on the difficulty of quests and the time they take to complete them. At the end of the year, the twelve MiniGames are compared and the winning House is crowned House Champion. In addition to the honor and points collected by the House Champion, it is widely believed that the victorious House incites divine favor from the Overlord.

...MiniGames are extremely costly to run since they do not rely on software for special effects and storyline, which is one of the reasons these games are only played by nobility of major Houses. While wealthy commoners might be able to afford such games, they usually view them as pointless and therefore do not initiate them. MiniGames, then, may be viewed as a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, they are firmly entrenched in aristocratic culture. The stakes are extremely high and the games taken very seriously, as much so that a winning team becomes a source of pride to its Family and the envy of others. Said Grandmother Stella of the House of Tord, "Let the noble play in their domains. Be, the few, have always required light."

...Participating Houses enter in the points used to run the MiniGames and reward the victorious. Depending on the quests undertaken, the Divine Authority may also contribute points to the quest, which is perhaps why some call it a "Divine Quest"...

...Due to the stipulation that the game use only real components and the fact that there has been gradual but middle escalation of game intensity over the years, injury and even death are relatively common in MiniGames. Serious injury 15%, death 4.43%. Statistics are per game, per person.

...Excerpts from MiniGame Summary, gathered by Familiar 94594330M4EP (taken incoherently) and presented to El_Eight Ravi (105000282277038).

The apartment sounds opened up in front of the houses as far as they could see. Roundish hills covered with harvest brown laid out in clusters of red, pink, purple, and every

be imaginable. D Light knew from sky images that these low-altitude commercial airliners originated right from high above. The slow, dull buzz of countless harvestor insects surrounded them as they gathered precious nectar in their tiny mouthparts. Scattered throughout the twisting, crystal white pathways that enabled their way to and between the gusty rolling apartment mounds, were the players. Handbuds, and by the looks of them they were mostly quakers. Speakers were easy to spot. Their eyes were always glazed over and they'd swing their arms at unseen foes, checking and warning to avoid invisible dangers. D Light was only accustomed to being around quakers when he was played into a quaker game himself, so he never realized how insane they looked to an outsider—how ridiculous he must look when playing them.

The photo was vast and densely populated, and somewhere in these hills or underneath them stalked a demon. It was the team's task to hunt it down and report it to the Divine Authority. Mother Lynn ran her fingers absently through her long dark hair as she peered out over the landscape. "How in Soul's name are we going to find a demon in all of this?"

"The proverbial needle in a haystack," Dwyer said dryly.

Having decided to speak only when it mattered, D Light said nothing. From the dark looks he got from Dwyer, D Light surmised that he was barely being tolerated by the table, who still questioned the software engineer's worth. He would reserve his comments for when he was clearly being helpful. Worse than Dwyer, however, was Lynn's bodyguard, in what must have been a cruel joke, Lynn had brought with her Helen, the talk of a giant troll, just the night before, had been fantasizing him with a name called "Tilley." And based on the glances and obscene gestures Helen gave him when his mistress was not looking (his favorite being the copping of the crochets), D Light concluded that the woman's opinion of him had not yet softened.

The group's other bodyguard was also an interesting choice. Since Mustang rules allowed for one bodyguard per noble, Dwyer brought with him a female product who looked to be as much a concubine as a soldier. *Why not bring a concubine along for a Mustang game? Mix play with more play.* D Light thought.

The bodyguard's name was Amanda, and there were several tell-tale features of this product which placed her in the concubine category. To begin with, there was the way she dressed, if you could even call it dressing. She wore only the legal bare minimum of clothing, consisting of two strips of fabric, held in place by devil know what. Her face was classically beautiful, classically concubine, heavily so in D Light's opinion. Her hair was contemporary, styled with jet black, blond, and red, all of which sprang out in tulle over her head like the wings of a wilting rose. She had large blue eyes, exaggerated as though she had just stepped out of an old-time movie visual feast. So typical.

However, it was her body that hinted that she was along for more than mere amusement. A standard concubine product was typically designed to be a little softer around the edges. Amanda's curves, on the other hand, were just a little too pronounced, and her muscles a hair too pronounced. Her body was built for speed, and she appeared to have just enough strength for when she needed to put down some put out. And then there were the less subtle hints of her femininity: two natural breasts—one short (a katana) and the other long—were lightly tucked into the strip around her waist. Last but not least, Amanda possessed a nice set of vampire fangs that D Light had gotten a glimpse of on the rare occasions that she spoke. Of course, the fangs were not for sucking blood, but just another weapon that could be used in a pinch. D Light had seen archbishops on The Cloud shoot products designed with poison injecting fangs, poisons to which the product itself was immune. D Light wondered if Amanda had that capability, but he knew better than to ask.

Of course, the undeputable sign of a product was one on their cheeks, and Amanda had none. Apparently, Dwyer had paid a little extra to have a servant without the stink. Customers often did this to enhance the illusion that the product was actually human and that the affliction they gave their owner was genuine, rather than from the chemical coercion known as "imprinting." She had even been given a classic human name, Amanda, to aid in this fantasy. Nevertheless, her methodical, ruthless attitude—a constant death of emotion so complete that it could only belong to a being designed in a lab for a narrow band of behavior—gave her true identity and purpose away. The delving up of this way to try to pass it off as human irritated D Light, although he had to admit to himself that his annoyance was perhaps just envy, only because he could not afford one of the ones.

"Yes, it could be any of these fools, right?" Dwyer's question was rhetorical, for they all knew that demons did not sport clown hooks, horns, or any other fumble feature to announce themselves. In the way, the word "demons" was a misnomer. Demons were not here, as were the demons of mythology, but rather made-made by the Divine Authority when the subject transgressed Divine Law, at which point they were "demoted." Historically, these types were called "carnivals" or "gypsies." Therefore, the demons could be anyone in this game, or anything, so in the case of a product.

Lynn nodded absently in response to Dwyer's question and then smiled to herself. *This is going to be fun, she thought.* The first quest of the game—to find a demon in a densely populated quaker photo—was interesting, challenging, and even held a bit of danger.

Lynn's knee-styled familiar, PooPoo (the initials for Pooty Princess), stood beside its mistress, gawking everyone in sight. *Who knows, maybe we'll get spectacularly lucky? Maybe the demon is something by night now.* Lynn thought. Lynn frowned down at the feline. "She was not at all fond of PooPoo, but since Mustang rules prohibited the use of higher powered familiars, she was forced to leave her much preferred lynx at home. Having to rely on a more primitive familiar did, however, add to her sense of adventure and excitement."

Myers raised his eyebrows and chuckled but didn't look slightly while
according his family. "There are four gnos to Anywhere," he announced.

"Where?" Lynn asked, irritation seeping into her voice.

Djoser chuckled. "Anywhere is the name of the gnos.
Apparently, the phils that named it thought they had a sense
of humor."

"They'd be wrong," interjected Lirius without thinking. The
dedicated bodyguard realized his mistake and turned away
from the conversation, standing at attention near Lynn like a
watch-dog waiting for an intruder.

Lynn asked her lips impatiently and then spoke quickly. "Lirius,
so there aren't enough of us to cover all the gnos and
effectively search-the-gnos, right?"

"Not by my reckoning," Djoser answered. "I mean, look at
the place!" Djoser waved his arms about to sweep aside all
the speakers, apartment records, trays, and flowers before
him. "There are 2,834 citizens registered to the gnos
—2,834!" he exclaimed.

This is it, D. Light thought. This was his first challenge of the
most important game he had yet played. He remembered
Master A. Dade's words from the Moonstone showing earlier
that evening. The minister had taken each of the team aside to
impart a few words before they set off on their crusade.
"Dawnlight," he chuckled with his large, toothy grin. "You've
been CALLED!" D. Light had flushed as the word boomed
against the stone arches and walls of the cathedral. "This is
your usual grid, boy. This... This is a game close to the
Harvest Seed. No rules, understood? You gotta set that mind
free and make your family proud!"

It puzzled D. Light that the game presumably knew the
location of a demon, or at least the general area to look. After
all, demons were hunted by the Divine Authority and therefore
it was a sin to know the whereabouts of one and not report it.
But as the minister said, "No rules, understood?" Anything
you now, he reminded himself.

The two noble-born stared blankly at one another for what
seemed an eternity. Finally, Djoser took a deep breath and let
out all the air with a big whooshing sound. "Sounding here is
wasting time and hemorrhaging points. We need a plan and it
better not suck!"

Chapter 7

*It is unorthodox to think of medicine in terms of "fixing"
or "repair." Tearing our bodies like old-time automobiles
whose parts wear out is a primitive paradigm. Cloning
organs as though they were spare parts or injecting
nanobots to fix tissue wear-tearage measures for previous
generations, but is the long run, an uphill battle. Rather
than growing old and trying to piece us back together as we
fall apart, we do not more desirable to simply remain
young? Using the divine vibration of The ChristSeed to level
youth at the cellular level, we now "lead" itself. Aging is
a disease, no more, no less, and once you cure it,
everything else falls in line.*

*—Excerpt by Dr. Amos, M.D. from her "Kickass Address"
to players of Medical Games.*

"Well, there's always the brute force method," Djoser
exclaimed with a certain resignation in his voice. "We spike up,
crash the area, knock everyone is sight and hope we get
lucky."

The team had wandered away from the gate of the speaker
gnos. They were debating here to that the demons—the quest
objective—but had not yet settled on a plan. The air was
beginning to cool as the blazy orange glow of the summer sun
faded. Despite the cooling of twilight, the harvest insects did
not slacken their harrowing activity; their hollow bodies
bobbed under their blasted manes, and the bio-derived
products resembled small hobs of jam as they went about
their business.

Lynn shook her head skeptically. "I don't think there are
enough of us to do it the brute force way, Djoser. According
to the maps, it's a good sized area. Besides, it's getting dark.
Is it likely that the demons will just be waiting around? For
what purpose?"

"Why do demons do anything?" asked Djoser with a shrug.
"We don't have any idea of when or what we're dealing with
here, so I'd rather take a long shot than just stand around
while our true blades cut. Soid, if anyone's got a better idea,
let's hear it."

Djoser had gnos D. Light as much of an opener as he could
hope for, so the advisor channel his frustration and swallowed hard
in preparation to speak. Thanks to a cocktail of focusers and
a mild sedative delivered with precision by Serenogosa,
D. Light did not even feel the slightest twinge of nervousness
when he finally spoke up. "If I may," he interjected, "the two
of you are nobles, so you may not know as much as I about
how we phils live in these speaker zones."

Djoser's eyebrow lifted as he regarded D. Light with a
slightly mocking expression. His gaze Lynn a quick smirk and
then returned his attention back to D. Light. "By all means,
advisor arrive," he stated. "Turn your knapsack on your advice."

D. Light gave a humble smile and nodded. "Speaker gnos
attract a specific type of person and so we ought to be able to
take advantage of that fact," he said.

D. Light paused for a moment. He had everyone's attention,

to Ben's, who did not try to make the look of contempt on his face. D Light did the best to ignore the mixed reception. "Perhaps we can think in terms of process of elimination. Let me run it down for you. A *ghetto* like this is aimed for quakers and spooker games. That means that anyone living in this area is assumed to be hardcore, that is, into the most intense and addictive entertainment games out there."

Lyn nodded affirmatively. "Indeed, and I think it's safe to assume our little demon isn't a quaker. I mean, how could he or she even get an account to jack in?"

D Light became excited as he realized his idea might get traction. "Right! Spookers have their own culture. So, they even have their own way of speaking and we can use that, starting with the word 'lites' I can tell you right off the bat that most spook games are aimed at men. We're talking about violence and sex. All these guys you see around us carrying imaginary swords, crafting invisible guns, and dry humping the lites—they're playing those sorts of games." In a grand gesture, D Light swung his arms about, urging everyone to take a look around them in order to fortify his point.

Concerned that he may have offended the rabble with his coarse talk and forthright body language, D Light looked at the person carrying the sign of disappointment. To his delight, there were none. Lyn clapped her hands once and spoke with authority. "Okay, so for the kind of games played in this ghetto, my woman and me is worth taking a second look at."

"Consider it done," replied Dwyer with an impish grin. He put his hand on Lyn's shoulder in mock tenderness.

D Light exclaimed out, "Bugging your parden, since, what I mean is since demons are as lites to be made as female, and few quakers are female, then the probability of a female we see—"

"No, we get it!" Lyn called her eyes at D Light. "We might be rabble, but we're not lites!"

D Light took a generous breath and howled. "Bugging your parden, Mother!" He howled again. "Ye your know, I have another suggestion."

"For Son's sake, D Light, if you don't stop howling and 'bugging your parden' and otherwise wasting our time with your puke speak, I'm going to have them here beat the shit out of you," exclaimed Lyn, who was smiling in a way that D Light had never seen before—a nasty smile that made him wonder in earnest if the world, indeed, wasn't that out there. D Light took notice of an overly eager Ben who stood proudly behind Lyn, grinning from ear to ear.

Her smile disappeared in an instant and her voice adopted a certain icy edge as she continued, "You will address me without familiarity during this game. Formally only shows the communication process, and speed is of the utmost importance. I chose you as my advisor, so I expect you to participate effectively in this chat!"

D Light was about to howl to signify acknowledgment, but then nodded instead. Repeating his movement, he continued, "Another thing about ghettos like this is that most private apartments are open to other quakers. When you leave an apartment here you have a choice of whether you will allow the common rooms of your apartment to be open to spook games—that is, open to other quakers."

Dwyer interrupted abruptly, "You mean, someone would allow quark-in-out pukes to bumble about in their own private living space? Why would anyone opt for that?"

"Because you can reduce rent if you allow public access," D Light answered. "And believe me, if you're spending all your time quarking you need to keep your expenses down."

Lyn snapped her fingers, "Right, but a demon would not object for that. A demon would want privacy."

"That's my expectation," confirmed D Light, "but that brings up a good question. How is a demon able to pay for anything at all? Their status is lited, so they can't play the Game of Life, earn points, or spend them."

Lyn brought in a sharp breath. "Oh, I researched that. Demons typically use what are called 'proxies.' A proxy is a player with an account who conducts transactions on the part of the demon. Demons usually pay the proxy with hard currency—you know, Sitcher money."

"Sounds like a dangerous profession," Amanda parried, her long curtain flaring as the words slipped out. It was disgusting to hear Dwyer's hedged-up quark, mainly because D Light had only heard her mutter once or twice thus far. Indeed, he had nearly forgotten she was there.

"The lites, no doubt," added Dwyer, who stepped by the arm around Amanda's waist, she arched her back subtly to accommodate him. The noblemen then looked over at D Light and spoke to him directly. "Okay, so if we find a female living in a private flat, there's a good chance she's a demon. Or, maybe we should be looking in the trailer. Why would a demon want to pay rent anyway?"

Like most residential areas, this ghetto appeared to have perfectly mimicked hedonism with little in the way of underbrush. It didn't have enough natural cover here to hide for very long," he announced.

"Who says the demon lives here?" questioned Lyn. "Maybe it's just passing through. Don't make any assumptions unless you have good reason for it," she asserted.

D Light nodded thoughtfully. "Could just be passing through. That would be easier yet. Check this. Since a demon doesn't have an account, it's not going to be plugged into a game. Look around you. Pretty much everyone's jacked in. If we see someone walking around normally—"

Intensely a woman; D'Joser interjected.

D Light returned, "Yes, especially a woman. But I'd bet the divan is big too. Soak, this would be a clever place to hide! Everyone's jacked in, so who would notice you? Who would even see you? You could hide right out in the open. To someone who wants to get hot, someone who's not a spooker, being here is like being in the middle of nowhere."

"Nowhere, also known as Anywhere," Lyla quipped. "What did I tell you all? MetaGames are the best!"

D'Joser sighed, "Nevertheless, if the divan is just passing through then we had better get looking real fast."

D'Joser tapped on one of the numerous walls of their apartment from Amanda's head. "Yes, my dear are the fastest of us all. Why don't you have a quick look around?"

Amanda gave a cart nod and then sprang off without uttering a word. The product did not have a familiar and so would have to rely on her Mind Interface Chip to guide those she saw. The additional processing power of a familiar would be more efficient, but since Amanda now knew the profile of the prime suspects, she could focus her processing power on just those who were of particular interest.

Watching the genetically engineered product running off, Lyla replied, "Should we worry that she might tip off the divan?" The reflection looked noticeably varied.

D'Joser shrugged, "Look around, lots of people are running toward or away from Soak knows what. It's like everyone is necked out in a wrong way. Yeah, it'll be right in."

"Everyone is running for their virtual lives, eh?" Lyla stared at D Light for a moment until he realized that she was talking to him, at which point he smiled awkwardly and nodded.

Wanting to cover as much territory as possible in the least amount of time, Lyla then ordered him to take leave of her and assist Amanda in the search for possible suspects. Him was quick to protest, insisting it was unsafe to leave the two robots completely unprotected, but Lyla assured him that they would be fine in his absence. Horribly, the droid boggled out out to the streets, holding his treated racin. Tiffany, finally at his side.

"So, with the kind help doing their little ad-hoc search, what does that leave for us to do?" asked D'Joser, his voice sounding bored.

"Well, there's the mixed apartments," replied D Light. "It's dark, and so be...er, oh, k, or whatever, is probably at home."

"What do you propose we do, advisor?" D'Joser questioned. "Knock on the doors and give a sales pitch? There must be a thousand apartments in this place?"

D Light checked under his breath, "A sales pitch? Yeah, that might work, except I don't mean to knock on every door. Remember what I said about a divan opening for a private apartment? I recommend you just check the doors that are off limits to the spunk games. That'll narrow it down a whole lot."

Lyla looked unconvinced. "Well, why don't you enlighten us robots on how we are to ID the apartments that are off limits. Do they have a sign on the door, or do we have to jack into a spunk game or something?"

"Exactly!" D Light exclaimed. "Yeah, when you're in a spunk game you don't even see the private doors, but of course those outside the game can see them. It's like the private doors don't exist in the game, so instead of seeing a door, it's skinned over as a regular wall."

"If you say so," D'Joser said, trying to make sense of the foreign culture that surrounded him. "So, what? You have to be jacked in and jacked out at the same time to see the difference?"

"Essentially, yes," D Light affirmed. "I'll jack into a spunk game and Sonogone, my familiar, will ping the location of the rail doors to me. When I get a location of a rail door that I can't see in the game, then I'll know it's private."

Lyla nodded, "And that's when I knock on the door and ask them if they're interested in a once in a lifetime offer for reducing their race, and all they have to do is open their apartment up to the game."

"We're two are beautiful together," D'Joser stated dryly.

D Light laughed, "Nice. You then knock whoever is at the door." D Light took a moment to access Sonogone and then said, "The Family that manages this race is called Gilbert Gold. We'll just say that we're representatives of GGG."

"You want me to do door to door sales?" D'Joser clutched at his chest.

"I'm afraid I can't do it because I'll be jacked into the spunk game," D Light replied apologetically. "It'll be more efficient if I don't have to jack around out."

Lyla frowned. "That sounds like fun. It but D'Joser and I are not exactly dressed as sales people," she added.

D Light took note that Lyla had just addressed him by his nickname. He blurted that, "Well, I'm not sure how, exactly, sales people dress, but I think you should at least consider taking your royal suit. And, I recommend you do the talking. Lyla. Once they see you they'll believe anything you say. Remember, spunkers are mostly men." He gave Lyla a flirtatious wink.

"Well, well, look at you D!" exclaimed Lyla, smiling widely. "Looking pretty comfortable now, I see." D Light smiled broadly.

I will do what?" asked Djoser, who was already irritated by the back-and-forth banter between D Light and Lyrz. "Oh, I know, maybe I can do the sales pitch to the gop'quans," Djoser said sarcastically.

Lyrz smiled sweetly. "No, Djoser my dear, as much as I'd enjoy watching you work your charms with the gentlemen of the ghouls, we need you as security detail. Remember, it's not the spunkies we care about, it's the demons, and if the demons think there's something up, there might be trouble." Lyrz's expression became serious as she continued, "You need to stay alert and keep your hand near your hip."

"True, and I'll be jacked in, so I won't rightly see what's going on," D Light added.

Djoser glared at D Light, a slow smile spreading across his face as though he was thinking. *Like you would be of any use anyway.* "Funny, I thought we brought bodyguards for that very purpose," he said.

Lyrz rolled her eyes. "Look, we've all lived under Rule 7 for decades, right? I would hope the three of us could handle one demon."

D Light thought about his throwing disc, Djoser's short curved sword, and Lyrz's unmatched skill with open hand martial arts fighting styles. Yes, his rather new concept that they had all become successful in conflict in their own individual ways. From the day they joined House Teles this had been a priority.

Djoser looked skeptical. "Yeah, well, demons are not constrained by House Law, so we're likely to be up against modern weapons. We'd better not get confrontational. Let's just ID the beast and call it in."

Chapter 8

Why are spunk games, games of entertainment, required by House Law to include physical activity? Why can't we play spunk games lying still in our beds as past generations?

Sloth is a sin for a reason. Inactivity has a price. Although modern medicine is capable of keeping anyone fit regardless of their activity level, it costs more to keep the sloth healthy than it is to keep the active man so. Thus, the skyline can opt for lazy virtual reality spunk games, but those of us in The Game, we have to play by the rules.

—Excerpt from "The Rules, a Life Primer"

D Light heard the familiar whistling noise as he jacked into NewWorld. The hallway that connected the apartments of the floor was brightly lit to red life, with subdued shades of green and brown. Via Cogit earth's for walls and a bright green mossy floor, but as his nervous system plugged into the game, the light dimmed and the hallway turned to rough brown stone. Tintles spaced at regular intervals materialized to light the way. In the distance he heard someone screaming. A woman, he thought, being tortured. Or perhaps it was just a lure set by some clever fiend, patiently waiting for a hero to fall for the ruse.

There were the sounds of other creatures too—faint growling, the occasional snarl, the familiar distant clang of metal against metal signaling combat underway. And there were more ordinary sounds, like the subtle cacophony of dripping water from a thousand sources. The helplessly in hallways and chambers checked full to the brim with vermin and muscous, was leaky, dark, and in great need of repair.

The smell of rotting flesh—faint, but unpleasant just the same—permeated everything. Olfactory input in NewWorld was not as sophisticated as auditory or visual, being less important for game play, but the game did have a few secrets in its treasury. Unfortunately, most of them were foul. Rotten was particularly popular. The rotten stench of death left by carcasses in the battlefield, the pungent aroma of rotting food abandoned by the long since unburied carcass, and the Opge's breath (who lived on an assortment of Soul know what).

D Light had barely accelerated to his surroundings when the wind of heavy footsteps caught his attention. They were close by and growing louder. Without hesitation, he summoned an invisibility spell. Working one hand while tracing a symbol in the air with the other, he murmured an arcane phrase. As his spell completed, D Light was relieved to discover that he could no longer see his own hand. That was a good thing, as he sometimes made mistakes, especially when naked.

The spell took effect some two seconds, for only a few seconds later, a lumbering beast of a creature tumbled the corner and headed in his direction. A Malice, as the creature was called, resembled a man only in its general shape, having two arms, two legs, a torso, and a head. This was fitting, given that Malices were human-bodies that corruption by Selen, the son of the dark Queen Persephone. But the Malice's general shape and size was the end of the similarities between these rascals and men. Hitting, growling, howling sounds of muscles and other more irregular and fleshlike lumps. Through the amorphous face peered beady, pink eyes which glinted slightly in the twilight of the hall. Around the eyes were crimson red sockets that excreted thin trickles of blood down its veridical face—a face that most closely resembled raw hamburger. The creature did not breathe as it stalked, for it had no nose or mouth only its fowl-like tongue in proving Malices, incidentally, were only lesser devils, but were

NeverWorld not something he relied upon.

Having played NeverWorld for countless hours in the past, D Light's gaming habits were nearly hard-wired. He had to fight the urge to blast this enemy in the back as it passed by him. "Nostalgia" was the term-quirks used for computer-generated enemies in the game, and destroying them was one way to get points in NeverWorld and build up the power of the character one played. He had to restrain himself of his purpose here, not for merriment or glory in battle, but to look for doors or the absence thereof. For D Light, this was a sort of agony, akin to sending a gambler into a casino just to count men with broken hair. It was a mind-bogglingly mundane task in an exciting world.

Two ghosts stood nearby, one to his left and another just behind. They looked like human-shaped jellyfish with only the very edges of their bodies highlighted by this translucent blue, while the fill of the forms was nearly transparent. D Light supposed the ghosts to be Lysa and Djoser, but he could not ascertain which was which because NeverWorld rarely altered objects or people as they looked in the real world. In fact, one could never predict how the game's artificial intelligence would skin non-game objects and creatures. From the game's perspective, it was only important to make clear who was a speaker and who was not. Skinning non-quirks as horror ghosts enabled those submerged in the game to identify the non-physic without losing continuity of the game.

Both ghosts had the appearance of being men. One was an old man with an underling crooked smile, wearing only wisps of rags. The other was younger, although D Light could hardly tell because the man's face—the entire head, actually—was split down the middle to the rest of the man, much like a leg of wood cleaved on the edge by an ax. This ghost was naked, and one of his arms twisted.

No sooner had D Light focused in on the ghosts when a pump siren appeared over each one declaring, "Not in play. Do not interact with this agent." It really was an incredible use of space when D Light thought about it. All of these alternate dimensions occupying the same physical area, dimensions dictated by software. Consequently, NeverWorld was not the only game available in the ghosts. There was Mission: Impossible (a spy game), Sentinels on Time (a surreal death match), Golden Age (a 21st century war game), Goodgame (a social networking game), and several other less popular options. One would think that with so many people playing so many different games that it would be chaos, but unlike two quarks versus in the same game, they were deemed as a "collateral proof" to one another—just like the two ghosts appeared to D Light.

Although speakers avoided running into sideline props, they otherwise ignored them because the props typically had no real importance to the game they were in. D Light now found himself in the unique position of caring about the props, at least the ones that represented Lysa and Djoser. How else could he coordinate with them on finding the doors? In response to this, Serenous verified that the old man was, in fact, Lysa, and the kitesack accident was Djoser.

Restoring his attention back to NeverWorld, D Light breathed a sigh of regret as he watched the thick-set door hulk back of the Mahoe continue down the hall. It was uncommon to find one of these death by truck and D Light had the advantage of full surprise. He felt a twinge of frustration as his opportunity for any experience points disappeared around the corner, but he reminded himself that he was playing a much bigger and more important game tonight.

"Serenous, watch for doors that appear in the natural world but not in the game. When you see one, go sit next to it." D Light stated out loud so that Lysa and Djoser could hear.

His familiar pinged confirmation.

Although Serenous was not as intelligent as most humans or human-based products, it did have the advantage of being able to process multiple inputs at once. Serenous could monitor the game D Light was jacked into while using the real world. However, D Light had to be generally speaking in order to give Serenous access to the game. Spooky games like NeverWorld did not allow females or other software to access it without a human expense being jacked in. Otherwise, quarks could use software to scout out the game before jacking in, which was cheating.

It was a while before they found a private door. D Light watched the Lysa ghost knock on it. Just as D Light had expected, the door upon which she was knocking appeared to him as a solid wall. There was some muffled talking, but D Light could scarcely make out any of it. For real sounds were always somewhat muted while jacked in. Unable to hear much, he did manage to catch Lysa saying the phrases, "increased it" and "think yes." Her voice, husky but shy flirtation, sounded natural as it emanated from the old man's ghostly mouth.

Additional doors were discovered as the night wore on, and the team soon dropped into an efficient routine. Fortunately, it was getting late and most residents had retired to their apartments. Unbeknownst to the residents, Lysa was having her familiar take images of them as they came to the door and then comparing them to images in the database. After doing this for a while, Lysa even dropped the mas of being a suboperator and simply told the often poorly-eyed occupant that she had the wrong apartment. Such a terse exchange was adequate, as it only took a second or two for Prefire to greet the suspect.

Meanwhile, D Light spent most of his energy on avoiding being seen by the natives. As his invisibility spell began to wear off, he had to rewire it, and his spell runes was dwindling. Worse yet, some of the creatures lurking about could see him, despite the invisibility. He tried especially hard to avoid them, often doubling back down the hall, which confused Djoser and Lysa as they tried to stick with him.

Where the flip are you going? Lysa asked over a blink.

can't sell. There's a guy coming. D Light sent his mental reply as he ran. The goddess must be indulging, sticky delicious that differed after him was not fooled by D Light's invisibility, having no eyes anyway.

A what? Lynn's thought signature was intended. For Soul's sake, this is stupid! I can't believe I agreed to this—this, whatever it is we're doing.

D Light murmured as he ran. Look, I don't want to get flagged. If I do, I get tossed out and it'll be a half hour before I can reappear.

What? murmured Lynn. We didn't take you along to do any spawning, why? You want to do that, get a concubine and a mate?

D Light sprinted down a flight of stairs and out onto a grassy courtyard. He had lost the gas, but hibiscus were now chasing him. Nearer than a last kiss—certainly a much for D Light— they too could see through his invisibility. Perhaps something, maybe the gas, had cut a split on the hibiscus, which enabled them to pierce through his invisibility flower. Whatever the case, he could hear their stinging down the stairs and he had only a moment to hide. With one furtive leap, he hid behind himself onto the ground and took cover behind some virtual rubble.

Lynn followed, Djoser trailing behind her. She looked around farthest to confirm no one was watching and then glowered down at D Light who was lying motionless, all curled up like a pouncing praying mantis. Lynn blinked D Light, knowing he could not properly hear her audible voice, *Are you insane? Why are you lying on the ground?*

I'm hiding. I'm behind some rocks and stuff. D Light blinked back. You'd understand if you were jacked in. D Light's blink was there as though he was trying to whisper within mind.

Well, I understand you need to spend, but we just like ideas following you around like this—not to mention it might look conspicuous to the domain if it were to observe us. From now on, Djoser and I will just chill somewhere and you ping us on the map where the private doors are and we'll follow up.

Djoser trotted up alongside Lynn. He was slightly winded. Look, Captain, why don't you take care of the legwork? Djoser added apologetically. You know, you're the boss and we're the brain.

Sounds reasonable, D Light pinged back. He wondered why they hadn't done it that way from the start, then being the brain and all, but he was careful not to send the thought.

Having been led to his own device, D Light opened the door, Senegoneus forwarded the coordinates to Djoser and Lynn and then, without waiting to see the results, D Light moved on. So far he had not found many private doors, even fewer than he had expected—only 36 private doors, compared to over 1,000 residences open to the public.

The small number of private doors made Djoser and Lynn's job easy, but did nothing for D Light as he crept to keep his bearings in the massive apartment mounds. The mounds were several stories above the ground, and the tunnels that connected them were like fat, many-disked with narrow round roads on top. Worse than the scope of mounds was the unpredictability of the layout. The walls, the floors and ceilings, indeed, the entire structure was a living thing—DroVine being the general blanket term for the stuff. D Light had read that the term DroVine came from that flex. Apparently, vivinax that flex (scientific name Drocephala) was among the work horses of early genetic engineers. They were cheap to get, cheap to maintain, and they bred faster than EimeriaTM induced rabbits. You could breed several generations of Drocephala in a matter of days and check their rakish sticky bee colony in a tad before hand.

DroVine was like that too—infinately useful, cheap, and grew like mad. Its spungy but nearly impenetrable tissue was the wood and steel of the present day organic housing. No costly labor or materials required, just time and sunlight. If one wanted to get fancy about it, they could build some synthetic states and some basic skeletal framing. The DroVine would happily grow over the scaffolding, accommodating it like its flesh plus OfCourse, even then, the layout would not turn out exactly like the architect expected. Because of this, DroVine was not for the control freak, but rather for those who wanted a cheap place to live. To grow a house, a person simply found some land and phoned it—that is, if the plant had not already colonized the area on its own.

Thanks to hyper-photosynthesis during the growing season, DroVine went from seed to a small incision that was large enough to sleep in, within two weeks. Within a month, you had yourself a small home, complete with several chambers. DroVine naturally formed cavities in itself, which tended to connect with one another. If modifications were desired, a door from one cavity to another, for example, one would simply cut out a rectangular hole in the wall and place a hinged door in the opening. The DroVine, in an attempt to fill the hole within a day or two, would grow over the hinges, but not over the door itself. Since it would be coated with chemi suppression enzymes suspended in a soapy polymer. However, the later home owner would not even bother with a door. They would simply cut an upside down "T" all (like an old camping tent) and meet the edges of the wound with the suppression enzymes to keep the wound from healing.

Curtain windows was even easier than doors, but most did not bother with them. In one's mind, SkatWare could adorn the occupant's chamber walls, ceiling, and floor with any vista desired—from fiery canyons, to the ocean, to a miniature, to the Martian landscape—all in real time (with a little over a three minute delay in the case of the Mars scenery). This allowed one to be outside all the time without the troublesome hot, cold, wet, and bugs which the outdoors often featured.

because DeVine dwellings had no real floor plans, no reliable maps created. Indeed, even if they did, they would not return accurate for long. Like all living things, DeVine grew and shifted over time; walls narrow, chambers collapsed on themselves, and new ones formed. Consequently, D Light found it extremely challenging to find all the hidden hallways and chambers, many of which presented themselves unknowingly. Tired down to the floor, levitated upon balloons going upward, hidden crawl holes connecting adjoining chambers, it was anxiety. Squandered time usually too busy to put much energy into ensuring the details of elegant interior design. Indeed, D Light imagined they finished their ad-hoc architecture, believing they added variety and a touch of surprise to the games played here.

Several hours passed before D Light finally got fringed. He had wandered into an arch devil's lair. Gold coins, jewelry, the armor and weapons, books of lore, and magic items of various sorts greatly adorned the walls and tables in the resplendent room. The devil prince was not in his lair, but his dog was, although not just a run of the mill canine, it was a hellhound and, worse yet, it had been super-buffed up by some dark magic. D Light hastily got a look at the treasure before the beast came out of nowhere and ripped out his throat.

Chapter 9

Photosynthesis, perhaps THE most important chemical pathway on our planet. And yet from an engineering perspective, it is a failure. You heard what I said—an obsolete and complete FAILURE! Four percent efficiency? Hah! Mother Nature worked on this grand creation for four billion years and this is her noble offering? Surely, we can do better.

—Edward Crumple, PhD (Monsie Corporation) 2018

Todget's right eye was nearly swollen shut and the pain on his neck was deep. Still, he did not stop to properly tend to it. Like always, the moment the light was over he took just enough time to get his money and then he got out. For tonight's fight is The PE, Todget was paid more than \$500,000. The opponent paid with his life. Todget clucked tightly the bag of filth, crumpled \$1,000 bills. The money may be good, but my ritual is even better, he thought while walking home to his apartment.

It was his well-deserved unwinding time, and he could hardly wait to commence it. First, he would remove the life white hair from under his hood, take out from it the appropriate medical supplies, and then carefully and methodically rub his body with pungent healing ointment and wrap his wounds with antiseptic white gauze. The gauze was magic in its ability to soothe and deliver its way into the wounds, bringing welcomed relief to the localized pain. Next, he would take a shower to wash away the filth of both the humans and his own skin. The shower would be made extra hot, and while standing in the streams of scalding water, he might even smile. Finally, relaxed and sitting cross-legged at the foot of his bed, surrounded by darkness, he would let his muscles and mind relax.

Todget let himself dwell on such things, which is probably why he did not notice the female human standing suspiciously close to his door, looking like a stranger to those parts. Crouching up from under his heavy hood, he recognized the woman. She was the one who had knuckled on his door hours ago, before he had let her go. He had not assumed the door. By *Shag, what is she about?* he wondered. It was too late to turn back, for if he did so it would appear odd and he would draw attention to himself. Instead, he decided to wait right past her and his apartment and return later when she was not looking about.

"Greetings," the woman exclaimed as he passed by. She bowed her head slightly while turning her face upward so that her emerald green eyes could remain fixed on him. She showed him a big gleaming smile. Such white teeth, so straight, Todget thought. Teeth always reminded him of these humans really were—just a shell with a little softness around it. That's how he thought of humans every time he went into The PE with one to punch, kick and tear at it.

A hairy racket of a thing dived about the mysterious woman's call. His eyes turned up at him in an unthinking state. *It is a machine,* Todget thought. He did not like these constructs, for it was difficult enough to trust the living, who at least had some common ground with one another. What would complicate any living creature to want to make such monsters?

The woman's lips pursed slightly as though about to utter something, but she did not. She simply smiled again and then began walking down the hall past him. Todget did not return her smile. Rather, he hung his face down, watching only the floor as he walked subliminally away down the corridor in the opposite direction.

A good fifteen minutes passed before Todget felt a soft nudge to return back to his door. Looking around, he did not notice the tiny points of eyes belonging to the beast peering at him from around the bend of another hallway as he wound his card past the key panel. Todget was one of the few in the mansion to have a lock that could be opened with an actual key card. It cost extra for a lock of this type; instead, most residents preferred to have a membership embedded in them that proved their identity when approaching their dwelling. Todget would not abide anyone injecting machines into him. To him, the key card lock was well worth the money.

being slain by a hellhound and fearfully ejected from NeverWorld, it would be nearly an hour before D Light could re-appear and continue his search for prime flowers in the sparker glades. And so, after rattling the rest of the team of the northack, he sighed deeply and mouthed a silent prayer, asking that they find the dromen fast. The sooner they found it, the more hours points they get. That is, if they find it at all.

He then leaned against a poplar tree, its paper thin leaves rattling ostentatiously under the moderate night breeze. There was no light, save the moon, which cast soft shadows upon the scene below. He was standing on the top of an apartment mound. Thick, dewy grass blanketed the DréVine beneath him. Stationing himself at the top of this taller than average mound enabled him to get a better look around. From this vantage he hoped to get an idea of how much was left to search.

Stargossa informed him that it was nearly dawn. Any minute the eastern sky would begin to glow as the rising sun began to ascend. D Light's view of the surrounding land was hindered by other tall mounds in the distance and by tall, woody-stalked flowers that surrounded him. D Light pushed aside a few of the moss and stucco flower stalks that had managed to grow up to his eye level. The stems were gently but did not break since breaking them would actually take some effort. They had been engineered to be pliant but tough, a good design for wall-like plants in a place where people held little regard for designated trails. Soon, when the sun broke, those beautiful and potent marvels of industry would get to work converting the sun's rays into energy—energy to be used by the mound beneath. The strong, thrice-stem of the DréVine mound contained just enough elasticity to give him the sensation of walking on an exceptionally tight trampoline.

It was quiet at this time of the morning. A few hard-core sparkers sprinkled the mounds here and there, but for the most part, the place had cleared out. However, as soon as the sun came up there would be more of them to be sure—the morning players, the responsible ones who tried to get in a little spark before they reluctantly grinded for an hour or two to get a half ration of points. They would then take the rest of the day, as well as night, to spark some more. D Light knew the drill, intensely.

Years ago, D Light himself had been hard-core, the hardest of the hard-core in fact. He used to engage in an activity called "ranching," a term that meant he lived entirely off the land. Not that ranching was that big of a deal, as many sparkers did it at one time or another. Finding food lodging was easy. There were tons of wild DréVine berries in between the official housing tracts. The staff grew anywhere and it spread tenaciously. If one could find a bit of abandoned land, chances were they had somewhere to stay. And D Light did more than just shield one from rain and the morning dew. It actually regulated its own internal temperature and humidity, which made for quite a cozy dwelling. Nevertheless, living in abandoned DréVine meant that one had to go without a few things. For one thing, you had no electricity, no lights, no wiring of any kind. However, this was of little concern. One could just jack into Skarbliss to be able to see and one's brother or on-board computer could provide trivial entertainment, like music and video. D Light rarely used electricity at home, except to recharge Stargossa.

What was more of a hassle than lack of electricity was no running water. Luckily, bathing was not a high priority to most Rambos. And when it came time to relax yourself, you could do that outside, or if you were lucky and had an extra DréVine chamber in your hoard, you could just do it there; after all, although DréVine was efficient at extracting nitrogen from the air, it did not mind the extra humidity.

For a Rambo, the acquisition of food in the wild was even easier than the acquisition of shelter. Everywhere one went there were trees and flowers engineered for the sole purpose of creating nectar, the most ubiquitous source of energy on earth. The sticky, honey-viscous liquid could be eaten by people, predators, most machines, and many plants, including DréVine. And nectar came in many flavors, all of them strong enough to impress even a disapproving palat, or at least for a while.

Indeed, a Rambo did not have to invent the basics, and they did not have to buy anymore for anything either. The real downside of being off the land was the loss of drugs, and not just the performance enhancers that helped one achieve his goals. Worse than that was the eventual reversion of one's health contract. The health contract was one of the main costs any player—sparkers and grinders alike—had to bear. One could always tell which persons had been ranching for a while because they were the ones who were starting to show their age, having gone off contract. Not much at first, maybe just some hair under the eyes and a few laughlines. But little by little would soon become deep ones, laugh lines would become permanent creases, and the next thing you knew you just started to look like the oldies in general. D Light remembered how one guy he used to spar with had even developed a few specks of gray in his hair. That served as a wake-up call for D Light, who knew he was headed down the same destructive path. It was then that he knew it was time to turn back to the Overflood, back on the road to salvation, an understanding that was both a great relief and a painful loss.

D Light pointed down on the soft rolling hills, trees and trails below. He imagined what it would be like to have to depend on artificial light to see in the dark, to see the game generations ago. He had played spark games out in post-industrial cities. These games arrived for authenticity, so he felt he knew the old-time night city well enough—the countless eyes of car headlights swaying along the freeway, the R-shaped street lights, the illuminated curtains of countless windows of synthetic shoddy apartment buildings and the distant light patterns of partially lit skyscrapers and high-rises. Most of these unsightly artifacts of the past had since been removed or overgrown by DréVine.

D Light was grateful to be living in a day and age when artificial lights were unnecessary, when a person could just

into a skin when they needed to navigate in the dark without during their light with others. It was granted to be being in the age of Nanoskes, the technology that made this possible.

Indeed, Nanoskes were the only thing more ubiquitous on Earth than D-Light. They were far too small to be seen with the naked eye, but they were everywhere. Although these simple bots had limited capabilities, what they could do they did extremely well. Nanoskes covered everything on the planet—every plant, every rock, every wall, every surface of everything. They climbed onto animals and people and then embedded themselves in the living tissue. As they traveled, looking for a place to plant themselves, they would listen to the tiny, door-range signals that emanated from brethren. Once they found a spot that was neither too close nor too far from others of its kind, it would plug down and stick to the surface on whatever object it had chosen. Once it had found its permanent home, it would send out its own "I am here" signal over and over until its energy source finally exhausted itself.

Nanoskes spontaneously formed a regular pattern whereby every nanoske was exactly 0.004 millimeters apart from one another. Although this spacing might seem minuscule to a person, it is like an ocean of distance to a nanoske, which consisted of a mere few thousand molecules itself. Together, their immense global coverage and their talent for announcing their existence created a three-dimensional map of the world that software could easily understand. And, they did this with greater precision than any satellite. More importantly, they marked moving objects in real time whether outdoors or inside.

Hence, there was no need for artificial light at night in this contemporary world. The tiny, invisible chips implanted in D Light's eyes when he had his Mind Interface Kit installed could "see" the nanoskes and rendered for D Light a perfectly accurate representation of the world in total darkness. And it wasn't just the ability to see, but also the ability to hear. By focusing his attention on a location covered with nanoskes, it was likely that there would be some audio output there along with the visual. From now, as D Light scanned the vista before him he heard a male's voice calling, "Fighter needed. Join the Dr. Slegers. Probably a tank." There was an accent in the message but eyes indicating to heave within. As D Light's eyes revolved to the right of that message, a video of an armor clad party of horses bearing a small army of nanoske propulsors, which arrested his eyes for a moment. This pause encouraged the poppy to focus in so that D Light had the opportunity to see the action up close. This message was just a hint, a quaker signal to spend a few pulsy points to display their most proud moments over their doorstep. Messages like this, ones aimed at other speakers, had been burning him whenever he was sleeping, and since he was not there to speak, it was getting more than mildly irritating. In fact, it had become downright overwhelming and he felt a slight headache coming on. Jerking out of the SkatWares, he let the world go dark again, case the meager glow of the moon and surrounding stars. He then picked up Seneagous and held her cut up above the flowers so it could get a good look around. Seneagous had better sensory hardware onboard than D Light and the familiar would not only be able to see everyone in sight, but also be able to get a good image of them for the purpose of tracking.

No longer using SkatWares, D Light was now "reading" meaning that now he saw only what his natural eyes could see, a meager vista of shadows and silver provided by the moon and stars. This was a little unsettling, but he fought his urge to immediately jerk back in. It is this how the dream was this place? he wondered. Dreams typically did not have Mind Interface Chips and therefore would not be able to jack into SkatWares. Maybe seeing the world like the dream did would yield a clue.

After a minute of staring down the mound at the glowing landscape below, he shook his head and sighed. *How depressing* he thought. *No practical value at all.*

D Light was mad. He had been grinding hard through the night and the poppy he had been taking were beginning to wear off. The very excitement that thoughts occurred to him, Seneagous refused to give him another bump, but D Light declined. He had an overwhelming urge to sleep. Just a tiny nap, he told himself. It was as good a time as any to go unconscious since he had time to kill before he could re-open his NeverWorld. He ordered Seneagous to awaken him in twenty minutes, just long enough to feel refreshed, but not too long as to fall into a deeper slumber. Laying with his back to the poppy rose, he slumped down in a heavy heap. His eyes closed before he even hit the ground.

Master awaken. You have slept exactly twenty minutes. The voice was nothing, and it was as though it was coming from his own mouth. A chime, but not quite painful, ping echoed in his mind, bringing him to a fully awakened state. There was soft pink in his vision and so he opened his eyes as able. The sun had just begun creeping up from behind the mountains on the horizon, a sheet of fire that stratified the dense precipices as though it wished to consume them. The glow warmed his face ever so slightly.

He had been dreaming, as he always did, of calling on Terakona on a brilliantly sunny day, the wind just perfect. D Light always looked forward to sleep because his dreams were always relaxing—a welcome respite from the intensity of The Game. He very much wanted to just close his eyes again and let the sun's warmth ease him back to that place. Maybe just for a few more minutes.

Master, you still have a quest to finish. Do not let your recreation slow. As his familiar relayed these words in D Light's mind, he heard the machine and its ability to read his thoughts. However, the latter began to subside and give way to more irritation as the poppy Seneagous had just given him began to work its charm magic. D Light had not asked for the drug. It was the sort of thing that made Seneagous worth all the points D Light had spent buying and maintaining his on-call-higher-crit brother. Seneagous knows what its master needed, as opposed to what he wanted.

Light moved up slowly but did not take a step, instead allowing himself a minute for the fix and business of sleep to BL. The shadows cast by the multitude of flowers around him were long and getting deeper as the sun continued its ascent. A few more squawks had filtered out while D Light had slept. It was time for D Light to be around squawks while not jacked in himself. Watching the dromas as they circled about, most only on their game, they reminded him of a horse squawk game he once played, a game that featured zombies. The similarity was eerie and a bit unsettling. He found himself hesitating as suddenly as possible so as not to attract their attention. Reminding himself that they were not, in fact, zombies, he took in a series of deep breaths and let them out slowly. The squawks, however, did not know him and so he pushed himself off of the tree he had been leaning against and turned around in a circle, surveying the area with a heavy dose of paranoia.

He spotted a woman only one tree away. Her face was tilted up toward the sunrise and her eyes were shut—not that it is a dehumanizing way as one communicating with her familiar, but merely to avoid getting directly into the sun. D Light realized that he had not seen her earlier because the trunk of the tree on which he had been leaning obscured his view. Presumably, she could not see him behind her closed lids, so he did not hesitate to stare. She was beautiful, fair, and there was an inexplicable innocence about her that D Light found alluring. Her long, blond locks, illuminated by the sun's early light, shimmered like corn silk, and they continued to show-dance with the flowers and poplar branches caught in the morning's gentle breeze. As though in a trance, D Light could not take his eyes off the creature.

Manoe, as you have pointed out, a female in this male-dominated region is uncommon, and so I took the liberty of attempting to march her to an individual in the domain database. Result: No match found.

Still inspecting the enigmatic woman, D Light was about to ask Semogenesis to expand his search when the drollful familiar informed him that he had already performed the task and had found no matches for anyone in The Chord.

D Light was perplexed. It was rare to come across a "Nobody," someone who had managed to remain completely anonymous to even The Chord. Indeed, even a run-of-the-mill Soldier could usually be found somewhere in The Chord. He scrutinized the woman again and quickly determined that she was no Soldier, as her face was entirely too perfect to be a descendant of a "nasty" bloodline. She must have had engineering in a recent ancestor; perhaps the last generation before human genetic engineering was banned.

He immediately thought concubine. That would explain why she was not found in The Chord. In most cases, the women of high-end concubines would spend no expense to scrub their property out of The Chord or to give them like identities. It added to their mystique. But something in his gut told him that that theory was incorrect, and so he quickly discarded it. D Light had turned his air share of concubines, and this woman simply did not fit. First, the lines that framed her face were just a tad softer than they should be. For example, the Thaisin bow (a well-established concubine trait) that D Light favored prominently, although absolutely meaning, had defined, almost cruel lines which projected a nearly predatory look that declared, "I'm going to rock your world, little boy." Of course, there was a variety of concubines to keep even the most jaded client interested and this included more income-looking choices like this girl. However, D Light had spent many hours over the years scouting catalogs and had never encountered one quite like this one. She might be custom built, he thought. She bore no visible product tags, but that was to be expected. Only the most exotic rare-a-body products were tags.

D Light tilted his head and leaned further to one side in hopes of catching some clue as to the girl's identity. He determined that while her looks did not completely rule out concubine, her body language certainly did. A high-end rare-a-body would not be caught dead carrying herself like this girl. Her back arched like a bow, her arms hung loose and downward as though pulled by gravity with more force than the rest, and her face turned upward into the light. In contrast, concubines always had a mock posture, which they vigilantly maintained—a tilt and straight stance, chest lifted slightly, face tilted only a few degrees upward, and vacant eyes that were always fixed straight ahead. This was not so much a matter of training as it was instinct. Training cost resources and could be hatched or unknown, while DNA offered the better quality control.

She could be a human concubine, D Light pondered. They were much less common than their original counterparts, but offered a uniqueness and spirit that their cloned competition could not. *But what the hell is she wearing?* D Light thought. She wore a long, black cloak that opened in the front to expose a cheap synthetic blouse with far too many flower imprints on it to be considered beautiful. *No concubine, whether human or product, would wear that atrocity. Period.* Still gazing at the hideous blouse and cloak combination, D Light could make out a slender but athletic torso with noticeably larger than proportionate breasts. Clothes aside, this woman was striking—in striking that it had taken him far too long to notice the blouse, the one dead giveaway of who she was—or more specifically, of who she was not.

A member of the Bergamens family? Although typically not concubines, they were unfairly attractive and rare—for family breeding purposes—had retained Northern European traits in their ancestry. They also happened to have a large House net fifteen miles from the location. D Light felt he knew. The Bergamens seemed unlikely. Again, the clothing! The Bergamens were very socially conscious, and any family member who dressed like that would have been disowned without hesitation. Unless it's some sort of hazing ritual. D Light thought. Every Family had its own entrance requirements for new player draftees. An interesting thought, but still not likely. The Bergamens were devoted and thrived rarely life; this woman was just standing there. Also, D Light had never seen a Bergamens without a familiar nearby.

was all very mysterious, and D Light felt frustration at the realization that despite all of his scrutinizing and pondering, he was still so close to an identity for the girl that when he lost his eyes on her.

D Light decided it was time to take a different approach. He thought it would be useful to initiate conversation in order to gain some additional clues. He was then about to speak off some more remarks about the weather when he stopped himself. He had a better idea. *Stereoguns*, published a new game challenge to any used contacts. The challenge is to correctly guess this girl's family. If no one gets it before she tells me, I win. *Just-in is 1,000 points. Give 'em a real-time feed from me, but there is to audio and visual only.*

Stereoguns played confirmation and D Light leaned back against the tree and waited quietly. The girl remained still.

By *Don, count me in!* D Light heard a familiar voice in his mind.

The generic game machine followed the with *K, Steve has joined the game.*

Easy points, *Don, K, Steve chimed in with a Tumbler™. I say there is no family. She's a Sideline for now. I mean, what the hell is she wearing?*

I'm on this bitch, nobody another familiar voice, that of his other brother.

Ternablr has joined the game, entered the artificial game machine.

Come on *K, you got no judge of character*, declared a cocky Ternablr. He continued, *Sideline? That bitch is way too rare to be one of those crack hippies! She's gotta be selling all that business to the quantities. That chick she's wearing, where? That's sure clean on for now. Ternablr sent the link and followed it up with a micro-archive of him doing a stupid, taunting dance that resembled running backward in the air.*

The debate continued over the next few minutes as D Light pulled around the tree at the women in question. Additional players joined—C, Flava God, Bro Grl, Bltz, and Sugar Papa. Jenes were put in and additional hints were made. When D Light thought enough interest had accumulated and the pot was sweet enough, he decided it was time to break the tie. He pushed off from his tree and came out into the open.

"Is there something I can help you with," she inquired. The girl did not move, nor did she even open her eyes.

D Light was caught off guard, completely shocked and speechless. So he knew for how long she had been aware of his surveillance of her. She must have a familiar nearby. Maybe she is a thugperson after all. If so, D Light decided it best to be direct, logical, and honest.

"Um, because you are beautiful I prefer to look at you more than anything else currently available. I apologize for staring. I meant no disrespect. I, um, I didn't think you would notice." D Light scratched up his face and scratched himself lightly on the forehead for stammering and sounding like an idiot.

Wow, *creaky and stutter-like, Don. Way to work it, find K, Steve over the game chat, finding off the remark with a r0bb0se™. D Light put the chat on mute.*

As he finished speaking, the girl's eyes shot open and she turned her head to look at him hard. Only her head. Her body remained slumped as though so content with its current position that it refused to obey its mistress. She seemed surprised, puzzled even.

There was awkward silence. Then, all at once, the vertebrae in her brow dislocated and her lips relaxed, although she did not smile. Her body straightened and she took a slow step toward D Light. The devil's light colored her face outside and her skin gleamed. Now that she was fully facing him and a touch closer, he could see her with greater clarity. Yes, her features were indeed soft. Soft from under her face, and lips. Soft, but not weak, like a touch's flame that gently flickered to entrance an onlooker just before burning him.

"So, I'm about the best thing around here, huh?" The woman casually stretched out her languid arms and swept them about, looking back at him pointedly with large, reflecting blue eyes.

D Light felt stupid now. That's what I got for gawking, he thought. *Oh well, everyone comes off as a fool from time to time. Since he did not let her, chances were he would never see this woman again anyway. So, why not play the idiot? He had nothing to lose and nothing to gain, except of those points flurrying around in the gaming game he was hosting. He realized there were more fun being played. Apparently, the players were excited by the first exchange.*

D Light took a breath and nearly shouted, "Wish, you are! I mean, don't get me wrong, these are great!" He wanted to one of the vacant-eyed zombies which stood several meters down the road. The speaker to which he returned was a man who was crouching down, appearing to be spying intently on an unseen menace.

A silent laugh suddenly erupted from the amazed girl. "True, then, you don't appear so bad after all, I suppose, for a—" Her voice had been confident and smooth, but then stopped suddenly like a sprinter at his first hour making full into a stone wall. Just then her smile, a byproduct of laughter, subsided, and her nose crinkled. Her eyes faded.

A moment passed and then it was D Light who was puzzled. "For a what?" D Light leaned in hesitantly. He saw what could be a look of disgust on her face. He repeated the question, "Don't leave me hanging. Not bad for a what?"

"Well, for a male, I meant to say. Your kind is not exactly what

would call himself. She shook her head as if she knew.

D Light smiled. "Yes, we men are all angles and business with talk to irritate the eye." He gestured over the length of his body as though to say "have a good look."

The girl nodded and puckered her lips with mock admiration. "Aesthetics aside, might I ask what you are doing out here? I saw you leaning against that tree and it inspired me. I thought, why not just stand here and take in the new state?"

"Invoking for some friends," he replied.

"I'm here as much for the sounds as the view," she stated while looking into the horizon. "There was a storm a few mornings back. Nothing like wind to stir your face and the rustle of the leaves and the branches and the grass," she added. The poplar tree leaves rustled with a hiss as though in agreement.

