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Wetware City
&
Utilising Play and Emergent Storytelling in Writing
Fiction

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Abstract

The creative component of this thesis consists of the novel *Wetware City*, a stacked narrative that consists of memories of a man trying to live forever, a mystery plot involving a kidnapped scientist and a MMORPG videogame, and the story of a wargaming miniature desperately trying to stop the war he finds himself entangled in against his will. All three strands examine themes of transhumanism and the power of gaming as a force that drives storytelling and can result in meaningful relationships in the real world.

The critical component explores the concept of play as a powerful tool, one that writers can use to develop, experiment, and engage with their own work. Play allows us to envision other points of view and encourages experimentation, freeing us from the constraints that can come with established traditions. Particular attention is paid to the lessons we can take from other forms, such as videogames and tabletop roleplaying games, and how these allow for the development of emergent narratives. During the play experiments undertaken during this project, I developed the term ‘stacked narratives’— a term which refers to works with multiple narrative strands that are linked more strongly by theme than story, giving a writer the opportunity to create their work in a free-flowing manner. Finally, genre is examined as a force that can stifle play, by imposing limits on writers that are usually value based or commercial in concern.

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I'd like to thank the school of English and Creative Writing for funding this PhD project — without your support I would not have been able to undertake it and for that I am eternally grateful.

To Xav, Metin and Tony — thanks for being great mates and apologies for putting your likenesses in this book.

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Finally, the biggest thank you must go to my wife, Katrine Solvaag — who inspires me to be a better writer every day and always made me a cup of tea when I was down. I love you more than I can say, and this book would never have been finished without you.

Utilising Play and Emergent Storytelling in Writing Fiction

In his book, *The Well-Played Game*, Bernard De Koven defines ‘play’ as:

Play is the enactment of anything that is not for real. Play is intended to be without consequence... We can play, in fact, with anything—ideas, emotions, challenges, principles. We can play with fear, getting as close as possible to sheer terror, without ever being really afraid. We can play with being other than we are.¹

Though De Koven is specifically talking about games, he uncovers the chief power of writing fiction — it liberates us. The act of writing fiction should be an act of play, where the mind is free to both explore and test itself. Bad writing, at least in my opinion, comes from the refusal to engage in the contract of play, by which ‘we can play, in fact, with anything.’

There can be many ways that a writer will hobble themselves and refuse to play. Refusal to ‘play with being other than we are’ and an unwillingness to do the work and research that it requires is one such example. Being overly concerned with genre is another, by which a writer focuses on tropes and their subversion, meaning that they miss the chance to play with ‘anything.’ Finally, writers often forget that it is not

¹Bernard De Koven, *The Well-Played Game: A Players Philosophy* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013), p.xxiv

forbidden to play more than one game at once, missing the exciting structural, narrative, and thematic opportunities which this provides.

To imagine being other than I am for *Wetware City* required a lot of work, though not always conscious work. In the initial proposal for the project, I had focused in on two topics: the unusual biology of octopuses and Espen J. Aarseth's work on Ergodic Literature. One of these had resulted from my natural interest and the other resulted from a conscious search for elements to include in the novel. The inclusion of the Ergodic elements had grown out of the desire to include something considered 'literary' that would lend legitimacy to the project. It was not something I was particularly passionate about, but rather something I felt the project needed. When it came to sitting down and writing the book, I found I was no longer interested. The Ergodic elements were not born out of play but work.

The genesis for *Wetware City* eventually came from a chance encounter with the book *To Be a Machine* by Mark O'Connell. Focusing on the movement known as transhumanism that is 'predicated on the conviction that we can and should use technology to control the future evolution of our species.'² The obsessive claims of mostly rich white men to the cyborg identity eventually led me to the opposing view of Jillian Weise and her essay *Common Cyborg* in which she asserts: 'The cyborg is the normate's wet dream. Not a real identity that's already taken up, populated breathing over here.'³ While I did not know it at the time, this conflict would become one of the cores of the book: the real lives of cyborgs, who depend on machines to live and function, compared with the religious fervour which Silicon Valley and similar entities pursued the chance to live forever.

² Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine* (Croydon: Granta Books, 2017), p. 2

³ Jillian Weise, 'Common Cyborg', *Granta* (2018) <<https://granta.com/common-cyborg/>>

At the same time, my interest in play outside the world of fiction would eventually come to greatly inform the book. Play is a concept which transcends medium. The narrative and structural lessons we can, specifically from gaming in my case, take can help to greatly improve our storytelling skills. The first and perhaps most fundamental influence, for me, is the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*. Along with its myriad of other imitators and competitors, tabletop roleplaying is a tool which I would strongly advise every writer to have in their toolbox. The player who runs the game of *D&D* is colloquially known as the ‘Dungeon Master’ — the chief creator at the table, whose role covers ‘inventing, writing, storytelling, improvising, acting, refereeing’ among others.⁴ The chief thing that *D&D* taught me is the importance of being able to improvise. In the world of tabletop roleplaying games there is a term known as ‘railroading’ — the act by which a Dungeon Masters locks players into a story they’re not interested in. This usually manifests as a Dungeon Masters creating an epic quest, prophecy, or similar, and the players either ignoring it to do something else or mess about. *D&D* is a co-operative game, and as such the Dungeon Master must be willing (and able) to improvise a new story on the spot, as well as all the characters, places, and items that they will need to tell that story.

As well as being great training in general for a writer, it provides the richest opportunities for writers to play, particularly in the case of when your writing surprises you. Many writers have spoken about characters ‘surprising them’ — doing or saying things that the author did not intend and may be at odds with the plan that they laid out. In *Wetware City* I had not planned for the character of Commander Metalfist to die at the midpoint of the novel, killed by chittering monstrous insects after he had tasted happiness for the first time in years. It completely blindsided me and my

⁴ Wizards of the Coast, *Dungeon Masters Guide* (Delémont, Wizards of the Coast, 2014), p.4

supervisor was furious as well, having grown attached to Metalfist, and his importance to the story. It had felt right that Metalfist died there though, and from that surprise I managed to bring him back, tying the story back into the central theme of transhumanism and the reality of its hardships and terrors. It gave me the opportunity to write the chapter concerning the creation of the Megasoldiers, one which I personally believe is one of the strongest in the book, all out of the improvisational skills I had gained from tabletop roleplaying games.

This kind of emergent storytelling was also influenced by my time in the massively multiplayer online game *EVE Online*. Set in the fictional galaxy of New Eden, thousands of players take on the role of spaceship pilots. The game has no innate story, only the adventures that the players have. The entire economy is player driven, from the asteroids being mined to the ships being built, which results in massive player alliances that will go to war with each other over valuable solar systems and the resources contained within. So much has happened in the game's nineteen-year history, that player Andrew Goren undertook the monumental task of writing a history of the wars, betrayals, heists, and espionage that has taken place in the game. My own time in that game was more humble, mining space rocks and occasionally seeing off a local gang of pirates, but the scope of what was possible in this game and the dedication of the people playing it only further cemented my conviction that emergent storytelling is a powerful tool to both use and inspiration from when writing.

The fictional videogame of *Wetware City* is directly inspired by *EVE Online*, the game providing the ideal model for the drama inherent to playing videogames — though the world, wars and characters of *EVE* are not real, the players treat them as if they are, and eventually, the experiences and friendships developed in those virtual spaces make it matter in the real world. Some stories have achieved infamy outside the game, in particular the Guiding Hand Social Club Assassination and the infamous

heist in which *EVE*'s devilish spymaster, the Mittani, after taking everything from a player alliance, left a taunting note reading 'the Mittani sends his regards.'⁵ As these examples demonstrate the lines between the digital and real worlds are increasingly blurred as virtual actions have status in the real world.

The final source of inspiration for the novel was my return to Games Workshops *Warhammer* miniatures wargame after many years away. This aspect firmly doubles down on my belief that games matter because we treat them as if they're real, caring about the time we invest in them and the friendships we make. The battles we enacted on the tabletop and the imagined histories of the armies we were creating echoed *D&D*'s social form of storytelling, allowing input and ideas into your projects that were not your own. Writing is often portrayed as a solitary act but in fact it is actually a deeply collaborative experience. Reader feedback, working with editors both professional and amateur, even the supervisor relationship found in PhD programs all tell a story of a collaborative art form, where learning to play together results in a better end result.

Play is something that writers must ensure that they do, both while writing and within their daily lives and leisure activities. Play gives us the opportunity to create whether we are writing or not, and emergent storytelling in all its myriad of forms, whether the structured systems of *D&D* or simply the little story you come up with about the birds in the garden, is always something writers should be on the lookout for.