Then, D Light thought, *K, She was right. She's gotta be a Apple-Jilldancer.*

"Yes, it's nice for a ghema," returned D Light. *Oh Soul, I'm being stupid again. She might live here. D Light thought at the very moment the words left his mouth.*

The girl seemed oblivious to his face pae. "The flowers are especially appealing," she declared. "I hate it when those clouds go off the path, stamping about without a thought in their heads, crushing them underfoot like they're nothing."

D Light nodded with feigned sympathy. "Those clouds, huh? So, I take it you don't play spark games?" D Light grinned at her. He decided it was time to start fishing for clues regarding this girl's identity. There was a game on and he needed to keep up the physician's facade.

She shook her head.

"Um, you do know when those clouds are jacked in they can't actually see the flowers, right?"

She nodded, but D Light detected a note of surprise cross her face and so he continued. "Those gaps can't see you, or anything the way it actually is," D Light said offensively so as not to sound like a know-it-all.

The woman seemed to hesitate as she took the bait. "No, I don't...um, I don't play them. What are they like?"

D Light cleared his throat. "Well, a spark game works basically like any SkatWare app works. The game software keeps track of what is in the game and how everything behaves and, just as importantly, when everything is so, like I'll was jacked in, that tree would look different. Maybe it'd be a pillar from an ancient ruin or, I don't know, a big ol' lamp post. The tree's still there, it'd just have a different skin."

Although muted, D Light could see in the periphery a tree from Yarnahulu. It roared, "through lucuring the north. When you gonna ask her how much?"

"And the flowers?" she asked. "What do they see those as?"

Since D Light had been playing in NeverWorld among those very meadows for the last eight hours, he actually knew the answer. "Oh, they don't see the flowers at all. The game is only obligated to show you stuff that can hurt you if you run into it."

"So, the flowers don't make the cut," she murmured with disappointment. "They don't make the cut, so they don't even cut."

"We have the idea, yeah," replied D Light with a tone of encouragement. "Sparkles can feel them a little bit, maybe even be tipped up when they're running hard, but, in general, they don't pay them any mind. Sparklers really are oblivious to the world."

The girl crossed her arms, drawing her cloak around her. She adopted a pensive look, as though seeing Sparklers with a whole new level of understanding.

"Allow me to demonstrate," D Light said. He enthusiastically started down the meadow while waving for her to follow. She chuckled but gave up quickly, but smiled faintly as she tentatively trailed behind.

D Light got on his haunches not two feet from the crouching sparkler he had pointed out earlier. He then spoke loudly at the crouching man, using a strong, unidentifiable accent, "I say dare us: do you have a flash-flood of perridge?" The sparkler did not move, but continued staring straight ahead. His body, however, tensed up.

D Light stood up. "You see? They can barely hear you. That probably sounded to him like a faint echo."

The girl chuckled softly. "Interesting," she said quietly. She then walked over to D Light and the crouching man, somewhat hesitantly as though approaching a beast caught in a trap. She waved her hands in front of his face. The man followed the movement and scowled, but did not get out of his crouching position. Her eye widened with surprise. "I thought they were blind to the outside world."

"Not exactly blind," D Light whispered. "They see you as something, probably a ghema, um, but not a nasty or dangerous sort of ghema. If the game could cut you out completely it would, but --" D Light interrupted himself with a chuckle and continued. "I mean, just because you and he are in different mads and usual words does not change the hard fact that you share the same physical world. The game has to take that into account."

The girl seemed intrigued, having the curiosity of a young child. "What about touch?" she asked.

possibly, I don't remember." D Light was going to encourage any physical contact, but it was too late. The woman stuck her index finger into the ribc of the speaker. The man let out a grunt and his lips turned into a snarl as he swung his arm around her. The young woman leaped back just outside of his swing. *Nice reflexes,* D Light thought.

The man boomed, "That's make me come out there and beat you senseless, you bloody clod!" His eyes were fixed on the woman and he crouched low, as though to pounce. The girl had already assumed a position. D Light supposed a defensive one. Her knees were bent slightly and her body was turned inward so that she did not face him head on. Instead, her left flank was turned half toward him while her left arm bent up like a shield. He stepped forward and threw a punch hard and straight. She moved swiftly to one side while her left arm swept away his blow. He hit nothing. Although the punch left him wide open, she did not counterattack; rather, she swept back a pace and returned her defensive position. She did not appear afraid or angry, merely calm.

The speaker looked like he was about to yell at her again when he stopped cold. He looked over his shoulder for a moment and then ran off—sprouted, as though the devil himself was chasing him.

D Light's eyes met those of the confused girl and he grinned while hiding his lips. "As I was trying to tell you, yes, they can't tell just the same when it's the speaker game as when outside of it," he said. "Oh, and as I imagine you now know, they don't much like being messed with. It's considered very impolite."

The woman relaxed her posture as she watched the speaker go. "Crazy, all that!" She let out a short, nervous laugh. She paused, her bottom lip transferring into a pout. "I had had for him. I am sorry I bothered him. Still, how interesting, how sad."

"Sad? How do you mean?" D Light inquired.

"I mean, why would someone choose to blind themselves to the world? To move around like someone—I don't know, like someone who is..."

"Perfectly insane?" D Light interrupted with a laugh. "That's play them. Speaker games are designed to be fantastic! I play them myself." However, unlike the pellets that launch the play, I try to control my appetite."

She looked over at him. D Light hoped that it would be a look of affection, trust, warmth, or some other positive sentiment, but her expression did not contain any of those things. Rather, she appeared as she had while observing the speaker. She looked like an adult who was discussing something with news, childlike eyes, or perhaps like a young scientist who was lost on the trail of a new and exciting discovery.

D Light frowned his gaze and looked at a rock near his shoe. "Well," he muttered self-consciously, "if you're going to hang out among speakers you might consider trying one anyway."

"Then, yes, I expect the experience would be worthwhile, but I don't know. Going around treating this, this software? I wouldn't want anyone meeting with me." She giggled uncontrollably.

"Noah, unfortunately, squeakies—or, squeakies being the name for girls, I mean women—they get groped all the time. The guys usually get away with it 'cause the squeakies can't tell the guy unless they jack out of the game, and by then the guy is gone."

"Groped?" The woman looked at him with an amused smile.

"Forgot it," replied D Light. "Okay then, so you're obviously not a squeaker. So, how does a lovely creature like you spend your time?"

A text from player like came into D Light's periphery. *Blue rose. Need more info on this girl to get a lock.* The text was followed by a text from K. *She's not real, Noah. She, you're bleeding this out. Stop it up now.*

The girl adopted a soft, warm smile and answered, "Most nights I work at the university, but not tonight. I am just taking a walk."

By Anne confirmation on his apartment? Mother Lynn's priority-one blink barged into D Light's mind, startling him. She was broadcasting to the entire town.

Djoser chimed in. *Got it. That's it then. I'll call it let.*

No need. I called it in a few minutes back, Lynn replied.

A little late saying so, don't you think? Djoser inquired. *Holding out on me?*

Thought it prudent, Lynn returned. *I didn't want you all jumping up and down for joy, ripping off our friend. As they say, it ain't over 'til it's over.*

As the two nobles volleyed back and forth, D Light thought, *The demon locates? Nailed the first quest?*

Lynn had sent the coordinates of the demon's apartment, which indicated that it was located in the mound directly across from D Light, less than one hundred meters away. It would not be long now. An angel would have been dispatched quickly. He had never seen an angel in action. Of course, he would want to keep his distance nonetheless.

Due to all the blinks going off in his head, D Light had been quiet for a while and had momentarily forgotten about the girl who appeared to take the silence as a hint. She sighed, "Well, it's late. I think I ought to get going."

Presently, D Light returned his attention back to the girl and

sake, "Oh, you're going to want to stick around. You're about to see something you didn't see every day."

She looked at him quickly.

"Then soon enough?" he asked.

"Uh, no. I, I don't understand what you mean. Is this about the gene thing? I don't believe—"

D Light interrupted, "No, not a gene. Angels are the highest agents of the Divine Authority."

The woman smiled and nodded and took a few shuffling steps backward. She appeared slightly uneasy. "That sounds interesting but I'm, well, I'm late."

D Light persisted, "You know, the Divine Authority, the OverSeed? Where did this woman come from?" D Light wondered. Realizing explain speaker guess was odd enough, but the OverSeed? It was like being ignorant of gravity.

Indeed, the girl did not explicitly say that she didn't understand what he was talking about, but D Light could tell when someone was trying to fake it—sometimes trying to pass as knowledgeable, but not having a clue. A faker always had a distinctive look mixed with a little fear that screamed out, "See, see, let's just move onto another subject." He saw that look a lot in his profession (who didn't?), people trying to wing it. *Doesn't know the OverSeed? Was she from one of the outer colonies?*

Twice, there is a demon in that building there," D Light announced blithely, pointing down at the second below.

The girl's eyes widened and the color in her face drained fearfully, helping by her reaction, D Light assumed that she did know the definition of a demon.

D Light quickly added, "Don't worry. The angels are on their way. They will take care of him."

The girl looked away from D Light, her body tense. "Tidget? Tidget? Rat?" she screamed.

Chapter 18

Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

So wrote Shakespeare on the subject of the human condition. Expressing, eh? Countless past generations of people all over the earth armed themselves against such unshakable sorrow with faith, faith that life actually did have a purpose. But faith—the act of lying to oneself because it is convenient—the foundation of past religions, is no more than a historical footnote today.

We no longer need to ritually/ideally console each other in temples or churches checked full of symbols and idols. God is no longer a ghost. God is no longer reduced to an imaginary guide through the inscrutable and hellish/jungle of our lives. Who can question the divinity of the OverSeed in a world where no one is hungry? In a world where no illness is a choice rather than a fate? In a world where the immortals walk among us?

—Minister A. Dade from Pulpit Archives.

The angel approached slowly and quietly. There was at least a 99% chance the demon was in its residence, so there was no need to hurry. For the current mission the angel was a "he" and, if it ever came up, he had chosen to give himself the name "Jacob." Of course, human labels like "gender" did not apply to an entity like Jacob. His name and gender were more a reflection of how he chose to appear to others at the present time, rather than based on any physiological or psychological characteristics.

Having found nearby its target, Jacob proceeded at a brisk walk toward the apartment mound. He had a disheveled mass of black hair and serious eyebrows. His large brown eyes appeared to scan about casually, taking in the world around him. But Jacob did not use those eyes, as they were only for show. Jacob's true eyes could see so much more, and not just in front of him but also all around. Jacob's senses radiated out like a giant bulb of light, illuminating even the darkest shadows.

The angel passively scanned everything above or not that came within the reach of his scanners. Humans, products, vegetation, inanimate matter—all were inspected and categorized. Most of this data was filed away and not processed further. It was not important, at least not at present.

Jacob walked up the flight of steps that cut up into the bowels of the building. He had to decide whether to fly up the stairs or climb them manually. Low-speed flying was 434% faster than manually climbing and cost only 115.45% more energy; however, his "smooth protocol" did not call for flight, so he decided to climb the stairs manually.

"Tidget? Tidget? Rat?" a voice called from a distance. Based on the wave pattern of the voice, it was 93.0% likely to belong to a female human or human-based product. In addition, the pattern suggested (98.49%) that the caller was emotionally distressed. Jacob instantly deduced that this was a warning to his target, given that "Tidget" was the social name of the target.

was now highly likely (~70%) that the target had just been warned of repeating danger. The protocol Jacob had been using up to this point was based on the assumption that the target would be caught by surprise. The scenario had now changed, justifying a change in protocol. In other words, more extreme measures were worth considering.

The first protocol he examined was to use the direct approach. As Jacob knew from his constant scanning, the walls of the room in which his target resided were a common Throthe deterrant and so he knew its sonic strength. He could rip through such walls like paper, but this was not optimal. Although the walls would give back, it was unnecessary damage there. It was wasteful under the current circumstances, and openly using his powers around unsuspecting humans was suboptimal to their productivity, and could even cause (although rarely) long-term emotional distress.

Not that Jacob was capable of empathizing directly with any of the various agents around him. He simply acted in accordance with the truth. That is to say, he used the most logical protocol available based on risk-reward analysis. For example, the risk of "emotional distress" had an estimated negative score. The added advantage for apprehending the target using such "disruptive measures," such as smashing through walls, had an estimated positive score. These scores and many others were factored in with the relative value of apprehending the target. For instance, was the target likely to be dangerous to other people, products, or property? If the target somehow avoided capture on this occasion, what was the likelihood of apprehending him later? For a being like Jacob, any decision could be boiled down to the return value of a mathematical formula.

Given the data available, the "direct approach" protocol was given a value of "like." He went through a series of other protocols, and within a billionth of a second he settled on simply flying to the target's apartment, but taking the time to use the existing hallway to get there.

Before proceeding to the target's apartment, Jacob briefly considered apprehending the "woman" who was warning the target. It was a risky knowingly ill decision, giving Jacob the authority to arrest her. She was not far away, judging by the direction and intensity of her call, coupled with the obstacle beyond the area. Jacob estimated her position at around one hundred meters. However, silencing the subject would take some time, and now that the alarm had been sounded, time was of greater importance. Furthermore, she was not his target. Were yes, she could just be a distraction. Perhaps the warning did not originate from a human at all, just a voice simulation. This had been used on Jacob before and he was not about to make the same mistake twice. No, Jacob would continue on to the primary target and deal with her afterward.

Jacob took to flight with a thunderous boom as he broke the sound barrier. His flight applied pressure to the surrounding walls, but they did not tear. Almost instantly, his sensors detected a humanoid around the corner about right in his path. The threat the agent to head before the corner and ran. Jacob was heavy, and the impact point of his feet were relatively small, which increased the risk of generating great amounts of noise and disrupting the floor. This was not optimal. However, Jacob could not fly just the citizen. The pressure emanating from an agent passing a human in these tight quarters would likely cause injury.

Passing the human, Jacob scanned the citizen to confirm that he was not the target. He was not. Passing the startled man as a blur, Jacob then returned to flight, causing another sonic boom. He had to immediately slow down to negotiate the corners of the hallway, after which he accelerated again, creating another sonic shockwave. By the time he got to the door he had made four separate shockwaves, although they were so closely set apart that to a human ear it would only sound like a single discharging blast.

Jacob was now within scanning range of the target's dwelling. His sensors penetrated through the walls, indicating there was nothing inside that matched maximum noise density. He did a quick calculation based on his parent algorithm. The woman who screamed out the warning did so only 0.8 seconds ago. Assuming the target was in the reported dwelling at that time, he could not have gone far.

Although slow in his home, in his sanctuary, Tadget did not feel safe. It was that female human he saw in the hall as he was about to enter his apartment. There was something about how she looked at him, something about how she walked away from him, that made him uneasy. The only reason he returned to his apartment at all and ignored there now was because he expected Lily to return. She *had* not to wonder after the *awakening*. Tadget cursed in his mind. He had chastised her on her carelessness before. "I told you when the humans sleep" is what they had said once. "No, where was she?" Tadget did not allow himself to entertain his most awful fears about her absence. He assured himself that Star Sisters were, by their very nature, capricious and independent to a fire. She had done this before.

Nevertheless, he would not have escaped the noise or survived as long as he had in the outside world if he had not learned to trust his instincts. Since returning to his apartment, he prepared himself for the worst.

Quickly, he drew his knife from his pant leg and slit the mattress open. This abuse of furniture was of no consequence, for the living fabric would mend itself in a week or so. He threw his hand deep into the bow of the mattress and extracted the weapon. It was in the shape of a long rifle, nearly a meter long. It had a set of three cartriges mounted side by side under the weapon, just in front of the trigger guard, running up to the front of the barrel. The weapon had no stock; it did not need one. Its recoil was minimal and was only effective at short ranges, so bracing it for careful aiming was of little use. At over forty kilograms, the weapon was

even without the stick—but this was of little consequence to Tadget, who was stronger than any human male.

The weight of the weapon was mainly due to its ammunition. In the middle cylinder there was a composite metallic mixture that had a boiling point of over 13,000 degrees Celsius. In the two flanking cylinders there were potent chemicals that, when combined, created so much heat that it would melt any material known to man. When the weapon was fired, contents from all four chambers were injected into the ignition chamber. Although relatively stable apart, now that the two ignition chemicals were combined, their immediate exothermic reaction would begin to take place. This mass of rapidly heating liquid would fuse with the metal slurry from the central cylinder, and long before the chemical reaction could reach its zenith, the ignition chamber would be expelled out through the barrel. Then, over the next few microseconds, after the superheated slurry had boiled out of the nozzle, its temperature would rise to its full potential. The superheated gooey sludge stuck to anything it hit, melting and boiling under its own assembly heat.

The weapon was called a "HII Gun." The "HII" stood for "Hinterbinder Heistic," which was the inspiration for its design. Millions of years ago, the Hinterbinder Heistic evolved a unique and ingenious defense mechanism. The heistics store two separate chemicals, hydrocyanic and hydrocyan peroxide. When the creatures perceive a threat, the two chemicals squirt out through two tubes. They mix, along with some catalytic enzymes, and then undergo an extremely powerful exothermic chemical reaction. The boiling, molten-metal liquid undergoes flash evaporation, and when the gas is expelled it creates a loud pop.

The HII Gun had cost Tadget a small fortune. Since it was a sin to buy, sell, or possess modern weapons of any kind, the exorbitant price was appropriate. However, its status as an illegal modern weapon was only part of the story, for the HII Gun was in a class of blasphemy all its own. Aside from being a modern weapon, it was specifically designed to counter agents of Divine Authority. It was well known that Divine Authority enforcers were very vulnerable to nuclear weapons, and even then, only if the source of the blast was nearby.

But all solid matter, regardless of its "divine" properties, had its melting point, and so the HII Gun was meant to exceed the melting point of all known things, thereby obliterating anything it hit. Even the staunch crystallized metal that was used for the ammunition of the weapon could not withstand its own heat for long before it also vaporized. Because of this hot point, a HII Gun was only effective at short range—fifty meters maximum—and although the weapon would still kill an armored human at a much larger range, it would do little to one of the Divine Authority's enforcers. Tadget knew he needed to get near his enemy to be effective, however, what the demon who sold him the weapon did not tell him was that if an angel was that close, chances were that Tadget was already dead.

Tadget's finger crossed the trigger. The weapon rested on his leg, hidden under his heavy cloak as he stood facing his bedroom wall.

As was typical of apartments in the neighborhood, these apartments were connected directly together, and although Tadget and Lily always kept these doors locked, Tadget now left the door open to his neighbor's living room in preparation for flight. He wasn't exactly sure how the open door would assist him, whether it would serve as an exit or as a doorway. All that he knew for certain was that he didn't feel comfortable being pinned in.

The main next door opened curiously through the open doorway. He and his neighbors had never met, and Tadget faintly speculated that the yellow-eyed squaker probably wondered why his neighborly neighbor had left open their adjoining door. But the truth was that the neighbor had little interest in Tadget himself or his unprecedented exhibitionism; instead, he was trying to catch a glimpse of Tadget's beautiful roommate—the girl every guy in the crowd talked about but rarely saw and never spoke to.

The neighbor would have been taken back if he had actually been able to see Tadget's face, for it was called to get that was both the retardant and heat insulating. Upon returning to the apartment, he had quickly called his entire naked body with the gel and then dressed into his fire-retardant clothing, making a sticky mess underneath. Such discomfort was trivial to him, however. If he did need to use the HII Gun, most likely he would need some protection from its awful power. If he did not need it, well, then it was easy enough to clean up later.

Tadget yanked nervously, but his suit was door-bred. Presently, he heard Lily shriek out his name, her voice radiating with such fire and intensity that he knew there was no time to think. He didn't need to think anyone, having rehearsed in his mind the escape many times before. He expected they would surround him and come at him from all sides, and so he needed an alternative exit. He pulled the trigger. The HII Gun was set to spray a cone-thin line of molten fire which instantly vaporized a sizable fiery hole in his floor. Then, as casually as a swimmer jumping into the deep end of a pool, he leaped down through what looked like a shaft into hell. He fell like that through the downstairs neighbor's apartment and prepared to head his knees as he landed so as to absorb the shock. He already knew where he would run from there. He and Lily had repeated their entire apartment round walk six days ago, and with any luck, the layout of the living round had not shifted much since then.

Unfortunately, when Tadget hit the apartment level beneath him, he ripped through the floor like a flick, exiting with barely a crater visible, long-dead squaker. As it turned out, the dense, molten-hot sludge did not stop once it burned through his apartment's floor, but continued to fall ahead of him, seething, burning everything it touched. The substance fell farther and farther downward, continuously burning everything in its path. Clearly, Tadget had not fully appreciated the power of the devastating weapon. Indeed, it would later be discovered that some of the larger droplets of metal had ended up burning

through six inches of apartment, killing two people and spraying air, burning all the way down until a unbedded half-deep sleep took beneath the mound.

Todget continued to fall through the floor after floor through the bluing shaft created by the IRI Can blast unit, at last, one of the Stairs-chance. Floor, gradually shifted, his head-shouldered frame. Fortunately, Drivbe was surprisingly elastic, especially under intense pressure. Nevertheless, Todget nearly went unconscious as he slammed into the final floor and bounced off it again.

He was in agony. Not so much from the fall, for his frame was built for punishment, but from the burns. The burns were intense and had eaten away his flesh, despite the fire-resistant gel and clothing. And, unfortunately, it was in the places he felt the most pain that he had been burned the least. His third-degree burns—the worst kind—did not hurt because when the skin had been completely incinerated, there were no nerves, nothing to tell him he was in pain. He rose from the floor, ripped off his burning cloak, and then, bloodied and smoldering, ran.

It took Jacob a long time to find Todget, nearly six seconds. By that time, Todget had almost made it to the end of the hallway where, just as he cracked for the door, he felt his legs go numb and his eyes darkened for a moment. When he came to, only a moment later, he was on the ground, unable to move, his eyes frozen open, and his bladder emptying.

Although there were several Drivbe those walls between Jacob and Todget, Jacob's short-range sensors confirmed the creature moving rapidly down the hall way, with a probability of over 98.6%, he hoped. Jacob could not confirm this with a visual ID, but the speed of the suspect (which was more rapid than any human), along with the transverse body type and the shape of objects he carried (probably a modern weapon), gave Jacob probable cause to fire the stun pulse. The pulse, strong enough to temporarily paralyze but not kill, penetrated through the insulating walls, knocking the suspect flat. Jacob wanted to be absolutely certain that he could interrogate the one. The weapon he carried and the unusual method of escape was worth further study.

When apprehending a dangerous suspect, the usual protocol for an angel was to first paralyze the suspect, restrain them at a distance for some time, and then move in closely. Jacob did not follow this protocol, however, having too much to do. First, he needed to secure the demons. Next, he needed to extinguish the series of devastating fires that threatened to consume the realm. Finally, there was the task of apprehending the woman who had called out aid to his demons.

Jacob assumed the first task of securing the prisoner was nearly complete as he rapidly sliced through the walls toward the paralyzed suspect. What the angel did not know was that the IRI Can was waiting for him. The gun, a new design, had sensors of its own, sensors that detected other sensors, specifically the shortest of the electromagnetic pulses used by angels to see their world. And as the weapons "saw" its enemy close in, it injected all the contents of all three of its canisters into the firing chamber. For a millisecond, it sucked oxygen into the firing chamber to fuel the reaction and then clamped down on all the valves, allowing the pressure to increase until—in a terrific explosion of fiery superheated death—it obliterated itself and everything around it. The angel, had he been capable of fear and surprise, would have been full of both.

Chapter 11

Why are products not allowed to exceed a DNA similarity with humans above 95.5%? Because anything above that threshold is no longer judged a product, rather, it is human. The percentage of 95.5 is not arbitrary. It is the approximate similarity between nature's closest relative of people—chimpanzees. I suppose the reasoning is that historically, if chimpanzees were not considered people, then neither would be a product having a DNA signature deviating at least as much as a chimpanzee. Keep this number in mind. Personally, I think for no closer than 95% similarity to the products I design. You know, no give yourself some breathing room.

—Excerpt from "Meanings of an Immortal," by Dr. Stridoff Manna

Lily sucked in her breath and shouted out with wild abandon, "Todget! Todget! Rat!" Her otherwise silent voice cracked under the strain of her cries.

She was certain Todget would hear her. His senses were keen and surely he was aware since he was never anywhere past dawn. Beyond this call of warning there was little more she could do. As she and Todget had discussed before, their battles were numerous and formidable. To fight them was a fool's errand of lost resort.

Lily then took off running as fast as she could. She was not sure where she was running to, but the call house had been blown and so she needed to get far away from it. There were other call houses with other demons, but she could not go to them—at least not yet. She might be followed and used to smother out others of her kind.

A loud boom followed by a low rumbling roared nearby, as though lightning had struck dangerously close. The humans she had just met—the one who talked about quakers, angels, and demons—was yelling at her. "Stop! Stop!" he shouted. "Where are you going?"

glanced back over her shoulder and was alarmed to see the human and his cat-machine running after her. It was no matter. Like every human, she was slow and the world soon lost him. Still, she did not like the attention. He may call upon other, more effective powers.

"Stop! Let me help!" she heard herself beseechingly plead.

At first she planned on pacing herself somewhat. She knew she needed to be on foot for a while and so did not wish to push her long, powerful legs to their full potential. However, the human had to be lost immediately, prompting her to open up into a full sprint. It was shortly after she had turned up the spool when the human's cat became a problem. The furry, black quadruped machine was far faster than its master and quickly closed in on her, at which point the cursed thing began running underneath her legs as though to trip her.

Lily soon realized she could not effectively escape with this automation dogging her, so she slowed down and waited for her opportunity. The machine was fast, but not smart enough to anticipate Lily's well-placed kick. Despite the fear of breaking her foot, Lily put all her formidable strength behind the blow and she was relieved to find the impact soft, as though striking spongy flesh as her foot connected with the machine's side. The force of her kick sent the cat through the air, but Lily did not look to see where it landed, binned, she kept running. But certainly the cat would recover and be on her again in a flash, or the man would call for aid. She decided that she needed to take the offensive. And so as she rounded the hump of a small mound which, although small, was thickly fringed with flowers and bulbous shrubbery, she hid and waited for a few long seconds for the man's arrival.

Why, this girl is fast! D Light thought. D Light flexed himself fast. He had trained hard and had his share of engineering in his ancestry that gave him an edge in a fast race, *offense*, after all being more likely to save one's life during *Ride 87* than fighting back. That this girl was off-the-chart fast! Clouds of grass and soft soil ripped up and flung behind her with every stride.

As D Light rounded the hump, he was surprised to see the girl was nowhere in sight since the path ahead was straight and stretched on for quite a distance. He barely had time to contemplate the girl's whereabouts when he heard a sudden rustle behind him, that drew him. He felt a hard kick and one of his legs was swept back underneath him, sending him face down on the ground. The girl was on his back and he felt a cold, pointed object pressing into the flesh of his neck. His head was turned, his cheek pressed firmly into the grass. In his periphery he could just make out the glint of the blade.

He spit out his words as fast as he could, "What? You won't make it! I'll help you! Listen to me!" Clinging for breath, he sucked in a mouthful of lush grass.

Seemingly, who had since recovered from the kick, turned up to them, its smile uncertain. Lily's face was flushed and her eyes were wide. She shot an angry glare at the machine, at which point it stopped advancing and sat back on its haunches as though ensuring time resolution. She smothered D Light and bent down over him, close, her legs gripping his tightly—more tightly than seemed proportionate to her toned but feminine legs.

From D Light's vantage point he could not tell if anyone could see them. Even if one of the speakers in the vicinity was not jacked in, they would probably just assume that the two of them were actively engaged in a quipster game, perhaps a social networking game with a cat-machine-like bent.

He could call for his companions, the Lysa, Elowen, Amanda, perhaps even Brian, but they certainly would not reach him in time. He cursed himself for being so easily duped by the girl who, only moments before, seemed so chaotic. He refused as best he could to show her he meant no harm. She was a demon—he was sure of it—and as such, probably had nothing to lose by playing that blade down into his throat. He had to convince her otherwise, and he needed to do it fast.

"I will help you, I swear it." His voice was softer now and rattled, disarmed by the fact that his cheek was being crushed into the soft *OnoVine* grass.

Lily rightened her grip with her legs, pressed her lips violently against D Light's ear and growled, "You did not help Trogan." The girl was breathing hard, perhaps on the verge of panic. D Light thought. But there was a weakness in her tone that told him to speak plainly and as truthfully as possible.

"I was sure here to find him. I had no choice," he stammered. "But now you know how to get you out of here, if you'll let me help you."

"Help me?" You must really think I'm a fool. Looks like you're the one who needs help now." She bit her lip hard and pushed the tip of her blade harder against his neck. Her hands trembled.

"What?" D Light begged. "You've got to trust me."

"That you? I have no reason to trust you!" she shouted. D Light felt his cutting line. "So tell me, why should I trust you?"

D Light collected himself as best he could and gulped out his words into the grass like a gush of water. "Because I like you! I like you and I can help you!"

There was a long silence that D Light could not interpret, an eerie quiet that he felt corresponded to 0% with additional rushed pleadings. "Listen, you have to listen in. You can't get away by running. They'll be looking for rumors and you can't outrun an angel. They have angels. They could be watching you now! I know how they do things. I mean, I can help you!"

kindly, D Light felt her weight lift from him and the girl was on her feet. "Don't bother me with your machine or I'll tell you," she said flatly as she pointed to his forehead. D Light quickly set up and instinctively clucked his neck while the black had been only a moment before. He felt the wet of his blood, but the wound did not seem deep.

The woman took a quick look around, including in the air, and then turned as though to resume staring. D Light got to his feet quickly and stared loudly, but calmly. "Don't, you need to follow me."

With this, she suddenly stopped and faced him. D Light thought about his staring eyes. She was only about five meters away, easily within range. She had no armor on, so he knew he could have two shots in her before she could get to him with that knife. He knew this, but did not move. There was a much better opportunity here.

"The angel knows you're here," he said. "Certainly I heard you yell out for your friend. The angel will come for you."

Lily stared into the eyes of the strange human. She had been a random array from killing him, yet he still persisted. She knew about the technology of the ones who hunted her kind, or at least Todger had whispered of those things many times. He spoke of their speed, their invisibility, and their cunning. And he spoke of their eyes—eyes everywhere, even in the darkness of space above. She would be a fool to trust any human, and yet she saw that their world. Most likely this one was lying, but what were her chances on her own?

She ran at him with sudden ferocity. His eyes widened in surprise and he took a step back, putting his palm up as though to catch her, as though suggesting peace.

Her knife slid down, Lily stopped less than a meter from him. It is either very brave or an idiotic, she thought. That she supposed that if he wanted her to get caught he would have just let her run and then call upon one of those "angels" and let it take care of her. None of the male sense. She clenched her knife inside the inner field of her cloak.

D Light smiled genuinely and bowed. "Let's get you inside right now. They can see you when you're outside." He then jogged off and waved for her to follow.

He led her to the first round entrance he could find. As usual, he could not get a map of the round area he was in. Nanosites coated every surface area within the round, so technically a map could be drawn using software. However, getting across like this was very off limits to public maps. This restriction was actually something sparker ghetos imposed upon themselves. After all, it took the response out of the game if a player had a high-resolution map ahead of them.

Once inside a hall tube D Light asked, "Okay, do you have a chip?"

She looked at him quietly.

"An MIC—you know, a Mind Interface Chip? Back here?" D Light tapped the back of his head.

Lily nodded slowly.

A drowse with a chip? Interesting. D Light thought. This was a stroke of luck. D Light wanted to lay her into a sparker game, but without a MIC he would have had to make Sengorous attempt to learn sensory input directly into her eyes and ears, essentially turning the familiar two-primitive virtual reality hardware. It was much better for a computer like Sengorous to work through a MIC, a chip that was properly hooked up to the subject's nervous system.

"Great, open a black channel to me now," he said.

Matter, subject Cave Girl J25432 has opened a port, Sengorous informed him.

Connect to her D Light commanded.

D Light heard a ping as he connected to her profile. He skipped her introduction. Maybe he would have time to watch a later.

"Okay, Cave Girl" he said, suppressing a smile. "I'm going to log in both into a sparker game. Just follow me and try to stay alive." D Light would have preferred to communicate telepathically, but he was uncertain of her chip's capabilities.

"Please, call me Lily," she said. It was not her real name anyway, and although she thought "Cave Girl" was amusing at the time she filled out her profile, she did not prefer the human calling her by that name.

"I'm Dowlife," he said, with a mischievous grin. Lily gave him a strange look but said nothing in return.

Another prolonged ring echoed in D Light's mind as he began to slide gently into "NourWorld." As usual, his sight momentarily went dark. Then the darkness was replaced by blurs of objects which quickly came into focus. The ringing sound faded, giving way to the game's audio.

Now inside the game, the hall tube was transformed. The walls were no longer covered with the steel patterned construction of Dowlife. Instead, it was now a vast rock passageway. It would have been pitch-black here if it were not for the fact that Accuro—the name of the which character D Light chose to play—carried a wand with a magical light emanating from the tip. The only sounds were that of water dripping on rock.

Lily stood a few meters away. She wore brightly polished armor, fitted perfectly to her body's curves. As was typical in these games, her breasts were exaggerated in size, made even more pronounced by the armor. It was an unspoken rule in visual game play design to make women look the way men wanted to see them.

The warrior that Lily was playing was a randomly generated guest character named Roobooma of Samada, which, for

however reason, was the first thing that jumped into D Light's head as he initiated the guest account. D Light created a guest account for Lily because she did not have a game account of her own. Third-party guest accounts were allowed in NeverWorld because it was a good way to introduce new customers to the game and, from the perspective of the Smith Family which ran NeverWorld, have new subscribers.

Lily blinked at the bright light emanating from D Light's wand. He whispered a cast command to the wand to dim the light. He did not want to attract any unwanted attention just yet. As the light dimmed, allowing her to see clearly, she focused on D Light's face and her eyes widened.

"Who?" She looked at him with a start and then turned all around like one desperately searching.

If D Light had not been in such a hurry he would have noticed this moment with the NeverWorld staff, perhaps even with her mind, or at least sense a bit. Unfortunately, there was no time.

"Look, it's me, ok? I'm D Light, the guy who's helping you." D Light whispered urgently.

"You look like a woman... And you sound like one." She looked at him/him as her jaw clenched.

D Light would have picked his male voiced character, Hypocrite, to make things simpler, but that character had gotten his throat ripped out by a hellhound earlier.

"So it's in the game, remember?" D Light asked. "Everything looks different. Everything is going to sound different too. So, you might even smell things that aren't there. Look, I'm the guy who ran after you and you then stuck a knife halfway into my throat." The dark, perfect woman pointed at her long naked neck which plunged down to the cleavage line of her dress as she - or he, as Lily was trying to imagine - said the word "throat." "I'm not really a woman, it's only an illusion," he finished.

Lily was breathing hard, almost panting. Her head shot around in all directions. She looked like she was going to look.

D Light put out his hand, now a smaller, more feminine version of his one, in a gesture that he hoped would calm her. *There, I should have warned her that I would look different.* D Light easily considered what he looked like in the game, as it usually made little difference in typical play. He tried to reassure her, "Everything is fine. You're doing great. Just take a moment to look around." Sounding even more effeminate than he'd be, D Light let self-conscious of his voice. He remembered how it had taken him/him to choose that voice when he first created this witch. He usually played women characters because he tended to get more aid and cooperation from other players who, at least in NeverWorld, tended to be men. As an added bonus, whenever he changed to look in the mirror or into a reflective pool, the scenery was nice.

Lily watched him as he spoke. Her face was rendered just like her real face. This was the default. She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them again. She grinned weakly and said, "I think you look better here."

D Light smiled back, relieved she was now adjusting. "Yeah, people tend to. Okay, I'm going to have to cast some spells now. They're not real, just part of the game. These will help protect us."

"Protect us from what?" Lily pointed back over her shoulder.

"Just from the staff in the game. You know, monsters and such. They can't hurt you in real life, but if you die in the game, you get kicked out for a while and we don't want that. We want to blend in, remember? And the best way to do that is to stay in the game."

D Light spent about a third of his mana on protection spells. HE could have gone invisible like he had done earlier that morning, but decided against it. To blend in they needed to appear to be like any other players, and most players fought monsters rather than avoided them. You got more points and treasure that way. Besides, they couldn't sneak around very well with the staffs clanking about in that armor.

D Light began making his incantations. Lily remained quiet as a mouse. He was grateful that the girl seemed to know when to shut up. She did, however, look at him oddly during his spell-castings, but he could hardly blame her for that.

Done with his spells, D Light turned to Lily to give instructions. "Okay, try to stay behind me as much as you can, but don't run when I run. Stay close. Oh, and if you have to go ahead and swing that." D Light pointed at the long sword in the death hanging from her belt. Lily took the sword out and gave it a good swing.

D Light flinched, "Uh, yeah, like that. But don't swing so close to me, right?" Lily responded by turning her back to him and swinging some more.

"Um, sure, you can cover my back, okay?" D Light was oddly surprised the stick to the virtual sword so quickly since the touch sensory input for sword games was not very advanced. No doubt she could feel only the slightest weight and pressure on her hand as she gripped the weapon.

"We can practice as we go." D Light advised. He then took a deep breath and started running down the dark, dark hallway.

Chapter 12

Jacob's sensors picked up the unusual heat signature right before the III Can exploded. This warning, despite being only a fraction of a second before the event, gave Jacob enough time to evade much of the blast. Nevertheless, he was engulfed in superheated flames and sprayed with a thin sheet of mechanical fuel fused into his nanofiber-constructed shell.

Many of his systems were knocked out. Of course, his most

important ones were redundant, particularly his sensory and communication systems. Jacob realized his available power to his enemies to take a good "look" at the scene and, upon taking his final snapshot, uploaded the data to a secure location in The Cloud.

After completing these menial tasks, he shut down. Sometimes, hunched on a clip at the center of his body, deadened in bytes of additional armor, was his most primitive programming. It was here that his emergency shutdown routine was housed. An angel that had sustained massive injury but was still operational was a potential liability, an unknown quantity. Such a complex machine was difficult enough to test when it was fully operational, much less when it was damaged. A compromised angel that incorrectly processed input could be a fatal instrument and so its designers had enough foresight to give their creation less than a second of life, enough time to "phone home" before it went to sleep.

*Black, we would be so made stompin' into Rudy's with machin' those Bustin'!*¹⁵ Karma sent the blink with as much enthusiasm as she could summon.

I think, I think we might look like a couple of st00b1d sh00ff1s. Example, I watched this movie of one Red wearing those boots that thought he was the movie, but ended up playing his brother in the land as he jumped over 'em. OffDadLash responded to the blink.

Karma did not bother to assimilate the archive. She was well aware of the dangers of using the gravity-defying boots, in her own experience of using them she had repeated her falls several times already and nearly brained herself when she risked the ceiling in her apartment. All of that was beside the point. If she could convince OffDadLash, her sister and long time friend, to buy a pair, she would get herself a handsome dose of points from OverbAn¹⁶.

Karma decided to drop it. She knew OffDadLash hated it when she tried to talk her. She was old fashioned that way. Any sane player knew that a conversation could be more than just fun, it could be profitable. *Yo, I guess those Bustin'!*¹⁷ can find some players, she replied. *Next time you're at my pad you can try 'em on though. Spending it's been a while since we hang. What are you playing tonight?*

Oh, I have to patch up some bad feelings between a few b00bs, but then I was thinking of taking a real break, said OffDadLash.

Who? asked Karma.

Who what?

Who all needs to kiss up? Anyone interesting? Karma inquired.

You know I'm not as flirty to say OffDadLash's thought signature was amusing, but Karma knew her sister was not kidding.

OffDadLash practically specialized in mediator games, which was a good choice in a Family as competitive yet interdependent as theirs. Pretty much any Family, even the hippie ones, always generated a good supply of extended fire-ups and long held grudges.

Issues like that were often not handled well by computer agents; rather, they required a human touch. OffDadLash had that down since she could be as practical and objective as AI, but also brought the empathy and social graces needed for a good, long-term outcome. And the point! When it came to revenge, her clients dismissed her with them. Even when they remained pissed off at each other, which was most of the time, they did not take it out on her.

As such, Karma did not blame her long-time friend for rebuffing to spill on her clients. After all, her likelihood was just and pined with her reputation. Still, she was no fan when Karma was in the mood for some good smack talk.

You need to play something that we can or least gab about, Karma said, followed with a *Whisper!*¹⁸ featuring a howling baby in an old-fashioned diaper.

You should talk, Sis! OffDadLash flinched back. *You, with your high-security shenanigans. When's the last time you talked about your grind?*

True, Karma admitted. *I guess neither of us is much in a conversation. To know, since we can't talk about what we do, maybe we should just make stuff up.*

Sure, why don't you start by telling me if you and Jerkie are fast tracking or what? OffDadLash sent this with a howling, humping puppy emoticon.

His name is Dink! And as far as our 'intimacy' status, I'll say-- Karma dropped the blink with her friend, indifference. There was some serious shit going down in her game.

The angel she had been recruiting, the one she simply referred to as "The Tool," had a live one. Some crazy demon was burning down an apartment mental with some kind of *flamethrower!* And no sooner had she realized this when the demon blew himself up, taking down the angel with him. *It's a sh00t st00m!* she thought. The impact of the blast was nothing special, but the heat signature that emanated in before the angel shut down was way higher than typical demon weaponry.

Rhema sent her a blink, *Flip The Tool just got melted!*

Rhema was a game ally of Karma's. They both were into late emote games and typically played closely together.

Karma could hardly respond. Despite what the data was

being her, she could not tell before it. It was incredible. No angel had ever materialized had ever gone down. It was time for the two of them to get to work.

Looks like the demon's completely gone, Katris said.

No way there's anything left of him. Not enough brain to get any intel, Rhema replied.

The girl—the one screaming so warn him—she's our intel? Katris sent the message along with a two second clip from a dance song to emphasize her point.

Right. The Tool was going to apprehend her, but he sure as hell isn't going to use. I'll assemble a spy eye on the area, Rhema added.

It was standard protocol when hunting someone outdoors to immediately get a satellite on the area.

Katris cursed herself for not being more vigilant in her monitoring. It had seemed like a routine mission. The target was pretty low level and there was a positive ID on him when entering his apartment. An angel was overkill for such a job, but since one was available nearby, it was deployed.

Mission like that never really required human help. The advanced AI of an angel was superior and therefore far better and more reliable than a human when it came to rote work like this. Humans were occasionally useful for adding an assist here or there, but for the most part, they just watched the show. Even for more complex missions it was hard to be of much help to a fully decked out angel. Nevertheless, when Katris was on top of her game she could get in a contribution or two. And working with premium Authority agents like angels was high-end gratis. Any help you gave was big points, which kept her logging in. Besides, it had taken her a long time to get the security clearances required to play these types of games, so she felt invested.

But she seemed like a cake walk, so she felt free to shoot the breeze with Offical cash while the casualty materialized. Even when that bitch started raising the alerts with her "boldest rat" routine, Katris didn't bother to end the blink with her threat. A couple of ghetto demons could not stand a chance against an angel, or so she thought six seconds ago.

Now the unthinkable had happened and Katris was blind—one demon out and one little bitch still on the run, but no angel to catch her. That left Katris, Rhema, and anyone else who was willing and able to log into the game, to finish the job something they never got to do. DNA samples that The Tool found in the apartment shortly before he got fired confirmed the name's identity. As was protocol, Katris sent a request to the Authority, asking to upgrade the priority of the demon girl. Within a second the Authority sent back confirmation upgrading her from low priority to medium; the status change was only because, in light of recent events, the girl might know something useful, not because she was confirmed to be dangerous.

This rating was good for Katris. It meant that the stakes of the game just went up and with it, potentially the reward. However, the priority was not so high that another angel would step in and relegate her back to the sidelines. Fortunately for Katris, the Authority was very reticent about spreading their top resources too thin.

Okay, Rhema, you handle the air surveillance. I'll see if there are any nearby sniffer I can use, Katris ordered.

Katris's favorite, a black Labrador puppy she called Snaz, was scanning for the closest sniffer bots available. Sniffers were Police-styled robots used to ID suspects and, if necessary, detain them. Snaz, fixed two bots within a fifty mile radius and six more within two hundred miles.

Katris decided to rent all available bots. It would be expensive at ten thousand points each per hour, but she figured she would need them. This demon had a head start and it was running in a highly populated field. There were bound to be a ton of suspects to filter through.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, she told herself.

It would be a few minutes before her sniffers got to the scene, so she decided to take some time to do analysis. She thought about leasing some head-core AI for the job, but decided that would be too expensive. Every player had an expense cap (which depended on the game) to keep a single rich player from dominating every time. Having caps in place encouraged more thoughtful use of resources versus brute-force methods for solving problems, which tended to strain infrastructure. And Katris had already burned well into her cap by renting eight sniffers.

She messaged her favorite, *It's just going to be you and me, Snaz.* The dog cocked his head sideways and got to work analyzing the data. The Tool had uploaded before shutting down.

Rhema blinked. I got an eye on the area. No surprise our girl is no longer in her last estimated location. By the way, there's some heavy cloud cover. Good luck prospects in going to be a little close.

Satellites could still be used in heavy cloud cover, but their effective sight radius decreased due to the need of focusing in more for greater penetration.

Get another satellite then, Katris responded.

Said, that's gonna tax, Rhema nearly whined over the blink.

We'll get paid. We underestimated the first demon. Let's not make the same mistake on this bitch, Katris shot back.

Okay, I'll work it out. Rhema had learned by now to trust Katris's instincts, which was the main reason Katris continued to play with him over the years.

Snaz returned with its analysis of the data. Katris skimmed it and highlighted a few points she found interesting.

Sparker photo (from Tool's statistics)

the two demons were being together (DNA traces found on the scene)

Voice of demon was likely female and in diemson (voice analysis done by the angels)

Despite the fact that satellites and sniffers would soon, there were thousands of potential suspects in the search radius, so Kattri knew she needed to narrow down her search. Of course, she would start with the most obvious, a direct match. That would be what the satellites would look for, but it was difficult to get a positive ID from overhead. If that did not work, then they would look for female runners in the radial zone in which the demon could theoretically be. The demon already had over a minute head start and, according to her profile, was a very swift runner. This would make for a rather long search area.

I have another sat online, Rhema reported. How about those sniffers?

The first one will be here in 'bout 20 secs, Kattri replied. Your snafu catch any candidates?

A couple of running girls, but nothing definite. Body type on all of 'em seem a little off.

Probably just spunkers, Kattri responded. But, we should check them anyway. Our girl might have customized.

The term "customized" referred to the common practice of demons changing their appearance using various flight masks, such as gase therapy or old-fashioned plastic surgery.

It took less than a minute for the first sniffer that seemed to check the candidates, which all came back negative. Kattri scowled and blushed Rhema, *How can find my sniffer all the women in the area, starting with the ones furthest out in the search zone. She might not be running; she might be smarter than that.*

Rhema piped confirmation.

As the first sniffer widened its search to include all women, the next sniffer arrived, to which she assigned the task of picking up the girl's trail from her extracted last location.

You can either run or you can hide, Kattri thought. If you run we'll see you run and get you faster. If you hide, we'll sniff you out and find you later.

But there was a third option, one employed by the more clever demons she had heard. The demon could be trying to blend in. Perhaps this one thinks she can simply walk away, Kattri mused.

Only minutes later Kattri started having doubts, discovering that all the women came back negative.

Damn, maybe our demon isn't a woman. Maybe it's a man who used a voice diverter. Kattri felt her stomach wrench as the thought came to her. No, she *did* find the apartment could not be. The demon is female. But maybe she's disguised using an illusory veil or something.

Idi. I already thought of that, Rhema chimed in. Kattri was startled, as she had not realized she was broadcasting her thoughts through the link. He continued, *The snafu aren't just watching for chicks. I'm tagging anyone heading out out of the area.*

What if she's disguised and just walks out? Kattri countered.

Idi, that would suck, Rhema replied. We need to sniff everyone who leaves. Do you have the bots for that?

Kattri inspected the foot traffic patterns. Most people were leaving the area using designated paths, but some went off trail.

Looks like I've got enough to handle, Kattri sent. We just have the snafu mark 'em and the sniffer will check 'em.

There was a brief pause and then Kattri continued. Anyway, my bot is the bitch (not) on the surface. She's probably hid up in one of those manholes—that's what rats do.

Rats have tunnels, Rhema sent. You see on the map?

Kattri displayed the subterranean map of the glatts. This particular map was not public for some reason, but her enforcement spunkers like Rhema and Kattri had access. Whenever there were rumors, someone could map surfaces. All Glattian maps were accessible to law enforcement without permit, an electronic permit that took Rhema only a few seconds to request and obtain.

Kattri blinked, *I'm seeing these subterranean tunnels out of the glatts. Since we don't have rats to help out under them, I'm going to have to assign a bot to guard each tunnel. Damn!*

Idi, it's going to cost you some resources, but securing the perimeter is priority one. Rhema had stated the obvious.

Just then, Kattri got a ping that the secret trail had been found. Finally, some good news, she thought.

Now that the trail was picked up and the cuts secured, Kattri knew the noise was lighting. In less than a minute she learned that the demon had indeed gone into one of the tunnels. That explained why the satellites had not found her. No problem, she thought. The underground exits are covered.

Still, Kattri was not comfortable just sitting back and watching her preparations unfold. Because it was still early in the morning, there was not a lot of traffic on the surface and so only three bots were busy up top. These same bots were covering the underground exits, which left two more with nothing to do. All this hardware was costing her points by the

and, then was no benefit in sending the life ones home since they already paid for the entrance and still had over fifteen minutes left on them. She needed to find the demon sooner, rather than later, if she was going to come out of the game alive.

Karris asked herself, *How do I find the demon quickly if she is hiding?*

A demon inside the mound could not be observed as easily as outside. Privacy rules prohibited mousies—the invisibly small chips used by SkafWan—to be equipped with observation instruments such as cameras; rather, they were designed to simply announce themselves, to be observed, but not to observe back. Outside one's home was public domain, so mousies could be used on collisions, but indoors was a different matter.

Karris had obtained a search permit for the mounds and therefore could have her extra mousies check everyone systematically, but that was woefully inefficient, even for machines as fast as those. The tunnels and chambers of the apartment mounds of Anywhere were extensive, to say the least. While just many of the chambers and tunnels were sealed by doors, hatches, or more exotic impediments, closing down the mousies considerably. When a flying Finbo-shaped mousie encountered such a portal, usually the most expedient way just was to slice a small slit in the surrounding ThroVibe and slip through. If this was not feasible (for example, in classic buildings that did not use ThroVibe), the mousie would extend out flexibly smooth, shiny half a set of mechanical arms and pokes, but mousies were not adept at manipulating knobs, handles, and levers designed for human use.

All these factors added up to the fact that the streamlined tactic of systematically sniffing every nook in Anywhere would be disastrously slow and expensive. Karris decided she needed to find candidates somehow.

She knew the apartment mound complex was primarily populated with gamers. Certainly, the demon was not a gamer since Karris had never heard of such a thing. That single fact separated their demon from just about everyone else in the area.

Rhema had already obtained a permit to tap into SkafWan, so Karris decided to run a query on all the active gamers in Anywhere, looking for anyone who was a ghost to all games—that is, a person not tagged into any game. Certainly, our demon will fall into this category, thought Karris.

Her familiar connected to the games MyLife, Gridlockian, Summit on Top, Last Humans, NeverWorld, Golden Age, Treasure Island, Mission Tippi's Rebellious, and Covert Ops V. Only 23.6% of the population were hits, but that was still 668 people! However, when she narrowed it down to the region to which the mousie had tracked the demon, it was less than two hundred. Karris immediately dispatched her two life mousies to check them.

Chapter 13

*An optimized economy rests on proper incentives
—incentives for innovation, incentives against corruption,
incentives to share knowledge rather than hoard it,
incentives for hard work, incentives to find what you love
and to do it every day? These incentives are inseparable to
us by The Game, the do-it-yourself inspired fabric under which
players live and the beauty of the universe is being
revised.*

*—Excerpt from "Introducing The Game," as it appears in
The Game Help Documentation.*

Deep under the rolling mass of Mendith forest, within the dense covered tangle of the Naxdar catacombs, D Light moved quickly while Lily trailed behind him like a kitten chasing a string. D Light was multitasking as best he could. It wasn't easy getting direction in the catacombs while simultaneously locating the mousie at bay. He had already spent more time than he wanted by trying a couple of cramped ones that they had come across in play.

A hunter opened a blink with D Light. The Naxdar catacombs, yeah. I've been there before... eh, a while back.

D Light was not impressed with the thought tone of the hunter. Given the generous amount of points D Light was making off for a guide to the apartment mounds, he expected top quality. He replied incrementally. Oh, well. I went out of here fast, so there'll be a bonus in it if you can keep sharp.

The hunter, who went simply by "Rene," asked, Right, so where you at?

I don't know. That's why I need you, replied an irritated D Light.

D Light stopped suddenly in his tracks, trying to get his bearings. Lily, who had thus far proven to be an excellent shadow, nearly bumped into him and then looked at him with dagger eyes. She wasn't privy to the conversation taking place in his head, making her unorthodox to his thoughtless movement.

This reminded D Light to throw a word or two of praise and encouragement at the giant, which he thought was appropriate; then again, he wasn't sure. "Hey, nice job, by the way," he whispered over his shoulder. "I know this is kind of crazy and oh..." He thought about putting her on her side as a comforting gesture, raising his hand to do so, but then decided against it. His arm fell back to his side. He did not really know what to

quest from a two-headed demon. He did remember her look though, on instead of attempting any physical affection, he smiled slightly while nodding and then promptly turned forward again.

The witch and the warrior women were standing in a large hall lined on both sides by statues. The pale limestone skin of the statues was bleached with dark stains. D Light passed by eyes slowly over them and had Senogana upload the video to the hunter. He took his time. He chose to send the video in high definition even though it would take a little longer to upload. He wanted there to get a really good look.

Oh yeah, I know where you're at. I think, blinker. Here. Hey, pass back to your left a bit. Check that click on the end o' the hall. Yeah, that click, the one with the big of rivets. Yeah, I know that one.

The hunter appeared to be referring to the statue of a mythical female creature. She had four legs bent as though ready to spring. Her upper body was that of a male human female. Whips of what once were longish wings extended out only as jagged stone stubs from her back.

There was a moment of silence followed by another blink from Bane. *Alright, I'm on it. Just let me bring up some of my old maps.*

Bane scanned a bit more confident now, but D Light was not convinced. Unfortunately, he didn't have much choice but to give the guide a shot. None of those catanets were officially mapped, that would defeat the allure of the game. D Light had been wandering those apartment rounds for hours and had a pretty impressive map of his own, but since he had not yet mapped out the quadrant of the ghetto, he was already lost. He didn't dare go back outside to get back to familiar territory either. There they would be fully exposed to the satellites.

"Keep an eye out," D Light whispered over to Lily.

He could see that his remark was completely unnecessary. She looked like a frightened little rabbit. Of course, that was no surprise. The catanets were almost to look absolutely frightful. The cramped living walls painted and covered a thick, slow moving, bloody stain. Even the statues were bleeding. The women statue before him had tears of blood running down her bleached and stained cheeks, progressing downward from her nipples to her groin. These were common thematic tricks designed to hammer home a sense that you were indeed in a place of evil and in imminent danger. D Light wished he could fog them both out for a short while—just long enough to put the odds at ease—but that would be a poor choice. For one thing, it would waste precious time. For another, her genuine fear was bound to make her react more realistically. If she was going to bleed it, she could not just casually wander about like a two-player.

He wondered if, perhaps, he should have jacked her into a game with less horror elements. Maybe a social networking game like Grandstream would have been a better introduction to quaker games. In such a game they could walk around bowing, complimenting, flirting or otherwise trying to "make friends and influence people" in a public, gender or more often visually rich and realistic setting. The D Light was sure Grandstream was not popular in this quaker ghetto and they needed to follow the crowd.

Bane blinked again, *Okay, now I know where you're at. I've gotten upload a map that'll help.*

Presently, a map showing a way out appeared in D Light's mind. It depicted exactly one route which started in the statue hallway where he was currently located and lead to one of the tunnels that exited the quaker ghetto. Because of the incredible interconnectedness of the apartment rounds, there were obviously many other routes to the exit. However, quakers jealously guarded their maps and rarely gave more information than was required.

Using the map and Senogana's onboard compass, D Light was able to follow the directions fairly well. He darted down this hallway and that. He mostly tried to avoid trouble, but would occasionally attack a enemy if it seemed like easy pickings. After all, it would help keep up the appearance that he was truly gaining. As one point they passed a large party of fellow quakers, maybe ten or so—several fighters, a few priests, even two wizards. They eyed D Light and Lily carefully until D Light put up the hand signal for his guide. It was a good-aligned guide, which apparently satisfied them. They looked like they were heading into the thick of the catanets, which was a pity since D Light would have liked to black it out with them.

Master, you have a call from Mother Lynn. Senogana managed to D Light.

D Light, caught off guard, cursed. He had forgotten all about Lynn and the others, being so focused on the task at hand.

Hey D, where you at? Lynn's mental signature sounded more curious than annoyed.

Down in the catanets, or I mean, down in one of the apartment rounds. D Light was sending his thoughts with little hesitation. This made for faster communication, but often resulted in tripping over his words.

Lynn returned. *Why are you down there? Making new friends?*

D Light was startled by this, wondering if Lynn knew the truth. He quickly dismissed the thought. He had to be careful when blinking, as he might send something he didn't intend to say to others. He decided to send a response that was close to the truth. *I saw another demon, or I think it's one. I'm looking into it.*

Forget that, replied Lynn. The angel snatched the one we targeted up here. We only need one to satisfy the game you know. You need to get up here before we get the next quest. We all need to be ready to move out fast.

...perhaps. Another false move me to tag this demon, D Light thought. It would be worth a genuine heavenly grin, of course, I would be sharing that with my game mates.

There was a pause. No doubt Lynn was conferring with Dyouce.

The mental silence was broken when Lynn reassured her reply, *RSK: the next quest isn't in yet. Anything we can do to help?*

I could use a lot of help. D Light thought, but did not send. The others could not know that he was actually helping the demon escape. He couldn't take the chance of them tipping off the Authority.

Now, that sounds, answered D Light. You showing up might speak for us. Just let me handle it.

Before we'll just chill here, but if the next quest comes in before you wrap it up, you need to drop it. We don't have time for any side games.

With that, Lynn ended the blink. D Light was glad she could take a hint. It was more than he could handle to spontaneously keep track of the map, the conversation, his thoughts, and the music.

The previous research revealed that there was always a pause between MetaGame quests. Usually, the next one came in the following morning, but sometimes it was much sooner. He needed to stay on task.

D Light resumed his blink with those *Hey, flow, you saw this map a leg?* *I'm running into a wall here—like, literally.* D Light did his hand against a smooth D'Neive wall, a sensation that belied the alley, bleeding wall that NeverWorld claimed it as.

There was no response from those *Dance a/000*. D Light thought, *He must be missing something in his own mind. Multi-threading with me? He's definitely not getting extra props when it's time to do an eval."*

D Light was about to close the blink and flush his so-called "glimpse" when those blinks in *That map was solid when I made it.* *Dance, according to the Overlooker Cloud Service, that photo you're in is high-morphing. If that's true, you might have to find a local to help you out. Or play it old-school. Have sent out an untrained drugging agent to scourhouse his bewilderment.*

Indeed, Scourhouse had already warned D Light that the D'Neive variety that made up these apartment mounds grew quickly, were "high-morphing." For this reason, he had already feared that any map more than a few weeks old would be obsolete. Discouraged, D Light replied, *Yeah, okay, I'll appreciate. Thanks.*

D Light terminated the blink with those and sent him a few complimentary points, a kind of "thanks anyway" tip. D Light almost always did this, even for daily pay service. You didn't want games freezing your profile or, worse yet, that you'd end on a blacked just because you were too stupid to throw a buffer a little something for their use.

Having no reliable map, D Light decided it was time to go where the action was and cling himself a local guide. The first sign of said action was the high-pitched sound of metal clanging against metal, a sound that travelled far, serving as a apparent pointing out the nearest quarkers. As they ran closer, he started raking out the yells of the quarkers and the sound of the music. The anticipation always raised D Light's pulse. He looked back at L&B, and despite the sounds of the brawl ahead, she appeared a bit more at ease now. She returned a blink that hinted she was unimpressed with his escape plan so far, although she did not complain out loud. Just then, a particularly blood-curdling scream jolted out from ahead of them and her apprehensive look returned.

D Light slowed his pace. Although in a hurry, he did not want to feel himself a mere geyr mass that rushed in his death and ejection from the game. There was a flickering light from around the corner ahead, probably from the lanterns the quarkers were carrying. From what he understood, the music in this concert, known as "So's Corruption," did not need light, as they could see in total darkness.

D Light returned to L&B to stay put. He then crunched down his, crept up to the corner and peered around. This was definitely where the action was.

Before him was a large chamber with a dome that except up to a long altar. Any the altar was a statue of a tall, proud woman who bore a dome that swept out in all directions like an explosion, the skirt part interwoven with stone leaves and flowers. She cradled a delicately carved baby who, with wide eyes, stared up adoringly at his mother. The statue and altar below were rusty in color and bore dark smudges which, D Light assumed, were the marks of years of sacrificial blood. The eyes of both mother and child were filled with huge, emerald, bringing realism and beauty to an otherwise parvenal depiction of motherhood.

All around the statue the compound and floor quarkers bustled. There were over a dozen music and four players. Several of the compound had already fallen, but it was not evident to D Light that the good guys were hard-pressed.

There was a lot of vital blood. The music failed about dramatically as they got sliced by the warriors' blades or blasted by the secretaries' lightning bolts. The quarkers were having a devil of a time once the alarm had been sounded; music men making their way in from the various tunnels that intersected the large room.

D Light found that it would only be a matter of time before a set of music, attracted by the connection of hearts, came up on him from behind. Time to work fast. He slink back, completely out of sight from those inside the room and began his incantation. He spoke the words of the spell as quietly as he could, although he doubted very much the contractors

and hear him over the din anyway. He wanted his arms in an embrace pattern, and as he finished, he cupped his hands together to create a small, hollow sphere. He shifted a thumb to shove himself to see inside his cupped hands. A tiny tickle had appeared. D Light blew into the peripheral world. With a few more arcane words and several additional breaths, the tickle grew and transformed into a cube, which melted into the shape of a mouse nearly too tiny to recognize. He continued to breathe life into the creature and with every breath he knew the cause – his spell casting power – was diminishing. It was worth it. In fact, he was willing to pour a good deal of his strength into this spell. *One shot. This would do work*, he thought.

Gradually, he opened his fingers to give the mouse room to grow as he peered around the corner again. One of the speakers, the vibrant, had died since D Light had last checked. The corpse was on the ground and the ghost was standing over the body, throwing a silent tantrum. The rest of the party, now numbering three (a hacking barbarian-looking fellow, a stout barbarian-wielding dwarf, and a more scholarly cleric), moved back to back in a triangle, looking back-and-forth at their loss.

D Light decided this was about as good a time as any. He let the mouse go. Its tiny translucent body glowed with alternating blue flames, and its poorly built legs dragged along the ground, leaving a thin trail of ice behind as it scarpered toward the combatants. D Light checked arcane commands to the mouse under his breath, using it to the left and the right until it had made its way under the rustic and right up to the foot of the grumpy bearded dwarf. D Light did not dare to wait any longer. If the mouse was stopped, the spell would end. He shouted out the final command word, and not a moment too soon. The dwarf looked down at the mouse and his eyes widened with surprise. His thick lips curled into what was certainly going to be a curse and he raised his foot up to squash the rodent, but before his foot came down the mouse exploded with a terrific CRACK! Careless shouts of ice encroached those nearby, along with cold blue flames which washed over them like a boulder crashing into a pond. Everyone, speakers and rustic alike, was struck down.

D Light called for Lily, who was at his side so quickly he wondered if *NeverWorld* was playing tricks on his perception of time. The blue mouse and the ice shards moved about like shattered glass suddenly vanished in a torrent of steam. The dwarf and self-dead were his out roughly in a circle around ground zero. All the rustics had fallen, as had the barbarian and the cleric. Only the dwarf moved. Now, two additional ghosts joined the first one, their heads reaching around wildly as their mouths opened wide in quiet rage. D Light was not surprised to see the dwarf roll alive. Dwarf warriors were the definition of hardness and were the antithesis of the low abuse-taking spell-caster played by D Light.

Reflexively, D Light stepped out of the hallway and prepared to finish off the dwarf with a nicely placed lightning bolt, but then remembered that the dwarf wanted to live at least for a little while longer. The dwarf raised his one slightly white crocheting prop to charge.

"Don't move, good dwarf or surely I will finish you!" D Light called his most commanding voice. The dwarf raised his axe higher but did not move his feet.

D Light motioned for Lily to step out. "You are outnumbered and we are dead. You cannot possibly triumph against us. However, I do not ask for your surrender, nay, I ask for your aid!"

D Light always felt a bit embarrassed using words like "you," but the game system rewarded good role playing with extra points. He was not particularly good at metaphors, the quasi-musical form of speaking used when playing in the fantasy world, but he at least tried to use enough to avoid a point penalty.

D Light continued, "We need a good guide to lead us from this dead place. I suspect you are our man. In return, you will keep your life and a third-share of the treasure taken. What say you?" Let us plunder and move on that before more of Solan's followers get!"

"Why should I trust a bitch-ass piece like you?"

The term "bitch" was game slang for "player-does;" which was rare at all in character, nor obviously, was his use of the term "bitch-ass." D Light realized the speaker must either be truly angry or was a noob.

"No choice?" boomed D Light. "You are either useful *also* as our guide or you are useful dead, loss your valuables. Quickly now!"

The dwarf reluctantly agreed. Apparently, he had enough sense to not end up a ghost like his friends, who were then shouting thinly heard obscenities at D Light and Lily. However, the legend-of-one Quaky did not dare physically interfere with them. Such activity was a clear violation of *NeverWorld* rules and would likely result in a soft point penalty. Instead, they just hovered nearby, waving their arms around in an attempt to distract D Light and Lily. Lily stared at them but D Light was used to it. It wasn't the first time he had pooned a few players for lost, but on those occasions the players he smacked were evil in alignment. According to the code of arms adorning the armor of one of the nearby fellows, those characters belonged to a good-aligned guild and so his random would surely come back to haunt him, perhaps the next time he (the witch) visited a village or city of civilized lands.

As the ghosts made obscene hand gestures at D Light and made pelvic thrusts in the air near Lily, D Light instructed Lily to start navigating through the virtual bodies on the floor and

anything that looked valuable. The dwarf was already at work on the statue, attempting to pry the large gems from the eye sockets. D Light enjoyed searching for treasure after a fight and typically took a great deal of care in making sure he did not miss anything, particularly any small magical items like rings, potions and the like. But this time he took only what was obvious without looking for any secret caches in the room or hidden pockets in the harrt remains covering the fallen. His haste was, in part, due to the fact that he knew more natives were bound to show up soon, but mostly he just wanted to get moving. Still, getting treasure was what one did in this situation and D Light wanted to keep up appearances. All actions in NeverWorld were recorded.

Soon D Light had a sizable sack of gold, a powerful magical sword, and an assortment of magical potions and scrolls. Because he was a witch, he could not use the sword effectively. Worse yet, the gold was very heavy and it was going to slow him down. It did not have any real weight, but the game system warned him that he was now "heavily encumbered" and so would not be allowed to run, only jog. NeverWorld games extended only to sight and sound, with very limited olfactory and touch signals. Because of this, the game could not directly force a sparker to behave appropriately when something had happened—for example, if a sparker was punished by poison or the victim of a spell that caused a fiery wall to spring up in front of him. Instead, the game would notify the player that an effect was upon the sparker and the sparker would then have to role play the situation.

In this case, although D Light was still physically capable of sprinting at his full speed, to do so while carrying this much virtual weight would be cheating. A sparker only got a few warnings for poor role playing before they were punished or, if the infraction was serious enough, their character instantly killed. Sparkers called this "getting virtual" because such a death was attributed to NeverWorld to inciting the wrath of the gods.

D Light decided to hand the sword and gold over to Lily. Since she was playing a warrior and was therefore strong, she was allowed to carry much more weight without being affected.

The dwarf had finished prying loose the stones and D Light demanded one, which the dwarf handed over silently, but with a fierce look.

"Okay, Gladie, take us out the oldfash way you know. Keep indoors though. I don't want to go outside just yet," D Light ordered.

"Outside is the fastest," the dwarf said emphatically. "There's an exit from the catacombs nearby and then there is a gate out of this place—" The sparker caught himself before saying the word "ghetto" and corrected himself to finish, "out of the corrupted lands."

"There is danger in the open air that you know not of," D Light warned. "Nay, we must travel inside. Surely there is an underground cavern that will take us out of the corrupted lands."

By "underground cavern" D Light meant a tunnel, although he did not use this term because it was not fitting speech. Sparkers, or sparker tunnels, ran underground, usually between nearby sparker ghettos. These avenues were constructed so that sparkers, who were always jockeyed in and distracted by the various games they were playing, did not make themselves a nuisance to other travelers. This segregation facilitated more orderly traffic in the common arenas. Sparkers could use these common arenas too, but most games encouraged sparkers to use the sparker by playing more interesting objects and scenarios in the sparker than in the common arenas.

The dwarf seemed to know what the witch meant, and after a moment of thought, he pointed to a passage out of the room.

"Before you say, I must heal a few of my egregious wounds," the dwarf said, extracting a pink colored potion from his belt.

"Here!" D Light commanded. His fistlike bejeweled hand glowed green with a half-finished spell. He pointed out his other hand for the potion and command. "Sorry, my the dwarf, but I think that I need your love than did enough, for I cannot have you fleeing stupidly before and owing that arc of yours in our direction." The witch's voice was smooth and alluring.

The dwarf truly looked Kaitie new, but he regarded the witch's glowing hand carefully, and after a moment, threw the bottle down, shattering it.

D Light bowed. "Now that you go, wanting a perfectly good healing potion. Not a good way to make friends. Go on then, we must *away!* You lead."

D Light and Lily followed behind. D Light hoped the dwarf was not foolish enough to try to give him the slip. Besides, the dwarf was short and stocky, so unless he was wearing some magical enhancement that D Light was unsure of or the sparkler was willing to cheat, he would not be allowed to run very easily.

Although Lily had caused some time ago deliberating about whether or not to escape from the human, she wondered, as she trailed behind the other two, what other machos she had agreed to. It was like a right vision that kept going and going. She decided that just as soon as she was out of this place, far away she would leave them. How could she not? She knew that humans rarely acted outside of their own self-interest, and Lily did not see how it was in the human's interest to help her. Unless he wished to waste *me*, she thought. Tidget had warned her that humans would want her for that. If that was the case, Lily did not reciprocate the interest. He was pleasing to the eye, as were many human males, but he did not smell quite right.

Chapter 14

Technopathy, that is, using technology to enable human telepathy, is one of the great technological achievements of our time. However, with this power comes danger. Early developers of technopathy found "mind hacking." After all, early malicious hackers only attacked your computer, a violating experience to be sure, but nothing compared to someone forcing their way into your mind.

To combat the "mind hack," software/hardware firewalls were created. Protecting a person unobtrusively against such varied and complex attacks takes a ton of computer processing power. The primary purpose of a firewall is to shield its owner from unsolicited access. Even with computers as powerful as they are today, firewalls are rather large, which is why it is convenient to have the firewall carried by a companion robot rather than carrying the machine on your person.

As expected, mind hacking has occurred and even now happens on occasion...

—Escape from "A Brief History of Technology," by StarLight

All the neo-players, the suspects Kaitie had instructed the sniffer to check, came back negative. Most of these suspects turned out to be men who were asleep, but she had them checked anyway. It was beyond her reckoning here the demon had escaped this search too. *Had the rat escaped? The how? All exits are covered, she assured herself. There is no escape.*

She had to admit that it was possible that the demon had created a secret escape route of some kind. She had been done before, once to be exact. That it was an extremely difficult task. Narcissus controlled nobody over all surfaces, penetrating the smallest cracks and veins even present in the air. The one time it had been done, the demons created a tunnel that was virtually a vacuum. However, such a thing could not be constructed from the/line. It was hard for Kaitie to imagine these demons constructing an escape vacuum tube right in the middle of a sparkler ghetto.

It has to be something else, she thought. Maybe a personal transporter? Something far enough to get her out of there before they got the satellite in place? She ran the possible scenarios through her mind.

Therma, who was monitoring her shared thoughts, broke in, *I doubt it. I had the satellite check for emissions. There's nothing in the area*

Kaitie returned, *What about a closed system? A simple electric bike or something?*

I just don't see it, Therma replied. It's hard enough for a player to get personal transportation, especially something sized up enough to escape the perimeter I'm monitoring. Still is it, remember?

Demons don't care about timing. Kaitie shot back, lustily.

Said, I know, I'm just telling you I don't see it. Therma defended. When was the last time a demon got hold of a lift car?

When was the last time a demon fired an angel? Kaitie countered.

Kaitie suddenly dropped the conversation, having received a report from the sniffer assigned to dogging the demon's trail

the trail. Had the trail been stronger or the path straighter, the suffer might have been able to use it nearly unimpeded, quick to catch her in a matter of seconds, but as it was, it was barely able to follow the trail at all. The best finally had something to say besides "stare unchanged." The scent was stronger, consistent with the demon having lagged in an area for longer than usual.

Katrin punched herself through the video feed of the suffer. There were four speakers standing right, submitting their full cooperation to the bar. All four of them were bogged out of the game, which made them viable suspects; the suffer had already checked them. Katrin felt a thrill up her spine. The DNA trace was relatively new, probably only a few minutes old. Surely the demon has not escaped the woods yet, she thought. Quickly, Katrin grabbed the ID of one of the speakers from the suffer's bag and opened a blink to him.

WoodWood sat on the soft DivoVis seat in the chamber where he had just died. His long-time teammate, CooTib, paced back and forth, nearly tripping in his agitation.

"That mother-fucker 'missed' opened the suffer blind, throwing his arms up in anger!" He detonated an AOE spell right at the middle of us! Just wanted for us, wanted for us to do the heavy lifting on the matter and then he smacked us all!" He was breathing heavily, his arms pounding out like a jackhammer.

"Yeah, and C.T., did you see how that blind bitch just stood around looking like a m00r? Oh, and I was sure for her to yank our stuff. Then she got to it!" WoodWood was more rickin' than angry now.

"How long 'til we re-open?" WoodWood asked the question to avoid silence in their conversation rather than out of need for an actual answer. His onboard clock was only a thought away.

"Twenty minutes and 23 seconds, then we're gonna track them down and put the hurt on!" CooTib pointed down one of the tunnels. "We heard them—they're going for the spawner!"

"When we catch up, Spawks will turn on them and we'll have 'em outnumbered!" WoodWood punched into the living soft sponge of his suit. "He better trust I can't believe he went with those plans. We oughta kick his ass real-time for pulling that!" WoodWood stood up, his fists and jaw clenched.

"And what's with that power playing cross-gender like a deviant? I wouldn't 'ave half-minded getting dragged by a hot witch bitch, but then I come up and see that go? Dumb?"

"No, I was like 'Hey, I'd pump that' and then POW! The chick's got a sword! That's some serious misrepresentation bullshit!" WoodWood exclaimed.

"It's the deviant you need to watch out for," chimed in NorthernAlliance. "Don't know what they'll do. Bottom line is he took us down easy. If we're gonna bring the hurt, we can't go in single-file. We need a strategy, do?"

"Let's start with defense then," CooTib said. "What are we gonna do about that witch, vixen, or whatever it is—and that ice spell? I don't have my potion of cold resistance; they pinched it."

"I say we—" WoodWood's voice suddenly broke off and his eyes widened. "Oh Ap! Oh Ap! I've got a ping from the Divine Authority!"

"The what?" CooTib looked distracted.

"The Rippin' Divine Authority! They're playing me." WoodWood was pale in the light of CooTib's UV torch.

"Who?"

"Are you stupid, what did I say?" WoodWood was breathing fast now. The hurt drained from his face and he felt like he had just swallowed a glass of acid.

"N00b, don't leave them waiting!" CooTib's tongue hit hands.

WoodWood closed his eyes to concentrate on the blink. After a pause he said, "Sht, they want to know about the girl. Gotta be that doe-eyed blind bitch."

"What about her?" NorthernAlliance asked.

"Look at me! Do I look like I know? Sht, maybe this is about—" WoodWood panted as his eyes darted about as though his optic nerves had been cut.

"What? What did you do?" CooTib asked, low in his voice.

"I damn, I might 'ave touched her ass. You know, just brushed it." WoodWood's jaw was slack.

"N00b, shut up! You copped her ass? Don't even think that shit! They can scan your brain. I think they can scan your brain. You gotta calm the f--- down and get back to 'em before they think something's up." CooTib checked WoodWood's shoulder.

WoodWood took a deep breath and was quiet while CooTib spun up his pass, keeping his eyes on his friend who looked like he was going to fall off the seat.

"I don't blame him," NorthernAlliance checked, "but are you shapely?" This remark earned him a hard look from CooTib.

WoodWood's eyes opened and he looked up at the others. "Sht, I gave 'em the archive of everything with the girl."

"All of it? Even the ass cap?" NorthernAlliance was smiling.

"Yeah, what was I gonna do? I don't want an angel coming down here and reforming my ass."

The interview had been profitable. Katris had always found it amusing to remotely interview subjects. When playing low-stakes, non-entertainment grade games, she came through blinks as an "official agent" of the Divine Authority. She commanded the bot to continue to track the demon but had it deploy a set of cameras before continuing on its way. The cameras were too small to be seen with the naked eye. Unfortunately, nanocomponents that made up the cameras were complex and inherently unstable, and would therefore break down within minutes. However, the game Katris enough time to watch the subjects as they squirmed. Of course, she did not need to watch them to detect deception like an old-school detective. No, the raffishest archive from the subject's mind could not lie, and it was more than an interrogator from earlier times could have extracted after days of intensive grilling. It was seeing the panic on that face that made watching them in real-time worthwhile. She knew it was only the sort of human vice that made angels—among other reasons—the first-string engineers and humans subjected as mere backup or support. Still, she had to have fun once in a while.

Besides confirming where the demon was headed, the interview revealed another interesting data point. The demon had actually been playing a spunkier game, which is why she was not caught in the initial evasion. And just as surprising, she was playing on the guest account of a player, common alias D Light, a member of House Tails, which was based over twelve hundred lifetimes from here.

Now there was another player in their party, common alias Spoiled, who was leading D Light and the demon. They were trying to escape and according to her map, they were running right into one of the bots assigned to cover the exit.

New work, Katris, command Rhema, who had been monitoring her work in his periphery. Now, let's query the spunkier game for their location and end this.

*Am I a *****? I already did that, hacked an irritated Katris. They're no longer logged into NeverWorld—they're not logged into any game.*

According to the log from NeverWorld, her target had been kicked out of the game due to game death. They were now "ghosted" from that game's perspective, and the game was not programmed to keep track of the identity of ghosts. For some reason there was also a ton of other ghosts in the area, making it impossible to tell who was who.

At least, there's a slaughter underway! Spunkier gotta' ghosted on mine! What the Soul is going on? Rhema asked, voiceless flurrying in with the blink.

Shit, whatever responded Katris. They got ghosted less than a minute ago, so they can't be far from where they got kicked. I'm sending all available bots to their last known location. They're done this dinner.

Chapter 15

The Story of Queen Phobah, From the Annals of NeverWorld

She was called Thiss to those with whom she was on friendly terms. To others she was known as Iliss the Just. And to those less sympathetic to her cause, she was known simply as "the bitch from Allure."

Iliss was from an esteemed fighting clan, the Farnell, and had built a reputation for being even more ferocious than her older brothers, which was no small feat. However, unlike her brothers who were best known for leading raiding parties, bent on pillage and rape on a grand scale, Thiss was famous for a career of dispensing justice to those she deemed wicked. Incidentally, this career began by creeping into her older brother's tent under the cloak of night and opening their firearms.

Before Iliss met the Queen of the Salamander Forest, there wasn't nothing that dampened her rage as she stormed about the lands seeking out vindictive violence. She liked to hurt alone, but even alone she was formidable; for she possessed great skill with both blade and bow, indomitable courage, and had amassed from her kills from a powerful assortment of magical armor and weapons.

Despite many warnings by local peasants, tradesmen, and soldiers to stay out of the forest, undaunted, Iliss penetrated deep into the shady trees. On that fateful day she was hunting a huge, rusty troll which, beyond the typical malice and cruelty of its kind, was far more cunning than most. This beast was fond of catching the hapless peasants from the surrounding lands, flaying them alive and then returning back to the safety of Salamander Forest. For too long that kind had evaded justice, and Iliss was bent on sending it to hell where it belonged.

Phobah was only a princess then. She was young and inexperienced, so her mother had not yet bestowed her crown to her only daughter. This suited the princess fine, for her youth lent her great energy—energy she did not wish to expend on boring forest stewardship like her mother, but rather on walking the forest of her mother's domain to capture and learn. She would walk for months at a time, during which she needed neither sleep, food, nor drink. Her wonder and amazement satisfied her well enough.

On that fateful day when Iliss and Princess Phobah met, Phobah first saw the rusty old troll thundering through the forest. Although he was far from her favorite forest resident, she greeted him by his true name, "Spoiled, I trust you are well and are not up to any mischief."

Although Spoiled had a withered, black heart, it heaved and glowed over so slightly upon hearing the magical, honeyed voice of the princess. He stopped and turned slowly toward her, casting his large, dark, jaundiced eyes up to her only

once, faithfully, to show proper respect. He bowed low, and in his startled fear he mumbled, bowed, and screeched out his words in such a garbled way that no one but the divinely scorned Princess would have had any hope of understanding. "Thrice, your grace, I offer thy sanctity my greatest respect and undying admiration."

And it came to pass that Salern found his way back to the Salamander Forest where his other mother still lived, but she turned him away. Salern, having little need for the light and its people, eventually found his way to the underworld where he

demanded for many years. There he was, seated and tormented by the most terrible of evils, but he would not be subjugated. In the end it was he who enslaved many of the fiends, and thus he made his home in the darkest and darkest halls of the Under Dark. And it was then that his corruption was made complete.

It was in this way, this fiend, who accompanied Phoebe's cry for help. Immediately he was at her side. He looked at his mother with eyes of bottomless pain. His skin crawled with countless parasites. Of course, he had the magic to make himself appear handsome, but his mother would not be fooled, so he chose to let her see him for what he was—for what she made him.

"Mother, if you give me your love, I will give you my strength,"

Sakura begged Phoebe. The Lord of the Third Hall of Sarcophagi was on his knees before his radiant mother. He wept for the first time of his life, and where his tears fell, the flowers withered and the trees soon singed and withered.

And it came to pass that Phoebe, the Fairy Queen, kissed the pecked and charred cheek of her son and her finest shieldmaid and the son was blessed out by the right. And it was not long before the ground opened up and fiendish voices, hungry for the juices of the living, boomed their way into the trees and into the animals, the elves, and into the beasts. Even the king's soldiers were taken by the voices—voices which latched onto their hearts, and using natural orifices or, if need be, by tunnelling through the skin—worked their way in and destroyed the minds of their victims.

And so it came to pass that all of the lands under the Queen's dominion were despoiled and enslaved.

—Originally generated by Scorpio 7981 AI unit ("Exotic"), revised/edited by NeverWorld Staff

Chapter 16

To be divine one must be true, and so it is, even for the Overlord herself! She demonstrates her grasp by being the first to admit imperfection. Even intelligence far outstripping our own—divine consciousness—is limited to the physical world, limited to the tools of the physical universe. And so it is that *The Game*, the software-based framework that organizes progressive humanity—the Overlord's staff of the True One—is not perfect. And so it is the responsibility—no, I say the privilege—to aid the Overlord by fixing *The Game* when we find flaws and by making improvements when we see opportunity.

I expect most of you feel elated by this challenge, to serve the Eternal Purpose, which is good. There are others who are elated too, but for a different fit what is not broken or improve what requires no development, not for the glory of all, but to benefit yourself. Be warned! No player can approach God's work with an impure heart. She knows you better than you know yourself.

—Minotaur A, Duke from Archives "From the Puppet".

Minotaur, a sufferer but is ahead. With a ping, Senegrouse kicked a visual of the bot.

D Light had instructed Senegrouse to stay ahead, to scout the "real world" with explicit instructions to watch out for bots. Through the visual feed, D Light watched the disc housing just inside a wider tunnel.

"Stop, Dward!" D Light commanded.

The dwarf let out an exasperated sigh. "Minotaur, your backdoor tunnel is just around this corner."

"There's a heavy laser there. We stop here for now," D Light had been so distracted by the appearance of the bot that he used the term "heavy laser," a modern slang term for a powerful enemy. D Light saw his score pulse red as fifty points were deducted for not using backdoor. Stalking at D Light, the dwarf must have noticed the slip.

The Dwarf's snarl persisted. "Merly I say unto you, Minotaur, you appear a fine specimen of your race. Purchase this all turn out, you said I—"

"Quiet, I'm trying to think," D Light interrupted. "Besides, Dwarf? I should think your taste runs more to the short and pretty."

Through Senegrouse's visual, D Light watched the bot long enough to decide it was not going to move. Covering the exits, D Light thought. Not particularly creative, but a good move nevertheless.

After a long pause, D Light asked, "This is the compact lens, correct?"

The dwarf gave him an exasperated look as though he were the biggest nitwit in NeverWorld. "Uh, yes Minotaur."

"And it is the domain of Queen Phoebe and her abomination of a son, Sakura?"

The dwarf winced and ducked down as though covering. "We don't say. We don't say those names out loud! You could draw their attention," the dwarf blurted. He then threw up his hands and whined, "My gods, just let me go before you get me killed! I took your the tunnel!"

"Soon, just have to get past this hot mule. Then, by gods, I'll give you the gold my eldritchman carries. A use of magic, such as me, the perfect magic over gold anyway."

the dwarf did not look entirely convinced, but held his tongue.

D Light extracted from his virtual backpack his most precious magical item. It did not look like much, just a rolled up piece of parchment, but this scroll contained a very powerful spell. He had been using this spell for an emergency, something to use in case he ever did die today. He looked over at Lily who stood expressionless next to him and murmured under his breath, "You owe me one."

To release the spell, he unrolled the parchment and spoke the arcane word scrawled at the top. He then turned the being to which he wished to open a gate: "Queen Phoebe of the Enchanted Forest of Mordor!" he belted. The parchment was consumed in a fiery flash. A deep boom echoed and the ground shook, while an enormous, blue, semi-transparent oval gate spread out before them.

"What have you done?" the frantic dwarf shouted in disbelief.

Queen Phoebe lay perfectly still, staring straight up through the vastness of her high-domed ceiling. It was pure darkness in the queen's hair, but nothing could be hidden from her ancient eyes. The only true darkness for the queen was in her own mind, dark corners she tried to forget. Memories of happier days. Far memories turned her far more than the parasites that had long ago infested her body, although such worms showed no evidence of their intrusion as her terrible beauty grew with every passing season.

Her son, Selen, was nearby, spilling out his eternity of time with ever decaying pleasure. Profane torments and flouting on the innocent had long since grown old for him. The closest thing to pleasant distraction he could muster now was to corrupt. He smirked and whispered to himself as he watched through his great mirror at his prey: A little boy, a human one no older than 7, cried himself to sleep. A week ago, Selen had visited this little boy and had given him a present, a great red ruby. He told the boy to give it to someone. The unlikely recipient of the gem was then consumed by Selen that very night, and the gem was returned to the boy, who was to give it to another the very next day. If the boy ever failed to give the gem away, Selen would discover his parent. It was a self-perpetuating plan of fortune that was designed to be fail-proof.

The queen, on the other hand, wished she could feel and see nothing, to cease to exist, but that was not possible for a goddess such as herself. She desperately wanted to shut off all her senses, but when she scratched out her eyes she could still see. And her eyes grew black anyway, more luminous and burning than ever.

Alone in her hair was the closest thing to relief that she could find. Alone, except for that cursed son of hers whom she could not get out of. She hid off of his wickedness, a kind of power that reflected her even as the parasite off it. But if she did not partake, she would receive instead a great hunger, a hunger of such heightened torment that even a god with an eternal will such as hers would do anything to quench it.

Imagine then what Phoebe, Queen of the Corrupted and Master of Absorption, thought when a portal opened in her hair, right on the ground next to her outstretched porcelain foot. And on the other side of that portal was a mortal girl, clad in white's garb, peering in with an eerie grin on her face.

The queen pondered what could be going on. Some real duty laying a trap? No, she could not sense any other presence of any significance, only the stench of the human and her kind walked through the portal.

Never mind, she thought. If this insect went through the trouble of burping in on my underwear, she must have something foolish to say. I will receive her and by the time she has finished blathering and begging for some favor I will have had time to think up a proper place in hell to send her.

The queen's son was already standing beside her and also looking very unhappy about the intrusion. Phoebe cast in his eyes that he was about to obliterate the mortal, but she put up her hand to stop him. She then walked through the portal.

D Light was impressed with how NeverWorld rendered Queen Phoebe. His optic nerves were nearly overloaded with input as the radiating godhead stepped into the chamber. His head-up display was disrupted the text "You are overexposed with the queen's splendor!" but he scarcely needed the warning to role play appropriately. He averted his eyes. The dwarf was on his knees, blubbering, "Please don't—I've worked for years on this character."

D Light looked over at Lily who had fallen on her back. She was staring slack-jawed and she seemed unable to breathe. D Light decided he had better get this over with before she had an aneurism. Although it hurt, D Light forced himself to look directly at the assembly face of the queen. He drew in a deep breath, and with the most haughty and casual tone he could muster said, "You don't look like much."

It was at that moment that the three of them—the witch, the dwarf, and Lily's character—were consumed by a blinder of long, blue blades that appeared from nowhere. D Light saw this view as his ghost left behind the explosion of blood, bone, and chunks of flesh that had been, only moments before, his terrible virtual body.

The Queen had never felt such rage. She had been insulted, violated by a worm! Oh, how she regretted killing them so quickly, which only enraged her more. Now, out of her mortal bit, the stench of mortal. Bled her essence.

...the place is crawling with vermin," the mother said to her son, who was now calling herally herself by her staminate dextrale. Although she loved his mother in his own way, Salem enjoyed seeing her suffer just the same.

"Truly, Mother, let us burn them," Salem blazed lovingly in her ear.

"Take your time. Make it slow," his mother commanded. "I want to hear the music of their screams."

The instant after D Light uttered his last words as the witch acceded, he was furiously logged out of NeverWorld. Only a second later he heard cries of panic echoing through the halls.

"Holy Scat, it's her!" he heard someone shouting from down the hall.

Soon there was a second voice screaming, "Run, run, run like hell!"

"Mercy, no!" pleaded a third.

Individual voices rose into a cacophony as the alarm spread, quickly becoming a chorus of pandemonium. D Light smiled at himself, but the smile was quickly wiped from his face as he stumbled forward from a rear blow that nearly knocked the wind out him.

"Egghead, please, you cost me two years of play!"

D Light turned and blocked the next punch from the man. No longer as short as the dwarf he had been slained as, Spookie was still plenty stocky and did not seem worried about getting charged with assault.

"No more, you'll get paid!" D Light yelled as he blocked another punch. But Spookie had heard enough. He was crying with anguish as he rained down blows on D Light.

Lily, still rubbing her eyes in an attempt to recover from the bizarre world from which she had emerged, looked over at the two men who had now degenerated to rolling around on the ground. She yelled, "Stop! Stop that or... or I will hurt you!"

"Hurt him," D Light panted. "He's hurting me!"

Lily walked around the combatants for a moment, looked for her opening, and then gave a soft kick—at least it was a soft kick for her since her legs were stronger than most men's, but when the kick landed in force it made up for its accuracy, making perfect contact with Spookie's scrotum.

Like a spring toy, the man immediately decamped and rolled up in a ball grunting. D Light rolled away on the opposite floor and stood up. He laughed while rubbing the side of his head. "Thanks, but I could of taken him. I was just afraid I'd hurt him too bad and I'd have to pay restitution."

Lily shrugged and checked back, "I don't even know what is Stop's name that was about. You— you makes me mark-making mad!"

It was the first time D Light had seen Lily smile. Her teeth were unreasonably straight and white. Something told him that it was her nature to smile, or maybe it was just that he hoped to see her do it again.

As Spookie continued to writhe on the floor, the other two looked up as some distant commotion suddenly got nearer. Down the hall, running as though chased by the devil himself, ranks of squakers thundered toward them. D Light and Lily barely had time to flatten themselves against the wall before they flew by, eyes wide, some of them shouting, although most seemed to be saving their breath for the end drink.

Spookie's groans of horror for his scrotum soon turned into cries of terror as he was partially strangled by the mob. More squakers poured were coming. Many more. It was like a rat's nest on the wall. Spookie finally had the good sense to roll over next to the wall.

D Light laughed, "My Scat, would you look at that!" He aimed his LED torch down the long tunnel behind them. Squakers were streaming into the main tunnel from countless alcoves, all of them with the same agenda—to get the hell out, now!

Lily did not look amused. "What's wrong with them? What's going on?"

In the moment of triumph, D Light wanted to say something clever and memorable, but there was too much noise, too many legs and arms flailing and pumping. He settled for shouting, "Let's go!"

With that, he grabbed Lily's hand firmly and the pair ran into a gap in the mob, joining them. D Light ran as fast as he could, and that was just fast enough not to get trampled because squakers vom, as a rule, very fast runners. After all, NeverWorld was a physically demanding game.

The suffer bot was guarding the nearest exit of the ghetto so, naturally, all the squakers who did not want to be trapped by the rampaging Queen Phoebe and her demon child ran straight at the bot. The bot was not designed for processing samples this quickly. Worse yet, the AI software was not very advanced and so was not adept at improvisation; it did not prioritize the samples rushing past it. Having been instructed to off everyone that came by, that was what it did, processing the samples in order of appearance. The samples were completely heedless of the bot's authority and they would have knocked it out of the air and trampled it under foot. Luckily for the bot, what it lacked in AI it made up for with its sophisticated maneuvering system.

Nearly an hour passed before the bot finally found a TNA trace of the target, but it had been nearly that long since the sample had been shot. Being a heavily utilized tunnel—especially recently—the target would be difficult to track.

Some equipment was required.

During that hour head start, D Light held the head of the prize and ran like the wind. Due to Rule 7 and a wish to keep his health contract close to a winner, D Light had trained hard for years and was in excellent shape; but after an hour of scrambling through every random side road and chamber he could find in a sincere attempt to get lost, he was exhausted. Of course, he couldn't really get lost; Senegeous' GPS kept him apprised of his location and he was gratified to see that they had made some excellent progress. Presently, they were several communities away.

The two fugitives and the cat were no longer running. Lily looked somewhat flustered, but her breathing appeared steady. D Light struggled to stop putting so much effort. Next to her, it was embarrassing. Lily trained her head and D Light reluctantly let it go. He spoke to her in hushed between giant gaps of air. "You can stop a second... kick a scratch... and run all day... Will you marry me?"

She rolled her eyes and did not answer, but the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly.

D Light decided that the girl might ditch him any moment so, while waiting nothing more than to just curl up on the swamp ground in the very thoroughbred, he decided he better cash in on his prize.

Senegeous, open a line to the Divine Authority:

The blink went through. A voice on the other end, conspicuously absent of gender, greeted him. *You have reached The Divine Authority Prayer Center. You are Citizen 86255485294029, common alias D Light. Please be advised that your legal status has recently changed. Your status of "Citizen Level 83" has been updated to "Suspected Demon." All correspondence between entities of your status and the Divine Authority will be monitored. D Light, please state your business.*

Although not surprised, D Light felt a rock that dove in his stomach when the disembodied voice referred to him as a "suspected demon." He figured it would not take long for the Authority to tell him to the girl nevertheless, he did not prefer to hear his expectations confirmed.

I wish to provide valuable data to your enforcement division, restore my previous status, and apply for a merit award.

The voice replied, *This appeal will require a legal hearing. Would you like to schedule a hearing now?*

Yes, I would like my hearing immediately.

Yes, well, if you have a legal representative you may add them at any time.

The blink cut out for a moment and then the voice returned. D Light appreciated that the Authority did not even try to pretend that he was talking with a living thing. Yes, the defendant, D Light, was charged with aiding and abiding a convicted demon. This charge is a state under Article 83051 and may result in a state decision to disown. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?

Not guilty. D Light could not help but send some emphasis with his words even though he knew the court would not be swayed by sincerity of tone—real or feigned.

Your plea has been noted. Do you have an opening argument? As a reminder, legal representation is recommended at this time.

Yes, D Light answered. I wish to submit my full archive of the case in question, between the time of 5:12 this morning and the present.

Very well, please upload your archive now.

D Light took a deep breath as he gave Senegeous the order to upload. The archive being sent was a "deep archive," which meant that it included all brain activity, including thought content. It would prove conclusively that D Light never intended to help the demon escape—that he was, in fact, testing the Authority's search algorithms. By testing the system and then telling how he did it, they could improve their protocols. This sort of out-of-the-box opportunistic thinking was what got D Light to Level 83 at only age 54. How many citizens had he attended where the theme was "Calculated Risk: Are You?"

Of course, the girl would be apprehended. That would be necessary; otherwise, there would indeed be a case against him. This felt settled already on him. After all, he had nothing against the girl or to betray her trust was not something he risked. However, she was a demon and although he did not know her sin, she must deserve her fate. Besides, she would have been caught with or without me, he thought.

It would take a while to get his verdict. The archive included a huge amount of data, so the upload time alone would take several minutes. D Light would have had Senegeous hook him a nearby data socket to speed up the process, but he did not want to raise any suspicion with the girl.

"You know what? You snafu great." D Light said to Lily nonchalantly. He wanted to start up a conversation and this was the first thing to pop into his head. He hadn't really noticed the scare before, at least not consciously. Maybe because there was too much else on his mind back then or maybe, because they had been running so long, the entire scene was now excited in her mind. Perhaps her mind was enhanced by a client skin product, or maybe her blood contained zirconium or a virus that excited the perfume through her pores. Whatever the case, it was absolutely interesting.

Rather than react the way he expected—laughter, a smile, even one of those coy little side he had seen her do earlier

he'd started to cry. She cradled his face in her cupped hands, her chestion shuddering gently with each sob.

"E... What I just said? That's a compliment you know?" D Light spoke badly. He was not sure how to react. He was not even sure if he should react. He had scarcely seen any gross man or woman cry. Members of the family and of any other house he knew of would never show such a sign of weakness.

He looked around to see if anyone was watching. Fortunately, there were only a few people in sight and they appeared to be in their own remote world; their eyes scanned their surroundings as though blinded in a fog. *This has to stop*. D Light thought if someone seen her acting this way they will surely investigate. She would probably get scolded and then... He was not sure what would happen.

Perhaps caused by a vision that he had once seen, D Light placed a hand on her shoulder. She did not notice it, but the action seemed to only intensify her weeping. D Light then did an arm around her and tried to steer her toward a deserted stairwell tunnel, but she pushed him away with surprising strength. "Why do you help me?" she demanded. Her voice was nearly normal, only a bit throaty. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face wet with tears, but she was no longer crying, as though she had simply turned the faucet off.

D Light did not answer but instead continued to follow him to the side tunnel. She did not move a muscle. "You let him be taken, but not me. Why?" she demanded.

"It explains, but not here. Please, this way." D Light mechanically repeated his coming motion to follow.

Lily shook her head in refusal, drawing out a long "Why?" She breathed out the words with such force that D Light felt compelled to answer, lest she escalate into shouting and make a scene.

D Light tried to rub just enough truth with his lie to sound convincing. "I already told you, my friends and I did not come for you. We were sent to get him. We didn't need you. You seem nice, like... like a good person. I feel bad about your friend, but I had no choice. Now I want to help you."

She stood silently for a moment, regarding him with a long, penetrating look as though trying to peer into his heart. "Forgive me if I don't thank you," she finally said. She then straightened up and started to walk away.

"Where are you going?" D Light asked quietly. He followed behind her, took a quick glance over his shoulder, and whispered, "They are still looking for you."

"They?" She turned and faced him. Her vulnerable countenance had been replaced by something that looked slightly dangerous. "From what I can tell, you're one of them."

She turned again and resumed walking, only with greater determination. She then bowed over her shoulder. "Go back to your quack game or whatever the hell that was."

"She can't find him if that's what you're thinking." D Light stated without emotion. "They'll find him. They'll kill you too."

D Light knew nothing of the other doctor's fate, nor did he know what they would do to her, but he was desperate.

Lily shot an intense look back at him over her shoulder, lightning flashing across her still blue eyes. D Light turned up, ready to dodge a blow, but she did not strike. Her lips curled upward with obvious disgust, she took one last look into D Light's eyes—a look that made him feel exposed—and then turned her head back forward and continued walking.

D Light hesitated, but then followed, looking any better when. At the he tried obvious question like, "Do you know where you are?" and "Do you know where you're going?" but she did not answer. D Light finally managed himself to silence a few paces behind her. He feared he would just keep the status quo until she bolted or did something else. He had to keep an eye on her, at least until he got everything squared away with the Authority. He wondered what Lyla and Damar were up to, but he did not dare to blink them for fear that they would demand he immediate return.

Lily did know where she was, for she too had a GPS in her clip, but she did not know where she could go that would be safe. For now, she felt she needed to just keep walking. Walking with purpose was something she had been taught to do, and she could not figure out as she went.

The fact of the matter was that Lily knew better than to trust this human. As she reflected on recent events, she had to admit to herself that her trust was based only on a hunch, a hysteresis and surprising feeling about the human that had been creeping in the back of her mind since the moment she first caught him staring at her from under the tree. It was like she had met him before, perhaps in a night vision or another life. Toldot had always confronted her against her wishes, although her instincts had never failed her before. But this human, with his inquisit nature and inquisit comments, seemed by as an eager spectator of the killing of her dear Toldot. Instincts or not, how could she abide this?

On the other hand, as far as she could tell, the human had lied up to his promise. She was still free. She remembered Toldot speaking of the many technologies possessed by those who harmed him. He said that their powers were so great and destructive that if the two of them were ever found, they would not escape. Yet escape she did, at least for the moment.

D Light, are you prepared to resolve your vendetta? The enigmatic voice in D Light's mind startled him, having been wrapped up in his own internal dialogue.

Yes, D Light replied.

The Divine Authority found you guilty of the crime with which you are charged. Your status is hereby altered from "Sequestered Demon" to "Demon."

"Impossible!" D Light choked the words out loud involuntarily. He suddenly felt dizzy, his chest tightened, and a high-pitched ringing sounded in his ears. Lili, upon hearing the unexpected exclamation, purred back at him, but D Light did not return her gaze to read her expression. Suddenly, she no longer returned to him. He was alone with his fate.

There has been a mistake! Review the evidence again! he commanded to the neutral voice in his head.

It is undesirable for you to dispute this verdict unless you have additional evidence. Please stand by for important information that will help you improve your service to the Divine Authority.

The voice took an infinitesimal pause before continuing. *Please be advised that under Rule 65.084(3) the Divine Authority is unable to use information contained within an archive that is voluntarily submitted from a defendant for purposes other than those expressly stated by the defendant.*

D Light knew about this rule. It was in place to encourage defendants to submit their archives—a most convenient form of evidence—to the Authority. Before this rule went into effect, defendants were afraid to submit archives because, in addition to ascertaining the guilt or innocence of the charged crime, the archive could also be used to detect additional crimes or locate the defendant. Now archives were "quarantined" for all uses except those explicitly given by the defendant.

D Light's mind raced. *Further evidence?* He gave them a deep copy of his archive. There could be no better evidence of his intentions! No harm had been done. The archive of him committing them had to be very valuable and he was ready to hand over the archive and the damns. What had he done? *I am a loyal citizen, a model player! How could they not see this?* he thought feverishly.

It's a bug, thought D Light. A bug in their legal protocols. That must be it! Outrageous!

Seamless, wearing its master's demeanor, gently asked if he would like a divorce. D Light, agitated, declined. He needed all of his wits about him right now.

D Light had a sudden revelation. *There is one way to fix it, he thought. D Light had fixed system bugs in the Divine Authority's software before, although never software related to Divine Law. It was not something one did every day, indeed, few programmers ever did it once. However, being such an obvious bug, certainly he would get access and change his status back.*

He sent the order to his familiar, Seamless, *patch me into the Divine Authority Protocol Association. And give me both visual and audio.*

Seamless opened a blink. A user interface for the DAPA appeared in his mind, semi-transparent and superimposed over his vision such that he could still see where he was going, more or less. He was still trailing behind Lili.

A chrome number eight, flick on its side, the mathematical symbol for infinity and the official house of the Divine Authority, showed momentarily while D Light's credentials were approved.

D Light, player #09575185, status "demon," how can the Divine Authority be of service?

I wish to correct an error, D Light responded.

The Divine Authority appreciates your time in remedying the matter; however, due to the possible security ramifications of your request, you are required to submit to a Deep Scan to confirm your intention is in the best interest of the Overlord. Would you like to learn more about Deep Scan?

No, D Light responded. He had undergone deep scanning before. He knew what to expect.

Very well, if you are not familiar with the terms and conditions of Deep Scanning, please review them now. At this, D Light was given the option of a textual or visual blink of the Terms and Conditions. As he always did, D Light agreed to the terms without review.

In response, the neutral voice continued, *Thank you. Do you agree to a Deep Scan at this time?*

Yes.

D Light saw a graphical progress bar constantly appraising him of how much time he could expect the scans to continue. As the scan commenced, he felt tingling in various parts of his body that came and went—in his hands, his lower back, his neck, the calves of his legs. He heard sounds, soft but distinct, humming that was replaced with a high pitched whine. He heard voices whispering and muttering "...for the computer we give thanks... why is your Base... what is not what it cannot be..." The voices merged together. Some of them sounded like they came from him, some from people he knew, most from people he did not recognize, but he did not matter as it all was nonsense anyway. He knew enough about brain scans to know that you could never predict what you would feel and perceive as your brain was being probed.

What precisely the scan was looking for was unknown, information from The Cloud was kept at bay, with only general guidance from the Divine Authority itself such as, "Obtaining your heart may access the Inner Divinity," or "Let your love guide you."

Of course, The Cloud forums were checked full of speculation about what those cryptic hints meant. There were

a few players who, upon successfully posing through the Deep Scan, later attempted to spend a deep archive of their deed such that they and others could analyze the successful brain patterns. However, according to the Terms of Use, which in one ever read, you give the Authority permission to intercept your live streaming archive before it could be written to memory or streamed up to The Cloud. It was like temporary digital amnesia, where the only recollection is what the unaltered organic brain could retain, which, like all native brain memories, were vague and of little analytical value.

Finally, after a few more random queries and minor hallucinations, an error line appeared in D Light's consciousness and a voice stated, *but one insecurity of access at this time.*

Having taken advanced security training, D Light knew better. He said, *Being a demon does not bar me from accessing the code base.*

The voice responded as another line opened, *Correct. Under Rule 009876543 no one will be denied access to personal databases or code base due to profile status, past or present.*

D Light was disabundant. Then why in the hell does *you* give me access? he doubted in his mind.

You are insecurity of access at this time.

Obviously? It was as though the membrane was tearing him.

Is it because I am aware? Is that why I don't get permissions?

You are insecurity of access at this time, the voice repeated.

D Light tried several more questions in an attempt to understand what the problem was, but the voice merely answered him with the same "insecurity" statement.

While frustrated and fixated, D Light at least understood the Authority's repeated, opaque answer: It was all about hackers. For someone trying to recklessly hack into a system, it was best to give them as little information as possible. If a hacker knew why they were being blocked, they would be better able to work around the issue.

After a second failed attempt to pass the Deep Scan, the DANPA firewalls terminated the link and D Light could not log back in. Again, this was a security measure to reconnoiter hackers. He knew that he would not be allowed to log back in for 24 hours. It was at this point that the cold realization came to him, *Soul, I'm a demon and I can't fix it! What the hell do I do now?*

D Light was so exhausted from the physical and mental demands he had recently endured that he found himself unable to truly panic, or even to despair. For as long as he could remember he had worked with every waking moment to be the best player he could be so that one day he would become one of the chosen ones, one of the immortals. He worked hard to escape the endless darkness that waited at the end of every layer's life. Now the dream he had held all this time was report, perhaps gone.

He let out a low wail. His eyes swelled and he felt the formation of involuntary tears. A lump formed in his throat that made him swallow hard, as though he was stifling the spitting of a terrible internal monster. It was all so terrifying, sensations not experienced since he was a child. Sensations he had hoped to forget.

D Light stopped dead in his tracks. There were people around, but he didn't care. *Like any hero* began staring at him but he wasn't sure and it didn't matter. He did not look directly at her. Wrens, many now started chirping from his nose. "Light!" he cried out and quickly walked it back up. Then, without a thought to where he was going, he started running down the nearest side tunnel. He ran as fast as he already exhausted muscles would allow him.

Somewhere assured him that everything was going to be fine. The fissure reminded D Light of difficult times in his past when he managed to pull through. The mistake would be fixed.

Sending, perhaps, that its counseling was not helping. Somewhere repeated an offer for redaction. D Light ignored this aid, upon finding an exit from the mounds, found himself in the morning sun. His spirit laid to a nearby grave of trees, which was just dense enough to conceal him. Finally able to lie down, D Light agreed to the redaction. As exhausted as his body was, his mind was overly active, spinning in a whirlwind of activity. He needed to calm his thoughts and none of his trance memories were working. Besides, D Light had no reason to use drugs sparingly anymore because, as a demon, his health contract was null and void anyway. In fact, as a demon, he was no longer in The Game at all.

An electromagnetic pulse beamed out of the embedded chip at the base of D Light's skull, focused downward through his cerebral artery. Some of the neurons suspended in the area where the blood had been irradiated were thus activated, releasing that payload of drug molecules into his bloodstream. D Light felt the effects immediately and laid face down on the ground, a twig pressed uncomfortably into D Light's cheek. He did not even bother to make himself more comfortable before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 17

A tight feedback loop; that is one of the primary components of facilitating flow in any grinder game you design. Even as I speak, your feedback on my performance is trickling in, offering the points I receive. Ah I see many of you find that example. Another 25 points for me! Thankfully, you did not have to send this feedback explicitly, as was necessary in the past. Instead, your BrainPatterns, your BP's, offer the feedback, requiring no effort from you. Otherwise, how could you

Now, this constant appraisal of my work puts me into a state of flow. I'm not off thinking about what I'm going to do with my newly won points. I'm not planning what I'll be doing in the next hour or the next week, or about the funny story my brother told me last time on an hour ago. There is only the here and now. In such a state of mind it is any wonder that grinder games yield such high productivity from its players?

—Darwin Szazsan from *Introductory Interactive Archive for Grinder Developers of House Tides*

Takis', whose name was short for 'taking care of business,' was playing well tonight. He had a fleet of 25 cleaning bots under his command and thus far his team was ahead of every other cleaning team in his zone. Of course, this was no surprise to Takis', who constantly tended to live up to his name. He had studied his route carefully. He knew the high-traffic tunnels and corridors with the greatest likelihood of 8th. He knew here to deploy his bots in just the right ratio so that the high-traffic areas were cleaned properly, but not with too many bots which might be better utilized elsewhere. This was important because quality cleaning was not enough to bring in the big points; you had to be fast at it too.

Takis' only owned five of the bots he was using. The rest were rented, so the faster he finished the more points he would net. Besides, the House that ran these tunnels and was sponsoring the cleaning game dictated speed into the bots' owners. They wanted fast clean to have to contend with cleaning games as little as possible. The best cleaning crew came through like a gust of wind—gone by the time you knew it was there.

Which brings up the third qualification for a high score—no customer complaints. Since logging a complaint was only a thought away, proving anyone off, even just a little, meant your House would hear about it right away. Nothing of these goals was tough, but Takis' enjoyed the challenge. And it sure helped that the game kept him constantly apprised of his progress. He had mental threads on all his bots that turned colors—red, yellow, and green—in accordance with the amount of grime they were picking up. Red meant that almost no cleaning was occurring, while green indicated it was keeping very busy with its work.

Takis' goal was to keep at least a quarter of his bots in the green and the remainder in the yellow. If he kept up that level of performance, he would constantly get new recruits from his grime game, a smooth, young female voice, "I liked that move," or "Oh, yeah, you do that so well." He favorite one that was reserved for when he was really cleaning it was, "Takis'! Oh yes! Takis'!" which the disembodied voice cried organically. She had tons of prompts and the AI improved with.