Of the aspects of writing that relate to play, the one that I find has the most complicated relationship is that of genre. I firmly dislike the concept of genre — I find that the categorisation of texts by similar story elements carries with it an implicit

⁵ Steven Messner, 'The 5 Greatest moments in EVE Online history', *PC Gamer* (2021) <<https://www.pcgamer.com/uk/the-5-greatest-moments-in-eve-online-history/>>

value judgement and worse, an obsession with the commercial aspects of books. Genre is for bookshops, not writers. These value judgements are often carried by writers who wish to frame their books as important or somehow better than the texts around them, a famous example being Margaret Atwood's derisive conclusion that science fiction is nothing but 'talking squids in outer space.'⁶ This was later echoed by Ian McEwan, who insisted that his novel *Machines Like Me* was not about 'travelling at 10 times the speed of light in anti-gravity boots, but in actually looking at the human dilemmas.'⁷ These frustrating takes by respected authors, are chiefly grounded in being seen as 'proper writers' and the weight their opinions carry is damaging in encouraging readers to limit the selection of texts they read. Writers who buy into this advice are only limiting their options to play in both reading and stifling the development of interests that may lead to interesting storytelling later — if I didn't enjoy the over-the-top, 'commercial' fiction of Warhammer's Black Library publishing imprint, I never would have created Commander Metalfist. The most infuriating thing is that McEwan is so close to understanding this. In saying he wants to focus on 'human dilemmas' he's aiming for what all good fiction should enable, the examination and interrogation of ourselves. His fear of somehow not being taken seriously leads him to conclude that somehow you can't do that within certain genres and story elements.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is one of the few books that can say it defined a genre. The disparate elements of what would become known as cyberpunk existed in various forms before, but until *Neuromancer* (along with *Blade Runner*) these elements had never been presented as one cohesive whole. The combination of urban

⁶ Cecilia Mancuso, 'Speculative or science fiction? As Margaret Atwood shows, there isn't much distinction', *The Guardian*, (2016), < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/10/speculative-or-science-fiction-as-margaret-atwood-shows-there-isnt-much-distinction> >

⁷ Sarah Ditum, 'It drives writers mad': why are authors still sniffy about sci-fi?', *The Guardian*, (2019), < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/18/it-drives-writers-mad-why-are-authors-still-sniffy-about-sci-fi> >

decay, transhumanism and corporate power drew on deep seated human fears about the future. What makes these two examples great, is their understanding that while genre elements can enhance the themes of a story, they are never the point of it. *Blade Runner* is ultimately about the fear of death, something to which everyone can relate. *Neuromancer* was particularly prescient, in predicting concerns about AI and the power of the internet — remember these two are not sci-fi tropes but rather a real-world reflection of what Gibson saw happening around him. Gibson played by drawing disparate elements from around him and combining them into something new but he never set-out to create cyberpunk. Creating a text that defies easy genre categorisation is something that writers should aim for, as it demonstrates a willingness to play with genre in a way that is free from value judgements. By picking disparate elements from a variety of traditions and sources, while never being beholden to the whole thing, allows writers to play in creating something genuinely new, and the bolted together Frankenstein-esque creations can often be the most exciting texts we read.

Wetware City can variously be described as science-fiction, a romance, an examination of millennial disenfranchisement, and military fiction. All of those things are true, and I drew from various different genres to create the work but in the end, genre is a tool — a framework to enhance the themes I want to discuss in a particular way, while providing a sense of the familiar to readers. In the end, I don't think it really matters what section of the bookshop *Wetware City* will end up in, as the value judgements that people will attach to the book says more about them than it does about the work.

The final element of my attempt to play while writing *Wetware City* was the inclusion of what I came to call 'stacked narratives.' Multi-narrative stories are nothing new: the technique of 'meanwhile, back at the ranch' whereby multi-narrative stories create dramatic tension by switching at the height of the action in each scene is well

established.⁸ Stacked narratives, on the other hand, is used to describe stories where multiple narrative strands (most often more than two) are connected most strongly by theme, rather than content. If the strands are connected by story, they are usually only connected tangentially. ‘Stacked’ refers to the layering of stories on top of one another, like bricks.

The king of stacked narratives, at least in my opinion, is David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*. Mitchell cleverly uses both stacked narratives and the ‘meanwhile, back at the ranch’ technique in the structure of his work: six stories ranging from the nineteenth century to a far apocalyptic future. These stories are told chronologically, one after the other, but each only consists of the first half of the story, the action breaking off at the height of the story. When the mid-point is reached, the timeline reverses and we receive the second half of the stories in reverse chronological order. Each story appears in the next as fiction, myth, or historical documents and apart from one character appearing in two stories, they are completely separate. Freed from the need to ensure that the stories he is telling are connected by plot, Mitchell creates the opportunity to play as much as he wants. He can cross genre, time, style, and form all within the same work, the cohesion of the book being predicated on whether the stories enhance each other thematically. Even within that it allows writers to add scenes to narrative strands that may not contribute to that individual strand but enhance the feeling generated within that scene. This is especially freeing in the aspect of play, sidestepping the writing dictum that if a scene can be removed from your narrative and it doesn’t collapse, then it isn’t necessary.

In *Wetware City* the most potent example of the idea of stacked narratives is Commander Metalfist because ultimately his storyline doesn’t matter. His impact on

⁸ Tony Zhuo, ‘F is for Fake (1973) – How to Structure a Video Essay’, *Every Frame a Painting* (2015) < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GXv2C7vwXo&ab_channel=EveryFrameaPainting >

the real world and Mack's quest to find Frankie is minimal, the fictional battles which he fights being largely self-contained. You could remove the entire strand, wipe Metalfist from existence, and the two other strands would still hold up as a cohesive story. The book would be much weaker for it though. Metalfist is a constant thematic echo throughout the work. He mirrors Nick's storyline in both the transhumanist elements and the bitterness he feels for what has been done to him. In the case of Mack, he mirrors both the classical quest narrative that Mack goes on, and by developing such an emotionally complex character out of a tiny plastic soldier, he serves to further highlight the importance of games and how they can generate stories. He becomes completely integral to the experience of reading the book all without ever really being part of it. The closest link to the 'real world' that Metalfist has is Bill and Sue's romance and even there, he is a thematic echo of the struggle to find happiness and acceptance.

Stacked narrative techniques can even be used to solve narrative problems as evidence by my creation of the Moorie storyline. Interestingly, in the original draft, the cyborg binmen, Three-Two-Five, Eight-Four and Clean Boy, were not present. Originally, they made one appearance, in the scene in which the Moorie talks to Mack, Laura and Concrete Joe. I knew that the novel would end with Nick's mind downloaded onto the Wetware servers, but the ending felt cheap as it blindsided the reader, not having been built up in the main story. Having entertained myself earlier by creating a cult of horrific servitor trash collectors, they were ready to go, already constructed and so another opportunity for play arose in solving that narrative problem, by adding yet another strand. All out of a single throwaway idea. This type of writing, in which individual throwaway scenes can lead to new ideas, or simply allowing myself to extract myself out of the main narrative for a page, or even just a paragraph was also one of the most freeing opportunities to play I experienced while writing. Some examples that come to mind include the construction of the Mycelium

Theatre, the vast fungoid theatre/sports arena. I didn't need two pages on how it was built, particularly given that it precedes an important scene in which Mack and Frankie are re-united for the first time but for two pages, I purely got to play, creating something completely for my own amusement. The resulting scene not only served to develop the world of *Wetware City* but also gave the reader an opportunity to rest, jumping out of several story heavy scenes to enjoy something more tangential. Similarly, the earlier mentioned scene in which the creation of the Megasoldiers is detailed, was an opportunity to create thematic richness rather than an overt focus on plot. In the initial draft, the scene which details the painting of a miniature, came much earlier in the book and was more similar to the construction of the theatre, adding something that I was interested in for fun, rather than plot. Later when I decided to resurrect Metalfist, it made complete sense to move this section so they mirrored one another and the connecting phrase 'That's how it happens' is perhaps the most overt declaration of the power of stacked narratives and the power of narratively linking by theme.

Stacked narratives are a powerful tool for play, for ultimately a very simple reason — writers get bored. In creating a sustained work of fiction, ninety-thousand words long, a writer who railroads themselves into a narrative that they are no longer interested in and insisting on seeing it through, leads to prose that can seem equally disinterested. By giving myself permission to not care whether something fits narratively and running with whatever I felt like writing, the book became all the richer for it. Off the back of that point, I find in the creation of stacked narratives, it works best if a writer does not plan the first draft. As mentioned earlier, in the example of Metalfist's death, it can stifle opportunities for the text to surprise you and gives carte-blanche to take the narrative wherever you see fit. It maximises your opportunities to play.