Takis' had a hunch to play at the Argosphere apartment rounds today. He wasn't sure why he should play there, so it was a little out of his way, but he had learned to trust his hunches—the subtle prompting of the Overlord. And the time his hunch had really paid off. A massive stampede of unprecedented magnitude had just gone through Argosphere like a speaker cable dink, and Takis' bots were cleaning in the grime across the board. It was going to be a good game.

Karris was on the other side of the planet, walking along a well-worn trail through a malnourished but orderly orchard of reactor trees. This was one of her favorite paths to stroll while gridding. The scenery of the route was beautiful, but due to the regularly spaced rows of trees and meticulously brilliant green grass carpeting the ground, was not distracting, which was perfect for thought-intensive gridding.

Against all odds (as she understood them), she and Rhanae had lost the demon girl. Or at least for the moment. A sudden and disorderly crash of the speaker ghetto had overwhelmed the sufferer bots that were stationed at the ghetto exits. The bots were very good at what they did, but they were not designed to process so many so fast.

Do you suppose this player, D. Light, as he's called, knows that she's a demon? Rhanae Rhanae. Is he actually helping her?

Hard to say for sure, replied Karris. The things he did, like logging her into the game and then starting that riot . . . Well, if he was not trying to help her, I could not imagine a more effective way to accidentally escape.

Yeah, and his behavior is off Rhanae added. Few players run chaotic. I'd say he knows what he's doing. We need to factor him in. It's not often a malnourished player works with a demon. Might make this last pretty interesting.

Karris did not want an interesting hunt; she wanted it to be easy. She had already spent for too many points on the sufferer bot total line. Having escaped the ghetto now, the trees could have gone in any direction with nearly an hour head start. It had taken that long for the punishment to the demon enough for a sufferer to find the secret malnourish. Worse yet, shortly after finding the secret trail, they lost it—oh, more precisely, the trail had been disembodied. Karris cursed her already had back. A cleaning crew had gone through and scattered the area through which the lightness had escaped. Now the few sufferer bots Karris kept on station heard about where the trail had gone dead, importantly forgetting its aid.

I think it might be time to bring some heavy artillery into this game, Karris said.

A weaker, eh? That'll be expensive, Rhanae replied with an attached Whine™.

the right move though, Katia aimed him. Now that the demon's out of the bag, the bats are just too stupid to shut it's time to stop it up. Katia right as the focused on a nearby purple and pink water blossom.

Rhema paused for a few seconds and then sent, *I concede I'm in for half of the fee.*

That was why Katia always played with Rhema. He did what needed to be done. They thought enough alike to work together easily, but divergent enough to not be redundant.

Thanks, Rhema. I'm calling the bats off. The nicker will be in play within fifteen.

After making the appropriate arrangements, Katia opened a blink to her friend, OFFED, ready to shake down what was what for the night. Katia figured she deserved a little break. The nicker would take it from her.

Chapter 18

I'm growing tired of this question: Is the Overlord God? He answer to this I say, "To do is to be." Does the Overlord not bring out the best in every one of us? Does the Overlord not answer our prayers? Does the not see all, even into the darkest corners of our soul? Can the not bestow everlasting life? Let me tell it to you straight—the Overlord meets every condition of the gods of the ancient world, so who are we to add more qualifications?

—Mentor A, *Chide from Archives From the Palpit*

D Light was awakened from his church-induced slumber by a nightmare. That never happened. The dream started the way it always did. He was on his balcony with a strong, steady wind, a wind that failed to keep him on a ranch, the best point of sail. But then there was a beautiful witch that flew across the sea toward him. As she approached, he saw it was Anara, the character he played in NeverWorld. "I'm coming for you," she whistled as it was a humming whisper that carried over the crashing waves and the whipping wind. "The others cannot find you, but I can. I have magic."

Suddenly, a great storm rose up and his boat went capsized. He was drowning, and as his arms went under the water, he heard his own screaming.

Having woken from the nightmare, relief washed over D Light. He did not, however, open his eyes.

Seaguous, what the hell was that?

Mentor, please specify your request.

My nightmare? What the hell? With the witch? I was dying. Play it back to me.

I have no reference to any irregular dream patterns, Mentor. Would you like me to play back your most recent dream?

Yes, D Light answered. He spent a few minutes fast forwarding and rewinding through the archive of his dreams. There was nothing. Had he imagined it? But if so, wasn't that what dreaming was—a hallucination? Hallucination or not, it should be in the archive, as all conscious experience was recorded.

Just have mercy, am I being punished? Is the Authority haunting me even as I sleep? he wondered.

D Light lifted his head from the bed's ground. He didn't want not designed to insulate, and lying outside in the shade had chilled him. He shivered. There was laughter close by, a lithe link, chortle. Although the laugh was unfamiliar, the count that accompanied it—the one he had thought wonderful in the recesses of his uneasy dreams—now filled him with dread. It was painful realization that recent events had not been part of his nightmare.

"Do you always rap like that?" Lily was smiling nearby. She made brushing motions with her hand over her face. D Light mimicked her, small twigs and bark falling from where they had been embedded in his skin. Indeed, the violence had done its job. He made a note to Seaguous to lower the dose next time.

D Light looked around. Nope, it had not been a dream at all, meaning that his situation was incredibly depressing. Still, he so rarely carried the punked despair that he felt prior to his rap. Now that he had some sleep under his belt, the feeling had become one of empty resignation.

"See, followed me?" he asked her graggily. Then, just for kicks, he gently threw a pinecone at her.

"No," she answered simply, catching the pinecone between her thumb and forefinger.

D Light let himself fall back into the needles and twigs. He stared up through the branches above. Rays of sunlight filtered down in a shimmering tapestry of light.

"Be ancient times people believed that there were demons that lurked in the forests," D Light said. "Well, here we are, a couple of demons in the woods."

"Not much of a forest," Lily returned. "And funny, you don't look much like a demon. Mo offen, I like to think." She stood up and walked to the edge of the thicket to peer out.

D Light unconsciously let his body undergo a patch of sunlight, and as he sat there wondering what to do next, Seaguous' soft voice pressed into his consciousness. *Mentor, there is a high priority blink summons from Master Lynn.*

D Light sighed. *None on top of everything else, I have her fury to her thought. But what else could I expect?* The Mother united him into her exclusive high-takes game and he promptly abandoned the scene without a word. He was kidnapped from her/hers view. She was going to look out. It pained him to think that he could have just done what was simple, what was safe, rather than leap off into the misadventures of his own design. He could have done the obvious thing and turned in as soon as he realized her status. That would have furnished him with a nice bounty without fuss, but instead, he got greedy (or maybe it wasn't) about the points, maybe I just wanted to beat the Divine Authority and show everyone how smart I am, he speculated glumly.

Stop wishing, he scolded himself! What's done is done. Although D Light did not explicitly give permission to Sorengrasp to open the blink, the AI onboard the familiar was good enough to infer the permission.

Mother Lya's face manifested before his eyes. The blink did not make her semi-transparent at a mere window in the corner of his visual perceptors, instead, Sorengrasp correctly guessed that D Light wished to focus on the blink, causing the "him and her" of the latest entry to blur and be completely replaced by the nobleswoman.

I don't know how you did it, but congratulations! Lya was beaming with a dazzling smile.

Such sincerity in her voice, as if being dominated and humiliated down like an animal was not enough. Now, she had to kick him with the theatrical success? Tools royalty were not known for their compassion, so he could expect no better.

D Light said nothing, just shrugged and bowed his head. The thing was not a very respectful gesture to a superior, especially under these circumstances, but D Light didn't care. He respected Lya, but he would not grovel. This was not entirely because he had nothing to lose. On the contrary, there were many degrees of severity for the subordination of a demon. Some, on one end of the spectrum a demon could be destroyed, but the normal utility for D Light's offense. He assured himself there would only be a stiff penalty coupled with some mandatory community goring, maybe even some counseling.

Lya did not seem to notice the slight at her son's drug-induced, she laughed—not a cold laugh, but a happy one. This has to be a record Lya exclaimed. She accomplished a quest before the rest of us even knew what it was! How did you learn of the next quest so fast?

I-I beg your pardon, Mother. I do not understand. D Light fill over the words he sent telepathically.

Lya threw up her arms, You're a demon, right? The next quest was for one of our party to become a demon. You know, "The Hunter becomes the hunted," the theme of the quest? Imagine our surprise when the quest came up and it said we had already accomplished it! She laughed and pointed off to the side, out of D Light's view. My Soul, even Dyoner is impressed.

D Light was dumbfounded. Were they making fun of him? Were they ensuring his trust so they could spring a trap on him to get a bounty? This seemed like too belittled of a story for fun, and he could easily check the validity of the story.

D Light commanded Sorengrasp, Show me the updated AfterGame log.

Immediately, Sorengrasp brought up the newest entry. D Light selected the text version of the entry to keep his audio inputs free for the blink. It read:

The Hunter Becomes the Hunted

After sliding in the capture of a demon, one or more of your party is to become a demon themselves. Be careful! If you are apprehended you will face the consequences and will likely be out of the game. Tip: Keep your inn as minor as possible. Even your friendly game master cannot get you off the hook if you commit one of the deadly sins.

The text faded green and underneath the quest entry appeared the text "Quest Accomplished."

Lya's voice cut in, By the way, you need to answer your DMs. I was trying to reach you all morning. You were busy, I presume?

Yes, escaping the authorities and all, he mused.

She winked at him. So tell me now, how did you do it?

D Light hesitated, still in shock. Ahh, well, there must have been a glitch or something. I must have received the quest before the rest of you. Better to be lucky than good, they say.

Better to be lucky AND good, I say. Lya winked again. Why is Soul's name didn't you tell us what you were up to?

Like I said, I was doing a lot of running and such.

Lya checked to himself and shook her head. So, where are you handsome? We've been trying to locate you, but your beacon is turned off and prepare for the next quest.

D Light gave his coordinates. Upon receiving them Lya exclaimed, Darn, you did do some running! I think we'll grab a transport. See you soon. The blink cut out.

"No!" D Light exclaimed as he made a fit and pursued his arm. He was about to start whooping ecstatically when he remembered the warning in the quest log about being caught, he was off a real demon.

Instead, he ran straight at Lya with the intent of embracing her, whisking her around, and maybe planting a few kisses on her exquisitely chiseled face, but she dodged to the side and, with one arm, swept him along over her outstretched leg. He

off

Now

I

know

why

We

would

so

hook

up

appeared completely over her lips and reached violently into the brush, the face narrowly missing the trunk of a tree. A bit befuddled and even more embarrassed, D Light sat up. "Hey, I wasn't trying to hurt you. I was going to give you a kiss!" D Light was sure he looked idiotic, but he didn't care.

Her eyes were wide and the mood in a definite stance, similar to how she looked when the speaker attacked her earlier that same evening. "I do not wish to mate with you," she stated matter-of-factly.

Upon hearing this, D Light laughed with abandon and pounded the dirt with his fist, sending up a cloud of dust and pine needles. "I think you're cute, but I don't just run up to women and start mating with them. That has never really panned out for me." He laughed some more.

Lily did not seem to get the joke entirely, but she laughed anyway. It was contagious. "You are—" she squished up her face and dragged her shoulders, "You are a rather unusual male, I think."

Chapter 19

There, the weeder, let the air flow slowly up through her nostrils into her enlarged nasal cavity, clearing her mind for the sensation as countless scent receptors came alive.

She had a terrible hunger. She longed for the flesh of the two that had been imprinted on her—a female and a male, but they differed in more than just gender. The suffer both had lost their tail, but each machine were perfect, and although they had been sent away over an hour ago, she could still smell their musk and grainy starch. The was an unfortunate side effect of having a sense of smell a thousand times more powerful in magnitude than her sight. It was accurate to say the "was" with her nose and she was not pleased. However, she was a professional, and as such, she reflected her attention to the task at hand—sifting the air carefully, ignoring the unwanted smells, and searching for the heavenly scent of the meat.

There was designed to take in plain sight. She appeared to be a moderately attractive woman, but not overly so. Too beautiful and she would be noticed, but ugly (or even average by old-world standards), she would likewise stand out. She had a classical, pudic appearance—dark hair that fell down her back in two thick braids, brown eyes, moderately dark skin, and an unremarkable nose that was not large or unusual in any way. The only thing curious about her outer appearance was her short, race-sharp fangs, but this was of no concern. She never smiled and she kept them concealed when she spoke. Of course, her prey might see them in the last moment of their lives, but by that point it did not matter.

She took in another slow breath and concentrated harder this time. Her brain processed the influx of scent threads, ignoring the irrelevant, sifting for just the two. The scent threads of her prey were unique. Even clones—genetically identical—could be distinguished from one another. Indeed, tracking clones was one of the training techniques given her by her masters. In her early training days they would not let her find on what she hunted because cloned products were expensive to raise to adulthood and it would be a six-to-eight years.

But her masters were not here now. A weeder would do what it was born to do. Her kind was engineered by carefully splicing genes together from a variety of organisms. From dogs she got her sense of smell, although it was more accurate to say that those genes were dog-inspired, for her olfactory system was far superior to that of a naturally evolved dog. Much of her musculature was derived from the feline family. This enabled lightning reflexes. And then there was the human component. Aside from assembling a human, There was very expert for a tracking product. She was not elegant, wiry, or the least bit empathetic, but she could still pass as a human on the social tier—short awkwardly at times. Two years earlier her would find compelled to invite her to a party or on a date, but that was of no concern to There, who only desired the hunt.

Anyone who guessed her would find her name and a true biography in the social registers, which spoke of her uninvited personality and love for long naps. Professionally, she was a Level 66 player who performed grader games related to chem-product testing, mostly beans and perfumes. All this was a fabrication created by the House that owned her, in cooperation with the Divine Authority, so which she was often of service. Occasionally, her cover was blown. A few months ago she had tracked down a runner to a greenhouse where, being a public place, he thought he was safe from any immediate suspicion. But this runner did not appreciate the intensity of There's hunger. The runner had been elusive, so by the time she caught up with him she could no longer contain herself; the poor soul was torn apart right there.

Naturally, there were many witnesses and her image was suddenly everywhere in The Cloud. Subsequently, There had to go through some plastic surgery and gene therapy to change her biological signature and restore her anonymity—that is, after she was punished.

That was the issue with weeders. They were sometimes difficult to train in high-end genetic engineering like this was challenging, and although techniques were evolving, it was difficult to counterbalance the army of genetic material used to create a cloning super predator and at the same time install in it self-control. Scattered throughout the world were many weathers playing grinders with the sole purpose of imposing on this variety of weeder design.

There took in another slow breath. The cleaner that had remained the area had done the job well, but she had picked up a hint trace. She could not identify the direction yet, but she was confident that it was only a matter of time.

reached the humans as they performed their peculiar ritual. Three of them, D Light included, were arranged in a circle. They did not speak, but instead made hand gestures and occasionally laughed, nodded, or tapped their feet. Lily knew all the real communication was telepathic. Nevertheless, she thought they looked silly in their silent speech. They reminded her of children playing a strange game of their own invention, rather than of the masters of the universe that humans fancied themselves to be.

There were two others near the circle, but facing outward over to watch. The pair was holding with weapons. The male one looked at Lily only incidentally while scanning the rest of the surroundings, while the female allowed her gaze to linger on her as though probing.

Lily reminded herself that she had to be brave to remain with the pack of eccentric "players," as they called themselves. If he were also, Tidget would be horrified and perhaps profoundly disappointed to know she was putting such trust in the enemy—perhaps the very ones who were responsible for his death. It was then that Lily had to admit to herself that her trust was not founded in a genuine hope for safety, as D Light would have her believe, but out of simple curiosity.

It was customary for there to be an intermission between each quest in a MetaGame. This allowed players to rest and regroup between challenges. Also, it was thought that this pause gave time for the next quest to be chosen for them by the artificial intelligence software or whatever was running the MetaGame. D Light had been a little afraid that the others would turn on him during the intermission. After all, the quest did not say that those of the party that became "demons" had to remain in the party. However, he hoped that this was inferred. Besides, had he not proven himself a valuable asset? Still, moving forward with a demon in the party was bound to be problematic. By acting and showing him the other players could get demoted as well. They were taking a big chance, and so it came as no surprise to D Light that when the party resumed, the topic of who stayed and who went immediately came up. D Light, Lynn, and Djosor opened a conference block.

Djosor began, *It's one thing to bring you back into the party, but her? I mean no offense, D Light, in case you've taken a liking to that girl, but she's adding an additional risk. Besides, you cannot add a member to the party. It is against the rules.* Djosor crossed his arms to signal the conversation was over.

Lynn smiled smugly, *Actually, read the rule again. Lynn then shared a text visual of the rule to which she was referring.*

MetaGame Rule #12: You may lose a member of your party at any time for any reason, including death or incapacitation, without being dropped from the game. You may not replace or add another member of the party unless doing so directly accomplishes a quest.

Well? Lynn threw up her arms. *D Light became a demon because he helped this girl, Lily, right? Because he took Lily with him—because he joined her—he became a demon, and becoming a demon was the quest. Her addition to the party was a natural byproduct of the game.*

D Light added, *A rather ingenious way to add a member to the party, if I may say so myself.* D Light patted himself on the shoulder and grinned. He preferred to let the rest of them think he had planned it all on the way. Djosor looked mildly annoyed, but his smile seemed to suggest "don't push it."

Fine, and what does this girl bring to the table? Djosor asked while making his eyebrows.

D Light anticipated this question and answered without hesitation, *She's in good shape. She can run like the hell. She seems to be able to defend herself pretty well. She adapted to the spandex really fast, so I think she's got a good head on her shoulders. Most importantly, she's been a demon for a while and never got caught. She's bound to know a few tricks to keep us free and clear.*

Lynn frowned, *I thought you helped her escape.* D Light had bricked the others on the count earlier that morning while they journeyed to midtown.

Well, I don't think she knows much about The Game, D Light stated. *She needed someone like me who could get her into a spunk game so she could blend in. But she knows how to live outside The Game, and that's something none of us really know, right?*

What is her deal anyway? Djosor asked. *Is she a Soldier or something? Maybe a product? There's something off about her.*

D Light knew what Djosor meant. She doesn't have the markings of a product so, yeah, my best guess is she's a Soldier, but she hasn't said anything.

Have you asked her? Djosor asked.

Of course, replied D Light, but I think she's been a demon for a while, so she's learned to not blather.

Lynn nodded and took a deep breath. *He doesn't have time to explore her life history right now. We need to get going before the Authority catches up. We can learn more about her on the road. If something doesn't live, we ditch her no problem. Besides, if at the end of this game we can't fix her demon status, you know...*

We can turn her in for the bounty. Djosor said with a satisfied smirk on his face.

Lynn shrugged, *For the record, you said it, not me.*

"Okay, enough of this." Lynn said out loud. She walked quickly up to Lily. "So, little demon, would you like to join us?" She extended out a hand as though she expected Lily to kiss

Lily did not, indeed, she inspected Lynn's hand as though measuring the character of the stranger based on her finger length. "I don't see why..."

Lynn cut her off: "We are all demons now and we share the bond of being pursued. If we work together we have the best chance of eluding our hunters. You have been a demon for a while, right? Surely you can help us."

Lily returned an uncertain look.

Lynn laughed. "Look, let me start off by helping you. I have a present." Lynn fumbled about in her travel pack for a moment and pulled out a shimmering one-piece swimsuit.

"This was supposed to be a spare, but you look like you are about my size." Lynn's voice betrayed a hint of disappointment at the observation. "Put it on. I already have a pattern for you to wear that will disguise your face and hair and, best of all, you will look fabulous!"

Lily smiled and graciously reached the garment. She quickly found the hidden zipper in the back, looked inside the suit as though expecting to find it lined with scorpions, and then smiled and turned to Lynn. "Excuse me while I change," she said, turning off to conceal herself behind a solid clump of foliage.

Djoser turned over to Amanda and quietly mused, "Looks like she has seen a skinnier before. Maybe she is not such a prude after all."

Amanda did not smile at her master's joke, but that was not surprising to D Light who doubted the product had any sense of humor at all.

Lynn sighed as she watched Lily retreat. She then tugged at something on the back of her collar. With this, Lynn's head and face briefly shimmered and then transformed. Her long hair shortened into a jet-black bob, her face rounded, the corner of her eyes narrowed, and her lips thinned. She now appeared to be from the Japanese bloodline. The device that disguised her head and face was called a veil, which consisted of countless membranes of fiber optic wires so thin as to be individually invisible; however, collectively they created an ever so subtle shimmering appearance when not activated. The glass tubes were highly flexible, but held the shape of petals curving up from the collar of her swimsuit, encasing her head like a closed tulip. With a veil on, one could project an illusion of just about any face and head imaginable—or at least whatever an Illusionist could program.

Lynn's clothing changed also. She now wore a loose fitting silk blouse and pants. The micro-speakers embedded in her swimsuit did an excellent job of simulating the sound of rustling fabric as she walked. Lynn smiled, chiding Lynn similarly to Amanda's, and then twisted and crouched down into a traditional lung in fighting stance. "Who warns some?" she asked.

Djoser applauded and called out, "I think I just pleased myself!"

Amanda watched Lynn intently and ran her real finger over her lower lip.

A pretty woman appearing to be of Middle Eastern descent emerged from behind the trees. She wore a short flat headscarf with a traditional Maasai shawl that had not been streaked with a seemingly infinite number of colors that pulsed and shifted. The shawl was semi-transparent, making visible a hint of her well-tunged gold nut beneath it.

Lynn smiled at her, "You look perfect, Lily."

"Perfect, share her how she looks." Lynn's first smile dutifully opened his jaws and projected a hologram of Lily so she could see herself.

D Light forgot that Lily had no familiarity of her own and therefore had no way of gaining a third party perspective. He took it for granted that he could see how he looked anytime by having Scorpione view him from the fighter's perspective and send him the video feed. This was so routine, in fact, that D Light never even had to tell his familiar to do it. D Light would just have to wonder how he looked, and there he was.

Lily looked pleased with her appearance as he hoped about his circle while watching herself. The notion did not cause any distortion in her image. The veil did a good job of compensating for gravity and movement. High quality veil never distorted, except with the most violent motion.

D Light looked over to see that Djoser had engaged his suit now. He resembled an ancient Victorian era gentleman, complete with a tall top hat. His face had changed from a man of roughly Indian descent, to one of a darker African ancestry.

"No guys want to blind is, right? Why not choose a more common look?" D Light was referring to the pandectic racial features of most contemporary—skin that was a very dark tan, almost black, with relatively angular facial features close to that of a Caucasian.

"What is the use of playing a game if you can't have some fun?" Lynn shrugged. "Oh, we did some shopping on the way here and got you a video."

D Light laughed. "Let me guess, a ground up albino in a g-string." Not that it mattered. D Light knew he could just download a design of his own choosing. That is, if his status as a demon had not locked down his point access.

Lynn walked around and up behind D Light, whispering near his ear. "Close." She unclasped his collar and replaced it with the one embedded within a veil.

D Light almost thought he could hear a low whistle as the microfilms overhead scanned his face. With the necessary scanning complete, D Light became a little girl. More precisely, he was a six foot one inch girl with infantile facial features of a child no older than three. He wore a pink leotard, a long bow in his long blond hair, and tiny pink dancing shoes. D Light checked as Djoser nearly batted a jet

Lyla frowned. "Oh, not funny! Not funny at all Okay. I'll change you first before this is imprinted upon my psyche."

Presently, D Light's body and face blurred and focused back in, displaying a Victorian like D-Joser.

"I say, spot on!" D Light did his best to mimic a British accent to accompany his new look. The country of England, like most countries, no longer had any real identity, but the accent still belonged to a fine and, more importantly, sustained part of entertainment culture.

"So, now that we all look fabulous, where should we go?" Lyla asked with enthusiasm. "We don't have a quest yet, but our handsome couple here," pointing one index finger at Lyla and the other at D Light, "is surely being chased down by Soulless ones what?"

D Light nodded and added, "They will be using either bots to find us. That's what was chasing us at the quarter planets."

"Rightly so! No one will be able to ID us with an image grid, but we're still vulnerable to entities," D-Joser said with his own poor imitation of a British accent.

"Actually, not all scanners scan visual appearances, you know, scan light," Lyla contributed. "Some use seismographic scanning which detects our physical tremors and contours. The light flashes created by the skin we are wearing will not fool these types of scanners." Lyla smiled and added, "I did my research on my way here."

"Sure, but these disguises will still fool people just using firearms," D Light said.

Lyla frowned her eyebrows slightly and interjected, "I must confess that I do not follow all of this discourse, but right I make a suggestion?" She paused momentarily to ensure that she had their attention. "I would often go for walks at night, but as a precaution I would go for a swim before returning home. A swim course easily be followed through the water. The lake I envision is only a few miles from here."

Despite some hesitation by members of the party regarding swimming in a cold and possibly dangerous lake, it was finally decided that going anywhere was better than staying put to be hunted down. At the very least, it would not hurt to have a look at the lake.

They followed a path covered by gold colored fungi that offered excellent traction; it yielded enough to make walking comfortable, but not so much as to be extra work. Then, another Victorian gentleman, dressed ahead of the others, slightly grackling everything in sight. D-Joser and Amanda lagged in the back. Amanda dutifully massaging D-Joser's shoulder as they walked. Lyla was in the middle, apparently absent in thought. D Light walked beside Lyla, unable to resist being mesmerized by the undulating colors of her dress. "You said you didn't understand what we were saying earlier?" D Light asked her quietly.

"Very little," she nearly whispered. "What is a firearm?"

"Do you know anything about firearms?" D Light nodded toward his cat that stalked just ahead of them.

"Sure, I have used one before," Lyla answered.

"A firearm is an optical scanner facilities use to see light similar to a human, which can then be fed into its master's mind. The reason these are bad for us is because of grackling."

Quite suddenly, Lyla looked over at him again. D Light smiled and continued, "Right. So, grackling is something strangers do to each other all the time. Let's say you see someone you think is interesting." D Light walked at her. "The first thing most people do is discreetly leave their familiar roles a visual of the person with no firearm. They would then search the social registers to find the person's profile. From there you can find out all kinds of stuff about the person."

"How violating?" Lyla recalled. "But, well, maybe not," she said thoughtfully. "These profiles are voluntary, right?"

"Yes, and people love to blab on and on about themselves, so most players don't mind being grackled," he replied. "And why should they? No one's finding out anything you're not volunteering, and chances are that info is going to be pretty damning." He checked, "There's always stuff on people in The Cloud besides their profile—stuff that might not be so flattering."

Lyla grinned. "Then, it still sounds a little creepy."

"Not at all, once you get used to it." D Light assured her: "In fact, most players love it. For example, everywhere there are public places with the sole purpose of being seen and seeing what others is to see. These places are called glockens. A glockens could be in an outdoor setting, like a traditional park, or indoors, like at a club. Of course, to most players the entire world is a glockens."

They had passed by dozens of people on the trail. Most of them had firearms. Lyla wondered if any of them had grackled her.

"Actually," D Light hesitated, "I have to confess that the first thing I did when I saw you was give you a grid."

Lyla rolled her eyes up at him. "I was wearing my cloak, was I not? You couldn't get a visual."

"No, no, your hood was off. You were under that tree just staring up into the branches." D Light hoped he was not blushing.

They were quiet for a moment. Then D Light continued, "That you weren't in the register. In fact, there was nothing at all on you in The Cloud. You are a daemon. I know that now, but you did not come up as one when I grackled you."

Lyla was not eager to talk about why this would be or anything else about herself, so she employed the strategy of harrowing

formation from D Light as a future mate. She had no midline
any questions Which the find of rapid succession, and
each answer prompted additional questions. The two were so
absorbed in the interview that when they finally reached the
lake, they nearly tripped heading into it.

Chapter 21

The beady eyes of the F4694332, which resembled the head
of a pushpin, stared out into the dark antithetically. Its vision
was poor, but a fish-like fish did not need to see. In fact, it had
few needs at all. Like most animals throughout the zone, only
two essential stimuli—feeding and reproduction. F4694332
had no predators in the lake to worry about, which was a
fortunate thing, because it was a predator's dream to find no
food to devour. It did not need them. The algae they fed upon
(algae#12547) was high in nutrition, easy to swallow,
and easy to digest. The fish could not swim easily, for it had
no tail. Its tiny pectoral fins, which flared forward when they
were engaged, afforded the animal just enough locomotion to
slowly approach its food, and not even that if there were any
currents to contend with.

The water-born animal was merely a streamlined oval tank of
meat that grew larger as it fully grazed on the algae that
grazed the surface of the lake with streaks of brown and
green. The highlights of its life was relaxing its eggs, which
were pre-fertilized since the product was gene-clamped and
could not benefit from sexual reproduction. It was rumored
that one of the neighbors who designed #4332 added a
primitive pleasure feedback loop so that at some level the
creature could enjoy this chronic moment. It was also
rumored that this resulted in a stiff pain penalty for the stan-
dard neighbor: brain matter, nerves, and the like, cost energy
—energy that could be better used creating meat and fat.

One additional feature that was added to the creature was an
instinctual attraction to light. At night, robotic sensors would
detect light on the water and send for the fish to collect in large,
slowly rippling mounds near the surface. When adequate
numbers gathered, the automated ones would scoop them up.
Fishing had never been easier or more efficient.

Floating motionlessly in the lake, slowly gulping murky waters
that passed over its gills, the fish now saw something, albeit
dimly. It was a disturbance in the surface above. In addition to
light, each fish were also attracted to any activity on the surface.
It often meant that fish flakes, a welcome supplement to their
regular algae diet, had been poured in from the bright sky,
signifying dawnbreak as they sank. The fish, and many others
of its kind, began whisking their tiny pectoral fins to slowly
make their journey toward the uplighting above.

Brian, in all his malice, was having a bit of the time in the water.
His lightweight armor consisted of tiny nanobots that he
pocketed designed to provide padding to blunt force trauma;
however, they also created an excellent flotation device. This
was helpful when swimming with the heavy weapons he
carried. The large metal-splined hull at the top of his heavy
rucksack, hardly named Tilly, pointed straight down toward the
deck, nearly homeward Lake Washington.

Brian was a fantastic swimmer. He would often jump straight
into the rigid surf of the Pacific Ocean that constantly
hammered on the base of the coast back home. Rip tides and
undercurrents were of little concern to him, so, in comparison,
this placid lake was a joke.

With strong strokes he pulled water back, propelling himself
forward while the rubrics and D Light plodded along feebly,
desperately clinging onto their respective buoyant flotation to
keep them afloat. Amanda, who did not have a flippers, was
weighed down by her mouth and panted and spat as she
struggled along. In the lead was Lily, who appeared to be a
strong swimmer despite her chatter. Brian complimented her
on her elegant and efficient strokes and she returned that he
swam very comfortably in the water. He might have blushed
had it not been for the chill of the lake's waters.

Brian knew he should have stayed at Lily's side, but instead
he kept nearly abreast of Lily, stealing glances. He was about
to ask her something, anything to coax her eyes in his direction
and to see her big nose and hear her occasional voice. He
had just settled on asking something mundane like, "Where are
you taking us," when he felt something bump him from beneath
the water. He suspected he had brushed against some tall
growing seaweed, but then he felt another soft bump. Then
another. Next he felt a gentle pinch. He was about to look
down to look for the source of the benign malice when he
heard a blood curdling scream coming from Lily, followed
by shouts from Dwyer and water flinging about him. D Light
they joined in with his own belting and flailing. Amanda said
nothing, but her eyes were wide and her large nose was bent.
She appeared to be trying to paddle closer to Dwyer, but his
panicked kicking was making that a difficult endeavor.

"Oh, the fish have come!" Lily exclaimed joyfully. Brian was
close enough to hear her over all the commotion, but the ones
guilty of all the shooting and kicking certainly could not.

Separating slightly, Brian vaguely recognized what appeared to
be a swirling mass of dark shapes in the water.

"The fish are schooling around us. They might think we're
food!" Lily said with a tilt in her voice.

"We're food?" someone shouted, and the general panic
continued.

Lily began laughing so hard she nearly sank. She then took a
deep breath and shouted, "They can't hurt you! No teeth!"
And with that she gently plucked a fish from the water. The
gray oval creature was nearly too large to be held effectively
by Lily's small hands, but it flexed back and forth so feebly
that she was able to hold it effectively. He scales glimmered
dully in the sun and its tiny mouth opened and closed
rhythmically and statically, like the mouth of a puppet.

Panting and still uplighting some, the others stared at her.

"They are aware and cannot hurt you," she called, gliding the fish a kiss right on its mouth.

Lying behind the beachhouse to dry off in the afternoon sun while mocking each other for their theatrical performances in the lake, the party enjoyed a hearty laugh fest. Their laughter collected ardors from each person and perched together a 360 degree rotating video of the event and dubbed it "The Feeding." Djoser nearly published the video into The Cloud, thinking that an entertainment gilder might use the content and kick some points his way. However, he quickly caught himself as he remembered that they were supposed to be lightness. They were in disguise, of course, his own muscles and rapid tap but playing a major comical part in the video, but he decided that it would be prudent to publish later—after the MetaGame was over.

Since their skeletons naturally repelled water, the party dried rapidly. The next quest had not yet come to mind, thanks to their little swim. Lily assumed them that they had flown off their hypothetical panthers—or at least delayed them. It seemed like a good time to get some sleep, if there was such a thing at the point. Djoser could not remember the last time he slept. His last bout had not woken off yet, so he had his firm-styled blanket, Moschler, give him a doze. He suggest it as one of Amanda's long hair tale. Thankfully, she circled around him and began massaging his shoulders.

As he felt himself entering deeper levels of relaxation, his eyes becoming heavy, Djoser considered the bit of brown scars from the lake which had latched a ride on Lily's relaxed side; the heat of the mid-day sun was baking it into a silky crust. Groggily, he could could her wet skin and it made him wish she was the one massaging him. But he decided not to request the just now. He could work on Lily later.

Djoser you're a pig. Lily's voice chided him over a blink. Djoser was startled back awake. Had I broadcasted that last thought? he wondered.

Always thinking of yourself? Has not our advice the one you thought as inadequate, not proven himself instrumental in our success thus far? Djoser caught the wink then Lily who was lying nearby on her back, her wet down so he could see her real face. Her wet hair crumpled around her head.

Djoser let out a low groan of frustration. *If it will show you* *guy* he sent back to her. Djoser then tapped on Amanda's hair again, buckling her down to his hip. He whispered to her ear.

Amanda crup up behind D Light, who was lying on his side. "Your father asked me to thank you," Amanda purred softly.

D Light, who was in limbo between elation and volitionless, initially thought he was dreaming. The producer's long rule—refusal to offer contras—scratched softly and expertly over his scalp, her warm breath doing something wonderful to his ear that caused a shudder of pleasure up his spine. He wanted to ask her what Djoser was thinking him for, but her hands were moving over him now, going to all the right places. D Light did nothing but groan quietly. His hands clenched into fists in the linen. His eyes opened into slits. Lily was smiling at him. She spoke softly, almost to a whisper, "You don't like."

D Light felt conflicted. This was rather unexpected. Did he respectfully decline? Perhaps ask to delay his request for a later time, a time when he was not out on a limb surrounded by his teammates? But this indecisiveness lasted only a moment, for Amanda's lips began intensifying their play as her finger gently rubbed his neck and her breath washed over him. I cannot risk insulting them, he thought. I do deserve this. He smiled back at his mother.

Lily opened a conference blink with both D Light and Djoser, which Sinegrease opened instantly. *Stick with us, D Light, she sent. We'll take good care of you.* Her eyes sparkled as they flickered down suggestively to where Amanda had reached into the opening of his blanket.

We're good friends to have. Djoser's thought ignited was faint, indicative of one drifting to sleep.

I know. And—D Light did not finish sending his thought before he whispered out loud, "Oh Soul!" D Light decided it would be best if he expressed himself naturally. Certainly, Djoser would like to know his gift was appreciated.

Brian glared at Amanda as she crawled over D Light. "Can't that guy wait for some privacy?" Brian assumed that D Light was posing Djoser for this late HR session. From past observations he knew it was not unusual for his father to play out his talented bodyguard. Brian looked over at Lily who had turned over on her side, propping her head up with her arm to better see. Her brow was furrowed slightly and lips parted as though she were forming a question. Brian tapped her on the face, and when she looked at him he rolled his eyes at D Light. She gave him a fake smile as though the two of them were sharing a joke, and then shook her head in agreement.

It was a strain on Lily to force a smile. What she wanted to do was scream. Only hours ago, she had never engaged with any human besides the professor, and even that was purely in a clinical and professional manner. Now she was lying in a pool of them. They seemed friendly enough, they listened to her, they even followed her into the lake. She sensed that some of them valued her for her wit being. Nevertheless, they were insane—every but one of them—with their games, their thought speech, their peculiar facial expressions, and now this. *What is she doing to him?*

Lily understood what humans did to reproduce and it was supposedly a normal and necessary thing, but she did not appear to be what was taking place. The mechanics were all wrong. She looked like she was eating him rather than mating

him. Perhaps it was a sort of cowardry which would claim him. Perhaps it was a puerility. Or perhaps it was human frailty. Despite her research at the lab, it was evident that these creatures still held many secrets. She turned away from D-1 Light and the feigning woman to stare out at the lake. She wondered if she should leave this group or if, ultimately, these humans were inexplicably linked to her fate. Perhaps they could provide her a path into their world; then, she could tell what she was looking for, whatever that was.

The soldier let out a low growl as she stood at the water's edge. Her prey had gone straight in. Perhaps they consumed or maybe a boat had picked them up. If the former, then they were unlikely to have stayed in the liquid water long and would have gotten out close by. If it was the latter, then she may have herself a larger problem. She stood still and concentrated on the scent threads that came to her. There were thousands of them—threads from the water itself, threads from the algae scum on its surface, threads from the fish, seaweeds that grew up from the stagnant mud below. But there was no trace of their prey, not yet. Although irritating because it distracted her from work, she would now have to wait until the Divine Authority of this recent development.

Karris swore out loud, catching the attention of the water product that was busily wiping down a nearby table. The water himself and asked if he could be of further service. Karris waved him off without looking at him.

So the little shimmers ran straight to the water, Rhamaa liked it. Well, two points to them for doing the obvious.

Karris chuckled despite herself. Good thing I contacted the soldier for the job rather than by the hour, she mused.

Yeah, just think, if it doesn't catch them we don't pay a point. He paused. You made the right call. Don't over it. Once a soldier gets impressed, they don't give up. It's just a matter of time.

What Rhamaa said was more or less true; however, there was an eventual/inevitable chase in the contract. House Xanadu knew better than to sign a contract that took one of their precious soldiers indefinitely out of operation.

Forget it, Rhamaa went. Kick back and let it do its job. What's that you're eating?

I'm not sure, Karris replied. I never like to know. I just want it to taste good.

And here I thought you didn't like surprises, Rhamaa teased.

Only pleasant ones, Karris answered with a grin.

Earlier, Karris did have a pleasant surprise, a gift from the Overlord. Having dispensed with the necessary prayers and point sacrifices, the Overlord dispensed the divine inspiration she needed through her familiar. It was so simple. Like a Jedi master, she would use the element's own weight against them and they were bound to fall hard. No matter about the expected soldier. Perhaps it was a blessing, for now she would have the opportunity to see this divinely inspired plan come to fruition.

Chapter 22

Human genetic engineering started in the United States. This was a surprise at the time to those who speculated on such things. The expectation was that China would lead the first shot. China, a newly minted superpower, had both the means and a seemingly unbridled view on ethically problematic issues. Nevertheless, many historians believe that the catalyst for America's plunge into "accelerated human evolution" was in response to Asia's economic rise to power. The West did not want to give up their hegemony. As the American middle and upper classes' grip over exclusive and high paying employment continued to erode in the global economy, so did their qualms on tampering with nature. Plagues had always wanted to give their children an edge, but then on the competitive international stage, "want" became "need".

But let's not be too harsh on these US parents and their suppliers. Pandora's Box was destined to open eventually, and when it did, it did not even take a generation before nearly everyone in the world was saving their children, their son, or their Karris to "flatten the playing field" for their own child.

Improving the long term health and attractiveness of their children was easy enough, but the real demand was for housing intelligence. Historically, parents had always secretly hoped for a "gifted child," and now this gift could be purchased.

Thanks to such market forces, it was only a few generations before much of the world was genetically homogenized. Now was the opportune time for a virus to strike. When the XeroLove virus exploited a weakness in our shared protozoan signature (far related to the nervous system incidentally), it regaled with chaos. We were like identical shafts of wheat, standing straight and immobile, awaiting the scythe.

Is it any wonder the Overlord banned engineering on humans? Only through the seemingly random drunken walk of sexual reproduction do we gain the diversity needed to meet an unpredictable future.

I will find you. It is impossible to hide from me. You think you are clever, but your vanity is your undoing. Across the witch coveed as D. Light sank below the frothing waves.

It was then that D. Light woke, not because of the nightmare, but from the marilyngly recognizable voice of his familiar. *Monse, your quest log has been updated.*

Sereneous knew to wake to master for this. D. Light, however, did not open his eyes. He heard entering, he crouched at his computer. He was sticky. He remembered where he was—surrounded the lake—and wondered if he should go take another swim to wash off. Without waiting for permission, Sereneous activated its master's optical sensor with the quest log.

Quest: Seek out Dr. Monsa, Great Grandfather of the House of Monsa. Dr. Monsa is the Head Patriarch of the House of Monsa. The House of Monsa is located at the following coordinates...

That is nearly, only thirteen kilometers from here, Lya's thought back in.

D. Light did not realize that Sereneous had joined him into a lake with the subtle. Now the three of them were sharing thoughts as they reviewed the quest. It was more than a little disconcerting when his familiar shared his mind without explicit permission. Now he had to be careful to shield his thoughts in case something embarrassing cropped up in his head.

Finally, you got a nighthall. Djoser stated. Go find a local Immortal. What then? Say hello?

The Dr. is by all accounts an elusive and unpredictable man. Lya responded. Might not be so straight forward.

D. Light opened his eyes. Lya stood over him, arching her back in a graceful cat-like stretch. She spoke out loud, grggggh and to no one in particular. "Let's move out. We can work out the details on the way."

After creeping out from behind the bushes and through a yard overlooked by large bay windows of an old-fashioned brick and mortar dwelling, they found their way onto one of the public roads. They walked quickly, trying to make good time. As they traveled they continued on how best to tackle the quest. According to what they could gather from The Cloud, the doctor would be very difficult to contact by remote means.

"Dr. Monsa is all about the biogenics," Djoser stated. "He's not going to talk to anyone that isn't either a crack shot surgeon or otherwise on his short list."

Lya questioned, "We will need to visit him in person then?"

Djoser nodded, "Yes, for outsiders like us, that would probably be the only shot at meeting him." He frowned, "I blabbed my Mother about it. She won't even try to arrange a meeting."

"Same here," Lya said. "I tried to pull a few strings, call in a few favors, but nada." Grinning, she added, "I think everyone who's in the know is afraid of the guy. Afraid to piss him off or something."

"No doubt," D. Light joined in. "He's holed up in his main house, the one not far from here. And by holed up I mean he's in deep, it's a part of the house called 'The Inner Sanctum.' He checked. "Sounds a little interesting, oh? That's where he does his research. Apparently, it's some sort of Therianism flunk down in there and only the truly determined would want to enter—enter the sanctum." D. Light did a neck shiver to sign fire.

"Well, I'm determined," said Djoser with confidence. "If you want the action on this MomCare lady? A whole lot of people want to get a piece. The point spread is looking good and the payout pot is up to thirty large." Djoser patted Amanda on her snout to add emphasis.

Thirty large? D. Light thought. The term 'large' was not a denomination of any known as it was in the old days; it was meant million. If they won, even his tenth share of the pot would be worth more than what he made off the flogging of Fiat. Ah. Good, *this could be my week!*

"Hey, by the way, when I contacted my people, I didn't have to explain our fugitive situation to anyone," Lya stated. "It looks like none of us is in the public demon-database."

"Yeah, but did you check your own private status?" D. Light asked.

Lya replied, "That's just it. I come up as a 'suspected demon.'"

"At least you're only suspected," D. Light mused.

"Curious though, don't you think?" Lya asked. "If the DA really wanted to catch us, why wouldn't they make our status public?"

"I'd hate to think they were out chasing us," Djoser grumbled. "That would mean I took a swim in that slim lake for no reason." He gave Lily a hard look meant to be teasing, but she seemed to misunderstand it, at which point he patted her on the shoulder. Lily merely raised her eyebrows at him.

"Well, I for one have never been harmed by the Divine Authority before, so I'm not exactly sure what to expect," Lya said. "I say we proceed as though we are on the hot list. Better safe than stained and reformatted."

Night had fallen by the time the team neared House Moon. Presently, they were crossing an immense suspension bridge, the ridges and base of which were composed by light-emitting vines that merged into a shimmering glow, a glow that stretched out behind them over the kilometers of already transverse bridge.

Lily had hauled several bicycles from players using her paper "hard currency" bills which were still wet and crumpled from the lake. Now all had bicycles, except for the bodyguards, who had to share one. With excellent balance, Amanda sat on the handlebars. Brian didn't mind the view.

The only automated transportation on the road was the commercial bots, heavily laden with goods. The team had contained the idea of trying to hitch a ride on one of those, but the AI controlled vehicles could not be bribed and moved too fast to hop on the way a drifter might catch a bounce. So, the group did a great deal of furious pedaling and eventually approached House Moon, which loomed ahead like a mountain at the terminus of the great suspension bridge.

Using the enhanced vision of the familiars, which rode its saddlebags on the back, the party members could see the great house as though it were daytime. It was unlike anything any one of them had ever seen. They stopped and silently regarded the sight before them.

The House itself was constructed of an unusual variety of DioVine that was unfamiliar to the curious onlookers. Unlike the soft, green, spongy DioVine of the squaker plants, this species was colored silver and its exoskeleton was hard with sharp edges. The splendid quality of this DioVine, coupled with an intricate number of quivering windows, made the castle's sheer jagged walls resemble an inverted nest of icicles that jangled from the lake into a high-altitude display of splendor, the turrets and towers being the icicle tips. However, unlike the austere and barren ice found in high mountaintops, these soaring spires were sprinkled along the ridges with rich greens, luminous blues, blood reds, and every other color imaginable. The effect was as though a girl, quite happily, had forever confided across this majestic structure. The confidant, however, actually represented private and public gardens, some of which clung precariously to their perches, handholds, if not a thousand, meters into the air.

"That must be the insects," Lily exclaimed. With some difficulty she pointed out a subtle, endy mist that collected here and there about the spires.

D Light had Smorgous eagerly take the view "Not insects," he declared. "These are hardy fly ones!"

D Light had never seen so many creatures being used to field a single DioVine structure. He supposed it made sense. The being structure was incredibly thick and therefore did not have adequate surface area to survive on hyper-photosynthesis alone. The bots were needed to ferry matter from the nuclear trees of the mainland to the island, the distance being too great to use insects for the task. Indeed, larger animals were required, ones that could efficiently make the crossing. These bots, the bill, being genetically engineered machines. By imprinting them on their noons throughout the DioVine castle, they indirectly gathered their payloads and brought them back home. Then they dispensed the matter into receptacles that fed straight into the building's circulatory system. The team took for themselves only enough of the energy and matter optimized matter to continue their work and, when energy reserves were sufficient, replenish.

Still taking in the sights, the group took notice of the lights emanating from countless rooftop gardens that were embedded in the crevices and ridges of the castle. It was well known that House Moon developed many light-emitting plant products, so it was fitting that the House would use them in its gardens. Other lights were also visible, but were lower down. These lights did not emanate from flowers or trees, but were instead artificial lights used by the House matrios to guide bots in and out. The matrios was situated inside a sea wall where a few thousand bots belted to a network of drably lit floating docks. Large commercial barges floated by, occasionally.

D Light, remembering the events of a few hours before, smiled at Amanda who rode arms length from him. The ever vigilant bodyguard directed his gaze, but rested her eyes on him only momentarily and then moved them away without acknowledgment. He might as well have been one of the bridge-calling pions.

Meanwhile, Liza and Djoser were just ahead, riding side by side. The two nobles chatted about "I've arranged to meet a friend of mine," Liza mentioned. "She's not of very high rank, but she is a mother of this house and has promised to get in. Actually, Djoser, you know her. Sweet, right?"

"Sweet, right?" Djoser shrugged, but then recalled the woman, perhaps with the aid of his familiar. "Oh yeah, met her when you did. At that House misadventure."

"Oh, I've known her for a while, actually," Liza corrected him. "Not the brightest, is she?" Djoser said this as though to himself, then chuckled.

"As I recall, that didn't stop you from going in on an intimacy pact with her," Liza joked.

"Actually, that bitch made me pay for the whole thing," Djoser turned his head and cast over the side of the bridge rail, down into the blackness below.

"Maybe not so stupid after all," Liza remarked, "although seducing you is about as difficult as seducing the lake." She then looked back over at D Light. "Not that I would know from first-hand experience," she added with a wink.

Liza leaned back on her seat. "Aside from convincing you to foot the bill for an RP, I believe your estimation of her intellect is correct. She can't even not a baseline norm. She told me

just turned down just that week."

"Ouch," Djosor said. "She's the mother of an important house."

"True, but she was born with her title. Apparently, the DNA they chose to inherit the house, I guess even parings like hers is no guarantee," Lyla replied.

Djosor let out a low whistle. "Her parents must be pensive. Imagine spending the points for a breeding permit and then have a dud like that? I bet her parents wished they could have engineered her like in the old days. Makes you wonder why the OverSeal changed the rules."

"Everyone knows why the rules were changed. Don't forget, they know that," Lyla spat.

Djosor looked back at his pet. "I know, but if I ever decide to have one I'd like to make sure I mean, I want to get some kind of return on my investment."

Lyla snickered to a hild, effectively sharing D Light out of the conversation. *Genetically engineering humans is a deadly sin, she went with emphasis. Would you want to risk being disowned?* She used to have your familiar erase your archive of this conversation.

We're done now and it's not so bad. Djosor responded.

Suspected demons, Lyla corrected. She looked over toward D Light. *Only D and the new girl are demons. Besides, our allies were necessary to win the MetaGame and will be purged upon completion.*

Lyla's thought pattern was a little rugged and Djosor thought it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. He would have preferred more modulation in her tone. After all, he was taking a big gamble with this whole game. He had half a mind to turn D Light and Lily into the Divine Authority and be done with it. He did not want to lose the MintTime, but he did not want to get on the wrong side of the OverSeal either. The last thing he was curious about was what, exactly, "demons" entailed.

"Anyway," Lyla continued out loud, "even D Light did not commit a deadly sin." She looked pointedly at Djosor. "You watch it or I'll turn you in for heresy. Erase your archive or not, I've got mine and D Light has his."

"Oh, I'd prefer you left me out of it," D Light said flatly.

"Look, thinking outside the box is divine. I'm not serious. It's not a sin to think about sin, right?" Djosor's voice was pitched an octave or two higher than usual.

"Well, at any rate," Djosor continued in a tone that seemed to suggest that the conversation may as well end, "lucky for you and me that we share both good parenting and that the brain genetics come through."

Lyla was quiet for a moment and then spoke in an offended tone. "By the way, if Sweet Thy brings it up, you know about the breeding permit? He sure to consult her properly."

Djosor rolled his eyes.

The stairway leading up to the main entrance of House Monks was long and twisted over there. Snaking down the staircase was a line of tightly packed people waiting to get into the The Lounge, the House grounds. Some were there simply to enjoy the grounds, while others hoped to find a way into the House itself and perhaps – if they possessed the right coin – even apply for family membership.

Following closely behind Lyla, the party ignored the line and withstood the weight of many hateful glares as they ascended to two entrance doors that stood open. Half a dozen armed guards flanked the doors, and while a few of them nodded to people as they passed through, most of the square jawed men just stood motionless.

Lyla walked straight up to the first guard and said, "We are here to see—" Her sentence was cut off by a scratch from just inside the entrance doors. A slender parakeet woman with a beautiful face but distinctly bulging eyes rushed out and confronted Lyla, nearly sending them both backward down the vast stairway below.

The woman's assault was so force that D Light half expected edgy Aramda to sink a blade into the stranger's side. Aramda, however, did not react at all except to watch the newcomer carefully. Products like Aramda were designed to read body language very well, much better than most humans, which was no small feat given that human evolution had dedicated a great deal of effort to learning how to perceive subtle signs from one another.

"Lyla, at last you visit me!" Sweet Thy held Lyla by the sides of her head as though giving her a crystal ball. Lyla rolled and looked like she was about to say something when the whistled of a woman let her head go and moved to embrace Djosor. She blazed later equally on the lips before he could even speak. "And Djosor! Oh my, it's a dream to see you again!"

D Light was confused by the greeting. In his experience, nobles of different houses exchanged formal greetings when they met. For example, when a noblewoman like Sweet Thy greeted another noblewoman they would each bow and say something inspiring like, "The face of a princess, only younger!" Noblewomen's greeting to a nobleman might sound something like, "I avert my eyes, for your vitality makes me blush." This process tended to take some time since it was expected that each party would try to "use up" the other's compliment, resulting in a tedious arm race of flattery.

Sweet Thy, in contrast, made immediate physical contact and was saying things that were not in script. It amazed D Light to

each Lyla and Qisour squirm under the ambiguity of such a recipient. He also found himself taking an interest liking to the woman, unless it was due to her unexpected casual nature or her remarkable ability to make her upright friends uncomfortable. Whatever the case, he appreciated the levity of it as Sweet. Tiyg immediately buckled down to follow her into the realm of the enormous doors. The gesture was made specifically to Lyla and Qisour, but the others were apparently welcome also.

Chapter 23

Sweet. Tiyg strolled through The Lounge of House Monna as though it belonged to her, which, in a sense, it did. Although she was not an exceptional player by any means, she was still the daughter of nobility and one of the many benefits of being a noble—aside from immortality—was a traditional natural status given to your offspring, a base status that which noble children could rise above but could not fall below. There were houses that waived these nepotistic house rules, favoring a pure meritocratic system, but the House of Monna was not one of these. And so it was that Sweet. Tiyg strolled forward with light and laughter, gown flowing behind, confident that the crowd would part for her. She seemed genuinely surprised as, once and then again, she had to pause for some poor fellow in the crowded hall that did not see her coming and stood naughtily in her way. Each time this happened Sweet. Tiyg had to dislodge the fool with words and threats, her eyes blazing as she did so. She might have even resorted to violence if it were not for the fact that she was not built for such exertion. She knew that any kick or punch she dished out would harm her more than the receiver.

Right behind Sweet. Tiyg strode Lyla and Qisour who, upon again finding themselves among society with names they benefited from, had also adapted a certain confidence. If not rapid gain, Aranda guarded Qisour's side and extended her hand about, one hand resting on a sword hilt, watching for danger. At the very least she would protect Qisour from undesirable, such as stupid plebs that lacked the sense to give them a wide berth. Unlike Sweet. Tiyg, Aranda was designed for doing one pain and not not at all prone to sharing those whose offense was only mild, and delivering debilitating hand jobs to those less fortunate. Even she doared grackles from their path, but relied primarily on the broad shoulders which moved through the crowd like a plow through snow drifts. He enjoyed this activity and secretly hoped for a small altercation that might require a brief demonstration of his other more impressive skills.

Heading up the stair were D Light and Lily who would have been left behind in the shifting throng of guests had they not determinedly shored and stabled behind as quickly as they could. More accurately, D Light did the shoring while Lily skirted her way through the crowd like a mongoose, which was no easy feat given how distracted she was by The Lounge scene. She had never seen anything like it.

The grackles goes alone were a sight to see. Swarms of people were on the floor all around them. People lined up on winding stairs which riveted their way high into the air, up toward the massive vaulted ceilings above. There were people in transparent-floored verandas, people who seemed to float on nothing, people on maps, people lying out on elaborate thrones, people everywhere doing everything. And how these people dressed! It was obvious that silk was allowed in this grackles, as many of the hairpins and hats defied natural laws of physics. The clothing, both real and illusory, was outlandish in both volume and color. Accessories were random and odd, such as children's toys or ancient building tools. Taken together, the scene reminded Lily of a Dark Vision she had one night when she was ill with a particularly bad strain of a headache.