Where planning does become useful and provides opportunities to play is in the second draft. Once you have your major story elements in place you are then free to change them, re-arrange them, re-writing them as much as you like. It's a chance to enter a dialogue with your own work, as an outsider would, which is why a break from the work is essential. Stephen King advises having completed a draft: 'how long you let your book rest... is entirely up to you, but I think it should be a minimum of six weeks.'⁹ I find that I entirely agree with him. Play can be an intense experience, as anyone who has felt the adrenaline rush of a difficult videogame can tell you and rest is an essential requirement to ensure you're playing well. The burnout factor, whereby an author loses enthusiasm for their own work is all too common, and stacked narratives, a disregard for genre and undirected research are all intended to help combat this. Even with those safeguards, rest is still necessary.

Play becomes more directed in a second draft — in the writing of *Wetware City* after a two-month break from writing, my supervisor and I wrote out the entire structure of the book on a whiteboard, detailing major story beats and key scenes. Part of the game here is spotting things that could be changed, may need improvement or things that simply aren't necessary. It was thrilling seeing the book like this, the planning stage now allowing me to hone the novel to where I wanted it to be. In the first draft of *Wetware City*, Frankie was originally Frank, Mack's male best friend. While a friendship is good for creating dramatic tension a relationship is better, carrying implicit stakes and emotional weight. In truth, I wouldn't have been able to see this if I had planned my first draft. Planning often results in an over investment in the original idea, meaning that writers find it harder to adjust their storytelling and allow the opportunities to play by asking 'what-if?' By the time the second draft was

⁹ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 2012) p. 252

completed, *Wetware City* was a much better book, and though this may be true for most novels, I found the experience to be entirely liberating rather than the struggle I know some of my fellow writers can feel.

The play I undertook in writing *Wetware City* was sometimes not easy: it required me to be directed but open to improvisation, aware of genre but not beholden to it and managing multiple narrative strands all without having a meticulously organised plot outline. Play can be difficult for everyone, requiring disengagement from the real while willingly accepting the unreal. In the end *Wetware City* is about those things: the power of play both in our real lives and in the constructed world of the writer. The examples of play that we can take from other mediums, in particular the world of games, which is entirely predicated on an individual's commitment to play, are powerful tools in a writer's arsenal. Bad writing comes from an unwillingness to play and a writer who takes themselves too seriously, seeing writing as work, rather than an opportunity to be 'other than we are' is missing out on all the freedom that that entails. All these techniques I used while writing *Wetware City* I used with the end goal of ensuring that I was playing and having fun. If you are not enjoying what you're writing then you shouldn't be writing it, it's as simple as that. I think I did achieve this goal, as though writing this novel was at times challenging and frustrating, I was *never* bored. This is not an exhaustive list of techniques to play either and I would encourage every writer to keep searching for ways we can play and therefore hopefully contribute to the field.

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Wetware City
By Calum Collins

We can do our best to push death to the margins, keeping corpses behind stainless-steel doors and tucking the sick and dying in hospital rooms. So masterfully do we hide death, you would almost believe we are the first generation of immortals. But we are not. We are all going to die and we know it.

-Caitlin Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*

“Wonderful”, the Flatline said, “I never did like to do anything simple when I could do it ass-backwards.”

-William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

PART ONE

One

I'm pissing like a thoroughbred racehorse and Frankie is hammering on the door. I'm not rushing this for anyone.

'Hurry up for Christ's sake.'

'I've been holding this in for an hour,' I shout back.

'You can't just cut and run in the middle of the job. You're the bloody operator.'

'Exactly. What I say goes. So, I'm having a piss. I finish up and run the tap to wash my hands.

'No time for hands,' Frankie shouts. More banging on the door. We've been running this operation for ten hours now. I just need a minute. My eyes hurt. My ears are aching from having the headset on for so long. It hangs around my neck like a plastic collar. I unlock the door. Frankie yanks it open.

Frankie's a giant. Six and a half feet of lanky skin and bone. Her hair is a mess. Coffee-stained t-shirt. Dark bags under both eyes. God she's bloody beautiful.

She waves her arms in exasperation.

'Get in your fucking chair or they'll notice I'm gone.'

'Okay, okay! Don't lose you shit.'

'Let's just get this done. I'm sick of these wild west losers. I want to come in from the cold.' She stomps back to our room. I hear her collapse into her chair.

'Have you been at Corinne's Adderall again?'

'Chair. Now.'

Across the hallway, a door opens a crack. A sleepy looking Corinne pokes her head out. She squints under the harsh fluorescents.

'What's going on?'

‘Sorry, did we wake you?’

‘Chair.’ Frankie’s voice echoes in the three AM silence.

‘Can you keep it down please? Close your doors or whatever.’

‘Will do,’ I say. She nods.

‘Chair!’ Frankie yells, oblivious to Corinne’s pleas.

The office is a tip. My desk is littered with half-full mugs of cold coffee. The only light in the room comes from two computer monitors. I’ve got chat open on one. The other is my window into Wetware City.

I sniff at one of the cold mugs. Seems okay. I need the caffeine. A bit of stimulant to perk up the Wetware. I fall through the screen and back down to the waiting streets below.

We flinch as another blast rocks the overturned hotdog cart we’re hiding behind. Loping Junction has turned into a battleground. The tarmac beneath my feet is slick with blood. Bullets zip overhead. Laura helps Concrete Joe tear off the sleeve of his jumpsuit to bandage his bleeding leg.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ Joe says. He’s one ugly cyclops, a single baby blue eye in the middle of his face.

‘Sorry, needed a piss.’

‘Seriously?’ Joe says. ‘Can’t you piss in a bottle like the rest of us troglodytes?’

‘Forgot it.’

‘R-r-r-rookie mistake,’ Laura says. Her voice jitters. Around her head is a marvellous clockwork crown. Vials of cheerfully coloured chemicals spin like horses on a carousel. The ticking stops. A needle glints and buries itself in her temple. The vial drains. She shivers as fresh chemicals worm their way into her head.

‘Dodge is at the other end of the junction,’ Joe says. ‘We’re at the crossroads and all that.’

I roll my eyes. Dodge is such a fucking drama queen. The gunfight at Loping Junction. I bet he’s been practicing his gunslinger banter all day.

‘Let’s have a chat then, shall we?’ I’ve got my white flag ready. He’ll love this. I poke it over the cart. Give it a wave. ‘Hey Dodge. Up for a quick chat?’

A bullet zips through the flag, leaving a smoking hole. I give it another little wave.

‘Good to see you too Dodge,’ I say. ‘I’m coming out with my hands up.’

‘Mack you stupid—’ Joe hisses. I stand up and shrug. He looks at Laura. She shrugs too.

‘Mack,’ Tom Dodge says. ‘Always a pleasure.’

Dodge goes hard on the whole cowboy shtick. Jangling spurs and leather duster, all that. A massive ten-gallon hat is cocked at a jaunty angle on his head. No hands just grafted on six-shooters.

Behind him is his new right-hand man, John Cassidy. The last one ate a bullet for questioning Dodge. Cassidy’s a bounty hunter, good one too. He doesn’t play dress up like Dodge. Simple, top of the line body armour and a plasma caster in his hands.

‘What can we do for you today?’ I say.

‘Well, if you’d surrender the Chop Shop to us, that’d be swell.’

Ten hours ago, the Tom Dodge Gang made a play for our path. We control the east coast of Wetware City: from Little Brazil all the way down to Baracca docks. Between the two is the Chop Shop, the most precious piece of real estate in the city.

The Chop shop looks like any other outdoor market as long as you don’t look too closely. It has the kind of stalls that should be laden with exotic fruit and veg. There is meat, packed into blood pink ice. Not the sort of cuts you’d fry up for dinner though.

The Chop Shop sells gear. Like an organic hipster market for augments and tech.

One stall, for example, consists of a Perspex cage filled with warm fog. Inside there's a little man, stripped to the waist and drenched in sweat. He puts the final touches on a set of eyes. The humidity keeps the quivering jelly orbs from drying out. Top of the line, ice blue, and implanted with magnifying lenses.

Another stall is made up of frosted operating theatre screens. Indistinct shapes move behind them as someone lying on a table is broken down and put back together. A man walks in on two legs and lopes back out on four, better for speedy courier duties.

One business doesn't even have a stall. Instead, it's just a locked metal hatch in the ground. Written on it in chalk is 'by appointment only.' Rumours abound of the goodies below.

All the money and meat and tech flows through the Chop Shop. You can buy anything. And there's the small matter of the four percent sales tax. We'd done well for ourselves over the last year.

'We can't just hand it over, Dodge. Be reasonable.' I hold my hands out, to show they're empty.

'It's a fine bit of land,' Dodge looks round. 'You ain't no kind of man if you ain't got land.'

'You want to make us an offer for it?' I step forward. Dodge's arms come up. His guns click as the muscles in his wrists cock the hammers. Cassidy levels the white barrel of the plasma caster at me.

'You give us the patch and I won't put a bullet in you?' Dodge smirks.

'Counteroffer: You stop trying to burn it to the ground and we fight for it?'

'Fight for it?' Dodge hesitates.

'Say... a duel?' I raise my hands.

‘That’s a mighty temptin’ offer...’ Dodge starts to lower his guns.

Just what I’d been waiting for. I’m going to John McClane this rodeo prick. I yank out the gun I’ve duct taped to my back. I’m fast. Dodge is faster.

Dodge’s guns are back up before mine has cleared my back. There’s a bang and a searing pain in my stomach. My gun goes off, pointlessly into the air. I crash to my knees. Ow. Big ow. Joe goes to run out, but Laura catches hold of him. I fall backwards.

‘Ah shit,’ I say, through gritted teeth. Pressed to my stomach, my hand is slick with blood.

Dodge comes over, his spurs clicking. Cassidy behind him.

‘You no-good cowardly son of a bitch,’ he says. He points a gun in my face. I gurgle blood.

‘Sure we can’t come to an agreement?’ I say. I’m feeling fuzzy.

‘I’ve got you at barrels end,’ Dodge says. ‘There’s no fucking agreement.’

‘Yeah, you’re right. Sorry about this Dodge.’

‘Sorry about what?’ Dodge’s eyes narrow.

John Cassidy shoves the plasma caster behind Dodge’s ear and pulls the trigger.

There’s a blinding flash of light and a sizzle like a steak hitting the pan. The ten-gallon hat is blown upwards on the draft of superheated air. The stump of Dodge’s neck looks like a burnt sausage. The headless body totters back and forth for a moment before dropping to the ground. The hat lands a moment later.

I push myself up into a sitting position. God, it hurts. John Cassidy walks over to Dodge’s corpse and pokes it with his boot. He presses a button and the plasma caster folds itself in half. He stows it in his jacket.

‘Nice performance,’ he says.

‘Thanks.’ I grin at him, the blood dribbling between my teeth. ‘I seem to have a hole in me though.’

‘We can deal with that.’ Cassidy comes over and helps me up. I wince.

‘Ready to come in from the cold?’ We limp back to Laura and Joe who catch hold of me.

‘Six months undercover.’ Cassidy sighs. He gives me a peck on the cheek.

‘We’ll get you weaned off that cowboy shit. Nice work, Frankie.’

The key to a good lie is being able to tell stories. That’s what it comes down to. People think a lie should be organic, messy like in real life. That’s a load of bollocks. Leaves too many questions hanging about. Give them a reason to believe it instead. Tell a story.

We spent ages trying to infiltrate Dodge’s gang. The war between us was heating up. Nothing like conflict to make everyone nervous about spies. I dressed up as a prospector called Willie, with a deep southern twang and rodeo skills. Tried to join the gang. No dice. Dodge’s suspicions ran deeper than his love of cowboys.

I’m not great at infiltration. Frankie’s the best. She can switch from character to character, slipping them on and off like a comfy jacket.

Her main character, Frankie Blue, was a man with spiky cyan hair. He’d been in Wetware City since the beginning when it was a burgeoning little frontier town. He cultivated an empire, Wired Connection Syndicate. You paid them what you owed. You kissed the ring. Frankie Blue was king.

John Cassidy was a newer addition to the metropolis. He was single minded. No allegiances. He worked for whoever paid highest. Had a knack for finding people who didn’t want to be found. You paid him on time. In full. He didn’t talk much. Famously quiet, John Cassidy.

No one knew John Cassidy and Frankie Blue were the same person.

Cassidy wanted revenge. Wired Connection had stiffed him on a job. He'd taken out the target. Bob Storm had crashed through Main Street in Little Brazil, knocking aside paper lanterns and fuzzy holographic adverts. Behind him followed the grim figure of John Cassidy. Top of the line black body armour. Plasma caster tucked into his jacket. Bob Storm hit the end of an alley. People craned their necks to see what was going on. Bob dropped to his knees. Cassidy pointed the plasma caster at his head.

'Please don't kill me,' Bob Storm begged.

'It's just business,' John Cassidy said. Bit cliché, but he didn't care.

'I can pay you.'

'How much?' Cassidy said. The plasma caster was rock steady.

'There's forty mil in my account.'

'This job pays fifty.' Cassidy pulled the trigger. Bob Storm's face was a pretty pile of ash twisting in the wind.

It really was a fantastic bit of acting. Concrete Joe played Bob Storm perfectly. Granted, the whole thing was a bit old hat but like I said: give them a reason to believe it.

So, when Dodge asked about to verify the story, well, plenty of people had seen Cassidy kill Bob Storm. Then Wired Connection didn't even pay him.

Dodge offered Cassidy a deal. Join the war against Wired Connection. Get your revenge.

Bish, bash, bosh, and John Cassidy was the most trusted man in the Tom Dodge Gang. A little distraction, I took a bullet and Dodge thought he'd won. It was over. He'd turn his back on Cassidy with absolute trust.

In Wetware City, trust will get you killed.

I rub my eyes and turn off the computer monitor. Sit in the dark for a moment. God my eyes hurt. Red numbers blink the time on a little alarm clock. It's four in the morning. From a crack in the curtains, amber light from the streetlamp outside spills over the walls. The house is still. No sounds of carnage from Wetware City. There's the sound of a car passing in the street below. A creak next door as Frankie gets out of her chair.

I hear the door to the office open behind me and Frankie comes in. Standing behind me she wraps her long bony arms around me and puts her head on my shoulder. I sit there for a moment, feeling how warm she is, breathing into my ear.

'You okay?' she says.

'Yeah, just tired. You?' She lets me go and I pull off my headphones. Spin around in my chair. At four in the morning, the world almost doesn't seem real, the fake world of Wetware City bleeding in through the yellow lamps and digital displays. Frankie doesn't seem real either. Someone I met online, in a game. Standing right in front of me.

'We should go to bed,' I say. Rub my eyes again. 'It's late.'

Frankie sits on the edge of my desk. She touches my chin, lifting it and leans down to kiss me. She runs her hands down my back and then pulls away grinning.

'Sorry for losing it at you earlier,' she says. 'Joe is right though; you do need a piss bottle.'

'Oh gross. Come on, you would not want to be with me if I was one of those people.'

'True. Maybe we'll get you a catheter instead.'

'I'm good,' I say with a shiver, and she laughs. 'Hey, I've got something for you.'

I reach down and open the bottom drawer of the desk

‘Oh my god, Rum!’ Frankie says as I pull the bottle out. ‘Oh Mack, you shouldn’t have.’

‘It was fun tricking Dodge, y’know? Like sometimes we play Wetware a bit... I don’t know. It should be fun, not work.’

Frankie uncorks the bottle and inhales deeply. I can smell the burnt sugar sweetness from here. She raises it.

‘To fun, not work,’ she toasts and takes a sip.

‘And to Wired Connection,’ I say.

‘Bed?’ she asks.

I can’t think of anything I want more. Wrapped up together, under the duvet.

‘God yes.’

She pulls me to my feet. I take the bottle from her. Wrap my arms around her again. The kiss tastes of caramel and spice and we fall grateful into bed and then, into sleep.

Two

When I wake in the morning and reach over to touch Frankie's shoulder, she's gone. I blink like an idiot as I try to adjust my eyes to the morning light.

'Frankie?' I say. She's not here. I pull on a t-shirt and wander downstairs.

Corinne is sat at the kitchen table, hugging her mug of tea to her chest.

'Morning' she says.

'Hey. Have you seen Frankie?' I yawn and put the kettle on.

'Wasn't down here when I got up.'

'Huh.' I say.

'She's left you again.' Bill, our other housemate, walks into the kitchen only wearing a pair of tracksuit pants. His immense beer gut hangs over the elastic, covered in coarse hair. Every bit of him jiggles. He scratches the prematurely greying stubble on his chin and picks at his teeth.

'Oh, shut up,' I say. Bill grins. He's a proper wind-up merchant.

'She'll just be at the lab, quit your bitching.' Bill wanders over to the fridge and opens it. He sticks his whole head in, revealing the dark crack of his arse to us. He comes back up with a bottle of beer and a cardboard-like slice of pizza. 'At the lab with her one true love!'