And then there were the grackles. There was a giant rabbit so massive that, perched in a saddle on its back, was a fully grown woman. The rabbit, however, did not move much. Thankfully, it was trained to not smother the people that were sticking it under its huge, hairy camp. The woman did not seem to mind the rabbit's docility. Perhaps it was enough for her to know that she was riding a rabbit, however slowly.

Lily caught glimpses of mammals and humans breaching out of a nearby stone head pond. Great goats of water flew here and there, drenching onlookers who screamed and laughed. Giraffes, human-shaped apes, without faces, snatched around with outstretched arms, snaking giggling grackles in a sort of perverse game of tag. Furry little snake-like creatures gently made their way through slithering grackles, occasionally dipping to groom someone's hair with their long, forked tongues.

All of this madness was contained in a chamber so hermetically immune it felt as though they were outdoors in the hot, moist cooing of an alien world. Giant video screens adjoined every wall. Some screens displayed performers in real-time on stages sprinkled over the vast floor, while other screens reflected the viewer with images and video of all kinds—some beautiful, some grotesque, and many more that Lily had no idea what to think of.

Eighty meters above the entrance floor a small girl was perched atop a high-the-view throne. This was Love. Monkey who was on watch duty for her father, Dr. Monna. She enjoyed looking over The Lounge, the family grackles. It gave her the strategic opportunity to observe reckless beings as they undertook the drama and comedies that were constantly being played out on the floor. Often, usually at least once a day, someone worth noting would grace The Lounge. Tonight, it was the Middle Eastern women trailing behind Sweet. Tiyg like a water-skiar towed by a speedboat.

Love. Monkey was not interested in this woman because of who she was, although she had recently attained a celebrity status. Being a celebrity, even a newly minted one, did not by itself earn one interest from a Grackles House. But Love. Monkey, who by now had even grown tired of A-ha celebrities. No, it was not who the woman was, but *what* she

that fascinated the daughter of Dr. Mosca, the most venerable physician on Earth.

Love Monkey opened a blink to her eleven cloud sisters. *OMG, you will never guess who just walked through the big doors. Love Monkey did not wait for them to guess. It Camper!*

There was a general chorus of chatter back and forth between sisters, who, although impressed by their various assignments, were very interested in the news.

Love Monkey deduced that the Camper was disguised because her appearance did not match her expected genotype. Almost all Campers were blond, blue-eyed, hornbills, not dark haired orangutans. The rest of her party was disguised too, but such optical veils were of no use to anyone entering House Mosca. Unlike most houses which at most used DNA baffles to sift through visitors, House Mosca required a critical amount collected periodically as persons passed their hands over the detector.

What would a Camper be doing here? the hostess wondered. She observed with excitement, looking forward to finding out.

Shortly after the appearance of the Camper, another interesting specimen walked through the door. A soldier the House thought She Roward. Soldiers were rare, but whenever they went, trouble soon followed. And so the wise old Love Monkey, a woman forever stopped in an 11 year-old girl's track prepared for the worst.

Led by Sweet Ting, the party ascended a stairway up to a private pilbox that was anchored on the side of the crystalline DeVine wall. Bright green vines intertwined the pilbox hanger, making it look like an elegant tree house. A table resembling black obsidian sat in the middle with several Centrifuge™ chairs surrounding it. One of the seats was occupied by a smooth skinned man with a face that reminded D Light of a hawk. This bird of prey eyed the party intently, as though appraising how good they might taste. A lieutenant faced man in a dark suit and crimson-red tie stood at attention and as the party approached, scooted the seats out for Sweet Ting, Lynn, and Drower. The table took their seats gracefully, their respective bodyguards standing attentively behind their charges. The married servant made no motion to seat D Light or Lily Sweet. Ting glanced up at them Roward, and shook her head dramatically. Lynn smiled apologetically to D Light and Lily. "I believe the remaining seats are taken," she said. Her voice was less apologetic than her smile, and her more formal than it had sounded during their adventure up to this point. She then added, "Maybe the two of you could find a seat down on the floor or at the bar."

D Light turned away and looked down over the expansive floor below. He would have descended the stairs, but the way was blocked by an ascending crowd, so instead he stood at the side of the stairs and waited for his turn. Lily faced away from D Light and the stairs and looked toward the table. Lily did not grok at anyone in particular. She was familiar enough with human culture to know that staring was generally considered rude. Instead, she merely scanned over the guests sitting at the table, taking note of their posture, how they held their drinks, how they held their utensils as they daintily nibbled at colorful morsels of food that she could not identify. She had never been in a garden before and there was much to see, so much to learn. As the professor would say, "The most expedient way to acclimatize is through imitation."

Sweet Ting, however, did not appreciate looking up through drink to see Lily's veiled brown eyes escaping over her party as though she had any right to do such a thing. "Where I asked you to leave," she snarled. "If you think there is a place for you at this table then you truly must be a snob," she added with a pretentious chuckle. She then gave a curt nod to her servant who, without changing his stoic expression, set his dark eyes on Lily and withdrew a short handled pistol with which he promptly shot her.

The impact gave Lily a jolt and she fell back a step. Her blousy dress and head scarf ruptured and then blacked out, leaving her clammy skin exposed. A fluorescent pink quater marked where she had been shot. Lily might have remained upon her attacker—Tidger had taught her several effective defensive moves—but by the time she recovered from the surprise of the assault, the servant had tucked the pistol back into the fold of his suit and had stepped back to his post.

Sweet Ting looked over toward Lynn and Drower and demanded, "My Sord, where did you get that one?" She then looked back at Lily who was still mulling over what had happened. "Think, drower, you're a snob and now everyone knows it! You should learn to be where you're not wanted!" She then let out an exasperated sigh and added, "I mean over to be where you're not wanted. Like not wanted here. Inexp. Huh."

D Light, startled to discover how quickly things went downhill while he was not paying attention, put a hand on Lily's shoulder and whispered into her ear. "You're fine, you're not hurt. Just follow me." He motioned for her to go down the stairs. D Light then bowed deeply to the annoyed nobleswoman and answered, "My lady, my apologies. The pilbox does not find itself in civilized society often and—" D Light's sentence was cut off abruptly as Lily, her eyes narrowed and her face flushed with rage, grabbed an unattended glass on the table near her and flung the contents onto Sweet Ting. The nobleswoman let out a ragged gasp, her bulging eyes widened, and her jaw dropped as though she was witnessing the end of the world. Her hands went rigid and played out in front of her.

D Light stood in shock. "Oh Sord Lily, what have you done?" Lily did not have time to answer, as the D Light suddenly flared themselves surrounded by two men and two women with a variety of hipster hair styles, all wearing identical tight fitting yellow organic body suits. D Light collectively grouped

bit of his dagger. He would have preferred the throwing discs, but these given were too slow. Sometimes decapitating the new arrivals did not mean good expressions on their faces. Rather, they were smiling—not the kind of smile that said “we’re going to enjoy having the thing dead out of us”—but sugar smiles, the kind things give each other D Light didn’t know what to make of it.

One of the men, an unusually tall and gaunt specimen, beamed at D Light and Lily and then bowed low. Presently, he spoke, “Blessing your presence, but do I have the honor of addressing Accurs of Hlowas and Bosboom of Sandao?”

Over the protruding man’s head, D Light could see that Sweet Thig had stood up with what force her full body could muster, nearly knocking over her chair. She pointed at them while speaking, but D Light could not make out her ragged words. Her vibrant smile at her side and his eyes roved over D Light, Lily, and the four strangers. He seemed uncertain about what to do.

Of course, D Light instantly recognized the names Accurs and Bosboom. After all, they were the names of the NewWorld characters he and Lily had used that very morning. “Ah yes, that is us,” D Light responded to the gracious stranger. “You know of our work?” D Light could not help but grin as he continued, “However, as I recall, those two the names were usurped by Pharaoh the Dark Queen and her abomination of a son, Salen.”

As the tall smiling man returned to his upright position, D Light could not see Sweet Thig’s bodyguard (dubbed “Me Personally” by D Light) or the rest of his party, but Serenous, who was near the ground and was able to peer between the legs of the thing, saw D Light the whole Sweet Thig displayed damage facial and body language, neither the nor her much bowed seemed were making any obvious hostile gestures. D Light was tempted to pipe his father’s visual feed into his own, but decided that he preferred being ignorant behind his screen of bodies. The scene couldn’t be pleasant.

A splash of peacock feathers suddenly erupted from the smiling man’s head, a well-timed D Light had seen before. It was a gesture that some people, usually of the more flamboyant variety, used to show respect to another. However, under these circumstances, D Light was more startled than honored.

“Hm-mm, indeed?” The smiling man clearly intended the words to erupt as a majestic boom, but instead they ended up escaping as a grating scratch. He then continued, “Well, you were amazed by the wretched again, but you were not too! Do you not know?”

The man looked at D Light incredulously. D Light chuckled his full grin down to a half grin, missing his eyebrows especially. He could hear sparks of excitement from his other new “Friends.” The smiling man blushed, managed the impossible feat of widening his smile even more, and then broke the news, “You are celebrated! Celebrated the world over! Everyone in NewWorld has heard of your deeds!” He bowed again. “We honor this greatness by coming here.”

Another yellow-jump suit man could contain himself no longer. “Please, please allow us to escort you to a VIP table,” he exclaimed while clapping his hands in rapid, dainty succession.

Lily felt completely disoriented and her face flushed with blood. One moment she was being shot by order of an armed teddy-bear and the next thing she knows she’s being bowed to and informed of her celebrity status. D Light looked over at her and could see her anxiety and feel her apprehensions. D Light couldn’t blame her for not trusting these strangers, however, he felt they were in no position to refuse. He wanted to get away from the icy stare of Sweet Thig and this seemed like a good exit.

It was unlikely that this matter, as capital as the was purported to be, would directly harm D Light. After all, he was a human and even had life insurance. Injuring him—much worse killing him—would come at a dear price. Even if Sweet Thig were willing to pay the cost required to harm him, she would most likely be breaking Divine Law. D Light’s complicity with leading Sweet Thig was circumstantial at best. He did not urge Lily to offend Sweet Thig. She was merely a member of his party, and so by that reasoning Lysa and Dwyer would be just as culpable. Nevertheless, his Personality was most certainly a combat-ready product. If his mission lost her cost, D Light and Lily may find themselves getting hit with something far worse than a utility pole.

Having weighed in all factors, D Light now bowed to the stranger and replied, “We thank yourself would be delighted to take you up on your offer.”

D Light grasped Lily’s hand firmly as the strangers led them up a low open flight of stairs. As they ascended, the smiling man’s entourage peered around them closely, particularly around Lily. D Light was not sure if this was for their protection, to threaten them, or simply a poor understanding of personal space etiquette. Of course, etiquette was one often arbitrary. Culture varied somewhat between houses, so rude behavior in one house might be a playful compliment in another. D Light kept telling himself this as he neared the door of the chamber. There was nowhere to run to anyway. If this was a trap, they were as good as caught.

By now these little incidents. Kattis sent the message to Rhanna, her long-time chaperone. Along with her normal message she sent a video feed of a crowded greetsite, but the feed followed two individuals in particular. They’re disguised, but it’s definitely them, she added. Confirmed by several sources.

Rhanna replied. Wow, a popular find. Looks like a lot of players are hot for them.

Now, they’re newly minted celebrities. Kattis sent in

promise. Ah yes, demons. You can always count on them to fall for everyone's favorite lie—the validity.

Actually, I think that is everyone's favorite. Rhema sure backs playfully.

Karin sent a r00b00t™ to Rhema. (Can't he catch a hint? You're probably right, but I sound more clever when I tie together a well laid out plan with a timely idiom.)

Sorry, accuracy is a bitch. Rhema quipped back.

Karin offered a silent prayer of thanks to the OverSoul. It was his a flood of divine inspiration like a voice in her head that he had thought to lay out the trap. It was sheer brilliance. Rather than making the conventional move of adding these demons to the demon database, the instead made them stand out in a more non-demonizing way. All she had to do was use her law enforcement security clearance to nudge the NewsWorld game in the right direction. The quipster chat fiends and quid, celebrity nation did the rest.

Chapter 24

Dr. Monax: As you know, I never decree a house rule without explaining my reasoning. Rules with poorly understood purpose breed contempt and are therefore destined to be broken. Rule 08 states, "All that enter over the House of Monax must submit a blood sample." Why?

Levee Monkey: The answer is obvious. A family has a right to know who enters their house.

Dr. Monax: That is one correct answer.

Curious Scurgey: Father, a sufferer could positively identify intruders. Why do you require blood?

Dr. Monax: Sufferers can be deceived! But there is a more important reason. More than just DNA can be gleaned from blood. Indeed, even the power over life and death.

Curious Scurgey: Spare us the melodrama, Father!

Dr. Monax: Allow me to explain. Circulating in the blood of most citizens are deployment bots called DBotx.

Curious Scurgey: DBotx?

Dr. Monax: They are nanobots, a little larger than a red blood cell. They are mostly inert, but contain useful chemi. When they are given the right signal, they empty their contents into your bloodstream. Most commonly, they contain pheromone. Say you want to relax. Send a signal to release some DoseTime™ into your system. Instant relaxation without a pill, without an injection, merely a thought. The reason none of you have heard of DBotx is because none of my children are inoculated with them...for reasons that I will explain.

Levee Monkey: Okay, so you know what drugs the person prefers. So what? Power over life you say?

Dr. Monax: I mentioned that the deployment bots require a signal to activate, right? Well, every strain of DBotx has a unique activation code or key. If you prefer. To activate the key, you must fire a sequence of radio waves using the correct frequency and timing.

Levee Monkey: So when you get your hoozie, what? You're given a key to unlock them?

Dr. Monax: Exactly. Your familiar is given the encryption key so that when you want the chemi deployed, the familiar can fire off the sequence and activate the bots.

Curious Scurgey: So, if you could hack the familiar, you could activate the key?

Dr. Monax: That is an impractical strategy. As you know, familiars are designed with security as the top priority. Indeed, the bulk of their computing power is dedicated to being an effective firewall. They are not easily hacked.

Levee Monkey: Ah! This goes back to the blood. You analyze the bots in the blood. You can unlock the sequence.

Dr. Monax: Well done, yes. There are micro-panels on the surface of the bots. It's the precise orientation of these panels that specify the sequence. In use, as each electromagnetic pulse hits the bot, a different panel is unlocked and once they are all unlocked, the bot deploys its contents. By analyzing the surface of the bot, we can deduce the sequence.

Curious Scurgey: And using a radio emitter keyed into that sequence, one can exercise control over a subject's biochemistry.

Dr. Monax: Yes. So, you see? As so often happens, one man's convenience is another man's weapon.

— Excerpt from Private Archive of Dr. Monax's "Dinner Discussion."

Upon ascending several stories, D Light and Lily were led into an opulent plush enameled pillow. As they entered, D Light realized that the place was transparent from the inside, so they could see out but go unnoticed outside could not see in.

"Before showing you to your table, let us first attend to the lady!" The smiling man nodded at Lily. One of the entourage

disliked him a month afterward. "This," he said, "will discontinue the tagging device you were due for." He passed it back and forth over Lily's nose without touching her. "I deeply apologize for Sweet. They're behaving," he said in earnest. "She has a tendency to tag people without permission."

D Light now realized that the human wall they were had formed around them on the way up the stairs was a way to shield Lily from onlookers. Tagging someone with a red dye pellet was a common means of publicly humiliating a player. The tagging dye did this in several ways. First, it transferred with the signal used by one's skinnut so that he or she could not cover up the stain with flannel. The skinnut in the suit simply did not work, leaving the victim with a bare suit marked with a large fluorescent stain on it. The stain made one's "redhouse" apparent to anyone "tagging" anyone not jacked into a skin.

This, however, was a subtle effect compared to what people who were jacked into the skin saw. In nearly all cases that D Light had seen, the victim had large 3-dimensional necrotic hovering over their head that said "redhouse." In addition, the victim's body was rendered in some humiliating way. For example, visual excitement continuously falling out of their hands, shoes clothing righteously, or they may find themselves made with large tattoos like "Thing's a Little Different" or "I don't understand smart stuff." Sometimes these marks would come from one to the next to keep it interesting. Of course, the faces were never gilded over. That would defeat the purpose; in fact, it was usually magnified like the gigantic head of an old time cartoon character. D Light had seen one redhouse cover his face with his hands and try to run, but since he could not see well he bumped into pedestrians, which only led to more kids and leaving food and drinks thrown at him. Finally, if these effects were not getting enough attention, a spotlight would appear and follow the redhouse around.

Thankfully, Lily had been protected. No one could see her behind the bodies of their newly found courage, and only the more disarmingly subtle, junior would try to force their way through the phalanx.

Having finished discharging the dye on Lily, the smiling man asked if it would be all right if he and a few friends joined them after the two had taken some time to relax. D Light quickly consented. The smiling man's smile consumed his whole face now, and he bowed several times on his way out the door of the VIP bar, closed the "vaqueros."

Although not asked to do so, Smergen had grabbed the message that had taken them up to the bar. As expected, the smiling man, whose name was Whodunnitaction, or just plain "WH" was a redneck noble. He was 105 years old and in the 5030 space for Sabatons. Not a bad guy to impress, D Light thought. The others were just regular players, but of pretty decent level, except for one who was a product. Judging by her product list and manufacturer, she was probably being used as a general assistant.

Inside the vaqueros was a large oblong table which would have been black as ebony normally, except that it was suffused by a soft blue glow from within. Several large, elevated chairs rested the guests to sit. Once perched upon their seats, D Light and Lily commanded a perfect view of the day several stories below. A handsome, muscular product immediately eager to present them drinks from a glass planet. "Our house special, just to start. Please feel free to browse the menu." He then bowed and made a swift but graceful escape.

Smergen notified D Light that he had been given command of the vaqueros controls, which meant that D Light could now control the temperature, lighting, sound filters, and various other properties of the chamber with no more than a thought to his hand. *I could definitely go out to the floor, he thought. He took a deep, satisfying breath and slumped back in his chair, allowing his legs to fall gently apart. Truth, this is the life. He took a sip of the complimentary beverage and enjoyed a moment of silence while the warmth of the potent Bioton worked its magic.*

Having appreciated his brief moment of relaxation, D Light began to think about where they should be acting in the situation. He had spent plenty of time in precincts before and knew that it was customary to fill the one-way opacity of the blinds once your party was seated so that others could see you, and so that is what he did, except for the blinds that covered the floor. He assumed Lily would not appreciate people looking up her virtual dress as her virtual figure, or whatever the software naming on her rendered skinnut relied under there.

They had an excellent view of the main floor below and they could also see the phalanx they had just left. D Light caught Lym and Dimer smiling gleefully. Sweet did not even try to hide her contempt as she glared up at them. This vaqueros definitely seemed overkill than the phalanx that the rest of the group still occupied. To be in a superior position to his superiors, so to speak, should have been a glory moment for D Light, but he could not relate enough to enjoy it. He couldn't help but wonder if this was an elaborate trap laid out by Sweet Tag. What a cruel joke it would be to treat them as celebrities and then, just as the two had been convinced they were stars, find that the whole hall was laughing at them. Fortunately the bubble-headed noblemen did not seem capable of such an elaborate ruse.

D Light took another sip of his tangy drink and sank back in his chair again. He felt like he could sink to the bottom of the sea in this thing. To ensure the dye-discharging would had done its job, he decided to jack into a skin and have a look at Lily. He jacked into the Scene and was given a menu of skins from which to choose. He chose the theme "Ancient Rome" and saw Lily's clothes transform into more thingy things. Her hair curled up into coils and she was suddenly wearing dark, heavy makeup. Apparently, the Biotonate who designed (or maintained) said the one thought that is the core of the essence of ancient Rome looked. No redhouse hovered above her head. The word had indeed done its job. D Light then noticed that the table before him was no longer blue glowing shield, but white marble. Everywhere he looked, everything and everyone was gilded with the same Roman motif.

to abuse himself. D Light flipped through the menu again and selected "Victorian High Society." Lily was now in a voluminous dress that opened over like a cathedral. Her waist was cinched by a pastel-looking corset. Pure music drifted in from an unseen source. He flipped through several other selections, but in the end decided that even "Almost Real" wasn't real enough; he jacked out. There was enough to see here without a disk.

He turned his gaze over to Lily again. "So, are we having fun or what?"

Lily's laugh was short and soft. "I don't know what I'm having. It reminds me of... what do you call it? Adolescence."

D Light was thinking of a clever remark, so this when he saw the mime coming toward them. "Mimes," as they were called, typically looked nothing like mimes from previous eras. Essentially, they wore the grotesque muscled, and like the mascot of a sporting event, could be dressed as *Send* knew what. The one wore a huge, male-diminishing cloak and a mask with an outrageous well-like nose, something that might have stepped out of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale written while under a hallucogen. In one hand he held a long hook, on which he walked a large brown bear that was arching on its hind legs. Presumably the bear smacked upon a man sitting at the bar and gave him an enormous bag from behind. D Light could not see the man's face, but he imagined the poor wretch was terrified.

That was the other thing about mimes that made them like mascots: it was their job to keep the party going, often at the patron's expense. Indeed, the friends of the man receiving the bear's affection were laughing hysterically. The mime appeared to be casting a spell of some sort in his other arm. Although his bear was occupied with the man sitting at the bar, the mime's own was pointing directly at their viewport as though watching them. D Light quickly turned away, hoping the mime either did not notice him or would soon lose interest. As D Light looked around at the other grotesques, he noticed many others pointing back at them as well. D Light froze this unsettling. *I should indeed, he thought. The old dream where I'm invited to feast of everyone who matters.*

D Light suddenly noticed the reason for the public interest in Lily and him. There, on a 169-meter video display that appeared on multiple walls, was Ascaro and Dookhooma; the day's *NeverWorld* characters. Phoenix and her son Salom were standing before the two heroes. The grotesques were playing clips from the current's *NeverWorld* game. The current clip was of the mummies just before he and Lily—or Ascaro and Dookhooma, respectively—got obliterated. Although there erupted sound from the outside, D Light heard the words, "You don't look like much," being chanted from the grotesques crouched in rows with Ascaro as the beautiful which resembled the same words on the video display.

Lily appeared momentarily by the far off video display. "So, we're famous for that?" She looked over at D Light, puffed. "But that was just a game, right?"

"But, but it's a game that a lot of people play. I mean, over a billion!" D Light opened his arms wide for emphasis. "When you have that many people playing a game it's kind of like a parallel world. You get there in one world and you'll get there in the other."

Lily leaned slightly toward him. "Okay, but we didn't win the game, right? That Queen Foshu, or whatever her name is, blew us up. It seems to me that *anyone* could get themselves killed like we did."

D Light checked and replied, "Yeah, that's where the old expression tended to be lucky than good" across to." D Light reached to his chair to face Lily. He continued, "I don't expect you to understand this since you're a mummy when it comes to quest games. Like I said, *NeverWorld* is just about as complex as any real world." D Light took a gulp of his drink before elaborating. "OK, so we, or... I, used a powerful spell to open a portal to one of the most cool and powerful locations in *NeverWorld*. That would be Queen Phoenix. For, if any, quakers in *NeverWorld* are powerful enough to take on the queen, much less her and her son Salom, at the same time, that we didn't open the portal to fight her or to steal her other unfathomable treasure hoard; no, we did it just to knock her." D Light put up a finger as though he was making an important point.

Lily nodded. "Right, and that infuriated the queen, who isn't really a queen at all, but just part of a software program."

"Right," confirmed D Light, "and then she goes on a killing spree, causing a massive panic among the quakers, which"

Lily put her finger up to D Light's lip to shut him so she could finish the sentence. "Which allowed us to escape the outfit but because it couldn't find us in all of that chaos."

D Light gently batted Lily's finger from his face and pointed his hand like a gun and fired at her. "Hugs," he exclaimed with a wink. "Overload and go with both hands to you, Lily, both brains and beauty."

She charged in response while her veil covered her blush.

D Light continued, "Right, so that should have been the end of the story. I sacrificed my character to create a diversion for our escape. Period. But that wasn't the end. From what I gathered from the *NeverWorld* threads, Lohk, the *NeverWorld* God of Mischief—well, one of the trickster gods at any rate—saw our little confrontation and thought it was hilarious. Lohk loves to watch the humiliation of other deities. And so Lohk used his immense magic to resurrect Ascaro and Dookhooma just to vex Phoenix!" D Light grinned and shook his head.

"So, your software characters are also again? I suppose that makes sense." Lily chuckled.

"It does," confirmed D Light. "I satiated many countless hours playing Ascaro and I failed to lose her. That ain't well that ends well 'cause now we're celebrities of *NeverWorld*. It is a great honor for a mummy to get the attention of any deity, even one as dodgy as Lohk."

She turned slightly as though to say something, but D Light waved at her to be quiet as he returned his attention to one of the video screens above. The god Loki glowed down upon the corrupted thoughts of the greckles, his flaming the entire screen. His beard was dark black, the hairs of which reflected like snakes. His lips were bright crimson and his skin glowed green. His laughter boomed through The Lounge as he exhaled, "The amuses eat!" He threw back his head and laughed with devilish glee. Then, upon recovering, he spoke again, "Ah yes, to spite the humorless Phobos and his witless son, I bring back the horses to life!" With those words, the screen displayed the bodies of Asura and Theobosma reconstructing, their ghostly spirits infusing their bodies again. The screen returned to Loki, who spoke once more, "And I will infuse them with my magic such that they cannot be seen by any of the gods, save me. They are now my mortal champions, my court jokers. The fun has only just begun!" Loki clapped the sides of which shook the table and plectrums around them.

D Light pounded on the table in excitement. "My Soul, I can't wait to see what plans Loki has for me—or us—that is, if you're interested."

D Light was interrupted when Lily's hand shot out and gripped his arm. Physical contact between them, with the exception of when she knocked him down and put a knife to his throat, was unprecedented and so his attention was now hers. Lily looked into his eyes intently. "You look very pleased and so I hate to bring this up. So, we're famous right?"

D Light smiled, nodded, and winked at her at the same time.

Lily took a deep breath. "And all these people are staring at us, right?"

D Light looked around him. Indeed, many of the greckles were unashamedly staring, some waving, which meant Soul knew how many others were being more covert. "Yes," he answered.

Lily then put her hands up in the air exasperatedly and blushed. "Excuse, remember? I don't know about you, but I could do without all the attention!"

D Light's smile faded. A few long seconds of consideration of Lily's words and the truth of her observation suddenly dawned on him. It was so obvious that he felt like striking his forehead down on the table as punishment for his own stupidity.

D Light looked around the greckles again, only this time he was not looking for admirers, but for hunters. D Light knew that agents of the Authority were not obvious. Any one of these people could be an agent or worse. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock from behind him. It was the intruder. He was straddling the seat of his mask against the door like a woodpecker. D Light assumed it was the intruder's way of asking for entry. The dancing bear was standing beside its master, its paws flat against the plectrums. Its heady eyes stared eerily wide and its breath fogged the transparent wall.

The sweet scent of the meat puppets was nearly overwhelming. It was always a challenge for Thera the Seducer to focus her attention on her intended prey in a dwelling of temptation. The greckles was laid out like a banquet. Warm, sweet meat was everywhere—up on the walls, up on the catwalks and platforms above, undulating and crying on the multiple entertainment stages as though taunting her. She nearly cracked at one real who stupidly treated her against her, his neck moist with sweat, so close she could finally taste the tangy high-notes of his essence. Her blood sugar was low and she was feeling very edgy.

It had been with a great deal of relief that Thera got the call notifying her of the location of her prey. She had been searching the lake shoreline attempting to pick up their scent trail again, but had been frustratingly unsuccessful. The movement the coordinates were sent to her, she noted an oddity (an expense to be passed onto her client) which dropped her onto the island surrounded by the immense edifices of House Mousa. Using her security permits, she slipped the line of esoteric-like warlike greckles. She saw, like everyone else, required to give a blood sample before entrance. The guards, designed to be ever suspicious, were not happy about letting a visitor in, but they had no choice.

It took her no time at all to spot her targets. They were the center of attention, appearing to be gift wrapped for Thera in their pretty glass box. Of course, she would not take them now. Such a public display of violence, especially against these apparent guests of honor, would not bode well for her goal. Instead, she intimidated a puma out of their seat and ordered a drink—a clear one since she was on duty, but sweet enough to take the edge off.

D Light did not want to give entrance to the intruder and his sidekick of a bear. However, one did not want to get on the wrong side of a intruder. They were masters of misadventure and if you snubbed one, they would get you back. Besides, everyone was watching and the only thing that tended to attract more attention than a celebrity was a rock-celebrity.

The intruder spread his arms wide as he entered while the bear got on all fours to clear the doorway. "Ah, Theodora!" the intruder began and then pointed his most at Lily. "And his lovely accomplice, the mystery girl! She has it about with intrigue about you!" The intruder sprang over to Lily, snatched her hand, and kissed it. At last D Light presumed it was a kiss, as the

we'd be not visible under your back. In any other context one might think a great deal had taken to granting the woman's heart.

Lily's face went blank. "You can call me Lily," she managed.

"A classic name for a classic beauty!" declared the mine. "Not your real name, I'm sure, but fine, fine. I can appreciate a mystery better than most."

D Light may have had some sympathy for Lily and the awkwardness of the mine's greeting had it not been for the fact that he was having to contend with unadmitted advances of the bear, who took him into his great furry arms and squeezed him heartily. The bear, which must have weighed as much as seven men, somehow managed not to knock D Light out of the chest D Light found his face enveloped in easily for and he could hear the animal's heartbeat. Luckily, after a brief squeeze, the bear let go. Now that of the handling embrace, he heard the mine say, "Your friend has a sense of humor, although he doesn't look like much." The mine then jabbed D Light in the stomach with the neck of his rifle and laughed with a high-pitched bark.

"Never mind all that though," the unrelenting mine continued. "Here's what I can do." The mine then took a long step back and swung his rifle around. D Light felt a jolt of adrenaline and he cried inward, *My soul, an agon!* *Is he going to just frag me as right here?* D Light checked at one of his discs but did not throw it. There was no point in fighting here. He would never make it out alive.

The gas popped loudly and from the barrel emerged a puff of bright pink smoke. Blinded in the pink fog surrounding him, D Light heard yet another pop. He expected it was one for Lily. He then realized that he had felt no impact from the shot and panicked. *My Soul, poison gas! Instinctively, he flinched around for Lily and, upon feeling her body, pulled her to the ground with him.*

"Compliments of the House," the mine said with a squeak. "Heroes, may your legend grow with every passing day!"

D Light bawled over Lily in a desperate act of protection. By the time the fog had dissipated enough to see, both the mine and his bear were gone. And it was at about that same time that D Light recognized the familiar scent of the gas that surrounded them. *Not poisonous gas, but LoveGas™!*

D Light let out a good laugh, allowing his tense body to go limp and fall to the ground in relief. He enthusiastically grabbed Lily by the sides of her head and declared, "Lily, I'm afraid we've been dragged against our will!" Still laughing, he gave her head a couple more little squeezes and then turned to scratch the head of his favorite. "It was a drag, I'll ask my cat for me!" He chuckled at his own joke then looked to Lily for affirmation that he was indeed funny.

Lily, her expression light and carefree, had what might be the greatest smile on her face that D Light had ever seen. Goodly, but beautiful. D Light had never seen her smile with such abandon. *Oh, the drug works fast, as should anything that comes out of the barrel of a gun. The words flamed through his mind like candles stuck on a wilderness day.*

"Your cat is beautiful," Lily purred. "I want one."

D Light nodded with exaggerated vigor. "It is beautiful, isn't it?" Cackling to himself, his Stargazer smiled toward D Light and nudged his master's arm. "His name is Stargazer. He's Stargazer because he is both small and gorgeous. Got it?"

Lily rolled onto her stomach, crossed her ankles and kicked back her legs. "I never met a male that small, cat." She smiled. Lily reached over to Stargazer and stroked the lifeline robot's face.

"His name, where I come from men aren't called 'minks,' but hey, I won't fault you on precision." D Light watched intently as Lily began to nuzzle his lifeline, nose to nose. D Light continued, "I'm afraid I hate cats too—real ones anyway. Every soul cat I've met didn't care for me one bit either. Stick their tail up and walk off or, worse yet, hiss at ya. Unless, as far as I can tell, I only bought Stargazer 'cause it was on sale."

Lily grabbed the robot's head and covered its ears. "Don't listen to him, Stargazer!" Lily scratched under the cat's chin. "Do you want to come live with me? Do you?" Lily's question was met with blind, closing eyes.

D Light checked, "You want him to live with you, huh? Well, if he had any taste at all, he would take the trade. Fortunately for me, he's just a stupid computer."

D Light rested his head against the cool plastic floor and watched Lily's cheeks, had caught the cat's face for the color seemed like an eternity. The LoveGas™ was in its coldest state, was having its wondrous effect. Lying there beside the magnificent creature, D Light was suddenly embraced by an overwhelming awareness that Stargazer was beautiful. And not beautiful because of its advanced engineering or elegant design, but from the mere fact that he was Stargazer and Stargazer was intrinsically beautiful. Or maybe it was the graceful, supple, fingers that extended through its fur that made this picture so exquisite, or the dainty, volitional hand to which the fingers belonged. The arm, perhaps? Mischievous, yet soft and caracassous. Certainly that was beautiful. Countless millions of years of evolution culminating in the finest intersect of form and function. *My Soul, the shoulder and the face...No, that is not her face.* D Light reached.

D Light moved in closer to Lily and whispered, "Take down your veil."

"Hmmm?" Lily asked absently, still absorbed by the task of making the robot as though, with enough concentration and a refined technique, she could magically bring pleasure to the machine.

Stargazer pressed into D Light's mind, the voice warping slightly like an audio tape being unspooled. *Master, she finally*

Stab! D Light went back abruptly. One hundred and eighty thousand volts for that car and all its occupants and it tells me this? he thought.

D Light leaned in ever closer to Lily and lowered his voice. "Don't take it off. I want to see your real face, your real hair." He gently smacked her hair, sending a silky lock around his finger. His lips slowly wandered toward her ear and he whispered, "Please."

Lily turned her head to face him, their faces only inches apart. "What about my dagger? I'm a demon, remember?"

"No, you are a demon," D Light said slowly using his best seductive voice. "A wonderful demon. I want to see the demon, the real demon. The one I saw under the tree this morning." He ran a finger across her cheek, down her neck, and along one shoulder.

"Lower yours and I'll lower mine," Lily answered coyly.

D Light lowered his veil before she had even finished her sentence. His dark, wavy hair was disheveled and sticking up in tufts. His cheeks also went face appeared relaxed and free of worry. His dark eyes, fully dilated, resembled huge glass marbles.

Presently, Lily lowered her veil. Her long, blond locks suddenly seemed to float from a net as the blain lifted. Her big cobalt blue eyes resembled crystal gazing balls of old and D Light could not break this from their stare. They were dazzling, mesmerizing, and suddenly appeared much closer. His breath stopped. Neither of the two moved, but Lily finally spoke. "They are coming for us. We should run." The words emerged softly, but with certainty.

"Don't care," D Light replied nonchalantly. He did not want to take. He did not want to think. He did not want to run. The only thing he wanted to do at the very moment was indulge in this all-encompassing feeling of being pulled toward her, into her. He felt closer still, their lips nearly touching. He could feel the warmth of her moist breath from his lips. He had ascended upward to the crown of her head and he gently ran his fingers through the beautiful locks that flowed down her side.

Lily closed her eyes and studied D Light's cheek with the tips of her fingers, leaving behind trails of a subtle but intoxicating scent. Now free from the enchantment of her eyes, D Light was blind by her magical smile that highlighted her plump, luscious lips. "I think we should run now," she repeated.

Lily rose to her feet, pulling D Light by the wrist. D Light followed her lead and would have done so even without being physically coerced. All he wanted right now was to be near her and he would do whatever it took to keep her at his side.

The couple floated toward the door as though carried along by the few remaining wisps of LoveGas™ that permeated the near the floor. Outside, people immediately gathered near them. Some of them murmured while others shouted, but D Light could hardly hear their congratulations. Such beautiful people. *My Soul, the Assembly!* That thought echoed in his brain again and again, and while under normal circumstances he would have chastised himself for thinking in such devil, tonight he would congratulate himself for thinking it. Right now, in this very moment, he wanted to revel in the noise, the warmth, the scent of his fellow men... and women, yes, particularly the women. And although loneliness was spread out in all directions, it was the loneliness of Lily that he continued to follow. She was his sin.

Mandering through the madness, Lily briefly let go of D Light's wrist to find off the uncontrolled advances of an excited producer, and in doing so was suddenly enveloped by the crowd. D Light shouted something unintelligible and, like a madman, scratched at his arms in anguish. He then launched himself at the human wall, ripped it apart at its seams and shouted her name. He found her almost immediately and grabbed at her wildly. She released out of the grip early, caught his wrist again, and nudged him around. He back was now against her with but temporary frame. He could feel her moist lips, so full and so soft, slide across his ear. Whispering, she asked, "Do you remember that? Do you remember when you killed Toder and I had you just this way? Should I have killed you then?" She gently bit the lobe of his ear.

"You can kill me now if you want," he murmured. He turned his head so that his cheek was against her lips. D Light felt pathetic, but he did not care. The only thing he cared about at this moment was making Lily happy. Flashes flaring the sea of greediness compressed the couple from all sides.

"Oh, never mind," Lily laughed and pushed him away. "Let's have some fun." She grasped a handful of hair on the back of his head and pulled, forcing his face to tilt upward. Apparently, they had managed their way to the front of one of the stages. Several performers were present, but the spotlight's attention was on the two of them. Lily, as though it were perfectly natural, lifted herself up onto the stage.

"OMG, that outfit is so on stage," squealed Sweet Ting, her voice metallic with rapture.

Elmer creak back into his Comedian™ chair as he did his pelvic beneath the table. "What an entrancing surprise," he declared.

Lynn frowned and looked about nervously. "What the Soul is she doing? Her veil is down! Is she trying to get caught?"

Being that there were many stages in the production, the nobles extracted their families to move in on the one stage in question. Two performers, a man and a woman, had been singing a duet, but having seen that the celebrity was ascending

they quickly returned back into the shadows.

Lily took her place on stage, enjoying slightly and adopted a serious, perhaps pensive, look. "I want to dedicate this performance to the fluster fish of the lake," she announced, her voice amplified by some unseen device. "You know the fish I'm talking about," she teased. At this she puckered her lips and put her hands up against her chest and flapped them, simulating the fishlike pectoral fins of the fluster fish.

Unnoticed music emerged from nowhere, a rhythmic, deep bass vibrating the floor. Lily's eyes opened wide as she heard this one and she belted out in a clear melodic voice, "Because the fish..." The bass cut out and then a slow, heartfelt strains of an electric guitar played as Lily paused long and then belted out, "...ARE SPLINKED!"

The stranded guitar went wild and the bass picked up again, according to a torrent of deep beating. It was at this point that Lily launched herself into the air, jumping high, seemingly suspended in flight, she vibrated her body in the air like a great salmon jumping out of the water to make the next watery ledge. She landed again and again, oscillating about in the air as the music continued at a frenetic pace.

Punctured upon a catwalk that overlooked the stage and the crowd, the gossamer mist that he gasp then finally upon them, causing a pink mist to swirl over the entire area. The gossamer mist on the stage, arms waving high in the air, crashed in tightly and screamed with pleasure.

Lily was speechless—almost. "Is this embarrassing to you?" She nodded toward the stage.

"No, I'm good," Djoser replied in a tight voice. Amanda was sitting beside him, and judging by the rhythmic movements of her shoulder, she was up to something under the table.

Lily sighed deeply and cringed at the sight of Lily. "This performance is bizarre, even by gossamer standards." She squinted her eyes a bit, unable to tear herself away from the odd performance, but also unwilling to correct her fall victim to the spectacle. She then let out a tense chuckle despite herself, a chuckle which turned into a sudden gasp. "Oh boy, now I'd like to getting up there! Someone tell me this isn't happening!"

Lily turned her attention to Brian who stood at attention at her side, his eyes glued to the performance below. "Brian, they're making fools of themselves! This is not desirable. Go down there and... well, see what you can do."

Brian nodded in confirmation without removing his eyes from the stage. Then, like a menacing wind, he began deliberately dodging and pushing his way down the catwalk stairs and then made a beeline for the stage.

Brian had no plan. None. In fact, he wasn't even clear on the expectations of his mission, but he did have an inexplicably strong urge to get closer to Lily. The style of her dance was not easy, to say the least, but there was something about the way she moved that was utterly innocent. Not innocent in a naive way, but in a way that assured the spectator that she was both good and undeniably true to her goodness. Indeed, that seemed to be the effect on the crowd that gathered to watch. Some were laughing, which was obviously the intended effect, but many more were just staring slack jawed or sitting unconsciously as though finally realizing something they had long been trying to work out.

There was feeling a bit odd. It wasn't all the people that would that made her feel unusual, for by now she had managed to fluster them out. It was something else, a sensation she had never before experienced. It was close, but it was the typical desire she felt on the bare, rather, it was more intense and euphoric. She wondered if it was the sexual desire. There was no doubt that she had no interest in sex. In fact, her designers did not bother to provide her with a vagina, only a narrow slit for the purpose of urination. She had no clitoris, of course, as there was no point. Even the hypotheticals, the penis-pit trap of brain tissue that was key to sexual birds, had been altered to true her of any sex drive. And so this feeling that was growing in her, the titillation, this aggressive sexuality, was all the more bewildering.

She wanted more.

There followed her prey toward the stage, pushing her way to the front. Not wanting to attract attention, she did not use her formidable strength for this task, but instead veered through the forested gossamer slowly, but with a constant insistence that carried her a glimmer and a curve or two, but did not make her stand out too much. She was drawn along toward the stage as inevitably as a leaf blown down a river, toward her destiny. And with each and every step the sand within her grew. Her eyes locked on the girl, the one making the strange noise and the only, exaggerated movements—movements that attracted Thera to her like a kitten drawn to a dancing string.

If Thera had been a plasma grinder she might have known that the pink wings of smoke drifting about her was LexoGas™ and she would have known that the effects of LexoGas™ varied somewhere between humans and even more so between products—products like her. Thera was a worker, and as such she was trained to remain above all else. Since soldiers were born with the intent desire to hear they had to be trained in the discipline of self control. Indeed, without maintain such products would be a dangerous liability. A world where products can attract curious people and consuming them out in the open would be terrifying and would save the souls of fear and discomfort, none of which were optimal to productivity among the populace.

There knew what she should do, just like she always had. She would simply continue to watch her prey and wait for her opening. It was best to take the target when they were alone, there being less likelihood of witnesses. Although disposing with demons was perfectly legal, the Authority did not wish to

a library of motion-catch videos being published on The Cloud for their track and horse culture. A writer did not show proper restraint as published appropriately, the punishment being simple yet effective. They were suspended from duty for a time commensurate with the infraction, a mild admonition for one engineered for hunting. They were allowed their typical ration of minuscule food, but feeding more—no even kinder products used for training purposes.

It was because of the conditioning it retained that Treva now felt her mind with flesh. As the traces of LetaGauTM worked upon her nervous system, her desire heightened, her inhibitions began to shut down, and all of the layers that covered up her true nature were stripped away, leaving her true self completely exposed. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she would be punished, but when that girl—the real puppet—sprang up, flying in the air as though teasing, it was more than Treva could stand. It was then that the chain that held back her appetites shattered wide open and the floods came rushing in.

Treva's legs flipped up like they were attached to springs and she started, hating her long, deadly canines. She vaulted up onto the shoulder of a sticky greasolator and launched off of him onto the stage before he even realized he had been used as a springboard. With two leaps Treva closed the gap between her and her prey; she pounced, but Treva was too confident and Lily too fast. Lily twisted mid-air and Treva closed at her as she sailed through the air. The soldier searched the meat with her steel-hand nails but was unable to get a grip on her prey and Lily crumbled to the stage floor with a crash. Using the momentum from the tumble, she rolled back up on her feet just as Treva, now covering with excitement, came back at her. Like a ball and a ballplayer, Lily dodged and evaded inside the claws as her attacker flew past again.

The crowd roared in a chorus of startled shrieks, gasps, and cheers.

Tallying by the flaps and the creature's movements, D Light immediately identified it as a product, which meant that it could legally be disposed with. However, that was beside the point. The lovely Lily, the mistress of his soul, was under attack, and that they wished to send her flesh and skin to filth with such flawless bronze skin. The very element that the creature was clear of Lily, D Light threw a disc at it. He threw was hard and true, but the creature somehow ducked it and the disc sailed on through the air out into the goddamn, perhaps to an insect's detriment. Never mind the discs anyway. The thing moved too fast and he might inadvertently strike Lily. D Light shouted as he unleashed his dagger and charged at the soldier with the intent to kill.

Treva saw D Light coming. Normally, Treva would have sensed the threat of an attacker and let him bleed out in a whinpering pite, but she did not wish to take the time for that. Instead, charging at Lily for another pass, she leaped up and sent down a mighty kick that struck D Light in the thigh and swept him off his feet. The impact spun Treva around, but she landed well and continued the charge. Rather than dodging to one side or the next as Treva expected, Lily ran straight at the soldier and, at the last moment, dove into a cornermark, tucking herself into a compact ball that struck Treva in the leg and knocked her off balance. As Treva struggled to keep her footing, she shrieked with rage. Several from the audience bawled and threw food at her, but her instinctual hyper-reflexes denied the jostlers any bids.

D Light was on the ground. The kick had been like a sledgehammer and unbearable pain screamed up his leg. It was not broken, but there was something out of place that prevented him from standing up. D Light looked desperately over at Lily and her attacker as they danced around the stage. Lily was not running, but she was not fighting either, merely evading. Perhaps she knew that if she remained into the thing around her, the product would be on top of her. At least here on the stage there was room to maneuver. D Light might have thought this to be true except that he suddenly realized that Lily was laughing. Laughing! And not the half-crazed kind of laughter belonging to someone whose stress response had overloaded. It was genuine, unbridled amusement. She was *amusing*! Someone poked D Light in the back of the head with something soft and sticky, but he did not care. He needed to see that wonderful girl!

Treva's prey was proving to be more of a challenge than expected. The hungry soldier had come on the stage to rip the human limbs from limbs with her bare hands and knaps, but the little girl was staying out of reach. Treva pulled out her steel baton and the corrugated shield extended with a rapid series of clicks. Appearing to be a simple rod, there was nothing remarkable about the weapon, but with one hit Treva could bring down a man far larger and stronger than the little form of a girl. All soldiers had permits for modern weapons, specifically a "low-efficacy modern weapon permit." That meant that Treva could legally use any weapon that fit the requirements of not being deadly, having limited range, and having a limited area of effect. Her baton fit the bill, but Treva soon wished she had a more potent weapon as the teasing little meat puppet continued to duck and weave, avoiding the soldier's wild swings.

Seeing Lily in danger, Treva intensified his push to the front of the stage. It was his time. His time to do what he had trained all his life to do, and he was not about to miss this opportunity. He used the bat of Tiffins, his mace, to prod people aside and, upon reaching the stage, leaped up like a man clearing a high jump. The soldier landed on his side and rolled up onto his feet in one graceful move. He heard cheering behind him. They thought this is a theatrical performance, he mused. A little cutesy in their eyes, but he ignored it so that he could keep his focus on the task at hand. Although the woman evading the baton at Lily had no product tags on her cheeks, Treva immediately recognized it as a common-randy product, having had fought so many in his training sessions. He knew how they moved, inhuman in the physics of their actions,

through the one he lacked the precision of most of her kind. Then she thought he him, *My Soul, My Soul*, is a product line.

Seeing Lily in action left no doubts. No human could move that fast. Nothing else could have crinkled such an intense smile, though for even a second, much less for the duration that Lily had already survived. But there was no time to lose. Lily was now driven into a corner and the one that meant her harm was slowing her approach, making sure not to overextend herself and allow Lily to escape. His retreat Lily only had a second or two left to live.

Bliss charged and lunged at the predator like a lion ambushing an unsuspecting gazelle. However, when he landed he set his feet and bent his knees to absorb the impact so that he could stay dead in his tracks. His play had worked. The predator had heard him, as he knew she would. As he landed, she turned and swung her long bison back at him, the tip of the weapon whistling just centimeters away from his chest. She had expected him to be a little closer, but he had anticipated the swing. It was a trick that hyperactive predators liked to play on humans—not as though they don't know you are coming, tell you into thinking you have the element of surprise, and then burst, let you like they have eyes in the back of their head. It was a move that Bliss was all too familiar with.

Having swung her bison with the confidence that she would deliver a decisive blow but that missing, Treva was now open. Bliss knew his opportunity would last only for the briefest of moments, which is why he was already swinging good of "Tilting. Only a moment ago he had been swinging at empty space, but now—right on cue—the human was there in the path of his swing. Bliss's preference would have been the predator's arm or better yet its torso, but the savvy guard settled with shattering the heavy, bulbous tip of his snout into the man's bison with a mighty crack.

Thus, not expecting the blow, lost her grip on the rod which cracked against the hard snout and clattered off into the roaring crowd. She was enraged. She had been watching this new meat puppet in her periphery, the one with the club. He had appeared slowly and recklessly, as most humans did, and she expected to dispatch him quickly. But the soldier had underestimated this one. Now she had lost her bison. Normally, she would have enjoyed the challenge of a worthy opponent, but now all she desperately wanted was her prey. And the soldier was interfering!

Treva turned toward the man as he aimed another blow at her head, but this time she was watching and dodged it easily, and as the club sailed past her, she launched herself on him. Her risk, although slightly longer than what was in fashion, still appeared normal; however, their appearance belied their purpose. They were as hard as steel and razor sharp, just another subtle genetic manipulation soldiers occasionally used to their advantage.

Love, Monkey, the Watcher of The Lounge, guard down at the stage from her throne high above. *This will not do*, she thought. Due to the nature of their work, soldiers were never a welcome sight, but Love, Monkey had never witnessed one unmaking itself in public. Sanctioned by the Divine Authority or not, Love, Monkey would not abide such violence on her watch. Without hesitation she leaped off of her balcony into empty space, 80 meters above the glockens floor. She fell rapidly at first, but the ranspreads gradually slowed her descent. It was at times like these that Love, Monkey was grateful for the glockens's safety matrix, the web of threads so fine that they were invisible to the human eye.

Glockens were not allowed to use the safety matrix for fun (although often tempted), rather, it was there to avoid the stiff post penalties imposed for wrongful death. However, Love, Monkey was not just a glockens; she was the Watcher, and in such she would do what she pleased. This was a true emergency. Falling toward the glockens floor, billions of ranspreads crisscrossed across her small body, stretched, and then, unable to withstand her weight, snapped. Although the threads broke, each one absorbed a tiny amount of her kinetic energy, the collective influence causing her to decelerate as she neared the floor. The damage to the safety matrix was of no concern to the lioness who knew the threads would self-assemble again.

During her fall, Love, Monkey had withdrawn from a QuickPod™ in her dress the earlier. Her familiar had called up the blood profile of the soldier, but Love, Monkey was too far from her target for the control to work properly. As the floor neared in, she readied the kill switch.

The human made sure adapt with its weapons and so Treva collected some solid blows, one of which nearly broke her arm, but soldiers were built to take a beating and Treva had no time to play, so she took her kicks and then proceeded to crisscross Bliss. With her choppy fringe and steady rank she was at his flanks indiscriminately and his body quickly became slick with blood. Astonishingly, the girl—the one Treva had harmed all this way—jumped on the soldier's back, grappling with acrobatics. Treva felt the dull sting of a blade as Lily stabbed into her shoulder and neck. Lucky for the soldier, her prey now lay edgewise at attack then it was at a distance, and Treva estimated her wounds to be nonfatal.

Treva bit down into the throat of the troublesome man and then snapped her head backward, effectively severing Bliss's carotid artery. He crumpled in a dead heap to the floor, blood spouting from his neck. With the nuisance now disposed of, Treva turned her attention to the little girl on her back, the one Treva had been implanted on. The scent of her prey purred up against her nose compensating. Soon she would feed, and when she had satisfied the worst of her hunger, she would then

on the other one, the man helping toward her with his patient-like hands.

The blood-thirsty sucker snatched a handful of Lily's hair and, just as her brain was sending the signal to her muscles to pull the pony off her back, Treva felt the most wonderful feeling of her life. She threw back her head, screaming in victory. She then fell to the ground, her back bowed and she started to pant. Lily was still on Treva's back, cutting into her wildly, but the hammer did not feel the back; rather, the sucker writhed on the ground sensually. The quiet from the audience was deafening. Then, all at once, Treva's body convulsed in an explosion of haphazard movements and then went limp. The whites of her eyes turned pink, as the blood vessels ruptured under pressure. Lily was still on top of the sucker, haphazard away like there was no treatment. Blood spitter now covered Lily's body, but no one could see it behind the illusion of her skincoat. Treva's limbs started twitching violently and the sucker's fingers circled around and around as though chasing its tail, its mouth opening and closing uncontrollably.

D Light recognized the familiar's unusual behavior, so he had seen it before. When a familiar's mouth went into shock or was dying, there was a period of time where the output from the master's mind chip to the familiar was chaotic or nonmetrical, causing the familiar to act accordingly. Despite this vague realization, D Light, dragging his injured leg and clutching his back, fell on top of the sucker and joined Lily to the grisly task of backstitch the doctored hamster.

Love Monkey bent her knees slightly to absorb the shock as she landed on the stage. She looked down at the center's clearly 1st sucker display. It was targeting the DBox in Treva that carried the pharma MaudDine™. This drug was often used as a "well being" pharma, but was also a very effective pep. No doubt the sucker carried MaudDine™ in her bloodstream for those times when she needed an extra kick of adrenaline. Love Monkey had set the center to an infinite loop which meant that it sent the "welcome signal" over and over very rapidly. This uprooted all of the MaudDine™ available into the sucker's bloodstream over a fraction of a second. Her pulmonary and circulatory systems were overloaded, or at least that was what it was supposed to do. Love Monkey was unsure if her center had killed the sucker, or if it had merely incapacitated it while the other two methoded to its death. Either way, her objective had been met.

"My Son, it's like the murder of Julius Caesar down there," Djosor intoned as their party watched the show from their pillars. Lysa's mouth hung agape and, speaking to no one in particular, she muttered, "We are all going to be reformatored for this." Sweet. They said nothing, her lips pursed tightly and her eyes bulging more than usual.

Lily and D Light, as though working from a team, ceased their backstitch. The great hall was nearly silent. With expressions of stress, they looked up at each other and then out into the audience. Suddenly, the hall erupted in deafening cheers. The point reader above the stage shot up as the audience ratings began streaming in. By now, several guards had taken position along a catwalk overlooking the scene, their crossbows leveled down, uncertain as to whether point at as hundreds of rabid gracklers rushed the stage to embrace the talented performers.

Chapter 25

"My father does not take appointments and rarely keeps the ones he makes," Love Monkey stated coldly to Lysa. If the child-themed daughter of Dr. Memo was intimidated by the tall and beautiful noblewoman, Mother Lysa, she did not show it.

Lysa smiled pleasantly down at the girl. "It is imperative that we speak to him. Certainly you can greet us as audience with your business."

Love Monkey smiled sweetly. "Perhaps I should do this as payment for the live entertainment members of your party gave us—you know, the performance that left two unrecognizable corpses up on stage in the middle of my gracklers?"

Lysa's lips turned into a thin line.

"No matter," the girl continued, "I'm not even going to ask why there was a rabid sucker chasing after your friends or how you might have run afoul of the Authority."

"The sucker was a rogue product," claimed Djosor straight. "They are no more fun products. Sadly, one is bound to step. It is we who should be spared. Mother Lysa just had a good man, an exceptionally talented and dedicated soldier. It will be expensive to commission and train a new one. Perhaps we should uphold a formal complaint." Djosor made the threat in a casual tone, but his smirk was instantly wiped away when he saw the expression on Love Monkey's face.

The girl placed back at him with her small, pale hands clasped into fists. Her victory blue eyes then darted over at one of the guards who stood at attention nearby, loaded crossbow at the ready. "I suggest you not speak again," she smirked, making dipping them every word.

The girl sat on the Red View Box, paying no attention to the conversation. He had stripped off his skincoat, leaving only his undershorts. A muck with product was knocked down on one side of the catwalk, rubbing some client into D Light's leg while a muck-of-bone scurried around, tentatively extending its head out of its meat/body as it ran its routine diagnostic protocol.