I'm not going to rise to it. Bill sits down heavily at the table.

The kitchen table is a battlefield. A squad of robot Megasoldiers have taken cover behind the wreckage of an eight-legged Spidertank. The advance of the Frost Zombies is relentless. The Megasoldiers' last hope is to stop the horde here at Breadbin Pass by collapsing the bridge and sending the Frost Zombies screaming down onto the linoleum below.

Bill picks up one of the miniatures. The tiny grim face of Commander Metalfist doesn't flinch as Bill takes a brush to him and starts to highlight his nose a shiny silver.

Corinne yawns, long and low, covering her mouth with her hand. 'God I'm tired,' she says.

'Sorry we woke you.'

'No, don't worry. Sounded like a lot of excitement.'

'You and that fucking game,' Bill says, not looking up. Commander Metalfist's cloak is getting painted with the decorative trim that befits a Commander of the Megasoldier Corps. He finishes dabbing at the model and looks up. 'You and Frankie both really need to get a life.'

'You can talk.' I wave my hand at the table full of models. 'You don't even play this game. You just paint the models and that's it.'

'Right yeah, because this is a hobby.' Bill puts the model down and takes a swig of beer. 'You and Frankie, you play Wetware City like it's your fucking job.'

'No, we don't...'

'You spent ten hours in there last night defending a bit of digital territory,' Bill says. 'And for what? It's like a weird addiction.'

'We're having fun, doing something together and spending time with mates, what's weird about that? These, on the other hand...' I pick up one of the models. 'Are like weird plastic heroin, the amount you spend.'

Bill takes the model very carefully from my hand and puts it back in the display. He sniffs. 'I don't care, it's relaxing.'

'You have to admit though that doing heroin is probably cheaper than those models.' Corinne points out.

'Everyone needs a hobby!' Bill protests.

'How much did the Spidertank cost again?' I ask.

‘Never you fucking mind.’

‘Eighty quid, was it?’

‘No, the bastard was a hundred.’ Bill looks at the model with a certain fondness.
‘Totally worth it.’

The bus rocks back and forth as it climbs the dark hill. It’s late. I’m on my way to work. The lights inside the bus are playing up, flickering on and off. The jostling crowd of people are lit for a moment and then plunged back into darkness.

‘Sorry about this,’ the bus driver says. He’s a nice bloke. Around here the buses are mainly driven by dour, miserable bastards. ‘Got the sparky coming to have a look tomorrow.’ The bus chugs to a stop outside the university. Always remember to thank your bus driver on the way out.

The Neurosciences Lab is an ugly block of a building, poured completely out of concrete. Harsh white light shines out from the windows of researchers working late. I look up, trying to spot Frankie’s window. Lights off.

My footsteps echo in the reception. Clive is sat behind the desk. There’s a faint squeak as he shifts about in his chair. The pale blue of the CCTV monitors is reflected in his thick square glasses. He pushes them back up the bridge of his nose, leaving a smudged fingerprint on the lenses.

‘Alright, Clive.’

‘Mack.’

‘Everything okay?’

‘Fine, thank you.’ He’s perfectly suited to be a night guard. Means he doesn’t have to talk to anyone. I’m probably the only person he’s spoken to today.

‘You haven’t seen Frankie, have you?’ I say. Clive pulls his gaze away from the screen and squints at me. He’s comically myopic.

‘No, I haven’t. She’s normally in early. Hmm.’ He picks up the sign in book off the desk. Holds it an inch from his nose and scans the columns. ‘No, she hasn’t been in.’

‘I’m going to go up to her lab and take a look,’ I say. ‘Do you mind staying for five?’

‘Not at all.’ He goes back to scrutinising the monitors.

Maybe I’m just lazy but I can’t think of a single person who’d want to be here a minute longer than they had to. It’s easy work but it’s boring and occasionally, fucking creepy. As you check each lab, you’re never sure what you’re going to find.

You open one door and hear the quiet scratching of cages full of mice. They all seem to be wearing funny green helmets. Then you peer a little closer and realise they’re not helmets. They’ve got microchips implanted in their heads. They seem content with the cold and inert silicon. No way to know.

Behind another door, it’s silent and cold. You know what they keep behind this door. Walls lined with square metal refrigerators, like bunks in a capsule hotel. No vacancies. The metal tables are always empty by the time you get there. Except for that one time when there was a pan that a researcher had forgotten to put away. Inside the pan was a human brain. The wet folds were so still. You’d thought that they would move.

Then there’s the door to Frankie’s lab. Through the tiny round window, I can see it’s dark inside. On the whiteboard next to the door there’s a scribbled message. ‘PLEASE KNOCK FIRST!’ I don’t knock. There’s no one here.

Also, I don’t want to wake the thing lurking behind it. I turn the handle and go inside.

The room is full of the gurgle of water. Washing back and forth. I click my flashlight on. The tank dominates the back wall. It’s easily the biggest fish tank I’ve

seen in my life. The humming pump beneath the tank creates the sloshing of waves, keeping the water cycling. The room smells like salty sea air.

Inside the tank there's a warren of rocks sat atop a bed of pale golden sand. Scattered about are dismembered pieces of crabs. Single pincers and hollow bodies. Bobbing about in the current is a collection of bright children's toys. Stuff you'd use to distract a toddler. A set of plastic rainbow keys. A rattle that chimes whenever it collides with the glass. Stickle bricks you'd push together to make shapes at the nursery.

You have to keep it entertained. Otherwise, it's liable to make mischief.

I walk over to the tank. A skin-raising animal shiver crawls over my back. I peer inside. Look between cracks in the rocks. Try and spot it.

One of the rocks starts to move. Detaches itself and floats to the bottom. It watches me. Its eyes are orange flecked with silver. The pupil is a black bar, blurring to royal purple at edges. Its body changes colour in a second, going from the pale brown of the stone to a blushing red. Its skin pushes out gelatinous horns. Tapering arms unfurl from its body. They reach out to probe and feel, adhering to the glass with white china suckers. It breathes, its body inflating.

On the tank is a label bearing the name of this awful alien thing.

Loretta.

Enteroctopus dofleini.

'Mack, Mack, Mack!' Frankie bounded down the stairs. I'd just got back from my third round of the lab. Frankie was working late. She'd said something extra, *extra* exciting was going to happen.

Three years ago, and we were just housemates. She was finishing her PhD and I was doing night shifts to earn some extra cash. Playing Wetware when we had the time.

‘Nick!’ Frankie ran over to the delivery guy standing in the lobby and hugged him. Next to him was a huge wooden crate.

‘Heya Frankie,’ Nick hugged her back. He was model handsome, the kind of guy they get to sell nerd-chic. His polo shirt had ‘Deep Blue Aquarium’ stitched on the front. ‘You doing okay?’

‘Fine thank you.’ Frankie tapped the crate. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah, she’s fine. Been good as gold.’

‘Mack, can you get the trolley? Oh, Nick this is Mack.’ Frankie had forgotten me for a second.

‘Hey man.’ Nick shook my hand.

‘Hey. How do you know Frankie?’

‘From the aquarium.’ He blushed a little.

‘Mack the trolley!’

I went behind the desk and grabbed the metal cart we use to wheel about lab equipment. Between the two of us we lifted the crate up onto the cart. It had something stamped on the back.

LIVE SPECIMEN – HANDLE WITH CARE.

‘Oh Christ, Frankie. What is this?’

‘Something so cool it’ll blow your mind. Nick, thank you so much.’

‘Wait, you need to sign for it.’ Nick held out a clipboard.

‘Sorry yes.’ Frankie practically snatched it out of his hands. She scribbled her signature. She handed it back to him. ‘Thanks again.’

She kissed him on the cheek. I looked away.

‘Good seeing you again.’

We left him in the lobby and got into the lift.

‘So, who was that?’

‘I told you, Nick. He works for the aquarium.’

‘Right... right...’

‘Jealous.’

I blushed and she grinned.

The doors lift doors dinged open. Out into the corridor. I held the lab door open as she pushed the crate inside.

The lab was a mess. Long garden hoses snaked all over the floor. They were all connected to a heavy industrial water pump. It sucked up water and dumped it into a huge fish tank up against the wall.

We got the crate off the cart and Frankie dismantled it with an electric drill. The hard buzz as she extracted the screws was ear splitting.

Inside the wooden crate was a blue plastic barrel. About waist high. The black lid on top was held down by a circular locking mechanism. It had been wrapped in white packing foam, like a big marshmallow. She tore the packing away.