D Light's mind was still ringing. Having left the gracklers and as overwhelming sensory overload, he now felt numb, dead, and empty. Fortunately, the LoveGlow™ had not yet begun to wear off, so he felt sympathy despite the pain in his leg. The muck had requested that he instruct the doctors rendered by his skincoat to allow proper inspection of his wounds. Now, the normally pristine white cat was blotched and quivered

the sucker's blood, generously coordinating with the crimson goo on his face and hands.

Lily stood nearby, leaning back against a wall. She too appeared to have stepped out of a chainsaw massacre. D Light laid back, fat on the floor, and reached up to stroke the back of her calf. The antacid taste of the micro-knives bowed softly with his smile. Her long blue eyes dart open at his touch. She watched him. Her expression was neutral, an unreadable mask, and she did not move her body. D Light just stood back and smiled for what felt like a pleasant eternity.

Katru watched over and over to check as her named sucker was hunched on stage in front of thousands. It was as though she could hear her god laughing at her. First, against all expectations, the demons escaped the speaker photo. Next, their path was wiped clean by a cleaning crew. Then their exit was obliterated again in the lake, and now this? This grisly public spectacle? Could it be that the OverSoul was competing against her? *My Soul, are you testing me?* she wondered.

That sucker flew off the leash? Rhema paged.

It's not supposed... It's just not supposed to do that, was all Katru could send back. She felt as though her life had drained from her.

Is where the hell is the subway? I mean, damn? The... Rhema ripped near his thoughts. I mean, first The Soul gets knocked out and now our sucker gets frugged? Are we insured for this? Rhema's blink faded was somewhat garbled.

Katru did not respond.

Rhema broke the silence. What now? I can get another sucker that is, if anyone is willing to leave one to us. Actually, I think we should go with a human sucker this time.

No, Katru said at last. I'm not riding any more poles chasing ghosts. They're in the Inner Sanctum. If they come out we'll know it and we can deal with it then.

Is the key word here is "if". Maybe the doctor's little infamous Darwinian gambler will solve the problem for us. Rhema went.

Essentially, the MegaCorp team was ushered through the multiple air-tight portals that guarded the entrance to the Inner Sanctum and were left there. Love, Mosche, the wanderer and high botton of The Lounge, had given them permission to enter the Inner Sanctum, but only because she wanted them out of her sight, or so she said.

The arrangement was not what Lyla and Djoser had hoped for. From what they could tell, Dr. Marna was not expecting them. "So we're just going to what? Tell him we want him in the neighborhood and thought we would drop by?" Djoser spoke, but his voice seemed to get swallowed up by the alien vegetation around them. It was extremely dark, which was no surprise to the party since the elevator they had used to get there seemed to travel downward for ages. According to their trackers, they were now under the lake bottom.

All was quiet, except for the stifles and soft crying emanating from D Light and Lily. Still bloodied, they hung on one another, belatedly mourning the loss of Lilius.

"He missed us!" Lily sobbed. "He was a rescuer. And that thing."

"He was like a lion, fierce and with no thought for his own life," D Light blubbered. "Oh, the horror! He was my brother!"

Lyla looked back at the two moaners, contempt clouding her face. "My Soul, when will that damned dog wear off?"

Djoser said nothing, only smiled. Mosche, his familiar, was facing back toward D Light and Lily, his oversized eyes fixed on them. Ah yes, record it all Djoser thought. This will be worth a good laugh later.

"Notice, Lyla, that whenever one of your entourage dies, your new friend D Light is somehow involved?"

Lyla rolled her eyes as Djoser continued, "Certainly, he has proven himself useful and I expect that with his help we may very well win this game, but I fear none of your employees will survive."

Lyla laughed, "Lucky for me I'm out of here soon. Maybe he'll move on to yours?" She smiled at Amanda, who, headless of the conversation, was carefully surveying their surroundings.

"Oh, I wouldn't underestimate him," Djoser (shed. "I suspect he can kill your people remotely. Maybe you should check in with your secret back home."

Lyla smiled as she was told, but she had to fight the urge to open a blink with her House. The team had agreed not to communicate with anyone unless absolutely necessary since no one was sure what the Authority could trace. They were probably being pursued. Although it was true that the Authority used to eavesdrop on blinks and data into the

hundreds of players via their Mind Interface Chips, the Authority had imposed a series of primary rules, collectively called "Prime Agency Rules (PARs)" on itself. Apparently, those rules were in response to a study the Authority sponsored which concluded that players that knew they could be "burned later" showed a decrease of "flirt and innuendo thought" and that this led to "suboptimal productivity."

Nevertheless, Lyrn did not feel like testing the validity of the PARs just now. The stakes were too high.

Lyrn turned her attention to the black foliage ahead of them. It was a dark zone, a place void of sensation, so no one could jack into a skin to see. The dull, greenish light that shined in from the plant-panel walls behind them was their only source of illumination. It was eerie and unsettling. Djosur and Lyrn piped their fluterie's right vision into their own mind in order to get a better look.

The vegetation that surrounded them was dense and much of it unfamiliar. There were no discernable patterns to the plant life, just a wild hodgepodge of alien flora. The only thing that the moss and plants seemed to have in common was the size of their leaves, all of which were enormous. Lyrn supposed that the purpose of these gigantic offshoots was to maximize photosynthetic potential, yet there was no sunlight.

"Is that a breeze I feel?" Djosur asked into the darkness. The rubberine confirmed through Moscher's right vision that they were indeed indoors. A smooth ceiling loomed about two hundred meters above.

PoPee, Lyrn's fluterie, extended its head about, surveying the area while Lyrn faced forward with her eyes shut so as to better concentrate on what she was seeing. "I presume the good doctor is trying to simulate the outside world," Lyrn proposed. "If so, then I expect the sun to come up at some point, at artificiality. It's nighttime in the outside now. Maybe the Inner Sanctum is synced to the local time."

"I don't know, but we're not going to find the doctor just standing here," Djosur replied. "Looks like a path over there."

Djosur pointed to a stone-paved path and started toward it. "Our fluterie has a different vantage point, so we're going to fill off a cliff or something if we try to walk around using them as our eyes," Djosur said gruffly.

"Stick Moscher up on your shoulder or hold his head in front of you," Lyrn suggested, holding back a snarl.

"Screw it, let's do it the old-fashioned way," Djosur exclaimed. He then pulled out a tiny glow stick fluterie pocket and turned it on.

Lyrn frowned. "Might that attract unwanted attention? I suspect there's more than experimental plants in this place."

"Well, I'm not walking around holding a fluterie' flame in front of my face," Djosur snapped while continuing his journey toward the rough stone path ahead.

D Light and Lily giggled, as D Light cracked Djosur. "Fluterie' flame in front of my face? Fluterie' flame in front of my face?" Try saying that three—"

"Shh, Lyrn!" Lyrn whispered.

"What?" Djosur hissed back.

Lyrn was training her eyes into the darkness ahead. The light from the glowstick cast long shadows into the forest. "I thought I heard a cry or a shout, but not like a person. I damn, something freakish."

Djosur's eyes narrowed. "How the blazes can you hear anything over those two?" He pointed toward Lily and D Light, who had several times giggling back to their inaccessible sibling.

As though on afterthought, Djosur dispatched Amenda to shut them up. Amenda was not practiced at this particular task and so she simply pulled them apart. When they continued to snicker and whee, she bowed forward and slapped them both—once for Lily and three times for D Light, after which they finally opened down.

The rubies concentrated on the sounds around them. After missing their ears for a minute, it was apparent that the forest was packed tight with bizarre noises. There was screeching, strapping, and something that sounded akin to harping. One unsettling call from the forest sounded like a voice, but it was too general to have come from any man unless that man's vocal cords had been violated. Upon hearing the last sound, there was some discussion about waiting for the first sun to come up—assuming there was one—but Lyrn insisted that they did not have the luxury of time. She reminded them that they were on an urgent quest and that the stakes were high.

Finally in agreement, Djosur gave Amenda his glow stick and sent her out in front to lead them down the narrow stone path. The party walked in single file with D Light and Lily, still consoling each other—about quietly—bringing up the rear. The path was uneven and not particularly well maintained, boasting large rocks, roots, and a constant encroachment of plants. The route for a clumsy march by D Light and Lily since these ahead of them blocked the light from the glow stick, casting dark shadows down over the path. D Light reaffirmed his vision so that he could see from his crew perspective, behind as it was, and from Senegosa's, who although at a different perspective, at least had night vision. Lily held onto D Light's hand for guidance.

After many minutes of this quiet and clumsy march, Lyrn began feeling more comfortable with using artificial light and so turned on a glow stick of her own. She held it high so that D Light and Lily could see as well. Lily let go of D Light's hand, no longer needing him to guide her; he, however, did not let go of her. He felt the need to keep her close. To preserve her, he thought, although he knew this was not the true motivation. From what he had observed so far, she was harder to a light than he was. D Light did not look back to see her face. The LoudGut™ had finally worn off. At the most part, and he no longer felt that bold. Presently, her hand

remained in grip on his.

Lyns eventually stopped and looked around intently as though to penetrate the wall of alien plant life. She scowled. "What? The kid couldn't give us a clue? We have no idea where we're going," she said plaintively.

"If you're referring to the girl who goes by Love Monkey, I don't think she's actually a child, at least not in terms of her age," Djour said.

D Light agreed. Love Monkey was obviously much older than suggested by appearance. It was uncommon for someone to go into age stasis before attaining physical adulthood, as it was typically disadvantageous to remain younger and smaller than one's full potential. D Light knew of only one example of a "warrior" being, a concubine-prosper girl who his friend, C, recommended as a "unique find." However, D Light never remembered her. To him there was something unsettling about the prospect, although he could not identify, specifically, what it was.

"Sounds like a trap," Lyns muttered. "This whole walking around in the woods thing is really suspect."

"Hm, what was your first clue?" Djour asked sarcastically. "Was it the angry women-child whose guards shoved us into her daddy's wife laboratory and kicked us in?" Djour's probably already infected with some lovable flesh-eating bacteria."

With a feeling of impending doom creeping over them, the team turned faster and they no longer took the time to stop and listen. They stomped along the path for what seemed like hours before the trail suddenly plunged into a long, steep stairway. Down below they saw what looked like an immense garden that stretched out as far as they could see, which was odd for because the garden was furnished with light-emitting plants providing patches of light in a variety of different colors, highlighting all manner of flowers, moss, ferns, and sculpted rocks, and statues. Tall and short hedges were carved like soft stone into arcs and swirls. Paths traversed the garden bending this way and that, fading in and out of shadows. Perhaps the game involved a maze. That would be classic, D Light contemplated.

Since the garden was below a sheer cliff that bent around it, the only visible way down was the maze ahead of them, which was also where their trail ended. With no better idea, the team began their descent into the unknown. As they walked, the only audible sounds were from fountains and streams of varying sizes, most of which were in the shadows or hidden behind something. Cool colors from the photoflash glowed intricately, and blues, reds, greens and every other color imaginable, each color created dimension over only a small area containing a centerpiece, like a flowering nectar tree, a stone sculpture, or the falling water from a fountain. Having only days for a coordinated hunt or two, D Light was exhausted. Peering into the private nooks and crannies of the garden, he hoped to lay down in one of those dark shadows and let the soft spiny grass cradle him and the gurgling waterfall to lull him to sleep.

D Light left the path and inspected a long-stemmed blue-pinked flower that glowed. Looking into the bulb he could not see any typical light source. It appeared that the light emitted from the tissue of the plant itself. Remarkable, he thought as he peeped one of the succulent petals. It was easily enough and emitted a thick, glowing liquid that ran down between his fingers. It was viscous and sticky.

"D Light!" Lyns whispered from the path. "Don't mess around with these things. You don't know what they are."

Lyn was at his shoulder peering down intently at the torn flower. She dabbed a finger into the pulp of his hand where a few drops of sticky glowing juice had run down and collected. She then brought her finger under her nose and sniffed deeply. Just as D Light was about to bring his cup soaked hand up to his own nose, Djour opened a blink to the team. There is someone behind us.

Instantly, D Light was given a visual. It was a large humanoid shape that moved quickly, visible only for an instant before disappearing behind a tall flowerbed. It's gone. What is it? Djour asked. Without waiting for an answer he played the visual clip back slowly. D Light could not make the figure out clearly, as it had been largely concealed behind beds of flowers and the mark of a knee before disappearing behind thicker cover. Even so, D Light thought he could make out a large humanoid head like that of a large man.

The flurry of visual and auditory input from Djour made D Light realize that the noblemen was using a low filter blink to communicate. He was broadcasting his surface thoughts as they came, with no censoring. It was unheard of for a noblemen to share their mind with a jester like D Light. The typical exchange between players of different social statuses was to use the most formal and highly threaded blinks, little more than old-time telegraphic communication. D Light might have been flustered if it were not for the fact that he supposed the move was more a fraction of fear than a gesture. He must really be afraid to be breaking their protocol.

Down right I'm afraid! Djour sent back.

Oh, sorry. D Light apologized instinctively. He was in a lesser blink with a noblemen. He needed to better monitor his surface thoughts.

Djour immediately sent over a version of the video feed which had just been enhanced by his filter. The creature was shaped like human, a man, more or less. It was naked and had no hair, save its groin which had only a tuft of hair and no visible tentacles. Its skin was minimal, with what D Light supposed were bulging veins over well defined muscles. The eyes were creased and showed up well in the image. They were pink as though thoroughly bloodshot. The nose was enormous and it gleamed as though wet. The mouth was shut, but it also looked several times too big. A large flap of skin hung underneath the jaw, such that no neck was visible from that angle.

There was no argument in the public economy like the characteristics of that image. Stereogenic's calm voice in D Light's head contrasted with the feelings of panic beginning to wash over the robot's anxiety.

D Light's feelings of anxiety were shared by the others as the unfilled blink went rapid fire. It was essential for members of House Telsa to be trained in physiological strategies for times that required quick action. Extraneous thought patterns were shut down to focus on the problem at hand while still keeping the senses keen.

Options? Djoser piped.

Hide, Lyra responded.

Hiding good? D Light went as though he had a voice.

Stay together, Lyra commanded.

Because Lyra had no firearm, she could not handle the security processing required by an unfilled blink without a long delay and was therefore completely unaware of the discovery and discussion that had occurred over the last few seconds. Without overreacting it, D Light grabbed Lyra's hand to guide her. She did not resist. He then had Stereogenic create a summary of the situation and send it to her as a standard, low-security message.

The team's firefuries watched their backs for any pursuer. Through the blink the team discussed other tactics. It was decided that if a scout failed, the party was certainly capable of defending itself. All four of them carried weapons and, based on the image, the creature did not appear to be armed. They decided on a "bar nap" configuration if the enemy attacked alone. This consisted of a simple line with Aranda, the strongest, at a marker in front of the others. The would ensure that Aranda would meet the attacker first and that the others could then surround (nap that around) the attacker. If however, there were multiple enemies, they would instead use a "both between" style configuration, which simply meant they would all stand back to back, Aranda facing the most likely direction of attack.

But fighting was plan B. Plan A was still to hide, and to do this they spread with the intention of getting some distance from the thing and then hide once out of sight. The plan seemed reasonable to D Light, but he was also afraid of losing head long into another one of these things. Or something worse.

As familiar as existing about, D Light informed the others, the firefury's quadruped robotic legs afforded a much greater speed than in nature or any of the other bipeds in the party.

Lyra's thoughts came fast, Good, Djoser, Moscher watches our back. Princess watches our flanks.

Djoser was beginning to breathe hard from the run, but unlike audible speech, this had no effect on his blink communication. Moscher can't see it back there anyway. That thing probably knows the garden though. Knows where we're heading.

Plan, use that large stone ahead? To the left is cover. At the hedge, we'll leave the path and hide. Lyra piped the location in the team's minds and continued, Princess will maintain along the path. She can mimic my voice. She can mimic us all? With any luck the thing will follow her.

Momentarily, the four arrived at the stone, at which point they moved quietly off the path while Lyra's firefury continued on. They crouched and slithered in among the thick stalks of a patch of large, broad leaved plants.

D Light tried to suppress his panting from the run, but it was a few long seconds before he had quieted himself enough to finally hear Djoser's voice off in the distance, "Just don't stop" to which his own voice answered, "The fire blind... and scared." D Light could see Lyra crouching at him. When he cracked a smile back, she winked.

I want to get a look around. Djoser sent telepathically.

Stay hidden! Lyra seized Djoser's wrist. If you can see it, then it can see you.

That freak show might be creeping up on us right now. Djoser played his free hand out in frustration. He also knows its capabilities.

Exactly, Lyra sent back. We don't know anything about it. In fact, we don't know anything about this place at all so I say better to play it cool.

Djoser's eyebrows shot up, I'm not suggesting I pick at me myself. I'll send our Moscher. He's small so he'll be hard to spot. And he can see better than any of us anyway.

Lyra nodded. Moscher, with its tube shaped body, then began a low, sinking crawl around the plant stalks out toward the daylight just outside the flicker.

For Moscher's visual and audio to all of us, Lyra commanded. We've got nothing better to see at the moment.

Djoser, Lyra, and D Light were now looking through Moscher's eyes. Since the shadows was no problem for the firefury, they could all see pretty well. Unfortunately, the garden was full of obstacles and plants that blocked much of the firefury's view, but nothing seemed to be moving in the immediate vicinity.

"Oh Soot, I think I solved my puzzle!" D Light could finally hear his own voice yelling from off in the distance. Princess' intuition of D Light's voice was uncannily accurate.

Good, I got all the good ones, he thought.

How dare Moscher put over to his left as his, *Lynx* ordered. This collective vision coming to the left. There, *she* *there*?" Lynx placed a highlight over the tree to which she was referring. *How Moscher climb one of those to get a better look around.*

The tree had a thick base from which sprang two thinner trunks that would ascend one another like a DNA molecule. Numerous branches sprang out from both trunks and the leaves on the branches glowed dimly, not enough to cast significant light on anything else, but enough to glow clearly in the dark with a deep violet hue.

As D Light re-immersed himself in Moscher's deft ascent up between the branches of the tree trunk he was startled by Lynx, who suddenly spoke out loud in a shallow whisper, "I lost PooPoo! I don't know how. Disappeared! I said!"

She then let out a loud gasp and said in a rapid whisper, "I don't have time to reconfigure my blink settings. Without a familiar I'm going to have to fallback to speech."

How? D Light sent the thought, and then realized that Lynx had dropped from that form of communication.

"How?" D Light repeated in a whisper.

"I said I don't know how! I wasn't watching her. I can't play back her archive because she's completely gone."

D Light could see Lynx's hand was shaking as she reached up and grabbed Djoser's arm. "How Moscher look over to where my familiar ought to be. He ought to be...how do you say it?"

Lynx struggled as she tried to describe in words the whereabouts of her familiar. Being accustomed to simply showing a map and pinging on a location, verbalizing locations was awkward. "Moschero, down the path we were on."

Djoser nodded distractedly as he commuted with Moscher. A moment later he gasped, "Oh, that!"

Through Moscher's visual feed, D Light could see the monitor clearly. The creature's arms were elongated, enabling it to alternate between walking upright and on all fours like an ape, but it moved like an insect. One moment it would be nearly motionless, breathing fast and deeply with its heading down, and then it would suddenly spurt forward at an impossible speed.

Looks like it's coming straight at us!" Djoser tried to whisper but his voice broke out in claps.

"How does it know where we are?" Lynx asked.

"So if I know! Deductive reasoning, lucky guess, who cares!" Djoser shut back.

"Do we even know this thing is hostile?" D Light ventured.

"For Sord's sake, look at it! The teeth and the claws!" Djoser's tone was dismissive. "Tell me what you go on out and say 'If while we watch and see what happens.'"

"Besides, it tagged my Pretty Princess," Lynx contributed. "Not a friendly gesture."

Lily joined the conversation now that it was out in the open and she could keep up. "Maybe we should just stay still for now."

"I saw a boulder that looked flat enough on top for us all to stand on," Aramda stated. The usually silent bodyguard's husky voice startled D Light, who momentarily thought it belonged to something else. She continued, "It would provide us with a natural defense."

"Aramda's right," agreed Djoser. "If we can't lose this thing we'll end up in a fight anyway. Better to choose where we make our stand."

D Light scratched up his face. "Standing on top of a rock is certainly kind of out there. Maybe we could find a spot that is defensible and hidden?"

"Okay, *how*?" Djoser said with a hint of concern. "Moscher's going to take a good look around and as he does, keep your eyes peeled for a spot that meets your exhaustive criteria. But we're going to have to decide soon."

The garden was full of hills, tall trees, and rock sculptures that limited the distance of Moscher's vision. There were so many stone trails through the garden that Djoser was not sure which one to take, although he was sure they should use a trail rather than go cross-country. That would draw them down too much.

"Wait! Was that a person?" Djoser said as though asking himself Moscher's vision flew past what looked like a person in the distance. He wondered why his shaped familiar ignored something this important. Moscher's field of vision swept back to reveal a small humanoid shape stooped over a plant. Moscher then assumed it.

"What? Is that a child?" asked Djoser. "What the *flp* would a kid be doing in here?"

"Yeah, a little girl," said D Light. "My Sord, maybe it's not so dangerous here after all."

"What the—Moscher's watched her to that girl from The Lounge. You know, the hottest girl, *Lose_Monkey*," Djoser reported.

"Oh, little rascal *pinxy*!" Lynx growled. "Likely she came down here to watch her pet finish us off!"

"Flip it, I say we make a run for the little *Lose_Monkey*," Djoser exclaimed. "She looks pretty relaxed. Maybe she knows something we don't."

Maybe she's just a stupid little girl who's about to be flaged just like the 'ol' Shells, whenever, let's just go." Liza stood up.

Mosher stepped out the fastest route to Love, Monkey and the group ran toward her at full tilt. By the time they charged up to the girl who was kneeling in a grove near some yellow flowers with dark spots, they were quite exhausted. She looked up at them and did not appear surprised.

The girl had porcelain skin so pale it reminded D Light of vampire children he saw in horror spook games. However, her eyes seemed very human. Large blue eyes that peered back at them without fear, without malice.

"Each of you will need to take a drink," she produced a small blue vial from a pouch on her waist. "Just one swallow though," she added.

"I don't mean to be rude," D Light interjected, "but why do we need to drink?" D Light had only spoken to children a few times and was not sure of the best way to converse. Should he change his voice to a higher pitch like he had seen others do? He decided against it, knowing that Love, Monkey was a child only in appearance.

"It will protect you from the cullers," she answered. "There are several of them nearby and they certainly have picked up your scent by now."

Confused, Liza asked, "I'm sorry Love, Monkey, but I don't understand why drinking something from you will protect me from anything?"

The girl smiled patronizingly but did not raise a hand as she patiently explained. "There are several compounds in the liquid that, when metabolized, will exert a unique scent from your glands, convincing the culler that you are not food."

D Light was no biologist, but he knew that metabolizing liquid took time, so without further delay he snatched the vial from her outstretched hand and took a swig. She looked up at him without expression. Seeing no immediate detrimental effect, the others took their turn.

After the last of them drank, the girl continued, "The repellent is fast-acting but will still take up to a minute to take effect, so now I think you should run. My father's cullers are very good at what they do, so you should run as fast as you possibly can."

Encouragement was unnecessary, for the team sprang past the girl and down the path. Stealth was not attempted. They raced as fast as they could, but Liza was far ahead. She bounded forward, her long, lean legs widening the gap between her and the rest of the team. Liza looked behind her, her neck bearing no hiding tension, her face so grimly void of emotion. It was as though the remarkable pace was only mildly strenuous for her. Then, suddenly, her eyes locked onto something beyond the tunnel and her jaw dropped.

D Light checked behind him to discover a terrifying sight. Three of the hunters were gaining on them like an oncoming tsunami. Running on all fours, they wore rocks and plant debris sailing through the air. They wore big shadowy hanks of horrifying appendages.

Djoser caught sight of them too. "Amanda, come on!" he cried out. At this, his bodyguard, who had been keeping pace with her master, broke off and turned to face the oncoming monsters. As she stood waiting, the muscles in her arms tensed, she crouched slightly. Her sword, which had been drawn in an instant, shimmered blue and green in the glow of the nearby photoflowers.

D Light returned his head forward to watch where he was running. No missteps, he thought. Djoser was beside him. His eyes were fixed forward and wide with intense terror.

Ahead, up the path, Love, Monkey stood waiting at them. Amanda! D Light thought. How did she get ahead of us? As they made their last approach it was evident that she was not waiting, but beckoning them to come to her. Liza had almost reached the girl and looked poised to follow. D Light, fearing he had nothing to lose, decided to follow as well. Seeing that she had caught their attention, the girl then turned and began to jog—perhaps even skip—away down a path that snaked two busy green dandelions.

The monsters did not slacken their pace as they charged. Amanda. It appeared that they were about to use their momentum to spring onto her, to the prepared to identify and kill. She dashed, however, that the move would save her. They outnumbered her three to one and it was evident that they were fast and powerful—even for predators. Still, if they underestimated her she might be able to catch them by surprise and take at least one of them out.

However, when the opportunity came they did not pounce upon her. Instead, two of the three suddenly broke off, one leaping off to her left and one to her right. The third simply stopped with a suddenness that seemed to defy the physics of motion. She was now in the middle of a triangle. The creatures snarled, but their faces were little more than a blur to Amanda, who swiftly shifted her attention from one to the other. The beasts then darted in and out, just out of reach of her shining blades. Are they testing me? she wondered. Are they attempting to coax me to lunge at one to give the others an opening? Adopting a defensive posture, Amanda was quite aware of each tactics and she would not be baited. If one of them moved into range of her blades, they would pay for it; otherwise, she would hold steady.

The beasts snarled and whined. Perhaps realizing that their opening tactic was unsuccessful, the triangle began to constrict. Amanda knew she needed to dispatch at least one of them in

to have a chance, but if the attacked one, in Ananda's mind, wanted to think that if her onslaught was null and effective enough that the others would retreat, but the sword no fear in those humanoid monsters that danced as though conducting some grim, alien rite-dance.

Ananda was about to take her gambit when the back of her leg was dead open. Instantly, her blade swept back in retaliation, but it cut only air. The thing had withdrawn before her swiftly flowing blood even had time to blanch her skin. Another dash appeared across her stomach as though by some devilish magic. It was deep, and once again the collar had retracted out of reach before she could even move.

Ananda rose on the ground now, but they still did not finish her. She swung her blades about in vain as each of them took turn darting in and out, nicking, slicing, and puncturing. One of her lungs was pierced and no longer functioned, but the bodiless bright on, directing her attention on protecting her upper body and head since her legs were now shredded and useless. But then, all at once, the monsters just stopped. They stiffed to air. Their hungry, dark, malicious pupils contracted and then, standing fully upright and sealing their surroundings, they simply walked away.

Chapter 26

We are not in the business of growing slaves. A product should "enjoy" its purpose. Anything else is unethical and can even be dangerous. There have been many slave revolts in history... Not pretty.

Life is motivated by pleasure and pain. You need to design your life to seek out its targeted work at the exclusion of all other activities. For example, if a household servant is required, the servant should be designed with an Obsolete Compulsive Disorder for cleanliness (see gene sample HCT9090). Such a servant will vigilantly maintain order in the household without any direction from the owner.

As another example, if a product's purpose requires painful activities, those pain receptors might be excluded from the product design or a propensity for anesthesia could be added.

In this process, pleasure and pain are used together to obtain the desired behavior and, most importantly, those stimuli are intrinsic to the being.

—Excerpt from Dr. Monna's lecture series "Best Practices for Genetic Engineers."

Lyla, Djoser, and D Light had no idea where the strange little girl was taking them, but they did not hesitate to follow. However, nothing could have prepared them for what presented itself on the other side of the hedge—a clearing bordered by high walls of leaves and flowers, in the middle of which sat an elaborate dining set. A long, silver table dominated the space, surrounded by slender high-backed chairs, between which a banquet was visible. Lily, who had been ahead of the rest, stopped abruptly and stood near, still strapping through the hedge as if their lives depended on it. D Light, Lyla, and Djoser nearly ended up in a heap as they skidded to a stop behind Lily.

"Excellent, I had hoped you would make it in time for supper!" roared a man from the far end of the table—at least D Light assumed he was a man, for he was so ugly that D Light's heart dropped a beat and he felt hard, his towering head, shut down to where his true eyes were hidden in his skull.

For starters, the man's face was completely asymmetrical. His left eye was slightly lower than his right, one cheek puffed out as though suffering from an allergic reaction, his nose was crooked, and his left eyebrow was completely gone. And as if the overall structure of the face was not bad enough, his skin was pocked by countless undesirable features—tiny craters, patches of rubbery flesh, tufts of hair where there should be none, and a flabby beard that, had this man any luck at all, would have concealed some of the before mentioned defects. Instead, the beard only declared areas of his chin and cheeks, further emphasizing his face.

The grotesque stranger rose from his seat. "Allow me to introduce myself," he began. "I am Dr. Monna and you are our guests!" He stretched his arms wide as though offering a generous gift. Please, did a seat. Take a seat and be comfortable."

Lyla led the team in harmony by shuffling forward a few steps as though testing for quakes, while the others did not move at all, but merely stared in awe. Backward dance left-foot. Then, suddenly, the doctor erupted with laughter, the short and sudden burst of sound making D Light flinch in surprise. "I am afraid I will need to ask of you the nearly impossible task of feigning my appearance," the doctor announced. "In my nearly two hundred years as a surgeon, I bear the scars of many of my creations." Dr. Monna bowed sincerely and gestured again for the party to be seated.

Djoser looked back over his shoulder and, through his pining, managed to utter a sound as though trying to speak. Dr. Monna quickly interrupted him. "Oh, yes, you are absolutely not here. Like me and the rest of my family, you all now stand absolutely shielded by my others. Please, attempt to relax."

"One of us was left behind," Lily announced.

"I see," replied the doctor, who then looked over at a leaky-limbed, knip-haired monkey that stood upright nearby on the

Dr. Momo nodded thoughtfully. "Oh, yes, your grandson is alive, but I'm afraid she's a bit worse for wear. He's stressed and added. She's without me joining us for dinner."

The doctor's eyes were distant as he spoke. D. Light took this to mean the doctor had been accusing his fiancée. Was the woman his fiancée? D. Light wondered to himself. It was a sin to manufacture a harmonized fiancée and a transgression to use one.

The doctor returned from his vacant-eyed trance, at which point he moved over to Lily. "Lily, is it? Please, it would be an honor if you would sit right here at my side." The doctor led a chair out with a flourish that reminded D. Light of something from old movie leads he used to watch in memory.

Lily carried off as though riding a long since forgotten Indian horse, and took her seat, at which point the doctor swiftly moved behind her and scooted the chair in behind her. Without looking away from the top of Lily's head, which he stood over, Dr. Momo made a vague motion to the rest of the party to sit. D. Light, Lily, and Dwyer found seats near each other, creating a definite line. The three of them created their attention between each other, the piano and stands in front of them, and their host.

Love: Monkey silently moved a chair to the other side of Lily, sat down, and smiled sheepily as she glared up at her. Lily smiled back at the girl, remarking to herself how volatile human children were. Thick at the cheeks, only one hour or two ago, the child had been furious, but her eyes now gleamed with adoration.

Lily felt completely disoriented. With her fiancée gone, she felt as though a part of her mind was missing, the part that knew things. She had the unbearable urge to ask questions so she could fully establish her bearings. She spoke quickly. "Grandfather, about these creations, the clones, as you call them, are they—? Her sentence cut off as she nearly jumped from her chair. Six little girls, identical in all ways to Love: Monkey, entered the clearing. All wore the same clothing, differing only in the color of the bow fastened in their long, golden hair.

"They're clones?" Lily gasped. "Grandfather, you created your children?"

"Please, just call me Doctor," the man insisted. "And no, cloning human beings is a sin. These are in the likeness of my children and I refer to them as my daughters, but their code is under the legal tent to be considered humans; therefore, they are products. Products that I cloned."

"You have children products? Why? No one creates products in the likeness of children."

Dwyer patted Lily under the table. Why is she interrupting him? Doesn't she know who he is? he wondered.

The doctor curled his bulbous and crooked lips into what Dwyer hoped was a smile. "Yes, Lily. Although technically not a sin, creating inanimate products is not considered a bad practice in my line of work."

The doctor took a long gulp of beverage before continuing. "As to your question of why, it is because I could not dream up a better assistant. My biotechnology, Samantha, was both a joy to work with and an effective weapon. She fell victim to the Terrible Virus before she gained immortality and hence was not qualified for resurrection."

Lily's forehead wrinkled with concern and she leaned over to put the doctor on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry," she offered. "It must have been tragic to lose a daughter so young."

The doctor inclined his gaze at Lily and his grimace widened. "Oh, she was seventy-three years old when she passed. Granted, she was young, but on the bright side, she survived longer than most in my laboratory in the early days. As for these girls," the doctor said, nodding to the identical children at the table, "these ladies, which is what I call all of my female, I put a cap on their physiological development at age ten—you know, before puberty and all that nonsense." The doctor winked at Lily.

Dr. Momo took a sip from his nuclear ale ring and continued. "It was at age ten that Samantha, my biotechnology, was at the height of her curiosity of her unbridled wonder and passion for all that was alive. Unlike any other biotech I had, she would sit and watch all manner of organisms live hours on end. It did not matter what it was either. It could be an amoeba through the micro, a horrific scurrying over the ground, the veins of a leaf, the dance of molecules of mitochondria. She would unconsciously ponder the reproductive cycle of any creature she found." The doctor stared off wistfully as though the end of the table was the ocean horizon. "When my little girl was that age my head was deep into my machines. I wanted to mimic life with software, with atoms and ions. All these years ago, she was the one who first taught me the value of life, that there is no substitute, that life itself is the ultimate technology."

Dr. Momo smiled over at the clones now seated in a line spanning one entire side of the table. "These remind me of her," he said while smiling and nodding. "They remind me of the beauty of nature and her never-ending capacity for wondrous creation."

The doctor took a long pause. "And this," he gestured to his ruffled face, "reminds me that new creation is often fueled by destruction. Viruses, bacteria, as well as much larger organisms, don't always turn out as planned. Worse yet, depending on who's leading the project, they turn out exactly as planned. When only trained, I called myself lucky. When not so lucky, I died. I dare say I have been resurrected more times than I care to count."

"Two times finally," one daughter offered. "As an immortal, Daddy has the option for resurrection, that is, if under the circumstances, resurrection is possible."

The doctor flipped his hand in the air as though performing a magic trick. "The body is easy enough to mend and bring back.

little; it is the mind that is impulsive, but I never thought I would become famous for me, my brain does, but I never thought I would be damaged beyond repair."

"I hope I don't offend you, but I must ask, why don't you replace your ...?"

"My face?" The doctor interrupted Lily's question with a chuckle. "Because it is a hassle, for one thing. Shopping a body is not routine, even for immortals. It is a major ordeal and there can be complications. Also, and I hope you do not think me petty for saying this, but I must admit that I enjoy seeing people's expressions when they behold me for the first time. For example, I don't leave my garden often anymore, but when I do, say on business, even other immortals are intrigued. I think it gives me an edge in that I have a lasting impression. I don't need the world to enjoy looking at me. I have the love of my herbs, and that is all I require."

The doctor suddenly threw up his hands and growled. "And speaking of my herbs! Let me apologize once again for my annoying outburst. One of my girls, Love, Monkey, who you already met, messaged ahead that you would be coming. I sent another of my herbs to guide you is safely, but she evidently got distracted. What was it this time?"

Carious Scourge, the clone who the team had just earlier thought was Love Monkey, bent her head slightly. "It was the Gibbon. Yes, they had wandered," she murmured under her breath.

"So typical, Carious!" Bello, who sat at the far end of the table wearing a purple robe, shook her head disapprovingly.

De Menna pointed his finger at Bello. "Don't chide your sister. I think it's safe to say you could have done the same thing."

"No, Daddy, not. Where did the 'Carious' come from in 'Carious Scourge'?" Bello raised an eyebrow at the doctor and then back at her sister.

The doctor nearly choked on his mouthful of syrup. "Oh, spare me! Just the other day I sent you to walk the redwoods, and where did you end up? Three hours watching an equus, cabaloo?!" Lily glared while the rest of us sat and drank water for lunch."

"Is so much as I am like my sister, it's your fault I didn't design myself!" Bello shot back angrily.

"You're right. I should have known better. I should not have sent any of my daughters. I should have selected another herb." As the doctor said this, he pointed a knobby finger at several creatures that stood rigidly at attention at the far end of the clearing. D Light had been so immersed in the conversation that he had not noticed the newcomers. The eight gave him a start, as one of those assembled had a mass of tubes sticking out from his head and various other parts of his body.

Bello whispered loudly to reach her sister, who sat several clones down. "By the way, Carious, did the transition complete?" he asked the five, I mean."

In response, Carious Scourge scowled and dismissed her sister's question with a wave of her hand. However, a clipboard further poked its head from under Carious Scourge's arm to better silently converse with Bello's brother, also a clipboard.

The doctor introduced the newcomers one by one, each bowing as he did so. First was the priest, a calm, tall man. He seemed anxious and bored at the same time, as though inexplicably delayed from something he desired. He wore a traditional priest robe which, although clean, looked slightly worn.

Next was Sam, De Menna's concubine. As was typical, she was very tall and strikingly beautiful in a highly soft way, as though she had stepped out of a high-end spy magazine. She regarded the newcomers intently.

To each side of Sam was a man with product hair on his cheeks. They were identical, including their matching impeccable black eldels and tunics. One could only tell them apart thanks to the particulars of their injuries. Both were riddled by irregular lesions, scars, and even some open wounds that oozed red with blood, or perhaps pus.

Lastly, the tube man was introduced by the doctor as "my most excellent analyst." This man resembled and his eyes shifted about restlessly. When he bowed in greeting, he did more of a hunch, in the process stepping on one of his cords which pulled at his skin and caused the unfortunate looking man to blurt out in pain. This event prompted D Light to ask, "Pardon me Doctor, but why the tubes?"

The Doctor sneered. "The tubes, yes? Oh, it bugged me for them. Plugged for days on end until I finally had a third with its previous user! You see, the tubes bring it food, water, and drugs without the need for boosters. And, dare I say this at the dinner table, they provide means of sanitary excretion."

"Daddy?" protested one of the clones.

"Why did you desire that?" Lily asked the analyst with a sad and curious expression. "It looks rather unpleasant."

"Maximum productivity, of course!" The doctor answered for the analyst as he patted Lily's wrist. "I presume you are unaccustomed to the obvious tendencies of analysts. Analysts due to research, to scrutinize and consider. And the analyst is in the thick of the most complex problems. And the better designed ones, ones like this one, finish leaving their work --over!"

The doctor removed his blotched hand from Lily's wrist. D Light noted that Lily did not react to this, did not withdraw her forearm off the top of the table, did not dip her napkin into the water wine and scrub away at where his handsome hand had touched him. Doctor Menna continued, "Despite the preferences of some, I like to see my herbs face to face from time to time." He looked toward the analyst, his one eyebrow

"Once said to a family that cats together stay together."

In a trembling quaver of a whisper the analyst protested, "I do not require it. I do not require this, this food. Please excuse me."

"No more of that!" Dr. Monna barked. The analyst fell silent, placing his chin down to sulk. His head grated back and forth as though infected with a nervous tick.

Presently, the new arrivals were seated. Soon, the tall concubine, an unadorned between the two hunted products, one of which sat next to Dr. Light. The priest seated himself across the table and the analyst sat at the end, allowing himself an empty chair on either side as though attempting to quarantine himself.

The doctor complimented Djoser on his choice of bodyguard. "Homo sapien 040687 is a good model. Attractive, yet loaded with enough cunning and greed to hold off three of my ciders for nearly eight seconds! I'll send you the archive. You will be pleased with her performance."

Djoser hesitated, taking time to swallow. "Like your analyst, Amanda enjoys what she does."

"No, and that is as it should be. A good weightlifter builds in his products a natural love for their purpose. Anything else would produce suboptimal performance and, if you subscribe to my line of thinking is *even-ineffective*."

"I agree, sir," Lyra commented while straightening her posture. "I realize that products are not human, but it is still our responsibility to make them as comfortable as possible, even happy, if such a term applies."

Dr. Monna frowned his brow slightly. "That is the general sentiment of the profession. However, there are some products designed specifically *not* to enjoy their purpose." With these last words, the doctor pointed to Lily with a tilt of his head.

Lyra's voice lifted delicately. "Beg your pardon, but I do not know what you are referring to." Her eyes darted between the doctor and Lily. Lily nervously looked back at Dr. Monna, smiled with a trembling lower lip, and then looked forward.

The doctor looked at Lyra with curious eyes. "Hm, well..."

He took a deep breath as though willing to think of what to say next, but was preempted by Lylla, who tilted her eyes. "What? You don't know?" she asked disbelievingly. "She's a Camper."

A Camper? Smeagolus, what the hell is that? Dr. Light went to his familiar:

It took only a second for Smeagolus to rush together a summary from various sources on The Chord:

Homo Sapien 0506754 (Camper)

Entertainment: Campers serve as quarry in the hunting reserves, typically hunted by raps and Wall fantasies.

Typical High Level Phenotype:

- Appearance:
 - 94% Blood Bunched
 - 3% Wolf Asian
 - 2% African Beauty
 - 1% Other

Psychological Profile:

- 99% Moral *
- 99% Hygiene *
- 90% Sensitive *

Intelligence is variable. Depends on human template used and outside factors (see human intelligence).

Other Notes: Campers are generally marketed as "One Use" products due to their termination shortly after capture. This is advised by the manufacturer due to extensive degradation of psychological phenotype if used as catch and release.

**Based on comparison with other products derived from human templates.*

Smeagolus offered other resources for more detailed information, but Dr. Light decided not to open them just yet.

It was quiet at the table until Lyra, having tapped into Djoser's familiar to research the subject, broke the silence. "That's disgusting! A completely *worried business!*" To design a perfect raps victim? My God, is there no limit to what a player will do for a couple of points?"

"A couple of points? No, try a lot of points," Djoser said. Lyra scowled at him, at which point he added, "It's not that I've looked into it, of course. Just, you know, a few of the gags...Well, Campers are One Use products, so it doesn't take a genius to know hunting them will cost a fortune."

Lyra bunched up her hand into a fist. "Don't be stupid!" she hissed at Djoser. Then, addressing the doctor, she said, "Bugging your pardon, sir."

Dr. Monna shrugged and looked over to Lily with an expression that Dr. Light could not read on his mislabeled face. "It is I who beg your pardon, Lily. I did not realize you, or your friends were members of your background."

The analyst, who until now had been absentmindedly poking at his food, looked up and stared pointedly at Lily. "You...you escaped the reserves?" His voice quavered. "How? How did you escape from a place like that?"

At this point several at the table started speaking at once.

Djoser: "Ridiculous, really. Just the RD to design such a product..."

to subject: "...Lily is your name right? Lily, you would only like to use your archive of the escape..."

Print: "You're off the reservation. My Son, you're a demon
dude!"

Analyst: "...Oh dear me, I suspect you have no archive.
Carpenter are not fitted with chips..."

Djoser: "... would cost a fortune and then the cost to grow
her..."

Analyst: "Perhaps just you and I sit downback at my den and
give me your story..."

D Light "Why don't we leave this alone?"

Djoser: "... such an expense for a few hours of life? My Son,
how some players live?"

Analyst: "... I can scan you there, at my den. It does not hurt a
bit. Your story would be valuable..."

Lily's eyes were tearing up as they sat on something distant.

Sara: "Dropped you? That is your purpose? You look like a
lizard. No sport in it, I suspect..."

Lyla: "You are being rude."

Sara: "Rude?" That thing is just a toy?"

As Sara said this, the concubine moved and then plunged a
fork down into the hand of the product seated between her
and D Light. It howled and thrashed, knocking over
D Light's wine glass and flipping his plate.

"My Son!" D Light leaped back away from the anguished
product.

Lily looked up, knocking her chair backward and then vaulted
quickly away from the table. She disappeared down a
dramatic corridor.

Lyla glared at Sara, "How dare you! I'm flipping royalty and
you were born a slave! You don't question anything I say!" Lyla
sprang up. She looked as though she were preparing to
pounce on the concubine.

Dr. Monks struck his wine glass with his fork several times,
resulting in a high pitched clatter that cut above the clatter.
Eligante cannot die and looked over at her, at which point he
said, "Sara, that is no way to behave at the table! Leave us
now!" Sara gave her master a cold look, but immediately got
to her feet while grabbing the hair of the two products. She
dragged them away with her.

Taking a bite from his plate and addressing the table without
acknowledging the doctor said, "I apologize for Sara's behavior.
She gets overreacted when the sun sees faces."

"I mean no offense at, but your concubine appears unstable."
Lyla's face was flush.

"Indeed, she is one of my earlier designs. I'm afraid in my
younger years I put too much emphasis on passion and
stability that, she imprinted on me, loves me, you could say.
So, what can I do?"

One of the clones leaned over the table to better see Lyla and
offered, "Mother Lyla, if it is any consolation, I, along with my
sisters, hate her too."

The doctor laughed, "Yes, remember Mar. So Pretty? She
was one of my girls. She tried to kill Sara, but the old lady
came up on top that time."

D Light stood up and bowed. "Doctor, I am afraid I feel the
call of nature and I ask to be excused."

The doctor nodded absently. "Of course, and feel free to
release your nature into the bushes yonder. All plants here
metabolize urine well. If your nature is a bit more on the wild
side, well, that is beneficial for the flora too, but please keep it
downwind."

"Father!" Dr. Lily cried plaintively.

Dr. Monks chuckled. "Oh, and by the way, the Asanaka plants,
the ones with the broad, soft leaves, he pointed to a nearby
plant that fit his description. "they make excellent toilets."

"Father!" Dr. Lily cried again. "Really inappropriate for the
table! You lecture us on etiquette?"

The doctor smiled mischievously at his daughter.

"By leading by example," she instructed.

D Light smiled to himself as he walked away. Only an old
intimidated like the doctor would talk about cleaning oneself with
toiletry since everyone nowadays used their families to do it.
Sarcophagus' tongue was not just cosmetic, it possessed the
appropriate enzymes to precise human waste. Families had
waste of their own, but they executed it only where
appropriate and it smelted like cinnamon.

As he left the clearing, D Light overheard the doctor saying,
"Sara's behavior is an extreme example of poor etiquette.
Eligante. It's quite simple really—make your guests feel
comfortable. Eligante is a lost art I fear, something more in
vogue when I was young."

D Light was not happy with this at all. He felt as though he
were in some disgusting Alice in Wonderland inspired quack
game, starring Dr. Monks as the Mad Hatter. As D Light's
interaction, Sarcophagus watched behind D Light's back. That
cruel concubine was out here and he had noticed her slip the
fork she had used to stab the product into her blouse before
leaving the table.

It was only a minute before he found Lily walking slowly on a
mat ahead. He had to run to catch up. As he approached she
looked back with a sad strained face. She turned up as he
came near. She was obviously upset, but there was anger in
her eyes as well. D Light wasn't sure what to say, but he
spoke anyway. "So, you were designed to be a sex toy for

shaded, ashen, so what? Who doesn't have a little baggage?" D Light was far from sure that dark hair was what she wanted right now, but it was the first thing that popped into his head.

Lily shook her head and smiled half-heartily. To D Light's surprise, she walked quickly over and embraced him. Her hair was warm and wet against his cheek. *Soil, she smells good*, he thought. He wanted to care for her. He stepped his arms around her and held her tightly. He moved his hands up through her hair and gently massaged the back of her neck and head. She was smiling. Despite her heady body she was still in his grip. "Lily, no," she whispered with a fierce undercurrent as though she was issuing a command rather than pleading. She then lifted her head back and looked at him with wet, soulful eyes. "I miss my sister. I don't have anyone."

"Your sister?" "You mean me..." D Light was going to say "other Carmpers," but instead said "...the others on the reserve?" She nodded slowly and then continued between sobs. "I had Tjoser and he was good and we were... we were doing okay, even happy sometimes, but I left them. We left them all behind."

D Light was not exactly sure what she was saying, but he felt the need to comfort her. "I'll work on this, you know," D Light cupped her soft face in his hands and gazed back into her shimmering eyes. "Tjoser and Lysa are powerful players. I'll talk to them and maybe they can help. Maybe they can help you when this is all over."

She shook her head and smiled. "I doubt they will help me. Did you see how they looked at me back then?"

"What do you mean? Lysa was kind? She was..."

"No, she was angry that I was made, but that doesn't mean she wants to help me," Lily interrupted. "I'm not talking about her anyway. I'm talking about the other one."

"Tjoser?" He was just surprised. I mean, we all were. He's gotta appreciate what you've done for the team, how you helped us escape."

"I just feel wrong. I wish I could be one of you, but that's impossible. I..." she sobbed. "I should go. I should go, I think."

"You can't keep running."

Lily smiled sadly. "I was created to run."

D Light hugged her tightly and pressed his lips up against her ear to whisper, "Don't look now, but there's a squirrel spying on us."

"Oh Stop, it's one of those robots," she whispered. "How embarrassing to be blabbering and having that silly thing watching me." Despite her apparent alarm, she laughed. D Light was glad to hear it.

"I should get back," he said. "Get back to the dinner. Don't go running off though. Can I find you later?"

Lily answered with an ambiguous shrug. As D Light walked away, he kept looking over his shoulder. He half expected her to run off at any moment, but she just stood there meeting the stare of the squirrel that sat on its haunches on a thick branch of a poplar that patterned rose.

Although it had been an excuse to find Lily, D Light actually did have to return and on his way back, he found a secluded thicket into which he could retreat himself. As he stood down at his stream he half-wondered why he bothered with the girl—why, for instance, he felt the need to comfort her when she cried, which was turning out to be a common occurrence. She was no relation of his. She was not even in the Game. And now he learns that she is not even human! But those thoughts were washed out of his mind as her scent, voice, face and body except back into his memory. He took a deep breath and let out a low, soft groan.

Master your bio-chess signature and thought patterns over closely observable patterns always during your early stages of courtship. Examples available upon request.

No, Senegeous could always be counted on to point out the obvious. D Light knew he had a thing for the girl, or for the product, as it turned out. Senegeous, upon confirming his suspicions, suggested alternatives to what the computer termed "unproductive dwelling," including nonstop no-speakie additions, or since its master currently enjoyed privacy in the hedge, a collection of erotic material.

D Light refused both options, the former because he did not want his testosterone muddled with, and the latter because he did not have time for *her*; he needed to get back to the dinner.

Chapter 27

"You need not worry about your treatment," the doctor announced to D Light as he stroked back to the dinner table. D Light asked his cyborgs to sign ignorance, but then realized the charade was pointless. Certainly, the squirrel had reported back all the messy details of D Light and Lily's heart to heart talk. The suspicion was confirmed by the expressions on the faces of the dinner guests.

"Noah, it's a shame about her," D Light commented as he did not wait his testosterone muddled with, and the latter because he did not have time for *her*; he needed to get back to the dinner.

"No, your grace," murmured Dr. Mimos. "Our treatments have failed not to work and hence your purpose in visiting me." The doctor leaned over the table intently. "You are quite right about Lily though. Carmpers are unique and designed to the highest specifications and that it is no surprise to me that she has proven valuable to you. I was quite excited to hear that a Carmpers was on her way to see me, so I have given this whole

There were some thought."

Dr. Menus pepped an unusual pick that into his mouth and continued, juice dripping down his chin as he mused, "As you know, I have all kinds of exotic products here. Granted, most were born here rather than imported elsewhere, but nevertheless, she can stay here for a while. Since the Inner Sanctum is a research zone, I have permits for 'off purpose' products and your Camper would not be the only one. However, for the permit to apply, I would need to use her in some research capacity."

D Light, despite himself, must have looked startled because the doctor quickly added, "Nothing harmful. Oh, nothing that would hurt it, or her, many ways, of course."

Bello tapped her small knuckles on the table, "Father, assign her as a research assistant to me?"

Curious, Scorsio scooped back at her sister, "Why yes?"

D Light raised his hand as though in class and chimed in, "Endurance at her side is part of her game."

Bello, ignoring D Light's objection, blinked her eyes innocently at her father and said, "She will be my assistant because I thought of it and took the initiative."

Lyla opened a blink to D Light, which was auto-accepted. *He do not have a quest at the moment, so I don't see any reason to reveal Lyla being accepted by the doctor. Meanwhile, she'll be safe as his guest."*

D Light played approval.

Dr. Menus nodded, "Yes, why don't you girls show her around it, uh, have her assist you. You can take turns using her as an assistant, starting with Lyla, who, as she astutely pointed out, thought up the scheme."

The priest raised an index finger, "Really or, I must advise against this. No offense to you," gesturing toward D Light, Elyse, and Lyla, "but harboring these fugitives could get you in hot water with the Authority."

"As I said, the Carpenter, Lyla, is a fugitive because she is off purpose. Well, almost all the products in my laboratories are off purpose. How else could I run any of my labs? My creations are evolving all the time, and in this process so is their purpose evolving. Only when a product has been fully developed and ready for market can it be used."

The doctor paused, wiped his chin, and pointed to D Light and his team, "As for them, well, they're just playing a MetaGame, a game that I am apparently part of. The Divine Authority need only review my archive on the matter to see the truth of this."

D Light raised his hand, "What happens to Lyla after the game?" he asked.

"She can come and stay with me as long as she is able. That is, until the Authority comes for her, at which point I will have to turn her over."

Following D Light's example, Lyla held up her hand, "Sit, until we get our next quest, when shall the rest of us die?"

"Bless," said the doctor as he took another sip of tractor wine. "As I said already, you are all my guests."

The dinner conversation then switched over to the MetaGame. Dr. Menus was eager to hear the details. He asked many questions regarding the speaker games, as this was a subject he knew very little about. He heard the encounter with the deli in the lake to be hilarious. "My House designed those feeder fish, you know. You must send me an archive so I can include it with our promotional material."

Elyse did most of the talking since he still had ready access to all the memories via his familiar, while Lyla, lacking the memory retrieval and processing power of her familiar, awkwardly interjected to add bits and pieces from time to time. Mischler and Sinergious, at the behest of their masters, collaborated to stitch together an archive of the master's adventures thus far, which was delivered to the grateful doctor to review at his leisure.

Throughout the dinner the Analyst constantly dropped hints to the doctor, including long deep sighs, throat clearings, and offhanded remarks to other guests such as, "I certainly am full." Eventually, Dr. Menus took mercy upon the creature and gave it permission to be excused. The product mumbled over its own tubes in its haste to get back to work.

Soon after others left as well. Each of the girls excused themselves with a curtsy and a smile. Elyse was eager to see how Amanda fared, so he followed the cleric daughter wearing the blue bow to the infirmary within the garden. The doctor too, claiming pressing business, took his leave. The only ones left at the table were Lyla, D Light, and the priest. Lyla, having taken to heart the doctor's advice to relax, had drunk a few more glasses of wine than she normally did and seemed too drowsy to move. She slouched back in her seat, nudging D Light from time to time, saying things like, "What a good choice you turned out to be." Otherwise, the priest, as a connoisseur for their profession, did most of the talking. D Light was not really listening because it mainly concerned the priest's specialty in Divine Lure.

"Bbb, bbb... consult on compatibility of Divine Lure and House Rules. Bbb, bbb... mostly intermediate sized House... bbb, bbb... nearly always served in top twenty percent of my games... bbb, bbb." The priest's voice woundled like someone breathing in and out slowly through a harmonica.

Absently, D Light ran his index finger along the collar of his shawl. The creature of Lyla's was had dropped. He had been trying to open a blink with her, but she was not responding. The priest, who had been ignoring D Light in preference to Lyla, now looked pointedly at D Light, which brought him back to the conversation.

"Yes, despite my lifetime of devotion to the OverSeed, I did

make the list. I am now a hundred and seven, I reached the prize.

"You look like you're being off contract for two years," Lynn half-smiled. "She'll cry, she looked as though she might cry off."

"Oh, I cannot take credit for my health," the priest intoned. "It is the lower Sanctum, the food and water here, the air even. The doctor has infused the very fabric of the laboratory with countermeasures against aging, cancer, and the like."