‘Get ready.’ She was a mad scientist. Eyes wild from a coffee-fuelled twelve hours work. White lab coat sleeves rolled up to the elbow. She pulled the lock open and lifted off the lid. I’d taken several steps back.

‘Oh my god. Wow.’

‘What is it?’ I said.

The surface of the water looked like a flat black mirror. Frankie leaned to stare inside, her nose almost touching the water.

‘Come see.’ She waved me over.

A few cautious steps and I leant forward and peered into the barrel.

At the bottom, bobbing up and down as if it were snoring, was an octopus. It wasn't much bigger than a grapefruit. The back head looked like a huge funny nose. It was a dull brown colour. I'd never actually seen an octopus in real life.

'This is a Giant Pacific Octopus,' Frankie said.

'It's not that big.'

'This one's only a baby. Can't be more than a couple of months old.' She was whispering, like she was in church. Her hand reached out and caught hold of mine. Gripped tight, knuckles white like she was riding a rollercoaster.

'They're the coolest things on earth.' She looked entranced. 'They've got three hearts. Their blood is blue because it uses copper instead of iron. They've got a beak like a parrot. They can change colour and shape at will. They're one of the only animals that do their body lay out differently. They go body, head and then legs.'

'Frankie, my hand...' I said but she ignored me and carried on.

'It's their brains though that's the really special part.' She wasn't listening to me. 'Most animals have got just the one, but octopuses have nine. Nine brains! One in the middle, shaped like a doughnut by the way, and then eight more in the arms. The neurons are split fifty-fifty between the central brain and the ones in the arms. They've got true distributed intelligence. Each arm can act and plan by itself. If we can figure that out, well then there's loads of spooky stuff we can do.'

The light of the lab fluorescent reflected off the water in the barrel and the ripples played off her face. Her other hand reached out, like it was acting by itself, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Still looking into the barrel, Frankie said 'I really want to kiss you.'

I froze. My hand in hers. I pondered the octopus for a second.

'I'd like that.'

'Cool,' she said. We stood there for another awkward moment.

‘Now?’ I’ve never felt so nervous.

The octopus bobbed up, its skin flushing a brilliant blood red.

‘It’s awake!’ Frankie said.

A jet of freezing saltwater shot out of the barrel and hosed both of us. She let go of my hand in surprise. We spluttered and wiped the stinging water from our eyes. My uniform was soaked.

Frankie burst out laughing. The octopus managed to look grumpy and put upon. It pointed its siphon up at us, threatening another soaking.

It was our first date: getting hosed by an octopus.

Cold hands grab me from behind, one clamped over my mouth and the other squeezing my arms tight against my sides. In her tank Loretta is uninterested. She picks at the bits of crab.

‘Don’t move,’ a man’s voice says. He’s got a soft northern accent, Yorkshire way. ‘Nice and still there, matey.’

The hand over my mouth has been mangled. A thick ridge of scar tissue runs over the back in a U-shape. I think I’m going to be sick.

The hand is glowing. Reflected in the dark of the tank I can see that it’s emitting a gentle orange light. In the glow my face looks tanned and healthy instead of pale and terrified.

‘Sorry about this,’ the man says.

‘What do we do?’ another voice says. It’s the voice of a female robot, buzzing at the end of each word through a speaker. Like Siri but more real than anything you’d get on a phone.

‘My bag, front pocket.’

‘I’m not doing that,’ the robot says.

‘I’ve got hold of him.’

‘I can’t-’ the robot says.

‘Just fucking do it.’

I manage to get an elbow free. I drive it backwards into the man’s stomach. There’s a wheezing ‘oof’ as the breath is driven from his body. His grip falters and I twist out of his arms. Turn to make a run for the door.

The other one blocks me. Pale faced and frightened with red hair and freckles. She holds a needle out in front of her. Underneath her black hoodie is a yellow t-shirt with the word ‘MOP’ in big black letters.

‘Stop,’ her voice buzzes. I charge her, knocking her to the side.

I get to the door. Strong hands grab me from behind, pulling my backwards. I’m flipped judo style. Breath driven out of me.

‘Quit making a fuss,’ the man says. ‘Give that here.’

I feel a sharp scratch in the side of my neck. Cold pushes into my veins. I try to push myself up.

‘You won’t even have a headache. I mix all this shit myself.’ He pats my arm.

‘Is he out?’ the robot woman says.

‘Nearly there.’

My brain is sliding sideways into sleep. My cheek is pressed against the cold linoleum. Got to scream. Warn Clive. Nothing.

‘Nighty night,’ the man says.

The last flicker of me lets go of consciousness and I drop into the dark.

Morning light begins to flare on the walls. I roll over. Too cold. Cold and hard. I roll my head back onto my pillow. Lovely and soft. Work really took it out of me last night. There was a break in and everything.

I sit up. I'm still in Frankie's lab. There's orange morning light and the sounds of the world waking up outside. In the hall there's the hum of the floor waxer.

I feel at my neck. Something soft there. I pull it off. A cotton ball attached with a bit of surgical tape. A tiny spot of red in the white fluff.

Loretta's tank is gone. You can see the outline where it was, a light rectangular patch on the wall. Frankie's desk has been cleared. All the files have been taken.

The pillow. I turn and look behind me. It's a black hoodie, folded into a rough square. Next to it, a yellow post-it note is stuck to the floor. One word: SORRY, written in a shaky capital letters.

Out into the corridor. Note in one hand and hoodie in the other. The guy buffing the floor gives me an odd look. I run past him, taking the steps down to reception four at a time.

Clive looks up from the desk.

'Oh, hi Mack.'

'Clive?'

'Yes?'

'You've been here all night?'

'Have I?'

'Clive, it's morning.'

'Is it?'

'Jesus Clive, there's been a break in.'

'I haven't seen anything on the monitors.' He peers at them.

'No, last night. They took Loretta.'

'Who?'

'Frankie's octopus. Look.' I hold out the hoodie and note and shake them for emphasis.

‘Mack, are you all right?’

‘Come with me.’ Back up the stairs along the corridor and I slam open the door to the lab. Clive follows me with a bemused shuffle. He’s humouring me. His face drops when he sees where the tank should be.

‘How in the hell?’

‘They knocked me out. With a needle. One had a glowing fist and the other was a lady robot for fuck’s sake.’ I think I’m hyperventilating. ‘Clive, I’m really freaking out man.’

‘Mack, come down to reception and sit down,’ he says. I’m shaking a little. ‘Have a nice cup of tea and I’ll get someone.’

Three

Commander Metalfist is tired. He can feel the age in his weary cyborg bones. By the time the next cycle finishes he will have served in the Megasoldier Corps for four hundred and forty-four years.

They've been here for months now. Trapped. The snow falls in fat flakes. The great mound of snow blocking the road has frozen solid into an impenetrable wall of ice. Their flamethrowers roar and belch but they don't have enough fuel to burn through. Every night the fresh snow freezes solid, pushing them a bit closer to the bridge.

The bridge spans a gorge so deep they can't even see the bottom. The floor is lost in the frigid mists. The ironwork structure is wide enough for a whole platoon to walk across it, shoulder to shoulder.

On the other side of the bridge they wait. The Frost Zombies. The Megasoldiers had crossed the bridge and Metalfist ordered them to set up camp for the night. The path ahead was clear. They would strike camp at first light, if you could call the wintry glow that dribbled through the clouds light at all.

They were woken at dawn by the sound of a thousand trudging feet. The Frost Zombies had caught up. They shuffled and stumbled towards the bridge. The cold kept them preserved forever. No rotting stench of fetid flesh.

A flurry of activity as the Megasoldiers packed their camp. Barked orders to stoke the boilers of the Spidertank and get all the gear loaded in. A hasty rank of riflemen stationed on the bridge.

'They take a step onto that bridge mow them down!' Commander Metalfist roared.

‘Aye sir!’ The reply came with two heavy metal clangs as the Megasoldiers beat their chests in the traditional salute of the Corps.

The Frost Zombies limped towards the bridge. Their eyes stared straight forward. Dead. No hunger or malice.

‘Take aim,’ Commander Metalfist shouted over the trudge of the zombies. Rifles raised.

A few more steps and they’d be at the bridge.

‘Steady. Steady.’

With one final footfall the Frost Zombies stopped just short of the bridge. They stood dead still. Staring.

That’s how it’s been for months now. Three months and they haven’t moved an inch. Snow piles up on their heads and shoulders in jolly little mounds. Like snowmen.

The Megasoldiers can’t flee. The ice blocks their escape. Back across the bridge the Zombies wait. They have the only cover for a thousand miles. A large metal shed with the word ‘BREADBIN’ painted on the side. Metalfist often stares across at the shed, wishing he were inside.