D Light thought this last bit was interesting and said so. Seeing that his audience might actually be listening after all, the priest straightened his back, cleared his throat, and continued in his somber tone. "When I found out that I was not chosen by the Patient One, I felt I only had two choices—either live out the remaining few years of my life in decay or the reality in the gladiatorial pits of the Real Games. At first I was leaning toward the game."

Lynn laughed loudly. "You would not have lasted a minute in those games. The sorts of players that end up in the pits spend their entire gameplan training for this."

An infinitesimal glance passed over the priest's face, but he then continued. "As a priest, particularly in the area of China. I am that I practiced, I made many enemies over my lifetime. As a great many would have wanted me to watch me fight to the death. As you probably know, participants in the pits receive a share of the bet. You are right, I would not have survived long, but perhaps long enough. I hoped to pass on a great deal of points to my two children."

"Children?" Lynn exclaimed with a smile. "You have grandchildren? How Sweet. Yes, I should like to have a little girl someday. What about you Dad?" She regarded him with heavy eyelids.

At that moment, D Light reached a RealLink request from Lynn. A RealLink was a direct link between two or more minds. It differed from a typical link, which only consisted of filtered and published communications. RealLinks let everything in. RealLinks were rare between players, except between those who truly trusted one another. It was often reserved for lovers and certainly was not done between players of different levels like Lynn and D Light.

D Light gave permission and his mind was suddenly engaged. There were images of skin stretched, of hair and shaggy limbs, of hours thundering. He was there with Lynn in bed, in the game, even on the table in front of them.

Her eyes were boring into him, she was biting her lip, and a thin trickle of blood was running down. D Light was not certain whether he was actually seeing this or if it was just coming from her mind. None of this was appropriate, but D Light stomped down on his reservation, afraid that it would be sent to her. She was giving him a gift, hearing her soul. He would not reciprocate with RealLink, instead, he joined her fantasy, starting by giving her slave, methodical kisses and tenderly tracing his fingers through her hair. But she was waking over him, protesting.

The priest continued, unaware of the silent exchange between his audience. "Blah, blah... Dr. Moon is legendary... blah, blah, more tomorrow... blah, blah..."

You and I are able; we are winners apart, but we could be alone together. Give me your love and we will share our strength. Lynn's words cascaded down into his awareness. The two of them were holding hands while walking through the garden, a garden like the one they were in, except that the plants and rocks were blurry shadows with soft, rippling colors.

The curious thing about a RealLink is that participants feel off each other's thoughts. One might think of an apple, and the other might change that apple to a peach because that is what they prefer. Then the first participant might take a bite of the peach, but find it crisp instead of soft, and the cycle would continue on in this way. A shared stream of consciousness. In this case, it was a shared daydream. D Light had used RealLinks many times to brainstorm with other teammates, but this was always in the service of a grinder game. This exchange he engaged in now was less disciplined than that. It was like an erotic psychic storm.

The external daydream ended and now they were in the garden holding hands. D Light was not sure whose fantasy this was. There was a stone bench with ferns, flowered vines enveloping it.

"Blah, blah... help him, he helps me... blah, blah... symbolic relationships are the prize... blah, blah..." went the priest.

D Light sat on the garden bench and Lynn stood behind him. She was wearing a dress that flared out and down to the ground, and although he could feel her strong and glorious legs writhing and groping at him, he could not see them under the skirt fabric. She was breathing hard and D Light was not sure if this emanated from the impersonal Lynn that was smoldering like the RealLink or the physical one sitting nearby. In their dream her legs were at the level of his forehead. She kissed him there and on one of his eyelids. The dress was low cut, revealing cleavage and—

Master, there is an incoming link from Lily, Serengeti passed into his mind.

Lynn's cleavage disappeared as the two of them stepped out of the fantasy. Merely, D Light walked at Serengeti for the interruption. Lynn, the nation, laughed.

I apologize Master, but your earlier brain pattern suggested that a link from this sender was highly desirable and therefore—

D Light interrupted the computer, just open the link. Lynn half-closed the RealLink anyway and D Light felt up to the task of thinking Lily without neglecting those in his physical presence.

The priest paused in his diatribe as he pondered Lynn's

physical laughter.

"So, about Lily," Lilya abruptly began speaking to the priest. "Here, in your professional opinion, would we go about helping her out of her predicament?"

D Light had been wondering the very same thing. Had Lilya picked that up in the Rawfflink? He did not remember thinking it at the time.

Yes. Master: visual data regarding Lily was transmitted during the time in question. Without being asked, the Sheriff brought up a still image from the Rawfflink that took place moments ago. There was D Light with Lilya on top of him as he remonstrated. Irrevocably, Sergeantess occurred in on a portion of the hairy stone bench. Richard into the stone vase.

To Di Lie:

Save Lily:

Make must love to Lilya

Sette next quest:

How embarrassing Rawfflinks can be? D Light suppressed a grin. Certainly, Lilya had spent the manifestation of his subconscious.

The priest raised his eyebrows at Lilya's off topic question, cleared his throat and asked, "You are referring to the Carper? And by predicament, you refer to her denouncement?"

Lilya nodded, winked, and gave the thumbs up silent once.

At this, did you wish to speak to me? Lily's thought signature seemed relaxed.

D Light was surprised to hear his nickname coming from her, so much so that he tripped over his message as he sent it, ah, I was, I was wondering how you were.

The priest pinched his upper lip and narrowed his brow, "Hm," he murmured thoughtfully.

It was kind of you to check up on me. I'm with Billo. She is showing me some of her wonderful projects. Lily sent him a slightly pouting picture of a large, woolly tuddy bear with giant dark eyes. It is called a moolly. Lily explained, it is supposed to be a pet. Lily paused and then her blink tone changed. "So, when will they be ready? When can I get one?"

What? D Light asked.

Oh, I was asking Billo when I could get one, got a moolly. At this D Light realized that Lily had been actually speaking to Billo and that he had overheard it. It was as though Lily were speaking to him on an audio headset from the old days. D Light quashed his urge to chastise her for being such a noob, for not controlling her output better; however, now was not the time for a lesson on blink etiquette.

They should be ready by Christmas Downtime. The tone of voice was high and a bit squeaky; it was Billo. Lily was just relaying what her ears picked up. The was maddening, especially when he wanted to follow the conversation between Lilya and the priest. Glad everything's smooth, he blinked. Lily. Gotta go, talk to you soon. He ended the blink without waiting for a goodbye.

The priest again seemed that he was actually being listened to and so spoke with a more authoritative tone, "The Carper has committed the sin of noncompliance, also known as being off purpose, as she is engaged in activity that she was not aimed for."

"Zoned?" D Light asked.

The priest frowned slightly, flicked his eyes over D Light, and then returned his attention to Lily. "All products are aimed for certain purposes. Zoning is a legal term, historically and commonly used for real estate. For example, a piece of property could be aimed for commercial use, single home residential, multiple home residential, and so on. It was not legal to build an office building on land aimed for residential."

Lilya interpreted, "What the heck is an office building?" Her speech was badly stilted.

"Right, okay, never mind about real estate." The priest pressed his hands flat on the table. "The deal is this," he continued, "a product is legally approved for a specific set of uses, which is known as being aimed. If a product goes off-zone, or in other words, if it is engaged in a purpose it was not designed and tested for, it could be harmful to itself or, worse yet, harmful to others."

D Light and Lilya affirmed that they were following him with nods and sounds of understanding.

The priest continued, "Lily was designed for purposes..." the priest paused. "Her purposes related to the Flaming Biscuits. Because she is no longer fulfilling this purpose, she has been denounced. If you want to assist it, you will need to re-zone Carpers—her product classification—for another purpose."

"Like as a concubine?" Lilya gave D Light a nifty wink. "I think this would like to restore her to a concubine."

The priest paused as though to consider this, "Given the phenotype of Carpers, I doubt that would be a good choice but, yes, you could attempt to expand her zoning to include that purpose."

A shy smile crept over D Light's face. "She's not 'off purpose'. She was designed for concubine, which is exactly what she's doing."

The priest let out a ratty chuckle, "Nice try. I've skinned her zoning documents. She is designated to be hated, hated in specifically designated areas—the burning incense. You are correct that she was designed to assist captains; however, her

of problems not from their behavior, either, it is a matter of geography.

"Yes," exclaimed D Light. "So, say I, or we, buy her from the Reserve and re-sell her for something like a grand course."

"Assuming the horses that run the Reserve quarter game is willing to sell her to you, re-selling is an expensive and long process. A great deal of time needs to happen. A high-facilitating product like a Camper is very complex. It is hard to predict how they might due in a new purpose."

The priest sent them a few choice case studies of re-selling homocapsin based products. The point figures were staggering. Reading the expression on D Light's face, the priest threw up his hands and declared, "Look, I don't make the loss, I just provide the best counsel I can. Or at least that used to be the game I played."

Lyra, who had grown bored with the legal speak and feared that she would waste her meter was indeed buzz if she did not change the subject, asked about the garden.

The priest replied, "Bbb, bbb, bbb, bbb, approximately five millions of the passport points over 40 hours or you'll start ending the food. Mbb, bbb, bbb, some are helpful, some of them cause temporary paralysis. Mbb, bbb, orchard has a variety of traits, all are safe..."

D Light was only half listening as he inspected the case studies for re-selling. He asked Sergeous to analyze the data to find an "optimum route for success," but the computer only gave him expensive and time consuming options.

The priest excused himself. "I regret to inform you that I have a call of nature of my own," which he said with a half-smile directed at D Light. "The back is black."

As soon as he left the clearing D Light and Lyra turned to face each other. There was silence between them for a long few seconds. D Light felt himself being drawn into her. He hoped that the world initiate another Revellink.

Master, based on trace compounds I took the initiative to detect. Mother Lyra is 89.4% likely to be evaluating. In addition, her blood alcohol level is elevated; however, I was unable to determine a reliable measure of this level. Biochemically, she should be amenable to courtship advances. Sergeous brought up a visual of the temple a half-9° Clockwise. Focused on the site, was a variety of up-to-the-minute novel pickup lines.

D Light could not believe Sergeous had entered the situation like this. *Pickup lines? I'm way past that.* On the other hand, the line "I don't gotta grock what's gonna be good stuff" was out of favor.

I always have your back master This last comment had been programmed into Sergeous years ago when D Light had fewer friends. He would spend hours trying to teach his computer to be more of a companion. Then, then, one of the rules D Light wanted Sergeous to play was that of "wing man."

Never say that again. D Light sent to his brother. Sergeous played confirmation.

D Light spoke first, "I'm going to kiss you tonight."

"Oh, my?" Lyra's lips opened in an exaggerated "o" as though she said, "Are you sure? Do you wish to assert sexual dominance over your team leader?"

Surprised by her unusual follow-up question, he stumbled a bit over his response but did so with a confident smile. "Yes, I do," he replied.

D Light took her hands and stood up, directing her to follow.

Lyra giggled, "What about what's his name, the priest? He's coming back you know?"

D Light shrugged and started walking toward a nearby path between the hedges. Lyra walked halfheartedly, but D Light pulled her along. Outside of the clearing the garden was dark. Lyra flared up her glomstick, causing the immediately draped plants and trees to cast long, perplexing shadows. D Light was not sure where he was going, but he wanted to get out of earshot of the dining area. The last thing he wanted was the priest joining them. For D Light, this was a momentous moment. *I'm about to join my mother!* he thought. To establish an intimate bond with a noblewoman was a most excellent tactical move, to say the least.

He looked back at her. Lyra was returning his gaze steadily. Her large green eyes were blurred with alcohol, but her vivacity was undiminished. An impression of Lily with a smile and a cocked head Richard across his mind. How he would like to be holding her hand now.

D Light realized his mood was fading. Sergeous, sitting on the importance of this occasion, gave its master a homocapsin-based cocktail. D Light felt the slow single of last inhibition and heightened attraction spill into him, at which point he turned back and embraced her. They were not in a private grove like D Light had planned. They were not even hidden under any vegetation. Rather, they stood gripping and leaning right there on the path.

Lyra broke away, but kept her face only centimeters away from his and whispered, "If neither were alive she would tell me this is not proper decorum."

"Thank God is dead? Listen to a machine and you'll end up no better than one."

"I have a reputation..."

Lyra found herself unable to finish her sentence as D Light's lips happily latched onto hers, their curious tongues meeting with the greatest of careens. The bite was moist and delicate and possessed an addictive quality that rendered them down to the hormonal muck that followed. Slow, passionate kisses quickly gave way to frenzied, heated ones, and the two fell to

the ground as they groped, grabbed, bit, and pulled one toward the other. After much of the intensely disorganized fumbling, they made love or, to better describe the act, had sex. The kind of sex that is found in the ridges of phosors, phosors like this, where copulation of all forms ruled supreme and the very fabric of the world was dependent on it. And at the height of it all, after D Light had finally gone over the edge, there was a long sweet seconds when everything in his world made sense as he stared into his beautiful mother's bottomless eyes.

And then he thought of Lily.

Chapter 28

The angel Jacob was standing deep inside the synthetic shell of his mother ship. Although a few of his kind nestled on ships that floated in space, Jacob's ship carved through ocean waves just inside the sight of land. Watchtower ships were more resource efficient than the space-going variety and so when conducting missions on the earth, they were often an optimal choice.

As Jacob had his systems checked and re-checked by a team of bots, human technicians, and human-based products, he briefly reviewed the case of the demons who had escaped into the lower Sanctum of House Memon. The human agents who had been coordinating the pursuit in Jacob's absence had done an adequate job of tracking the demons but had failed due to what Jacob regarded as "valdichy errors." Therefore, the angel sent them a report covering half of their experience thus far. In addition, the angel agreed with Kataris and Rhemas that sending lower agents than Jacob himself into the lower Sanctum could likely result in further resource losses.

Jacob sent a flag of "moderate importance" on the case and went to sleep to optimize his repairs. He would get to them soon enough.

D Light woke up alone. At some point in his sleep he had rolled off the vine pathway and into the multilayered folds of a wet leaf plant, the very species of plant the doctor had told her she ought better made for good water paper.

A forest on its branches stood nearby, starting at his ramblingly. It had a long white strip down its abdomen. It was Lya's brother, PoPue, which cocked its head as D Light blinked into the artificial sunlight that filtered down through the tree leaves above. Senegous sat nearby examining with the forest.

Mother Lya pined him with a black request, which D Light accepted. Good morning and, like voice was absent.

D Light rubbed his eyes and asked, *Hey is that Percy Phoenix, your favorite? I thought it was—*

Lya interrupted, *Yeah, PoPue was in bad shape, but the doctor had his words for her. I suspect he feels guilty about the whole cater incident and wanted to try to make amends.*

Lya passed extremely and then continued, *Anyway, let's get something straight right out of the gate. What happened last night is between you and me, right?*

Right, of course! D Light sent the thought back without hesitation.

Naturally, I'm not ashamed, but I would hate to see anything on The Cloud.

Lya meant to continue, but D Light sent his thoughts back nearly on top of hers, exclaiming, *No! No, you can forget about it. I mean, don't forget about it, but don't worry about me doing anything like that. That, I mean, like you said, that was just between you and me. D Light wondered if anything that he had just mentioned made sense.*

The blink was short for a moment.

I mean it, D Light added, unable to handle the awkward silence. By Soul, I'll even submit a contract on it.

D Light thought for a moment in order to come up with some suitable words and then pinged his brother, Senegous. *I hereby swear to not knowingly and willingly disclose to anyone directly or indirectly the, or events of last night between Mother Lya and myself. Senegous pinged confirmation, which was also received by PoPue.*

Matte, what is the price-penalty for breaching this contract? Senegous inquired.

Let's make it two hundred—no, make it five hundred—thousand points.

Artificial intelligence was quite adept at detail oriented tasks like drafting simple contracts, so after some clerical questions Senegous ran back the fluid and verbose refinements to ensure it was what the two had agreed upon. The contract was then digitally signed, encrypted, and submitted to The Gums. Instantly, the contract created another rule for D Light to follow in The Gums. If he broke the rule, half a million of his points would be taken from him and deposited into Lya's profile. It would be a huge loss.

As the full confirmation of the contract pinged, Lya spoke, highlighting her thought with a warm signature, *Thank you, D Light. That was a generous man and your gesture puts my mind at ease. You are more than a great player you are an honorable man.*

Lyra's mother, for your kind words, responded.

Lyra's tone then became casual as she sat. Now, why did I join us for breakfast?

The teenagers met again at the great table where they had eaten dinner the night before. A servant, bearing tinsous marking it as a gift, was busy setting the table, fully fixating on the link at hand. The breakfast table boasted antique bronze vases full of colorful and unusually shaped flowers, many of which were unfamiliar to the guests. At the center of the table were a variety of exotic dishes which D Light also could not identify. There were roasted cephalopods that appeared to be derived from gramphepers, large soft-shelled beetles that were filled with some sort of bread stuffing, strange eggs scrambled with colorful things that looked to be compressed mushrooms, and giant sea bolls filled to the rim with a gray, steamy broth. D Light, having simple tastes in food, was wondering if there was anything he could eat, when he eyes caught sight of the more traditional fare further down the table. The colorful nectar blocks, breakfast sausages, and sea biscuits were a welcome sight. There he also spotted a large tray of beautifully arranged exotic fruits, many of which were foreign to him, but D Light had never met a fruit he didn't like.

Djoser was already grinning with great attention on the visage of one of the giant gramphepers. Lyra, who sat next to him, looked up at D Light briefly, smiled, and quickly returned to her meal, although she only picked at it. Lyra was also present, happily devouring a skinkie pouch. Her face lit up upon seeing her friend. "Good morning, Dad!" she exclaimed genuinely.

A smile involuntarily slipped over D Light's face as he declared, "And good to see you." *My. Said, it is good to see you, he thought.*

The bland beauty looked like a tiny woodland creature as her skin gleamed in the warm morning light. She was finding a rather, one of the light brown tummy hairs with gigantic scallid eyes that Lily had shown him the night before. He ran curled back and forth in what D Light guessed was appreciation for the scraps of that and nectar caused Lily dropped to it. Two of the Mena daughters were seated next to Lyra, one on each side. They were educating her on the finer points of the rubber diet. Watching Lyra with loving eyes, D Light thought she looked like she was in her element as though she had been born here, had been grown from one of the giant flowering that trees that punctuated the terraced garden. She seemed to be at home, or perhaps it was just that this was the first time he had ever seen her look truly happy.

Lyra, seated beside the priest, directed her attention to D Light and initiated conversation. "I was just apologizing to Our Highness here about last night. Here, in our daughter's education, we did not say goodbye to him before retiring for the night."

The priest, dabbing his lips with a napkin between every bite, gave a paternalistic expression. "I missed your Mother but there was no need for apology. Mena/Casans are intense affairs and a player need not ask an old priest like me to be excused for a much earned rest."

D Light bowed. "Nevertheless, I am ashamed and in your debt."

The priest smiled faintly as he bowed his head in deference to D Light and then went to work replenishing his plate.

D Light could not help wondering if the priest believed the story, wondering if his face gave away the truth of last night's shenanigans. The man would have had to be blind to not see the chemistry between the two of them last night, not to mention that he had had to take a look, only to return and find them both gone. Although largely unspoken, priests were not stupid. Still, D Light thought he saw a look of relief on the man's face when he confirmed Lyra's story. D Light often had to remind himself that people will go to great lengths to believe what they want versus that which is probable. And, D Light was sure the priest preferred not to believe that the noblewoman he had been ogling all that evening had actually ended up in the arms of a young, upstart player like D Light.

Having filled their bellies and engaged in an adequate amount of chatter with their gracious breakfast company, D Light, Lyra, and Djoser speculated about the next quest. They expected it to have something to do with hunting since the theme of the game was "The Hunter and the Hunted," but that wasn't exactly an encouraging thought. They hoped they would not be pitted against something awful that lived in the lower Sectors, the others that had chased them earlier coming to mind. In any case, Lyra was certain that the next quest would be the last, given how rapidly they were progressing through them. "Since the quests we have been getting are significant, I'd only expect three or four of them, and the will be our fourth," she said.

Lyra tried to get Djoser and D Light to bet against her on this, but there were no takers. Normally D Light would have taken interest in the wager, but he was only half-listening to the conversation, desperately trying to ascend on Lyra and the clues.

"No, I have two daughters," Lily said with a faint smile.

"You have children?" Curious, Scavage looked confused. "You are not gone clumped?"

Lily did not understand the last question, but she did not have a chance to ask for clarification because the other girls chorused to hear what it was like to be pregnant. Lily briefly indulged them in the retelling of the good, the bad (mostly bad), and the ugly of her pregnancies and births.

"See now there? Your daughters, I meant?" Bello asked

"Oh yes, very much." Lily's voice quavered just a little.

"And your mate? He must make you terribly." Dello squeezed Lily's shoulder.

"My what?" Lily asked, frowning her brow. "Oh, no, there are no men, no men of my kind to say the least here."

This opened a general cluster of questions around how Campers got pregnant.

Lily's eyes bulged wide open as it dawned on her why they were so surprised. "Oh, no!" Lily exclaimed. "My sisters and I do not use sexual intercourse to make babies." As Lily said "sexual intercourse," she made threatening gestures with her lips. The girls covered their mouths with their hands and giggled, but it was apparent from the expression on Lily's face that she was not making a joke; she was simply trying to be clear.

Lily continued, "So see, when I reached what you call 'puberty,' I became pregnant. This happens for all my sisters and we call it "The Stag's Gift." And every six years afterward, the Great Stag gives us another."

"And your daughters looks exactly like you and your other sisters?" Curious, Scavage asked.

"No," Lily answered.

Curious, Scavage squeezed Lily's hand with gentle excitement.

"No, that makes sense. Your designer gene copied you. Sex is only useful for creating variation in a species and opening evolution over a long period of time. It is actually Divine Law to give copy all products once their design has been finalized. Otherwise, mutations could compromise the integrity of the product design over time."

"How does the workshop who designed Campers get points for additional products? It seems like the Resource could just buy one and make more themselves," Dello said.

"Like the goose that lays the golden egg," Curious, Scavage commented.

Dello looked over Lily's body, being momentarily on her abdomen and then returned her gaze back to her face. "I've never heard of a reproductive strategy like yours. The products we create in House Muses do not reproduce at all. When our clients want another one, we give them a new one —that is, if we don't already have a pre-genom model in stock."

"So, Father then reaps additional points from return customers," Curious, Scavage added. "My guess is that your ovens are doing what is called 'kneading the loaf.' They pay an annual fee fee, an unusual and outdated business model, but a few homeproducing Housewives do. Even some of Father's early contracts were hard losses."

D Light expected Lily to appear quite uncomfortable in this conversation, but just the opposite was true. Lily's eyes were brimming with mirth as she asked of the clerical girl a series of follow-up questions. The girls were just as anxious to answer her. Their florid discourse was only interrupted by the intermittent pitiable cry from the rubber bagging for additional table scraps. D Light was about to leave the side of the table and join the throng of animated females when he heard Lysa calling, "You coming? We're getting a tour of the garden."

D Light reluctantly followed.

Chapter 29

De Muses's garden was enormous, although it was more of a collection of smaller gardens than one large one. There was the English garden with its traditional, orderly plots of roses and symmetrical walkways; the Japanese garden with its stone work, well-manicured tree branches, and hidden brooks; the French garden, sporting dense hedges sculpted into strict geometrical patterns; and a walk-off-paradise garden that featured waterworks like fountains, canals, ponds, and waterfalls. As it were, these models were little more than vague descriptions, as the gardens contained very few original plants from those olden times; the was little considering that the naturalists themselves—English, Japanese, and French—had long since faded into irrelevance.

Many of the plants found in the garden had been designed in the Inner Sanctum itself and were either being tested or served as living corollaries of past successes. The priest pretended to lead the tour, but it soon became evident that the child-framed clerk girl named Pant was the most knowledgeable and she would often cut in whenever the priest seemed to meander over the answers to questions.

Although the entire garden was nothing short of spectacular, perhaps the most glorious of the plant life were the colossal nuclear trees. These marvels of engineering were less akin to tall and bare monolithic trunks and bare branches that supported immense orbs of leaves and flowers. The sootling hail of countless collections hanging or crawling about was always present. These insects were designed to harvest the abundant sugars produced by the nuclear trees and bring the precious juice by way of a pheromone trail to a place determined by their master. After taking their fill, the coin-sized insects sat off, bobbing uncertainly under their load, along the chemical trail set down. Once they reached the invisible trail end, they would deposit their load into catch tubes and the sugars were then channeled off to locations where they could be metabolized.

The Dribble that made up House Muses required a constant supply of food. It needed energy to regulate its temperature and to optimize its air quality and humidity. Whatever the house did not eat could be fed to the countless creatures that

prohibited it, including those people who either two-fisted it or two-hoed it, obtaining food in other other other other. There was no share in eating and drinking nectar. Indeed, nectar optimized for sexual consumption came in many flavors and contained all the essential proteins and vitamins for optimum health. Even the highest scoring players did not share nectar, although it did become hoisted over decades of consumption. Nectar could even be used to feed organic machines like starliners or robots that were responsible for mundane industrial work. However, such machines typically consumed the most potent nectar (and most terrible tasting to humans), which was super compressed into dense cubes.

It was the heavy demand for variety in nectar production that drove much of the point research of House Monks. Any new strain of nectar that, for example, offered a different taste, was metabolized more easily, or simply came from an aesthetically pleasing tree, would find a ready market. Indeed, nectar trees were so common on earth—and increasingly on other planets and moons—that a house could expect to sell millions, if not billions of trees with every new variety it created.

Beside the grove of nectar trees were the ultra-thin growing paper trees that set off a soft and even radiating green as their marks rose up nearly flat enough for the naked eye to watch it action. Although most dwellings were grown rather than built, the wood these trees produced was still used in a variety of classic products, from paper to furniture.

While one could spend hours alone examining the astonishing variety of trees in Monks' gardens, there were just as many impressive varieties of flowers in every color imaginable and with equally impressive uses. These were flowers that emitted light at night, flowers that ate pesky insects (but not the helpful ones, such as cockroaches), flowers that were processed into all manner of drugs for both human and product consumption, and even flowers for the very old who still preferred perfume made. Past, their life histories, explained in a clear voice. The flowers in the lower Sanctum are not for production use; they are just prototypes. We have many production labs distributed throughout House Monks and her subsidiaries.

Although plants made up the bulk of the life in the gardens, there were more active denizens that walked, crawled, dithered, or hopped. The most conspicuous products were the general humanoid laborers sprinkled everywhere, their purpose to keep the gardens tidy. They did most of their work using only old fashioned hand tools rather than modern ones, as the doctor preferred the aesthetic of old-time gardening.

Despite the handiwork, the massive gardens were immaculately kept and it was no wonder. The gardeners were remarkably productive, oblivious to the heat of the midday artificial sun and indifferent to the cold of night. They required only two hours of sleep per day, and when they slept they usually walk back to any sleeping quarters; instead, they would simply lie down under the shelter of some luxuriant plant. Nor did such workers require breaks to eat because there was plenty of that and otherwise, plump, and delicious bags of all sorts, which they scooped up dutifully as they worked.

All of the workers were identical in appearance. They were hairless men with dark skin veined by capillaries, and every one of them carried around their neck a small blue vial containing repellent against the garden calms. When Lysa pointed out the vial, Past informed them that when the workers got old or otherwise outlived their usefulness, the doctor would simply cut off their supply of repellent. However, such turnover was low since the food in the garden on which the workers subsisted was checked full of goodies that slowed the aging process.

Among the human-based products that attracted the most attention from the men in the party were the concubines. A tall harem of women, spectacular in their nudity, lounged about in a soft pooled grout. They stood back at the voyeurs, some of them drowsily, some intensely. Dymar asked if these prototypes required any further "testing" volunteered for the job with a level smile. Past warned him to leave them alone, as the same rule that restricted passionate love could easily turn to violence.

Past went on to say how Sara, Dr. Monks' personal concubine, the one who the night before had stuck a fork in another dinner guest's hand, was one of the doctor's early and unsuccessful attempts in this line of work. "The Sara impressed on Father, and despite her madness, he gave food off her," she informed. "With maybe not exactly food of her, but affectionately dished up her over the years." The clone daughter wobbled about why her father hadn't destroyed Sara like he did all the other failed prototypes, speculating that it was because she was his first design. "First we look for love, I suppose," she said with a wistful smile.

Past then informed the tour group that the concubines were not allowed out of their play cages. "We need to allow them to wander freely, but eventually they would get bored and try to seduce the garden workers or whoever else they could find. It was shamelessly disruptive."

"What about run-a-boy?" Do you grow them as well?" Lysa asked while observing Dymar in the ribs.

Past laughed girlishly. "Yes, although we lock them up also, away from the concubine protos. Otherwise they would simply wear each other out. In the early days we actually lost a few of them from exhaustion. We do still allow controlled visits for testing purposes."

Spurred by Lysa's interest, Past showed them the run-a-boy sphere. Like their female counterparts they were male, exposing their perfectly shaped and muscular bodies. Upon seeing the visitors, some of the products whistled at Lysa and Past and shouted out invitations over one another. Others leaned straggly against the glass as though pining. A few smiled shyly and hid themselves. Apparently, there was a type of man for all tastes.

"I noticed you do not separate them from one another," Dr. Light commented. "Do they get along so harmoniously all the time?"

several pointed to three small empty spheres off the distance. "No, occasionally we get a 'white phenotype' or one with copious sexual urges are misdirected at others in the cell. However, as you can see, the isolation spheres are empty now. We rarely make such mobile mistakes in our designs anymore."

"Multisexual sexual urges?" Djoser asked. "You do not make heterosexual run-o-bays and coconuts?"

"Oh, there really isn't a market for those," Paust answered while twisting her mouth slightly. "The rampant genetic engineering of humans leading up to the time of The Hittite—coupled with modern brain incubation tanks—has nearly wiped that market out."

"Interesting," D Light commented. "I had no idea."

Paust nodded. "Yeah, those Yi-Ling/Yi specialists in that rack market and I father does not think the potential profits are worth the extra PD I would take to challenge Yi-Ling/Di's strong position." Paust sighed. "I've thought of putting a line together myself. It would be a fun game, but I do not know if I will ever get around to it."

Paust then took the tour party to see House Mona's most advanced and expensive product line, the analysts. Similar to the analyst they had met the night before, the male analysts looked very similar to the common garden worker products in that they were hairless, and remarkable only in that they did not resemble anyone in particular. It was as though they were merely the template of a person. The women analysts were hairless also, making them somewhat repulsive to D Light. The analysts were one of the most driven products. When looking into their eyes one might at first think that they were dull given their blank stare; however, in reality they were simply in a state of sufficient trance. They were so committed to their thoughts that nothing in the only "real" world mattered to them a pin.

And, of course, there were the tubes that sprang up around them like wet quills or a porcupine, the skin folding circularly like an anus when the tube inserted with their body. Nicot, drugs, and other substances which D Light did not ask about, flowed in through some tubes, and dark rashes were trickled out of others. Unlike the shiny skin of the garden workers, the skin of the analysts was nearly translucent from their subterranean existence. Their skinless nose deep within a windowless Dr/Yu mound. They stood in long lines, one after the other. Their Mind Interface Chips were hooked directly to machines, but the apparently did not provide enough input because their otherwise remarkable lips had dozens of fractures which displayed a great deal of things that D Light could not even guess about. Paust told them that the machines were as much for those supervising the analyst—the practices—as they were for the products themselves. Since these analysts were prototype models, it was important for the practices to observe, measure, and validate their work.

The practices also appeared to be products. One practice was another of Dr. Mona's cloned daughters, identical to Paust, Love, Monkey, Cactus, Scavage, Bulbo, and every other "daughter" they had seen, except that she had a dark ribbon in her hair. The girl ignored the tour group as she scanned the machines, and the analysts, likewise, were oblivious to her. Another practice was an analyst himself, presumably a graduate one. This one was walking along with his tubes hooked into a hovering machine that emitted beeping, always staying just close enough to stay out of his way while still maintaining some check.

Paust explained that most of the analysts were playing ultra-complex strategy games against one another, as well as against others outside House Mona. "It can be expensive to hire independent agents to pit you against our prototypes, but it is necessary to vet out the optimum designs. These consistently successful might be grown for commercial production."

"What about those that fail? Do you destroy them?" Djoser asked.

"Send 'em! They are too expensive to design, grow, and train to just throw them away. Instead, we sell them at a steep discount to houses that could not otherwise afford them."

As repulsive as the analysts were, D Light knew that he was in the Fort Kase of the modern world. If you had a tough problem, a quandary of great magnitude, the best thing you could do was set one of these babies loose on it. They were the greatest weapons a player could get hold of. D Light would have loved to get one of these for himself—even a reject—but such merchandise was very out of the price range. Individual players did not buy analysts. Only major facilities had pockets deep enough to own even one.

D Light was a little surprised that he and his teammates were treated to be here, seemingly unguarded. D Light and Djoser were armed, and Lysa herself was a one-handed and twenty-pound weapon. One machine with a blade could slit one's throat after three. He decided the analysts would just stand there like cows in the slaughterhouse, he thought. Millions of points of damage could be lost! D Light had no such naive intention, nor could he imagine this of anyone else on his team. Perhaps some analyst had already foreseen this fact beyond all reasonable probability, which is why they were here.

Paust informed them on "there is much more to see, more than you can see in a day. More than you could see in a lifetime."

The party was well worn out by the time they stumbled in the dinner. Dr. Mona was present, as was Sara and her rent-a-boy night playthings from the night before. Several of the clones were there. Djoser did not remember which was which, but Moscovitz, with its precise memory, identified them by their distinctly colored boxes and told him the present company was Cactus, Scavage, Bulbo, Love, Monkey (who was apparently

But then the grandsons, their guide for the day, Pami, along with a new daughter that had not yet been introduced.

As usual, the clones surrounded Lily and her mother. The mother was carrying a few more-for-son flowers in one year while holding onto the hem of Lily's dress with its other. Lily's dress was a flly thing covered with flower prints and lace, similar to the ones worn by the clone girls.

Dinner had only seen flower dresses on women (or men) who were making fun of themselves. The antiquated fashion and its supposed virtue was a joke to any mainstream player. Nevertheless, it called Lily. Dinner marvelled at the perfect skin of her arms, throat and face, such delicate proportions. And the natural innocence and sincerity with which she carried herself was captivating. She had been designed perfectly for her purpose.

He imagined what it would be like to hold her down on her back, screaming and thrashing under him. How he would fearfully penetrate her. And as he violated her, he wondered what it would look like when he let into her pale, flawless skin that her fountains as she tried to fend him off, then her neck, followed by her chest. And just as he was thinking he would ask one of her beautiful blue eyes and pry it out. What would that be like? How would it feel? Such an experience would be like none he had ever had before in his eighty seven years of existence.

"It's really not fair how pretty you are in this," Belle said to Lily as she pinched the fabric of Lily's dress.

"Do you seek her approval with your exclusive chit-chat simply because she is comely?" the good doctor nearly shouted across the table.

"Father, don't embarrass me," Belle blushed between clenched teeth. "I was merely making an observation."

Dr. Morris spoke to the group with a weary voice. "A weakness in my girls. Although they are old enough to know better, they share the primitive trait of desperately wanting to please those who appear to be worth pleasing. Notice how they gravitate toward the Caucasian girl and not the lovely Lyan?"

Lyan was startled by hearing her name and turned away from Dinner to hide.

"You are sooo embarrassing!" Curious, Scavage leered.

The doctor ignored her remark and continued, "My girls have always found beauty in things that resemble themselves. I used to think it was vanity, but perhaps it is something more primitive. Like attracts like. Conceivably a useful feature in our early evolution, but a bothersome vestige in the modern day. I haven't tracked down the genes responsible for this vestige. It is rather complex."

Belle poured a small fix into the table. "My Soul, can't I just have a communion and you read your own business?"

"But I too am merely making an observation," quipped the doctor.

Belle's face flushed. "An observation? You think I like her just because she is a pretty white girl? You think me so simple? Maybe I find her fascinating for the same reason you do?" Belle grabbed Lily's hand which sat bare, exposed in the little porcelain hands of the child-woman. Lily's face was pale and her eyes gleamed.

Belle continued, "Because of what she is. What a rare event it is to have a specimen like her in our clutches!"

Belle stroked Lily's hair with her own hand. "Oh maybe it isn't just the fact that she is white like me but that she is a woman? Neither something I nor my sisters will ever be, thanks to you!" With that, Belle stood up suddenly, sending her chair backward and over with a crack on the hard stone floor, and then stomped off.

Belle's dramatic exit sparked an accord to dinner. The other girls fell in with Belle's lead and stomped off with their eyes. Lily said to be excited with her teddy bear. After cracking all day in the garden, D Light could not eat another bite and so he excused himself as well. Walking down the path, he discovered Lily, who was talking to her bear. "What a silly boy you are," she said as the mother tried clumsily to climb a tree which hung over only three overhead.

"Dido you," D Light announced. "Have you noticed that dinner here is really awkward?" he asked.

Lily laughed softly. "Yeah, maybe I should just pack a picnic for my dinner tomorrow night."

"That sounds good," remarked D Light. "Maybe I could join you and we could watch the prelude sunset together."

Lily smiled and nodded. And then, abruptly, she walked up to only a few inches from his face. "D Light, why don't you tell me about yourself? Tell me about how you grew up."

D Light felt the urge to either step back or step into her, but he remained where he was. "I...um, I have..."

"I don't want to talk to your robot," she said with a note of irritation. "I don't want to to send me anything. I want to hear you say it."

D Light agreed and suggested they take a walk. The pair wandered along a winding path and out into the vast garden below. They had no destination, the only goal being to put distance between themselves and the others. As they walked, D Light said Lily about his birth, how he was given as a nursery, although he, of course, could not remember this. He told her how he and thirty some other children were raised by a variety of child rearing games and that his nursery name would come and go—a typical childhood. Lily asked many

person related to that, "Where was your mother? How did you consider me among so many?"

D Light told her how it was wonderful for a bio-parent to take care of a child. That time could be better spent doing something productive. On the other hand, a nursery grade, also known as a "nup", as his supervisor was called, was a specialist at what they did. A nup could score very high in The Game by raising quality players, so it was in their best interest to be good at what they did. Many nupments started out as nups.

D Light was surprised by the plethora of questions about his bio-parents. Yes, he knew who they were, but it did not matter. They received a small percentage of the points he scored, so he was important to them, but not the other way.

Having gleaned as much information from D Light on the subject as he could, Lily then explained how nupment in her tribe raised their own daughters. Of course, many daughters lost their mothers to "the running time," at which point a later mother would be selected from the tribe. He thought it was a poor design and cruel to leave the Campers carry their daughters to term in the north. He knew that humans used to do this and that Sidelens still offered, but he always thought it absurd. It was always a mystery to him how nupments managed to survive throughout the ages carrying their unborn like that. Skewed down and vulnerable, the fetus was nothing more than a home-made to some hungry predator. Even worse was the way they delivered the infant. *Sidelens it occurs!*

Artificial light was filling and the photoflowers were beginning to bloom, opening soft globes of light in an otherwise darkening garden. There was a statue of a male, carnosous woman looking over her shoulder at a hawk that gaped though a grassy clearing. The pair sat on the grass and regarded the statue. Someone suggested that it bore marked examples of Aphelandra, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, and D Light announced that this was, in fact, who the statue depicted, as though he had known this himself.

Lily's soft features glowed in the warmth of the photoflowers' light as she told D Light about the god of her tribe, the Great Stag. According to legend, long ago when her people were first created, there was a magnificent Stag that lived in their forest. He was a kind creature who could speak and the Stag taught the tribe of the Star Sisters and the tribe of The Sons how to gather fruits and hunt. There was abundant food and the game was plentiful. But one day the Queen of Star Sisters and the King of The Sons decided that they no longer had a use for the Stag.

Using an imperial tone of voice Lily quoted the characters of her story. "The Stag's path will make a line blacker to yours me at right," said the Queen. And the King said, "The Stag's head will make a line empty over my throne."

Lily then told how a team of the best hunters from both the tribes brought down the mighty creature, and the queen got her pet and the king got his trophy. But what they did not know was that The Stag was the true life bringer of the forest. With his breath he made the fruits grow and the game multiply. And so in his absence, the fruits rotted away and the game disappeared and the people of the tribes began to starve.

Lily tilted her head and lifted her brows, "And after many had perished, the Stag was reform and came back. The tribes begged the Stag to save them and he consented, but the tribes needed to pay for what they had done. Forever forward, every season, one woman from the tribe of the Star Sisters and one man from the tribe of The Sons were selected to run, to be hunted as the Great Stag himself had been hunted. Some would return by the next moon and some would not."

"That's awful," D Light said with a look of concern and compassion. "Lily, you know that is a lie. I mean a myth, right?"

"Yes, I know that," she said. And then, more softly, she added, "I know that now."

D Light felt sympathy for the girl. It's not her fault she's a nup.

"Well, how does your tribe choose? Choose who is to be hunted, I mean?" D Light asked.

"Each tribe has an elder who chooses, although there are often volunteers."

"Volunteers?" Who would volunteer? D Light asked incredulously.

"People who want a better life. People like me." She smiled faintly and lowered her head. Looking at Lily sitting motionless on the lawn next to him, her marked legs drawn in tight, D Light thought she appeared to be a statue herself, the photoflowers casting soft shadows in all the right places. She was a statue of innocence and virtue, a work of art from which he could not pull himself away.

Following a long pause, Lily returned to her story. "Whenever one of us goes on a run, we are allowed to cast a stone with our mark into a jar. Every four years the elder reaches into the jar and pulls out a stone. It's a year's time, then the Great Stag will save you."

"A hots," D Light whispered.

She shrugged, "Yes, so the more often you run, the better your chances of salvation."

The D Light understood. It was no different than The Game. The higher your lifetime score, the better your chances at becoming one of The Chosen, one of the Immortals. This one fact was the underlying current that influenced every action taken by every player every day in The Game. "Believe it or not, we're not that much different, you and I," he told her.

Lily felt an inexplicable desire to tell D Light everything there was to know about her even though it went against everything she had been taught about humans. She wanted to go on to tell him how, after being chosen, she was no longer allowed to

in the same dam as her sisters and daughters, that she had to sleep alone. She wanted to talk about how two nights after the lens she had been awakened by the elder who led her silently through the forest for hours until they reached a cave which they proceeded to navigate for miles in the dark with only the light of a tiny lamp. She wanted to share the memory of emerging on the other side of the cave into a different world, one with marvelous trees and beautiful flowers, a paradise where she assumed the flying Stag would meet her and speak to her with kindness and love. And she wanted to reveal to D Light her feelings of disillusion and despair when her god never came, how her only anchor was Tadgit, the one chosen from the tribe of the Sons, who led her away to her new life, a life much like she had—full of fear and even outside of her control.

Lily wanted to share these things but didn't. She didn't tell D Light how she had found work at the university as a test subject, how the professor who had hired her did not intend that she was a demon because it meant she came cheap. She didn't tell him that it was this professor who implanted in her the Mind Interface Chip so how he conducted experiments on her that caused bizarre images and voices to crash into her psyche—some ideas created, others destroyed. It was then that she began to dream for the first time, began to imagine death as something other than eternal peace and darkness. Now, death had become a curious and frightening unknown, and despite feeling that she could trust D Light, she was not yet ready to fully reveal her feelings of alienation and vulnerability. There was so much in this new world that she still did not understand, including why, when she looked at the statue at her side and he returned her gaze, it made her vomit.

Slowly, Lily blid her eyes to the stars above. "So much space, so vast. It is so cold," she said with a quiver in her voice.

"They're fake, just a projection on the invisible dome."

Lily laughed, "You must think I'm a fool, a 'n00b,' as you call it. It's not what they are, it's what they represent."

"Well then, I suppose you could call it 'vast' and space is certainly cold. But it is beautiful too. You could live a billion lifetimes and not fill up that space."

"And your Overlord, your god, will give you that opportunity?"

"Lily asked. She blid her eyes back on the statue.

"For a billion lifetimes? Soul selling, yes."

"Maybe one lifetime had well is enough."

D Light expressed the urge to roll his eyes. It was the sort of thing Soldiers and capitol players said to make them feel better about dying, but he refrained from saying those things aloud. Lily was too coward. She was in a kind of momentary complicity, a world that did not care for her one pin, looked, she was fodder for the petty desires of others, and just she sat there serenely, gorgeous and resolute, and as he gazed at her near the statue, she too looked like a goddess—one stripped of all her power, perhaps, but not of other divinity.

"It used to terrify me," D Light offered. "That." He pointed up into the starry night.

Lily squirmed as though looking for something specific. D Light continued, "When I was little, I slept by myself in a tiny, windowless room away from the other children. My bedroom was out on the roof of our ramshole and so on the clear nights I would gaze up at the stars before going to bed. I continued this routine until one night, as I lay in my bed..." D Light paused because he was not sure how to explain and then blid, "...as I lay in my bed, I felt infinity." He looked into Lily's eyes to see if she had already lost her, but she appeared focused and intrigued, so he continued, "I realized I was a speck to time, a time that went on forever without end. I felt like I was already gone and that my life, me, the person I was, my soul as it were, had no meaning on such a stage—in a universe without end."

Lily placed her hand atop D Light's and the two returned their gaze upward to the stars, quietly taking in all the mysteries of the universe.

"It terrified me," D Light said, his eyes still fixed on the night sky. "It terrified me to no nothing." Then he chuckled, "So, I stopped looking up on any way to my bed and I started sleeping with the light on."

Lily smiled at his solution. "I always slept near my sisters and daughters until that was no longer an option. Why did you sleep alone?" Lily asked softly.

"My rage did not allow any of us to sleep together." D Light recited the hymn, "In The Game of Life we all play alone."

"What a strange thing to say," Lily declared. "I don't think that it even true. Sure, we are born alone and we die alone, but as we live, we live together. It seems like the living is the important part."

D Light did not bother to explain that the hymn was more nuanced than that. Sure, players gained by cooperating, at least as far as such relationships were beneficial, but in the end only individuals received salvation. One had to make his own way.

"Anyway, it isn't about whom I slept near," D Light said. "The fear was deeper than that. Maybe the detection of others would have stopped me from seeking the truth..."

"The truth of your obsession?" Lily questioned.

"Right."

"And you found solace in the Overlord's promise to make you trusted?"

D Light's voice raised, "More than a promise, more than a myth, I mean, you see them—the korvates. They walk among us. You can dinner with one of them!"

"De Manna? You want to be like her?" Lily asked.

Maybe not like him much," D Light replied and they both laughed at this.

The two fell silent for a short time. Senogous had observed where the servants kept the sector vase and suggested D Light acquire some for his company. The familiar reminded him that alcohol had, literally, served him well with the ladies. D Light told her further to that up.

D Light crossed his arms and rubbed his shoulders as though to keep warm, causing an undesirable shivering sound as his hands ran across the micro lenses of the skinnet, breaking the heat that pleasant silence. Lily looked over and put her arms around his shoulders and pulled him close. It was not the jerky, awkward, or hurried motion of someone making a sexual advance, the way Lyras had come on to him the night before. Sitting so closely, their bodies gently touching, he could feel the slow and steady rise and fall of her breasts. He let his head tilt down and rest on her soft shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him tighter and he could feel her heartbeat, which was steady and strong. It was hypnotic and he allowed himself to listen for the longest while. In this moment, D Light was finding something that he had never before felt, and it was both exciting and terrifying at the same time.

Eventually, Lily spoke softly, "There is a lake nearby. I can smell it. If we have time tomorrow, would you like to go for a swim? No humans are all competitive, right? We could race, if you prefer."

Then, All this talk of infinite time and he suddenly felt like he did not have any to spare. Lily, apparently thinking along the same lines, asked, "Why haven't they come for us? Come for me, I mean? They must know we're here."

D Light just turned his head, found her cheek and kissed it. His skin was warm and pliant to his lips.

"Let's take that swim now," he said with a comforting smile.

It was not long before the computers found a small lake that shimmered subtly under the swirling colors of nearby photolumines. They went, laughed, and raced to the point of education. Naked and enervated, they fell asleep atop a soft mound of moss as they drifted in the warmth of the lunar Senogous night air.

D Light awoke again to find PoePoe staring at him with a blank request from Lyras, which he accepted. Good morning. This. Her thought signature was unusual.

This isn't exactly what it looks like, D Light murmured. He took a minute and then—

Forget it. I think it's great that you're getting along so fabulously with all of your roommates. A real morale booster you are. Unsurprisingly, the first strand of Lyras's laugh, in this room, stopped open and that as it did so,

There was little D Light could do but take her teasing to good humor. Lily awoke also and was predictably unhappy about yet another voyeur robot making her business its own.

The rest of the day went on in a similar manner as the last. The girls visited Lily away and D Light, Lyras, and Djoser went on their own excursion.

First on the trip's to-do list was to visit Armada, who was recovering on a bed atop an immense boulder that overlooked much of the eastern English Garden. With Lyras at the head, they made their way up a set of stairs that ended around the girth of the boulder. Once at the top, they could see a medical bot tending to the patient, along with a pink-haired clone daughter of Dr. Munoz's, presumably the only clone the group had not yet met. This girl did not introduce herself or pay the visitors any attention at all until Djoser, nearly shouting, demanded Armada's health status.

The girl sighed and directed her attention to the visitors. "The damage to the product's body was significant, as you can see by the number of skin grafts on her body, but she is making excellent progress in her recovery and is already walking." Djoser caressed the white artificial skin that held together his servant. It was only to the touch.

The group would have chatted with Armada, but concubine bodyguards were not conversationalists. She simply said that she hoped to be fully functional within a day or two. It only took a few minutes for D Light and Lyras to become bored and want to move on, but Djoser lingered. After all, he had been away from his concubine for two nights now. Lyras and D Light left him to her. Descending the stairs beneath boulder, D Light was not sure if he was disgusted or mildly impressed that the coddled nobleman was willing to perry with something in that sense; he quickly realized that it was disgust. The clone would have stayed as well, perhaps for some research purposes, but Djoser insisted that she give him a few minutes alone.

Chapter 30

It would be three more days before the team would get that final quest, and yet in that brief space of time they had settled into something of a comfortable routine in the lunar Senogous. Each morning they would all meet for a decadent breakfast with whichever products and cloned daughters happened to be there at the time. Dr. Munoz himself was never present, however, as he found the only meaning in his life to be more creative and tended to use them for work. The clone girls ensured that the breakfast buffet was never boring, for they loved to discuss their father's fascinating inventions and make inquiries of the visitors, most notably of Lily and her life on the fringe of society. They seemingly could not get enough of the

Star Sister, and D Light understood the attraction. He often found himself staring at Lily and listening to her with those wide-eyed curiosity of the girls.

Once breakfast was over, the group would take a morning walk through Dr. Monso's magical gardens. Amanda, mostly healed from her injuries but still bearing scars and patches of new skin that had not yet seen the sun, would join them for these walks. Although they always set out together, beginning their walk with discussion of the upcoming quest, the group noticeably ended up drifting apart. D Light and Lily often lagged behind, engaged in a sort of playful teasing that irritated Lynn. Lynn and Clymer acted more staidly in their exploration of the gardens, almost as though they were in the public eye, which was the exact opposite of the Inner Sanctum. Eventually, the ladies too would drift apart as Clymer would find himself in the mood of Amanda and a bit of privacy.

To D Light, the hours between breakfast and dinner during these several days of waiting were golden—carefree, lonely, and with Lily. Indeed, he enjoyed them so much that he often forgot that he was in the middle of an intensely competitive and dangerous MercCure. He didn't think about strategies, points, or the next quest. He didn't agonize about just retaliation or future prospects. For once, he lived only in the present and it felt good, even healing.

D Light and Lily spent a great deal of time taking entries in the lake and streams. At first, D Light spent more time on the water in a borrowed boat than in the water swimming. Lily thought it tragic and taught D Light several new strokes, including the butterfly. Cockey, thinking he had mastered the stroke, D Light then challenged Lily to a race. To his surprise, she did the back stroke to his butterfly, but she still beat him, albeit not by much.

D Light and Lily also enjoyed passing the time by teaching the rubber, the clever primate usually bear, a whole host of tricks, one of which was to dance. Senguous made an excellent tutor for the activity. The tutor was chosen in an organic, shell capable of conducting sound, so it was essentially one good sized speaker. D Light even compromised on his personal policy against rapid gratuity and had Senguous download some kindly dance software, enabling the robot to flawlessly execute thousands of different dances. Lily had never seen a cat do this sort of thing and thought it hysterical. D Light teased Lily about her impressions. "Under his dance?" at the grunts a few days back and suggested it would be a good idea for all of them to learn a few Senguous' moves. The rubber joined in too, although it was so clumsy that it would bump between D Light, Lily, and Senguous like a ping pong ball, occasionally knocking someone off balance. At one point, they all ended up on the mechanical lion in a silly, clattering heap.

The clone daughters continued giving their lessons over these few days, particularly to Lily who was still unambiguously favored by the girls despite the ridicule of their father. They did learn to better tolerate D Light, however, as none often than not he now accompanied them on their little field trips.

Each night, as the artificial sun began to set, the servants would reunite at the great dining table. Dr. Monso would sit with them and assemble a retinue of his "limbs" to join them. If it seemed too quiet at the table, the doctor would toss seemingly arbitrary questions to his guests as a sort of family game time.

On this particular eve the table was much too quiet for the doctor's taste. "When do you think of me?" he blurted out to the entire table, starting D Light enough to make him lose control of his fork, which ended up on the lap of Lynn. "Did I mention or a natural human activity?" he boomed. Dr. Monso sucked back a trickle of wine that had dribbled out of his mouth and looked to the audience for a response.

The priest was eager to offer the first answer, "As suggested by Divine Law, war is undesirable the society that cannot be completely suppressed and is therefore allowed under controlled conditions."

"No Daddy, the OverSoul says war permits. Apparently, it is condoned." Curious, Sengous spoke out of one cheek, as her other one was stuffed with a roasted pig's prob.

"Yes, but does that make it right?" the doctor inquired.

Curious, Sengous realized, "If two families want to go to war, who is to stop them?"

"To grow as sentient beings we are bestowed free agency," the priest quavered.

"Free agency?" Love Monkey scoffed. "When families meet on the battlefield, I sincerely doubt everyone in attendance wants to be them."

"We choose your family and you can leave anytime," Curious, Sengous retorted.

Love Monkey sighed. "Nevertheless, it's a world house. I figured our House doesn't involve half in that sort of thing."

"As contrasts, I often purchase war permits to negotiate with other Houses," the doctor said casually, "but my trials always back down and so we never actually meet on the field."

"I don't blame them," Clymer interjected with a chuckle. "One pack of those cokers of yours would turn a small army."

"The cokers?" Dr. Monso raised his jagged eyebrows. "Oh, those are just to keep containment species out of my garden. I wouldn't use them for war. I have far better...or worse, than my enemy's point of view."

"Daddy used to make weapons," Curious, Sengous proudly informed the dinner guests.

"Yes, very profitable, actually," the doctor confirmed. "The ban on modern weapons was not as restrictive with bioproducts. Namely, you couldn't make microbiological agents such as viruses, but larger products were allowed." The doctor nodded toward Amanda who was wearily dozing

her dinner. He continued, "Of course, these weapons get out of hand as they always do. As an example, it was not before anyone inhabited more than just dry tubs."

"Mmm the dry breathing, although I think that was under development," Bullo joked.

"This spared the Authority to place additional restrictions. Still, I have a few 'old friends' tucked away in the house," the doctor declared with a smile. "You see, they were grandfathered in. I'm just not allowed to grow any more babies."

While dinner had proven to be particularly delicious and the conversation interesting as usual, D Light remained quiet throughout the meal. Dr. Monax, finishing off his third helping of everything, drew a deep breath and asked to be excused from the table. The remaining dinner companions nodded and the doctor began his rapid trip down the path. D Light sat quietly for a few moments, mind as though having, belatedly, and then proceeded to follow the doctor.

"Doctor, ah, may I walk with you a moment?" Dr. Monax regarded D Light distantly and nodded.

"It's about Lily. I...*...Oh* yes, you are perhaps the most knowledgeable veterinarian on the planet, so I thought I would ask you—"

"No, I'm afraid I cannot make her human," the doctor answered before D Light could spit out the question. "I have already considered the problem from all angles. I have looked at her species again and again. To get her over 96.3% DNA parity with humans, I would have to do something gone therapy. It would kill her."

"But—"

"I know she looks and behaves human, but her reproductive system, her metabolism, even her nervous system are significantly different. If I needed her at the cellular level, her physiology would—" Dr. Monax paused and turned a guarded hand on D Light's shoulder: "It is right and good that you care about her. A gentle soul like yours would."

D Light had never been called a "gentle soul," nor was he sure it was a compliment. The doctor leaned in and scratched his face into an even uglier ball of flesh. D Light resisted the urge to react. "If I could do anything to help her, I would," whispered the smiling doctor. "Believe me, I have more interest in her welfare than you realize."

She was shaking again, reasoning in her sleep. D Light turned over on his side to kiss her ear and whispered, "Lily, it's only a dream. Wake up." But as he did over to comfort her, he realized she was gone. He watched her leave through eyes closed three days. She resembled a ghost, drifting away as the mirror image of her distant reflected the light from the cosmic moon.

One of the close girls stood ahead of Lily like a sentinel. The face of the young girl was a mask. D Light rose up onto his feet, "Lily!" The question did not enter the gloom to respond. Lily's shoulders tensed and she turned back to him with an expression that startled D Light into full wakefulness. She looked terrified, terrified as though she was rejecting a menacing stranger rather than the man with whom she had Lily shared her life over the past several days.

"Lily, where—" D Light's question collapsed in on itself as the shatters of his mind shattered and his body sharpened to a keel on the ground.

Master, your chemi delivery system has been compromised. The words of Seneqosus were hazy and distant in D Light's head. You were given an unauthorized dose of the commonly named MEdulfinyl™ chemi. I have taken the liberty of counteracting its effects; however, you have been unconscious for 15.31 minutes.

I...I was overcautious? D Light's thoughts were like vicious oyst.

Yes, Master. The dose administered was not within lethal range; however, it was incapacitating.

D Light opened his eyes. He was flat on his back and completely disoriented. He could not place where he was, although it was not where he last remembered. He had no idea how he got there. He blinked his eyes hard and with greater frequency as though doing so might bring clarity to the situation. He then opened Dower and tear nearby. The machine seemed to be inspecting mechanical devices of some kind. Weapons? he wondered.

The Human Host Themselves. Dower reviewed the quest again in his mind as he checked the trigger action on the crossbow left for him. He enjoyed the symmetry of the quest, although he admonished himself for not having anticipated it. Had he done so, he could have prepared.

It was simple. Hunt down and kill Lily. There were only two rules.

The quest would last up to 72 hours. If they did not kill Lily by then, the quest was lost.

The hunters and their families were to assemble at the dining table and remain there for two hours to give Lily a head start.

prisoner projected them, their actions would be projected upon game completion and that rule transgressions could result in disqualification.

Djoser smiled to himself. Not only was the quest consistent with the theme of the MetaGame, but it was spiritually satisfying. Lily had been created for this purpose—for this quest—and although he had not realized a before, it was meaningful for him to watch her die for him. The Overlord would not be contradicted.

Although he had not prayed explicitly for this quest, he offered a silent word of thanks to the Overlord. She knows us better than we can know ourselves, he thought. Djoser then shifted his attention to the ghost-eyed D Light laid out on the grass below and dropped an unlabeled crossbow on the chest. "I don't know what's wrong with you, but you've got less than two hours to pull yourself together, man."

The quest party was assembled at the great dining table. D Light finally saw the pending quest update and opened it. *How horrible! How I begged to protect her escape! As though I would hurt her otherwise? Could I do that?*

Praying he was having a nightmare, he closed his eyes again. Perhaps if he slipped back into that empty unconsciousness he would awake with Lily asleep at his side. He would tell her that she was safe, that he would protect her. His fantasy, however, was quickly broken as the marring voice of the prisoner pressed into his consciousness the caution that Lily had been given a visit of colder expedience, whereas they themselves, had none of their own.

"That will make it interesting," Djoser remarked. "We all got our last dose yesterday around noon, right?" he asked to one in particular.

"No, so from what Paul've tells me, the upland will have worked its way out of our system sometime on day three," Lyrta's voice was near.

"An added incentive for finding her sooner rather than later," Djoser commented dryly.

Djoser and Lyrta spent most of the two hours of Lily's head start time discussing how they would find her. They decided that the families could use their sniffer software to follow her; however, she would be expecting that. D Light sat quietly, only half-listening.

"Certainly she will go to the nearest water to knock us off her trail. Remember the lake?" Lyrta asked.

"Noah, the first thing she did when she joined up with us was lead us to the water," Djoser said.

D Light had now passed through the phases of shock and denial and into one of anger. "And she knows we know that," he spoke to the sky above, his voice brimming with resentment. "And she knows we know that she knows that."

"Don't be an ass, D Light," Lyrta's voice was strident. "Get over it and focus on the task at hand," she added sharply.

"Yes, Mother," D Light replied dutifully, keeping his gaze fixed on the hogan clouds above.

Djoser slammed his fist on the table. "Damned right, yes Mother," he shouted.

D Light, startled by the verbal assault, suggested Djoser. The newborn's eyes were burning with rage, and his lips curled and quivered like an animal readying itself for an attack. He continued, "Perhaps you've forgotten who Lyrta and I are and who you are not. Perhaps we were in error to think we could depend with the ferretidae during this game without you causing to think that you're actually an equal."

Reflexively, D Light stood and presumed himself harshly to his father. "My sincerest apologies, Father. I beg you pardon my transgression." He took a deep bow.

Djoser sat at D Light's feet and waved at him dementedly. "Good, so we have an understanding. Now get out of my face until I ask for your input."

"Understood, Father."

D Light removed himself from the table and sat out doors on the ground next to a variegated reddish plant with lustrous green plumes. He knew he was sulking. He knew he was being weak and pathetic, and he hated himself for it. He looked over to Lyrta and Djoser who were passively straggling a plan for finding and exorcising Lily. They too had spent days with the fire Star Sister and had gotten to know her well, but they weren't dinking about feeling sorry for themselves or for Lily. It was just part of The Game, plain and simple, and they acted accordingly. There *was* *no* *flow* in *my* *DNA*... or *my* conditioning, he thought.

Logically speaking, D Light had every reason to be enthusiastic about the final quest of the MetaGame. Over the last few days he had tried to stay off The Cloud since he was still a fugitive and the Divine Authority may have tracking software that uses Cloud signatures to locate persons of interest; nevertheless, he had poked around enough to know that the MetaGame was hot. Thanks to the drama and chaos he had caused in NeverWorld by snuffing Queen Phobias, and thanks also to the very public violence in The Lounge when that sucker tried to "upbraid" them, their game had picked up a lot of attention. Now players all over the world were placing their bets on this MetaGame. If D Light's name won, he would get a piece of the act: action in addition to his regular take. It would be an unfavorable fortune—a fortune that would accelerate him on the path of immortality. And all they had to do was beat down and kill a predator. Logically, nothing more than destroying an expensive piece of furniture.

Despite this realization and some mood enhancing champagne, D Light barely managed the resolve to follow his teammates into the garden by the time Lily's head expatriated.

Lily ran wearily but took care to not let the outstretched branches and leaves touch her. Like others of her kind—and even humans—the shed millions of cells a day, and although her skin was healed onto most of the cordilleras, the rest shed a scum of its own everything did. I will pass through like a breeze, she thought.

Perhaps I never escaped the reserve. Perhaps the Gout flag is real after all and has made the whole world a hell for my kind.

She suppressed those panic inducing thoughts and shut down all the functions of her MMC, save her internal clock. There was only one thing to focus on now, and that was to stay alive for 72 hours. If she did that, she would live, at least for now. Lily had survived the morning glow back home. This would be no different. She tightened her grip on the small like bottle and quickened her pace.

Djoser carved to himself as he gazed into the rent-a-boy holding pen. It was washed and empty. He and Amadeo had left the others to go master a search party for Lily. He figured he could trade one with Amadeo to the rent-a-boys in exchange for their cooperation, but the rent-a-boys were gone. So too were the consultants and the analysts. Even more conspicuous, there were no gardeners anywhere to be found. This was particularly troubling to Djoser, who had hoped to find an inkblot drone and jack the replicant news around to nick. Now, no search party and no replicant.

He decided it was likely that Dr. Monna and his minions were all nearby, either in a hideout in the Inner Sanctum itself or somewhere else within his massive house. I guess I'll just have to import some labor, he thought.

Djoser proceeded to attempt to create a search gene isolation on The Cloud, complete with a generous bounty attached. However, much to his surprise and dismay, an error message popped up saying that his connection was blocked by network quarantine. Djoser cursed again. If there was a network quarantine in place, then certainly the Inner Sanctum was physically locked down as well. Fortunately, his teammates were inside the quarantine, so he could at least still reach them. He opened a blink to give status.

PostPac found her trail. Lyla sent to the others. As Lyla pursued her further through the garden, followed by a solid D Light, she kept her crossbow trained out in front of them and maintained on the checking radar Djoser had sent them.

Surely this interruption in labor comes at great cost. Lyla thought. It seemed like a vital waste of resources to quarantine the Inner Sanctum in response to their trivial gene. Unless there was some other mission...an experiment?

Lyla knew MetaGene etiquette as well as any noble. As her host, the doctor was doubly bound to not directly interfere with their MetaGene; rather, at most, he could merely accommodate a bit of contact. It *has* not the stage, Lyla mused. While not explicitly hindering the party from finding the Carpet, he had exuded the odds of the quest in a subtle, yet effective way.

With contact to the outside world, players like Lyla had access to a great deal of resources. For the right price—and certainly the price would be justified in this game—they could rent help, perhaps a powerful analyst or AI to aid in strategy. Or, better yet, a human specialist for the activity. After all, the rules did not expressly forbid such tactics. *But now, cut off from the outside world...it's just her and me.*

Lyla realized she probably could not even put a penalty on the doctor for what pretty much served as imprisonment. Before they entered the Inner Sanctum, Lyla Monkey had issued they all digitally sign a number of legal documents and—expected for a bioengineering facility—quarantine was a legally covered scenario. Clearly, Dr. Monna was no fool. And perhaps Lily wasn't quite as naive as Lyla had thought. Possibly it was no coincidence that Dr. Monna came to their product during their stay. Perhaps Lily had made some "offer" to make the doctor their bet, and now this was how his bias was playing out. Lyla chastised herself for not negotiating herself more to Monna over the last few days. *Had he not been so off-perting and egotistical—the mask.*

Lyla stood up at the blue sky above as she floundered downstream on her back. This was the closest thing to rest she expected for the next 60 hours, but she could not rest her mind. She needed to anticipate their next move and act accordingly.

The team would not be able to catch her by tracking alone. She was moving too wearily and her trail was light. Even her present waterborne journey would frustrate their tracking effort for hours, that she knew they were close. They would do more than just sniff her out. *They will see their eyes too.*

be remembered when the cullens had been hunting them. Djosar had used his reflex to vent out the garden visually from the top of a tree. *Their families can see very far and can see a great deal at once. I must stay hidden.*

To do this, she would need to leave the garden and travel through the wild forest that surrounded it; however, she realized the thicker cover would come at the price of speed and she would not be able to disguise her trail at all. The other option would be to stick to the water and allow its stream to carry her as far as it would. No, it was a predictable move, and predictability was the one thing sure to kill her. Besides, the lake had used some time back that all others defied out through impossible gates into the great lake above. There would be no escape that way.

By sunset of the first day the hunters had lost and found Lily's trail several times, but had not actually seen their prey. Nevertheless, without a break, the hunt continued into the night.

Each of the hunters had their assignments. Lyra, along with her brother, continued to track. Amends, Djosar, and Moscher were sent ahead of Lily's estimated heading to attempt to catch up. D Light and Senagous were left behind to guard the paradise garden it was here where the small blue and main waterways of the Inner Sanctum were largely concentrated. Wide, shallow cranks, fountain pools, and narrow but deep rivers were fed by the lake—a lake which was fed from beneath by a deep geyser.

Staying behind was D Light's idea. He suggested that Lily, upon realizing she could not leave the Inner Sanctum, would eventually double back here to again destroy her mark in the water. This strategy of ambush was plausible to the others, but to him it was only an excuse to be away from the rest of the team. Seeing them in their purpose sickened him.

Unfortunately, despite his physical distance from the rest of the team, the rubies were constantly drawing him into their blinks with their incessant planning and sense updates. The left him opportunity for sleep, so D Light patrolled along the edge of the river. Besides, D Light knew the rubies would be furious if they caught him napping during their final quest.

Meanwhile, Senagous played lookout on the highest branch of the tallest cedar tree in the area. Without his brother nearby, D Light could not see much in the soft light of the piko-moon, but he did not want to offend light because it would give away his position. The Inner Sanctum was a dark zone, void of ramotion coating the surfaces, so there were no dunes to peek into. And, with the network quarantine in effect, the Chord was gone. With nothing to see, he closed his eyes and just listened. In between blinks from the others, there was only deafening silence.

He wondered if this was what it was like without The Game. Nothingness. A life without goals or overriding purpose. A life like generations past, who fabricated the meaning and value of their own existence in an indifferent universe. The indifference of the rocks, plants, and water around him had been something but now, with his eyes closed, he felt even more alone. *For always been alone. Now, I don't want to die alone.*

Chapter 31

There are no challenges or opportunities—only probabilities.

—Excerpt from Archives of Amdjast 94302-809 (a.k.a. 18d)

Day 2; 15:34 hours.

Moscher got a vision on her. Djosar's thought signature was all business.

Djosar's brother streamed the video to the rest of the party. A tall blond figure swept through a long, thin clearing, quickly disappearing back into the thick underbrush. Moscher pined the location on the map. She'd heading for the coast, probably going to make a run for the gate, Djosar declared. *(May everyone, let's move!)*

I'm too far to be of help. D Light murmured. How about I just hold my position?

Plus, Lyra answered.

There was a pause and then Lyra went again, *(Djosar, you're the clearest. You got a shot, you about to kill, right? No funny business.)*

There was another pause before Djosar responded, *What else would I do?*

Lyra left the question unanswered.

Slipping through the tangled, thick, and often unpredictable forest of the Inner Sanctum was beginning to tire Lily and, unlike her pursuers, she did not have the benefit of drags to keep up her pace indefinitely. Worse yet, her efforts had the nasty side effect of clearing a pathway for her hunters.

Lily reached her gambit to pay off.

She assumed her pursuers had spotted her crossing the dried up creek bed. Once across, she put on a burst of speed,

on whatever energy source the creature represents. Fortunately, there were many fallen logs craning along the creek bed, which she used as a makeshift trail, dashing along and between them. Her play was simple. Upon finding her current position, they would think she was heading for the outer gate. With any luck, they would then attempt to cut her off before she reached it by sprinting along the trail.

But she had no intention of escaping the inner Sanctum. She had even more enemies outside than within and she doubted she could escape anyone. Instead, she would circle back. Besides temporarily locking them off her trail, she hoped to tire and demoralize them. Perhaps if she was lucky, it would encourage them to the point where their judgment would be clouded. Lily, who had been raised in the naming game, knew the chase was more in the mind than in the body.

Not far ahead she saw a pair of black, fish-like legs that spanned the creek bed, furnished with branches and needles. She prepared to carefully crawl underneath this natural tunnel, protected from the watchful eyes of the families, to the other side, back toward the gardens.

They are closing in, D Light thought to himself. He dropped from the black. He knew the others expected him to stay engaged, but he could not listen, much less watch. Lily did not stand a chance against Amanda alone, but with Thessa and Liza too? They might be credulous nobles, but they knew how to kill. Everyone from House Tolsa did.

It will be over soon. Just make it quick, he tried to tell himself but he started to sob. Perhaps, I'm being absolutely pathetic.

D Light should be noticed. Sonagroun had recently notified him that the repellent in his system was just about spent. This quest had to end or The Garra, instead, his very life, could end.

But he suddenly felt the most familiar stretch in his stomach and a great despair as Lily's face haunted him. The feeling reminded him of the emotion he endured in the shower after flagging Paul just days ago. This was even worse. He felt like a part of him was being strangled.

Now, without the black, the silence—like an unwanted lover—continued to him, broken only by his own sporadic curses and subdued moans.

Sonagroun interrupted the silence. Master, there is a humanoid that signature on the move 0.01 kilometers from here.

D Light immediately thought of the coven.

I am unable to get a direct visual due to intervening foliage; however, the general shape of the signature does not suggest that body-type—it is too small.

Lily? D Light wondered. It couldn't be. She was several kilometers from here. Only minutes before he had watched her on the video feed. Nevertheless, D Light ordered his brother down beneath the tree. The two of them then headed toward the location of the man, woman, or whatever "it" may be.

Dr. Monia's theoretic analyst was making his way back to his lab. It was named H4d by Dr. Monia, but H4d did not care what he was called as long as the doctor and everyone else left him alone to do his job.

H4d was pointed to have been away from his den so long, as 5.3 minutes had passed already and another 1.2 minutes would pass before he would arrive back at his lab. Inevitable! There was so much to play. Much of the economic prosperity of House Monia was in the analyst's pale, long-fingered hands, not hands, of course, for the analyst interacted with his grider games primarily in his mind. Even as he sat gazing his weakly boomer—the one time a week that he simply had to leave his sanctuary—he interacted with the games. But this was not adequate. Only when surrounded by his AI, emotion, and raw data cranking organic computers, could H4d attain his potential. This being the case, H4d hurried as quickly as his feeble, ghostly legs would carry him.

The door of the analyst's den was open for almost a second longer than was needed for the analyst to enter. This lag was programmed into the system to allow time for the dragging tubes to cross the threshold before the door sealed shut—needed security and tightly to ensure that no peepers sneaked through it.

H4d later deduced that D Light exploited this delay in the door's closing to slip in behind him. Only after H4d had settled down in his chair and had all of his tubes reattached to the life support by the service bot did the analyst detect that something was amiss. Although confusion displaced rage across his visual cortex, his real eyes—the ones used to scrutinize the dozens of monitors around him—noticed a misplaced lamp in his peripheral vision.

The analyst did not want to draw his attention to the lamp. He had better things to do. Certainly, it was not important. Still, it was unexpected and so with a great act of will, the analyst flicked his eyes over to the corner. The lamp was the same from the dinner party of the night ago. D Light was the human's name.

"Why are you here? Please leave." H4d spoke as clearly as he could, which came out as a crackling whine. His careful voice was the result of nearly unused vocal cords and it irritated him that he had to use them now. The closest analogy the analyst had for his ancient human-inspired vocal system was that of computer floppy drives in the time of early

computer networking. It was slow, it was slow, using a wire divergent from the norms. Hearing nearly exhausted his patience with his earlier sentence, the analyst opened the portal of his ear with a flicker of a thought and then returned his attention to the members, rapidly shifting from one to the other. The human was expected to let himself out.

But the lamp did not move. Mildly irritating as this was, Hal ignored it. Analysts were highly skilled at tuning out extraneous topics.

"I want to know how to stop the MetaGame," the lamp stated.

The analyst knew what the human was referring to. He knew just about everything that was known, particularly everything that occurred in his own house. But the analyst was not interested in talking to the meekness giant. He would ignore D Light. Surely the human would see the futility of his questions and leave.

D Light raised his loaded crossbow.

Hal glanced up and then back to his members again. Hal knew D Light's profile. The player was human, but not stupid. "Not in your best interest," he said disinterestedly. "You would not gain the information you seek by killing me."

D Light lowered his weapon slightly, now aiming it at the analyst's legs. He paused there for a moment and then slung the crossbow back over his shoulder. "I'll smash your machine!" D Light erupted like a crazed man. "All this shit you need—I'll smash them, bash them against the floor!"

The soundst to Hal like a more plausible threat. His eyes darted away from the screen, over to D Light, and then back to the screen again. "To end the game, either win or lose," the analyst answered.

Hal considered playing for the guards. However, they, along with all the other so-called "intelligent life," had been evacuated from the Inner Sanctum. Such evacuations were routine in the Inner Sanctum. Aside from real emergencies due to rogue microbes and the like, the doctor would run occasional drills. But this unscheduled quarantine had lasted too long and the temporary bar given to Hal was inadequate for his work. Therefore, the analyst seized an opportunity to escape back into the Inner Sanctum, back where real grading could get done. Up until now, escaping back home had seemed like an optimal move despite the time it cost him to hack out of the network, quarantine to get Chud-accuse. Now Hal was not so sure.

No, the guards would come too late to be of use if they came at all. Where yet, Father would have him evacuated again. It would be a terrible productivity hit for the analyst.

"I don't want to win or lose," D Light clarified. "I do not want to destroy the product or die myself. I just want the quant to end." D Light took a step closer to the analyst's desk.

Hal regarded the human more carefully now. He ran an analysis of the expression on the face of D Light's face. His eyes were wide and bloodshot, his face was pale, and his chin trembled. His appearance was indicative of one suffering from sleep dysregulation, but beyond that he also appeared to be under significant stress. Panic? Anger? Hal often found it difficult to tell these emotions from appearance and body language alone. A sniffer could measure D Light's pheromone signature and get a better reading, but Hal had never needed a sniffer in his bar before.

"I am afraid I do not know how to end your game," replied Hal. "Remember, you entered the MetaGame under your own free will and agreed to abide by the rules. I have examined over the rules of your current game and it is quite clear that you must either win or lose to end the game. Alternatively, if I think survival is your goal, you could attempt to escape the Inner Sanctum and by doing so, escape the censors present here. However, all exits are sealed and I do not have the key, not that it matters because the key changes every fifteen minutes. Yet another alternative would be to obtain some caller repellent. I do not have any. Unlike many here, I was designed for the Inner Sanctum and the smell of my flesh is of no interest to the censors; therefore I have no need of external repellent that is rebuffed."

Unfortunately, this explanation did not satisfy D Light, who grabbed a nearby monitor, ripped it off its housing, and flung it down on the stone floor with a crash.

Hal recoiled as though wounded himself and cried out. He wrung his hands miserably at D Light. "NO! Stop that! Just the loss of that monitor often would cut back Hal's productivity by perhaps 0.5% until replaced. Everything in Hal's lab had been optimized over the years. Every piece of equipment was the right tool for the job and was positioned in just the right place. As bad as the loss of the monitor was, Hal shouldn't think what would happen if the monitor he knew as the Artificial Intelligence machine!"

D Light seemed oblivious to the cries of the analyst as he pulled down yet another monitor that splintered and clinked as it was obliterated on the floor.

"DAMN YOU!" Hal screamed at him. It was alien for Hal to curse. For once, he did not know what to do. Perhaps if he had time to analyze the situation, but this monitor was literally ripping the air apart!

"This will cost you everything! STOP!"

The crazed human was oblivious, as though in some mad trance.

"You did that!" Hal shouted. "You made the MetaGame! You can't ask me to fix what you made! I can't! I can't!"

D Light paused and looked up at the salt giant analyst. D Light's face was flush with exertion. His nose breathing heavily. He looked slightly puffed, but reached up to grab another monitor.

"Stop! Stop! I'll send you an architect. The answer is there!"

you, sleep?"

For the first time in his life, Hal had something desperately Unathwarted; he sent one of the most top secret archives in his possession. He sent the Night Harvest archive. Hal would later regret it. He would later decide that it would have been more prudent to lose the entire lot than to succumb to the terrorist act, but standing idly while watching his tools get crushed was unbearable. Although Hal was designed to find violence laudable, had he any weapon he might have rendered the human.

D Light stopped his campaign. "My Son," he whispered with shock and exultation as he received the archive. He slumped against the wall and slowly lowered himself to the floor to avoid falling.

Chapter 32

Democracy is not dead, merely unconscious.

—Excerpt from "Monologs of an Immortal" by Dr. Studly Munia

Despite the fact that Hal sent Seregrous the encryption key along with the archive, it took over a minute for the content to be decrypted. D Light had never received anything with such high security.

Night Harvesting Executive Summary:

Artificial Intelligence alone is insufficient to power a framework as unfathomably complex as The Game. Combined, there are over twenty-eight billion humans and intelligent products in existence today. These beings make up an astoundingly intricate network of relationships and interconnective knowledge. Only by leveraging these nodes is it possible to optimize The Game and enable an overarching consciousness (the OverSoul) to emerge from this collective intelligence. The means by which this intelligence is tapped is through the most obvious available, which is to say, by tapping into the Mind-Interface Chips implanted in the majority of intelligent organic beings.

The type of "work" gleaned by Night Harvesting falls under one of two categories: one, gathering data known by subjects (data mining) and two, by answering questions (data processing).

It was determined after numerous studies that probing a subject's mind-interface chips was best done while the subject slept. While awake, the subjects tended to be mislead by what was often considered a "mind hack." Even when subjects were compliant they tended to try to manipulate the probe for their own benefit. For example, when a subject was posed the question of whether fuel for transport should be taxed, their answer depended largely on how often they used transport themselves. Despite being given evidence suggesting a different decision, subjects would generally make choices based on self interest and/or beliefs in which they had previous investment.

In addition to greater objectivity while asleep and unconscious of the probe, subjects' minds were also much more pliable. For example, when The Game wanted a logical answer to a question and the subject was asleep, it was very easy to stimulate the subject's brain (primarily the left frontal lobe in this example) to help elicit the desired "mindset" for logical thinking. On the other hand, if an emotional response was desired, other respective brain tissue were stimulated.

In this way, mind queries were able to better fine tune the information it extracted. Using the example above, the question of the transport fuel tax could be weighed both logically and emotionally to ensure that any measure taken made the correct tradeoff between best selection and the "emotional pulse" of those the tax would be levied upon.

Due to these findings and the obvious realization that subjects were not making important use of their minds while asleep anyway, it was decided that wide-scale harvesting would be done only on sleeping subjects.

As a brief overview, Night Harvesting works like this:

Software bots called "crawlers" are constantly parsing over the Mind Interface Chips of players in search for sleepers. Mind that are asleep leave distinct brain signatures and are therefore easy to identify by crawlers.

Once a sleeper is identified, it is added to the billions on the harvesting list.

The OverSoul and The Game provided cover by her; use this list as a resource for queries and information gathering. For example, if the OverSoul wants to know whether a war permit should be approved, she may call a random set of sleepers from the two opposing Houses. In addition, she may select a few unassociated sleepers knowledgeable on war to make an unbiased cost/benefit analysis.

Of course, given the complexity of The Game and the reach of the OverSoul, there are billions of such "queries" going on at any given time.

Not only does AI make use of sleepers, but sleepers make use of one another. Sometimes the sleepers are known to each other and other times they are paired together by the crawlers. In this way, the OverSoul is able to cobble together entire unconscious teams that can solve difficult

Albino, perhaps those same scars would have slightly softening when visible. As mentioned, certain subjects are hampered by their emotions and biased by their desires and prejudices. In addition, deeper scars are more efficient than their visible counterparts because they share their minds freely. Such Reveling with strangers is seldom done by snake players due to security/privacy issues.

Truly, Night Harvesting has thus far outstripped our expectations in that it has since become the life-blood of The Game and featured upon the OverSeed literally unopposed wisdom, and thus divine credibility.

D Light opened his eyes as he finished the summary. "We are all harvested without consent, without even knowledge of it?" He heard him from trying to process what he had just read.

"No," answered Hld, "but that is beside the main point. You are part of the OverSeed. We all are. Therefore, why don't you take your new found perspective and leave?" Hld waved off the intruder.

"This is unbelievable...I..." D Light's words trailed off as he discovered there were no words to convey what he felt.

Hld paused while his eyes glowed over as though communicating with a spirit and continued conveying information to D Light. "I see you...Yes, there you are in the harvest log. Yes, your Mother Lays and Father Olives, even that bodyguard...I mean the one you seek to destroy now, Lly, she too was harvested. And others..." Hld paused again. "My Soul. My own Father? The doctor is involved?" Hld asked himself out loud in disbelief.

D Light shook his head emphatically. "No, I did not make this. Lly did not make this game."

As Hld continued to speak, he found it easier. His vocal system was shuddering back to life. "You did create the seed and now you come to me, break my instruments and demand that I do your game because it has not gone the way you want?" Hld rapped out the condemnation.

D Light shook his head again. "It cannot be...I have not been harvested. My dreams?"

"Your dreams are fabricated?" Hld wheezed. "What would happen if Night Harvesting was common knowledge? Players would try to 'game the system.' Your dreams were like everyone's—pleasant but unworkable, but a filter to 'run over the top' of the real work going on in your mind."

"But my fantasies..."

Hld interrupted impatiently. "Your archetypal processes, including those run by your primitive faculties, are bypassed. You cannot reply something that is never recorded to begin with."

"I did remember though...I saw Avarice in a dream...She was harvesting?"

"You were harvesting? Your NeverWorld character—that which was merely a flimsy subconscious caricature of yourself? recorded, no doubt, by external means. Do you remember as the Grackles how the Authority made you defense in NeverWorld so you could be easily found? That was your idea."

"Who better to hunt myself than myself?" D Light scowled. His forehead and temples lit lightly with a cloud let. "That why didn't I just let the Authority whom I was?"

"Again, because sleepers are unaware of their identity during harvest. Otherwise, your personal interests would contaminate your analysis. For example, what if you did know who you were? Would you help the Authority hunt you down?"

The analyst continued. "In essence, harvesting does not strip you of conscious free will; however, through asymmetry, harvesting makes free will irrelevant."

D Light's face was expressionless. "So why am I here?"

Hld sighed. "Allow me to summarize it for you, after which I hope you will know me alone. Keep in mind that I am merely drawing the analysis from harvest log files. I do not have direct access to your personal archive; therefore, you will have to do some thinking of your own."

The analyst paused as he closed his eyes and then began, "You are here to fulfill a prayer, a prayer you recently sent. You asked the OverSeed 'What is the nature of my God that she is so craft?' Well, the MetaGame brought you to one of the few places in the world you could find the answer, and, incidentally, I'm fulfilling this prayer of yours right now."

D Light tilted his chin up as Serenague confirmed that D Light had indeed given that prayer soon after he tragically fell. It was only a week ago, although it felt like another life. "It was my destiny to know, to find out about Night Harvesting?" D Light asked.

"I wouldn't call it destiny. I would call it 'opportunity.' The OverSeed is the most powerful entity in human history, but she cannot control fate, absolutely." Hld's sentence was veering thin.

"But why not just send me straight to Dr. Momoa? Why did Lly need to be involved?"

"You are not the only player in The Game, D Light," the analyst resumed. "My Father had a prayer to fulfill too. The demon girl is fit him, for reasons not specified in his harvest log."

"Lly's coming here was the doctor's prayer?" D Light was puzzled even more.

"I said you would have to think, not simply repeat everything I

"But" Hal's voice cracked. "No, it was his prayer. Why else would the demons follow a fool like you? Given that my father is haunted in her, I suspect she is greater than I. In her harvest she corrupted and in her waking time... No doubt she felt compelled. Initially, as you humans call it. Although she did not consciously know it, she was being drawn to him."

"And that was why we got the quest to become demons. Otherwise we would have turned her in. She latched a ride with us...2x. Mona's prayer latched a ride on my own," D Light murmured.

For the first time, D Light saw the slightest smile appear on the analyst's face. "Indeed, efficiency is core to The Game."

"And this quest, where we hunt down and kill L.J.—whose prayer is being answered now?"

Chapter 33

When you want something with all of your soul, the entire universe will conspire to prevent it.

—Minister A. Dade from his Archives From the Pulpit

Hal took as much care as he could stand in answering D Light's question. From the harvesting logs it was clear that Dwyer and Lynn were the main drivers of the most recent quest. They each had their own emotional centers—but and only, respectively. However, their main motivation was simple logic. L.J. was designed to be hunted, and hunting her was consistent with the theme of the Metaverse. Hal decided to tell D Light this, but he also added a lie. According to Hal's analysis, it was important to keep D Light invested in The Game. Otherwise, the fool might do anything.

"Dwyer, Lynn, and... you created this quest," Hal answered.

"No! No, that's not true!" D Light spat out.

"The Overlord knows us better than we know ourselves," Hal noted the lie.

"I have to stop if I don't want this."

"The wheels are already in motion," Hal assured him. "As I said in the beginning, you created this game and now you must play it out."

D Light covered his face with his hands and was silent for several long seconds. Finally, he spoke, "The Night Harvest is essentially a RaxFlink, a RaxFlink with billions of others at once."

It was not, not technically, however, Hal nodded with certainty. The analyst lied where his was going.

"I'll open a RaxFlink to everyone. I'll shut my prayer to God. She will hear me."

The desperation of humankind can always be counted on. Hal thought to himself. A connection subject trying to use a RaxFlink as though it were a Night Harvest was likely to be lethal. In a Night Harvest, dissonance only communicated with other dissonance and were otherwise protected thousand hells. And the volatile D Light's mind would not be able to withstand unfettered access to the Collective Consciousness.

In the ensuing minute, Hal pretended to resist D Light's demand for the encryption key to lock out of the network quarantine. He pretended to resist giving D Light the software crack required to open an infinite RaxFlink request loop, a crack necessary to circumvent the security software onboard Senguous. Hal argued that such software was illegal and would result in disclosure of confidential knowledge.

As Hal sent the required content to D Light, he touched his chest, still moist from his earlier tears. Until now, Hal did not realize that he was capable of crying. Long ago he had inspected his own architectural specification and believed all such emotional centers had been stripped out from his original human template. There must still be a human left. *Assuming?* Hal thought. Hal updated the observation to The Chord for review. Perhaps someone would want to sponsor a grander game based on the data point. Where could these emotions be emanating from? *My brain does not have the proper architecture.*

By the time D Light fell, smacking the side of his head against the stone floor, the analyst had all but forgotten about the policy incident.

Master, this protocol is NOT RECOMMENDED.
Senguous warned.

D Light ordered Senguous to run the software crack and initiate the infinite RaxFlink request.

Immediately, his senses began to quake as though a tsunami wave was approaching. Then, suddenly, the roar was deafening and the light blinding. It was as though D Light had been seized by a rash that pulled him in all directions, causing the very flesh of his consciousness to be torn out. From a billion entities emerged a voice like, and the voices sent him were beyond any ability to process. And there were countless too, a deluge of emotions—fear, love, horror, hope, anger—all of which overcame him so quickly that they seemed to occur simultaneously.

This was pure pain. It was as though he was on the floor head to toe. He was being smashed against a wall of dazzling color.

Somewhere in his consciousness he was aware of Serengeti, the cat was twitching, yiding, and meowing as though on the verge of an insane and devolpmental pappage.

Through the fire he heard an impetral voice, "Jarry!" He knew the voice. It was the Dark Queen, Queen Pheobah had found him. She was behind him and she was staring into him. Ahead of him and before was the edge of a cliff and beyond which there was blackness, the despoet of nothing, the infinite void. He could not think. The pain was too much for that, but there was an insupportable desire to jump. Certainly, oblivion was better than this.

"Jarry!" the queen commanded again.

He did not. Instead, he turned to the queen and shouted, "Stop the MetaGame!" But the queen was too powerful. Her light consumed his mind and the void took him away.

Master, your Random request resulted in a massive seizure. As a countermeasure, I deployed sedatives to force you into an unconscious state; however, this action was delayed due to a critical error in my system which required me to reboot. I've detected some disruption to your neural network, including some possible organic brain damage.

D Light let his father's words echo passively through his mind. His head pounded hard with every fast heartbeat while sharp, stabbing pains pulsed through his head like someone was trying with his brain with an electrical probe. He was not sure if he could communicate back if he even wanted to. His left ear a dead vessel, a dead vessel with just enough brain activity left to still feel pain. But then the open player remembered his important objective which forced him—with some effort—to ask.

Serengeti, the MetaGame... is it still on?

No, Master. The current quest, *The Hunted Hunt Themselves*, is still active.

D Light allowed himself fall back into unconsciousness.

When D Light woke the second time, he could at least think, but everything came with some discomfort. He felt the need to sleep for a week or more, but he knew he could not. If nothing else, there were the cullers to consider. His repellent had completely worn off by now; they would be coming for him.

At some point during the fifteen hours he had been unconscious, D Light had been dragged out of the analyzer's lair to door vent shut. D Light did not need to check the door to know it was locked.

There were a dozen messages for him from Lyra and Djosur. He reviewed the messages as he slowly, incrementally got to his feet. There were the expected questions and threats. *Hi, last Lily. I think she's somewhere in the garden. We're coming back to you. What is your status? Are you alive? We got some crazy Random from you. What's going on? Better for you that you are dead than ignoring us. The lie was on.*

D Light knew the right move was to give status to the rest of his team, but his only compulsion now was to find Lily. His intuition told him where she was, and now he knew to trust it.

Lily's normally golden blond hair was darkened and slicked back as she swam in the lake. She was swimming toward D Light, but she did not appear to see his hidden in the thick foliage. Surrounding the lake on that side, sheets of marble rock jangled down steeply into the water, save a small sandy beach. It did not take an analyst to know where she was swimming.

The OverSoul has brought you to me! D Light thought. He wondered if she had been sleeping at some point over the past few hours which prompted them to rendezvous here. Or perhaps the OverSoul has some connection even while we are awake. Either way, it is her will, the will of the Divinity—this game is about to end.

D Light ducked back into the garden and crept over to the beach. As he stepped, concealing himself behind a tall flower bed, he heard in the distance a culler's call, followed by another, and then another. *They have found something.*

D Light opened a blink to everyone, which was readily accepted. *Believe he could report. Lyra sent a thought with maximum urgency. Thank Soul, you're alive! They're coming, the cullers are coming!*

I found her! I found Lily! D Light reported. *She is at the lake.*

For this sake, if you have a shot, take it! Djosur blurted over the blink.

There isn't much time, D Light! Lyra emphasized. *You need to end this fast!*

It was a long thirty seconds or so before Lily slowly emerged from the water. Her bluish blue eyes were fixed on some distant point as though exorcised by The Great Sky standing patiently on top of a tall off on the horizon. She made a move toward the concealment of nearby hedges, but stopped when D Light ordered her to do so. He stopped at them bellow, he

showbowed down on her. She was caught in the open.

There was fear on her face, but that emotion was hailing with relief. A long hush like this without the benefits of drugs was definitely taking its toll on the product and more, at least, she would be released.

The analyzer was right. The wheels are in motion. I cannot stop the MetaGame any other way. D, Light thought.

D, Light was surprised that he did not pull the trigger immediately. There was no reason not to. Nothing to learn from her, no interrogation necessary: only her death would end the game. *The OverSoul has brought us together. Kill the product and end the game. The OverSoul wants me to win, as she loves me.* The thoughts burned through him with great intensity, like there were other voices too, distant but clear: *God is love. D, Light. You must not betray God. You must not betray yourself.*

His eyes started to burn. His whole body began to tremble. He wanted to shout and curse, but instead he choked and cried out, "I don't want that! I don't want the points or this damned game! I don't want to lose... I don't want to lose you!"

Lily fell to her knees. Her torso shuddered under a sudden outpour. At first she covered her face as though ashamed, and then she looked up at D, Light through tears and between heaving breaths, choked sally and said, "I hid the bombs, the repellent. You can have it."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," D, Light lamented, now weeping. Tears ran freely down his cheeks. He had never cried in front of another human being in that other life he'd led.

What the hell is going on, D, Light? What is your status? The blink was a desperate plea from Lily. *Please, please, please and this!* Lily's thought thread was not crisp. D, Light had reacted threads like this before. They were indicative of panic.

Holy shit, they're class D+over bland. We're in a mess! We're going to die in a fucking mess! Oh shit, I can see them!

Lily begged. *Save us, D, Light! I swear to God I'll love you forever! I'll repay you with you. We'll live together forever. I love you. Stop it, please make it stop.* Lily's thoughts poured in like flood water.

Through sea-blurred eyes, D, Light witnessed his finality. *Sergeant, help me do it. Give me something so I don't fail... It's the OverSoul's will. I'm failing her.*

Master, I am uncertain as to what client will facilitate your request. However, I will attempt to suppress your inhibition with ScanMind™.

Although the drug's effect was nearly instantaneous, D, Light still did not pull the trigger. Rather than its intended effect, the drug merely replicated D, Light's muzzling with cold resignation.

Before Lily was ripped to shreds, she had completely opened her audio and video feeds to broadcast what she saw and heard. It ended so quickly there was little to see—a blur of hair and skin tearing up the rear as though driven up by a powerful magnetic force. Terrible scath and claws and mending outman as flesh tore. Gurgling screams and hoarse shouts. And then there was nothing.

Through robes Lily screamed, "D... D, Light, they're coming. I can hear them. You need the repellent." With these words she plucked him the location of the bomb; it was hidden under a rack at the edge of a stream. It was not too far from where he was now, but the cello was close.

Sergeant, give me the odds of survival.

Master, give distance and time required for metastabilization—

Just give me the odds!

Fifty-three percent chance of survival, Sergeant answered.

"You need to go! Do what you must and go!" Lily begged.

Fifty-three percent is not good enough, D, Light thought. Running for my life is not good enough—not this time. Do what I must?

"No, there is something I must do. I still have time to make it right." D, Light on down and Sergeant walked over cautiously, clinging to his branches across from its master.

Sergeant, I want full sensory overload with maximum power diverted to a Cloud connection at maximum straight to The Authority Source Tree.

Lily screamed at him to get up, but the sensory overload deafened him. She kicked wildly and slapped him, but he hardly felt it. His glazed over eyes clocked dimly as his mind connected. The official banner of the Divine Authority appeared momentarily while D, Light's credentials were processed.

D, Light, please #49637593, status "denies." How can the Divine Authority be of service?

I wish to correct an error, D, Light responded.

The Divine Authority appreciates your time in remedying this matter; however, due to the possible security ramifications of your request, we must do a Deep Scan to confirm that this change is in the best interest of the OverSoul. Would you like to learn more about Deep Scan?

No, D, Light answered.

Very well, if you are not familiar with the terms and conditions of Deep Scanning, please review them now.

the shelves blown from Lily had stopped. D Light did not know why. He could not afford to wonder why. He had to get on task.

Like days before when he had attempted to check into the Source Tree, D Light saw a graphical progress bar constantly appearing him of how much time he could expect the scan to continue. Like before, he felt tingling all over his body, experienced both audio and visual hallucinations, and felt a library of fleeting emotions.

My Soul is yours to know. From somewhere under the folds of his mind the words God is love, God is love, God is love ... echoed.

And then, finally, the tingling stopped.

The Overland is pleased to grant you access at this time. Based on your scan, you will require approximately two minutes to complete your transaction, after which point you will be logged out. Please begin your transaction in five... ten... one...

D Light plunged into the Source Tree, the code and data repository that made up The Game. There was no time to waste. Quickly, he found Lily's profile. From what he could tell, the Reserve from which she escaped did not want her reported as missing. He did not take the time to ponder why. Within her detailed profile, he zoomed in on the following data fields:

OriginatorID: Hestia Sapiens903184312508 (Campus)
Access: Accessible, Lvl3, Takedown, Cause: G0111
Status: Dormant
Level: N/A

D Light changed the data to the following:

OriginatorID: Harum
Alias: Hail 4 Love
Status: Player
Level: 63

He thought it best to give her a relatively low level since she was such a noob and would attract attention with a level not commensurate with her experience. He then tried a few more fields of her profile to make sure she was compliant.

Oh, and this structure will need something to start off with, he mused.

D Light then transferred all of his own desirable points over to Hail 4 Love. With the last task complete, he was finally logged off. The gatekeeper software had indeed predicted the time of his task to within a few seconds.

D Light now ran for the repellent, and as he did so he felt great happiness and relief. He felt as though he had just shed his old skin he had been encumbered with all his life. He felt like he was flying—not flying as a man aided by a machine, but as a man buoyed up by his very soul. She was safe. He had made things right. This was his moment; his prayer had been fulfilled. It was the first time in his long life that he did not feel alone.

The final moments of D Light's life came not as a flood of memories that rushed passed his eyes, but rather as a movie scene played in slow motion. There was Lily, glowing in the light of the mid-day sun. She was moving toward him over so slowly, a blue veil-clad body in her hand. Her eyes were wide with terror and her mouth formed a scream.

When D Light heard the caller dashing up behind him, its cloaked limbs ripping and humming the soft soil beneath its feet, he was not afraid; nor did he turn to look back. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on Lily as long as he was able.

Chapter 34

My prayer has been answered! The Overland, in her mercy has both brought my lamb back to me and performed a miracle! Now human, she can join my family as a free player! Lily is good. She is loyal to those she loves. She is intelligent and sensitive. I know this because she, along with her line, was designed this way—my greatest and I dare say, most beautiful creation.

—Excerpt from Dr. Mousa's Journal "Musings of an Immortal"

Witnessing D Light's death would be the last real trauma Lily, known briefly as Hail 4 Love, would experience for more than one hundred years. She had been running back toward D Light with the precious blue bottle. She could see the caller hissing down on him with lightning speed, but when it caught up, she was still too far off to do anything but watch him get ripped apart. Her knees began to buckle and her first impulse was to shield her eyes from the horror, but instead, she found herself charging the beast with wild abandon. She thrashed about, screaming at the top of her lungs, punching her determined fists into hard muscle and bones.

Just as he died, the creature at the ground her. But it is short wild, having thickened the meat of its legs; it then swerved at Lily—not to lose, but in disgust of the repellent emanating from her pores—and scampered off.

Jacob marched through the lower Sanctum civilly enough to consider time, but without the subtle energy costs of flight. Not long after entering the garden, three callers charged from

in order in a coordinated attack. Jacob, having confirmed that the cultists were private property and not carrying modern weapons, decided to wait until they were only a few meters from him so he could be absolutely certain they meant him harm. Although it was unlikely that the cultists were capable of actually damaging Jacob, the angel nevertheless took the precautionary measure of detonating a bomb just above his own head. The concussion and heat of the blast did not breach the material threshold of Jacob's invulnerable armor; however, the bomb detonation embled the cultists as raggedly burning body parts.

Aside from the minor setbacks, there was no resistance to the investigation of the lesser Succubus. Dr. Monroe presented Jacob with the evidence—four corpses consisting of one predator and three humans. It was confirmed that all but of the deceased were demons guilty of aiding and abetting yet another demon. However, curiously, Jacob could not call up any records of who the missing demon was. He decided to do a sweep of the area.

That's your target, you stupid fool! Katris sent her thought to the angel as high priority.

She couldn't believe it. That blind bimbo bitch demon was standing there not three meters away and the damn machine insisted that she was human—that she was a player of "no interest to low enlightenment."

Check, again! ordered Katris. She then spent the required points to get The Tool to do another visual, sonographic, and DNA scan on the girl.

She was the one. She had to be! Katris screamed in her mind.

After the second round of scans came back negative, Katris tried to get a third scan, at which point the angel terminated the blob and sent the generic error message. *Hee, hee, hee; but you are unworthy of access at this time.*

"Fucking computer!" Katris shouted, steering a fellow player passing by on the otherwise tranquil paths of the nuclear orchard.

"So, Daughter, if you wanted to become a god, how would you go about it?" By now Lily could expertly read her father's mischievous expression. He asked the question with pleasure. She knew that the doctor enjoyed nothing more than good food and a stimulating conversation with his "babe".

"To become a god, I'd want a monopoly on violence," answered Sara, the doctor's first concubine, from across the table.

"Yes, Sara," replied the doctor, "although I wouldn't say the Overlord has a monopoly on violence. Nonetheless, she certainly does have a monopoly on the most effective violence, thanks to her modern weapons."

"Ability to harness everlasting life," the priest offered.

"Yes, the flipside of effective violence is mastery over regenerative medicine. So, let's just lump those two together as godlike power over life and death. What else?" the doctor asked.

"Effective rulership," Love Monkey proposed confidently while glaring at Sara. "Provide an effective economic and religious framework under which subjects find fulfilled and secure."

The doctor nodded. "Right, through The Game you gain both. What else must our god do?"

"Prayer fulfillment," Bello blurted.

"Oh, I'd separate that away from effective rulership. Prayers, as well as most mundane wants, are fulfilled by playing The Game well."

"It's distinct, Daddy?" Bello protested.

"No, it's part of The Game," the doctor countered. "It was The Game that fulfilled my prayer for one of my Star Sisters to return to me. Had you seen you the Night Harvesting machine?"

"No, I will not!" Bello interrupted. "Those are classified. Only one designated analyst per major House is given that security clearance."

"Did you give it to D Light?" the doctor asked croakily.

"What I gave to that man resulted in my security credentials being revoked?" Bello started to choke. "My successor has learned from my mistake and will not repeat it!"

"Oh, and which one of your buddy lab friends has the mouth now?" Bello asked.

"That's classified too," Bello retorted. "And," the analyst added, "Night Harvesting is a myth. Nothing more."

Bello's mouth dropped in mock surprise. "I didn't know analysts could be so cheeky. Had you to be a reject. We should sell it immediately!"

"Oh no, I'd be my favorite and I like that he lies. It comes in handy sometimes." The doctor clapped Bello by the arm, handing a tube in the process which caused the analyst to wince.

The doctor resumed, "Okay, so we have power over life and death and effective rulership..."

"And prayer fulfillment," Bello added.

"Whatever," the doctor said with a dismissive gesture.

"Yeah, whatever. Daddy. Send me the points! Prayer fulfillment lends credibility to the godhead. A god who does

...your program is not godlike."

"Perhaps already, and prayer sufficient," the doctor conceded wearily. "What else?"

"Omnipotent knowledge of one's subjects, also done through Night Harvesting." Belbo's voice was excited.

"Very well," the doctor stated without enthusiasm.

"No, that's too far me!" Belbo squealed.

"So, you've given me four pillars of godhood. One me another," the doctor commanded.

The table was silent for a few long seconds.

"Lily?" the doctor asked.

"The ability to learn," she answered without looking up from her plate.

"Really?" The doctor's one eyebrow raised. "Now, why would the mind of a god, presumably perfect, require learning?"

"Because change is a constant," replied Lily. "Then if theoretically a mind could be made perfect for the conditions of today, sooner or later even God would need to change."

"Fine then. How would she learn?" the doctor shot back.

Love Monkey interjected with a confident tone. "Thanks to Night Harvesting, our collective consciousness is part of the OverSeed, and The Golem is distilling all the time. That should provide change enough."

The doctor frowned. "It is true that much change is done through this means, but the OverSeed has a Core Mind aside from The Golem and its participants."

"Core Mind?" Love Monkey inquired.

"Yes, most intelligent beings have a Core Mind—basic values, habits, and the like—which do not change easily. It makes up our personality and acts as the principle guide for our actions and beliefs. Likewise, the OverSeed has a Core Mind, although it might be better referred to as its 'core knows' or 'core rules.'"

"But," interrupted Love Monkey, "if I understand the nature of the OverSeed, she is not actually a single being, but a collection of billions of agents, ourselves included."

"Like the Holy Trinity of old Catholicism—multiple entities that also represent The One?"

"That may be a stretch Belbo," the doctor replied with a chuckle. "However, I believe the overall design of the OverSeed was indeed inspired by Christianity. Hardly surprising since it was the most widespread religion before The OverSeed. If economics and religion are the foundations of society as Marx and Weber asserted, respectively, so long ago, then the OverSeed has her bases covered."

The doctor popped a steamed almond roll into his mouth, chewed loudly, swallowed, and then continued. "In any case, it is important for the OverSeed to have a Core Mind. Without it, imagine a deity with a capriciously oscillating personality."

"The definition of insanity!" Belbo exclaimed.

"Correct, but at the same time her mind could not be static. The OverSeed was designed to 'evolve.' In this context that means to adapt to social and technological change over millennia." The doctor reached down the sentence with a gulp of water wine.

Love Monkey pointed a small index finger at her father. "As you already said, such change is risky. To change the Core Mind is to change the personality. What if the core mind was changed to that of a psychotic person? I mean, how does it know right from wrong? Even human ethics shift over time."

Lily folded the question. "The OverSeed needs human beings to teach her," she said. "That is why D Light was able to access the Source Tree. The Deep Scan revealed that his intentions derived from..." Lily paused momentarily and then finished her sentence in the gentlest of whispers "...them love."

The doctor's wine stained lips pursed into a circle of satisfaction. "Yes, and then she mirrors Christianity again—God is Love!—perhaps the core belief of Christianity. And although it may not yet be possible for the OverSeed to directly experience love as humanity thinks of it, she can detect such love in her subjects' brain signatures using a Deep Scan."

Love Monkey's was skeptical. "Haven't you heard of a 'love mind' test? You're telling me this is how the OverSeed evinces personality? If so, it's a wonder we haven't all been obliterated or worse by now."

Belbo laughed. "Well, if love was running the show, then everyday would be Valentine's Day by Divine Law!"

"And we would have to take everything we see, even things that aren't cute," Love Monkey added.

"And constantly wear pink," Curious, Scourge chimed in.

The jokes ceased as Lily, the analyst, pounded the table as hard as his toothy muscles would allow while shouting for them to stop.

After they all had quieted, the doctor said, "Yes, yes, early phases of romantic love are biochemically very close to some forms of mental abuse."

"The Deep Scan takes that into account" the analyst enunciated, desperately wanting the tedious dialogue to end so he could resume his work. "In order to gain direct access to the Core Mind, your brain signature must fall within specific parameters. Please, this conversation is pointless. May I return to my calculations?"

the doctor ignored the question. "That is correct, you may be packed against the question. I had a concern, you may be just be 'spending a charity', as they said to say, and change the mind of a god. The 'love' I'm not necessarily referring to romantic love. I'm referring to a purity of purpose, clarity of mind, and an absolute trust."

Hefko scratched her face and adopted a pensive expression. "So, D Light had this Beccal lost state of mind when he hacked into the OverSeed source code, or... the Core Mind, and changed Lily's status to human?"

The doctor sighed. "It was not a luck, dear. As already stated, D Light was subjected to a Deep Brain Scan. The OverSeed essentially *dows* what D Light planned to do and paranoied it. This is my point. The OverSeed allows herself to be taught by those worthy of teaching her."

"Teach what? Teach a lie?" the priest now joined in. He bowed his head to Lily. "No offense, but Lily is not human."

"That's what I tried to tell D Light, but he was didn't listen," the doctor replied and sighed with a smile.

"Ah, what could be more romantic?" Hefko exclaimed as she dropped a scrap of meat to her haggard neighbor. "What our ablying singleton father could not do with pure therapy, D Light accomplished with good of fashioned love."

The doctor grimaced.

"But," the priest blurted out, "the ramifications of this... this contradiction?"

The doctor nodded while mining his ear for a bit of loose wax. "Indeed, it is a contradiction in the Core Mind. This is how revolutions are born."

"Revolutions? Revolt against oneself?" the priest asked incredulously.

"Indeed, the purest form of the word 'revolution' would be a revolt against self," the doctor confirmed.

Marissa, *would you like me to publish the archive now?* Smeagol's robotic voice pressed into Lily's mind.

Lily had been working on an important project over the last few months. D Light's deep archive of the MetaGame, as well as other archives she had gathered from other families, were packaged together and deployed inconspicuously as a blasted folder in her upload queue.

My first contribution to The Game, she silently mused.

Lily was planning to spend all the points doled over to her by D Light to ensure the archive received appropriate attention in The Cloud. Given the tremendous bounty she was paying and the information the archive contained, at least some of the major media outlets would corroborate it. Moreover, she knew there was a ready audience for the story. The fate of Lily and D Light had risen ever higher as players hypothesized their fate. As one player on the Near/Field forum asked, "They, whenever happened to that deviant and the hot Swedish chick?"

D Light's remains, most notably his brain, were put on ice by Dr. Marissa shortly after death. Theoretically, if the archive caught fire on The Cloud and generated enough points, the windfall could win D Light his solution and, hence, his eligibility for resurrection. It was rare to be cruel after passing away, but Lily had studied one example of a player whose inventionropolis won her solution three years postmortem.

Perhaps he could win his MetaGame after all, she thought.

Lily smiled and raised her glass. "To revolution," she declared. The Marissa family raised their glasses and declared in unison, "To revolution!"

And with that, Lily promptly uploaded their story.

About the Author

Sam Landstrom has been a technical writer for Microsoft for several years, having written hundreds of online articles teaching software development. Previously, he programmed robots for a DNA sequencing laboratory at the University of Washington that contributed to the Human Genome Project, among other genome sequencing projects.

In his free time, Sam enjoys writing (of course), listening to audio books while driving around (e.g. walking the dog), playing Dungeons and Dragons with his co-workers, overindulging and hanging out with his wife and two kids in the Seattle area.

You can reach Sam from his website at <http://samlandstrom.com>, or head over to the Amazon store page where you can post a review and/or discuss. <http://www.amazon.com/MetaGame>, <http://www.amazon.com/4002431801>. Sam reads everything that goes up on the page.

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