Metalfist climbs the steps of the hasty rampart they’d built. He likes to check on the soldiers on watch duty. Private Wirenerve, the youngest member of the platoon, stands with his metal face set against the howling wind.

‘Anything to report, son?’

‘Nothing, sir.’ Even after the heavy cyberfusion procedures his voice still sounds young.

‘Go and see to your kit, son,’ Metalfist says. ‘I’ll take it from here.’

‘No need, sir. I’ve got this. You rest up.’

‘That’s an order Private.’

‘Sorry, sir.’ Private Wirenerve clanks down the steps. He bashes his chest twice as he passes. Commander Metalfist does a half-hearted bash back.

‘Sir?’ Wirenerve stops and looks back at Metalfist.

‘Yes, Private?’

‘Do you know when the rescue is coming?’

‘They’ll come when they come.’

‘Some of the other men say you don’t know.’

‘Some of the other men can go fuck themselves. The Corps leaves no one behind.’

‘But what if they don’t come, sir?’

‘Movement!’ A shout from another soldier on watch further down the rampart. ‘There’s movement!’

Wirenerve bangs back up the steps and stands next to Metalfist. There’s a mechanical whine as their optic sensors zoom in and refocus.

The guard is right: one Frost Zombie is moving. It’s walking in an aimless circle. Dragging a length of metal pipe behind it. An improvised weapon? Two more circles. Then it stops. Stands still again. The Megasoldiers all hold their breath and wait. A minute passes. Two. Then five have gone by.

Commander Metalfist breathes out a shaky sigh. His hands shake from all the combat stims his body has administered preparing for a battle that isn’t coming. The Zombie is still, lost in the crowd.

Commander Metalfist feels very tired. He’s sick of waiting.

‘Stop playing with that,’ Bill says. I look down. I’m twiddling one of the miniatures between my fingers. ‘It took me ages to get the blood right, so don’t break the fucker.’

‘Sorry,’ I say. I put the Frost Zombie back down.

It's the next day. Frankie still hasn't come home. Not answering her phone either; it keeps going straight to voicemail.

'You don't think they've got her?' I say. My voice is shaking. The hand on my face, glowing, loomed in my mind. 'They took the octopus and then her?'

'I don't know,' Bill says. 'She's wandered off before mate.'

I can't sit still. My leg keeps giggling. I call the police.

'I think my girlfriend is missing,' I say to the lady on the phone. They already know about the octopus, the cops were yesterday morning. They couldn't make heads or tails of it. You couldn't move the tank and the water without some serious lifting equipment.

'Who did you see?'

My answer of 'a lady robot and a northern cyborg' had them giving each other sideways glances. They gently asked if I wanted to see a therapist.

'Who'd want to steal an octopus anyway?' I asked them. The police officer shrugged.

'Smuggling exotic animals is a big trade these days,' they said. I told them it isn't even illegal to keep them.

They're tricky animals to keep too. They have to be in a saltwater aquarium. You have to remove all traces of copper in the water or it'll kill them. They're predators too so you need live crabs to feed them.

The police checked the CCTV. Nothing. It just showed me making the rounds, like any other night. I said it could be looped footage from another night. They asked if I wanted to see a therapist again.

Now, I describe Frankie to the nice woman, and she asks me to email a photo and any details. I do that and then sit miserably looking at the kitchen floor. Bill comes in.

‘Here,’ he says, putting a beer down in front of me. Then he stuffs a paintbrush and a model into my hands.

This is Bill’s solution to everything: little plastic men and cheap Dutch lager. We sit there for an hour, my paint job looking like it was done by a five-year old. I down my beer.

‘Another?’ Bill says from the fridge.

‘Yeah thanks,’ I say. He comes back with two more beers and sits down. We clink bottles. ‘Thanks for this though.’

‘Thought you could do with a bit of distraction.’

The more we keep painting, the more the figures crowd the tabletop. They seem to be moving closer in, menacing me.

‘I’m going to go and have a lie down.’

‘You sure?’ Bill says. He’s got his head buried in a brand-new box of miniatures. Purchased today. Megasoldier Battle Angels. The elite flying forces of the Corps. The box art showed brass-bodied female cyborgs screaming from the sky on plasma jet wings.

‘Yeah.’

‘Okay. Look after yourself.’ Bill’s already clipping plastic body parts out of frames and gluing them together.

Upstairs. Our bedroom seems weird without her. Tidy little bookshelf. Wetware poster on the wall as well as a faded Gilmore Girls one. She should be at her desk, the game pouring out of the screen. I stare at the bed for a moment. Nothing would be worse than sleep right now, not after the chemical daze that was injected into my neck.

I go next door, into the office. Sit at my desk and start up Wetware City.

The Red Rubicon bustles with people. The lights over the dancefloor tint everyone blood red. A man with no skin, muscles shining and wet, croons into a silver microphone.

The dancefloor is packed. Replicants grind against cyborgs. Coloured puffs of smoke float upwards as revellers sup on drug bowls.

The bar is packed and I have to battle with my elbows to make space. I raise a hand and wave it at the bartender.

‘Whiskey, please. If you’re not too busy.’

‘No sir, I’m not busy at all.’ The bartender’s hair is slicked back in a widow’s peak. Red jacket and unblinking eyes. It’s Lloyd from The Shining. A hard-light hologram. The owner changes it every so often. One month it’s Moe, next it’s Al Swearengen. Stephen Fry’s Jeeves was a favourite.

There’s a click and I can feel the barrel of a gun being pressed into the back of my head. I sip my whiskey.

‘Evenin’ Mack,’ Dodge says. I turn around, the gun nearly poking me in the eye.

He’s got a new head, held on by Frankenstein-esque metal staples. A fresh hat too. He’s had the revolvers removed from his wrists. Now’s he’s got some mechanical hands.

‘Alright, Dodge,’ I say.

‘You and me are going to take a little walk and then—’

‘Knock it off, Dodge. I’m not in the mood.’

The bar has gone very quiet. The crowd gawks.

‘You coward,’ he says. Cocks the pistol.

I grab the gun and twist it till the trigger guard nearly breaks his finger off.

‘Just stop will you? You’re not a badass cowboy outlaw. You’re an accountant from Texas. I’m not in the mood for roleplaying today.’

I let go. He drops the gun and rubs his hand. He looks a bit guilty.

‘I thought you wanted this war in character and shit.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.’ I look down at my drink. ‘I think I’m losing it Dodge.’

‘You okay?’ Dodge says. It’s funny. Normally we spend all our time trying to kill each other for fun. Never really talked unless we’re quipping while cutting each other to pieces. Now he’s being nice to me. It takes two seconds before I’m just babbling about the cyborgs, the octopus, Frankie being missing.

He just sits there and takes it all in. Nodding, like a sage older gunslinger in a bad western.

‘Huh. Well, I just saw him walking around the Chop Shop, couple of hours ago.’ Dodge pauses. ‘His character at least.’ He waves at Lloyd for a drink.

‘What?’ I stare at him.

‘Look at your friend’s list man, it should be on there.’

I swipe through my interface and there it is.

Frankie Blue. Last online twelve hours ago.

‘Un-fucking-believable.’ My worry flashes into anger, like water superheated into steam.

‘Hey quiet it, down man. People are staring.’

‘She won’t even pick up her phone, but she’s got time to play videogames!?’

I open my Wetware email and start typing.

NEW MESSAGE

To: Frankie Blue

RE: WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU!

You have time to play Wetware? I got assaulted Frankie, at your lab. Call me RIGHT NOW.

I press send and turn to look at Dodge.

‘Bloody cheek,’ I say. Dodge grins and sips his drink, the ice crackling as he tips the glass. ‘What?’

‘No, it’s just sweet. You really seem to care. You guys a couple?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Nawh.’

‘Shut up or I’ll kill you again,’ I say.

‘Cassidy was Frankie the whole time. I can’t believe I didn’t see it. I’m not even mad, just impressed.’ Dodge shakes his head.

‘You want another drink? I’m going to go and get a beer.’

‘Like a real beer?’

‘Why not?’

‘It’s midday here,’ Dodge says. ‘But whatever. Be right back.’

Out of Wetware City and back into the real world. My last beer has gone warm sitting on the desk. I go downstairs. Bill has a full set of Megasoldier Battle Angels assembled on the table. Unpainted they’re lumps of dull grey plastic. Bill’s shaking a can of spray paint.

‘Mind if I have another beer?’

‘Help yourself.’

‘Don’t spray paint in here. Take them outside.’

‘I was going to,’ Bill lies. There’s the sound of the letterbox flapping open.

‘Can you get that *on your way out*,’ I say.

‘I’ll just be a minute.’

‘Fine, I’ll get it you lazy ass. I’m serious about spraying in here, you know how Corinne is about marks on the table.’

There’s a folded piece of paper on the doormat. I pick it up.

Frankie is safe. Do not talk to the police again.

My hands shake. She really has been taken. They know where I *live*.

I open the front door. Run out into the street barefoot. It’s quiet. No one about. The wind makes the leaves rustle over the tarmac.

‘Fuck you,’ I shout to the empty street. ‘Bring her back! I’m going to fucking find her!’

An old lady wobbles around the corner pushing a little shopping trolley. She gives me a funny look and limps over to me.

‘You alright, love?’ She’s a scouser.

‘I’m sorry. I’m fine.’

‘Just you’re standing in the middle of the road with a beer, y’know like? You need any help or anything?’

‘Sorry. I’m... I’m just not feeling well.’ Tears are burning the edges of my eyes.

‘Get back inside love and get yourself a brew.’

‘Thank you. Sorry again.’

‘It’s alright, pet. Off you go.’

She crosses the road. When she gets to the curb she stops to lift her trolley up. Just about manages it. Then she plants her feet for the step up. As she does so her skirts lift, revealing her ankles.

She’s got a prosthetic leg. Moulded plastic where it surrounds her stump. Then a metal rod going down to her shoe, attaching to a fake foot. The other ankle is skinny and liver spotted.

I go back inside the house. Lock the door and put the chain on. From inside the kitchen comes the smell of spray paint. There's a hiss as Bill coats another model.

'Bill?' I say. The hissing stops.

'Er... sorry.'

A Memory

‘Nick, I need to know that you understand what I’m saying.’

‘Yes, I do.’ It’s the moment in the film where the diagnosis comes, and everything is muted and quiet. The patient is in a daze. I feel like I should point out he’s got mustard on his lapel, but he doesn’t, so I don’t.

The moment is sharp. Like glass. Crystallising into memory in an instant.

‘The next step is to look at the options for treatment.’

‘Treatment. Like chemo?’

‘We can consider chemotherapy, or if our tests indicate, radiotherapy might be an option.’

‘How much time would that buy me?’

‘I wish I could give you an estimate but we just don’t know. We’ll have to see how you respond to treatment. For now, take the time to discuss things with your family. Support is really important at a time like this.’

‘Er, thanks.’

In the car park, I stand and stare at my keys. The one for the car flips out the side when you press the little silver button. I open and close it a few times.

Open and close. Open and close. Click. Click. The feel of it in my hand.

I look back at reception.

An old lady is being wheeled out the entrance by a nurse. He parks her at the edge of the road, puts the brakes on the chair and fucks off back inside. The wind’s got some bite in it today –

– ice rippling in the air, holidays to the Isle of Wight –

– so she’s wrapped up in her dressing gown. The hospital gown stops just below her knees and you can see her spotted brown legs. They look like burnt cuts of beef. Someone has doodled all over her left leg in permanent marker.

She reaches into the folds of her dressing gown and pulls out a bag of baccy. She rolls a cigarette so thin that it’s more paper than anything. The flame on her lighter trembles in her shaky hands but she gets the fag on the first go. She sucks on it. Notices me staring and gives a cheery wave.

‘Alright, love.’

‘Sorry for staring,’ I say.

‘What?’ she says.

‘I’m sorry that I was staring.’

‘I’m a bit deaf love, you’ll have to come over ‘ere.’ Her voice is high pitched scouse squawk. I shuffle over.

‘I said I’m sorry for staring. Didn’t mean to.’

‘Oh, it’s no worries love. Love a bit of people watching I do.’ She blows out a long stream of smoke. ‘You having a good day, love?’

‘Not really, no.’ I say. ‘Can I have a cigarette please?’

‘Help yourself love. Only thing to get through a bad day sometimes.’

I inexpertly roll a cigarette and choke on the first puff.

Harsh, like sandpaper and grit.

I drop it and double over coughing. There’s a thwack like solid iron across my back. The tiny old lady in the wheelchair is giving me a good belting.

‘Get it all out pet. Don’t smoke, do you?’

‘No.’

‘Why’d you ask for one then you daft bugger? Disgusting habit. Like sucking on a car exhaust.’ She takes another drag. ‘You sure you’re alright love?’

‘To be honest I can’t remember where I left my car.’

‘I’ll give you a hand if you like? Give us the keys.’ I hand them over. ‘Right, let’s go.’

‘Go where?’

‘Look for your car. I can’t wheel meself around. You’ll push and I’ll click.’ She waves the keys, pressing the button for central locking. I shrug and start to push her around the rows of silent cars. She holds the keys above her head and clicks away merrily. She lights another cigarette off the stub of the old one and carries on puffing.

In the distance a car chirps.

‘Wait a second,’ I say. ‘Press it again.’

The car chirps again. There it is. My battered grey Astra. I wheel her over to it. She gives me back the keys.

‘Thanks for your help,’ I say.

‘Not at all, pet. Good bit of fun that. I bet that nurse is shitting himself. Losing an old woman like that, it’s shameful.’ She cackles. I smile.

‘Want me to take you back?’

‘No need, pet.’ She pushes herself up out of the wheelchair and onto one leg. Standing like a flamingo, she lowers the other slowly, testing her weight on it.

‘Won’t let me walk on it but fuck ‘em, I’m having it off this week. Good bloody riddance.’

‘Sorry to hear.’

‘Probably for the best. I’ll let you get on. You’ll forgive an old biddy for wanting to piss about a bit.’

‘No, it was fun.’

‘Have a good day, love.’ She totters off. Below the hemline of her dressing gown I can see that the back of her leg has been scribbled all over as well. Lots of arrows and

lines, showing how much needs trimming off. On the back of the right is written 'NOT THIS ONE' in permanent marker.

The nurse comes hurrying over, red in the face and out of breath. He says something and she waves him away. Points back to me. I put the brakes on the wheelchair and jump into the car.

The drive back reeks of cow shit. They've been spraying the fields –

–Dad on a country drive. He breathes deep and bellows, 'Ah country air, good for the tubes!' –

It makes me feel sick. To be fair to the cow shit, I've been feeling sick since I left the hospital.

The roads are quiet. No one about. I look down at my chest. Just for a second. Breathe deep. Really pull that shitty air down into the tubes. The 'country air' should be good for me. Maybe that'll sort it.

I breathe out and there it is. A sound like there's loose gravel rattling around inside there. The alveoli spluttering and coughing. The dark shadow on the X-ray. I cover my mouth. Cough again. I look at my palm –

– a film, a bonnet drama, a pale heroine coughing a splatter of blood. The doctor shaking his head and whispering 'consumption' –

–my hand is clean. Not coughing blood yet. Suppose that's a good sign.

When I pull into the car park at work I sit and cry for five minutes. Delayed shock I suppose. When I'm finished, I clean myself up. Wipe my nose. Eyes red. I pull off my shirt and wrangle on my work polo.

Deep Blue is the biggest aquarium in the country. It's a fat doughnut of a building, bordered by an outdoor exhibit for the Sea Lions. Vicious buggers. In the reception, Lindsay buzzes me through.

'Hey, Nick.'

‘You alright Linds?’ I say. Keep it normal. I just want to go home.

‘Yeah, all good. Steve wants to see you.’

Behind the scenes of an aquarium is all big hoses and massive pumps. I find Steve feeding a tank of shrimp. He’s a little dude, has to stand on a stepladder to access the top.

‘Hey Nick, so it’s usual stuff today. Check in with all your tanks and stuff and make sure everyone is okay. Michael called in sick, got a cold or something. Would you mind doing the otter talk?’

Poor Michael. ‘Yeah sure.’

Steve comes down off his ladder. He’s got his serious face on. ‘We’re going to have to take Kraken off display too. I know you like him, so I won’t make you do it if you don’t want to.’

I look at my shoes. Deep breathe.

Ignore the rattle.

Ignore the tears, hot in the corners, like little chips of fire.

‘No, I’ll do it.’

‘You sure?’ Steve is being kind, bless him.

‘Yeah,’ I say and leave Steve with his shrimp.

The reef exhibit is all bright colours and a big touch pool in the centre. At night, when all the kids have stopped screaming and gone home, it’s kind of calming. The water of the pool swishes and you can reach down and stroke the rays –

–skin like wet leather, sliding through cold water –

I go over to one of the tanks set into the walls. Inside the water swirls around a rocky outcrop set into the sand. At the bottom there’s a lair, for the tank’s occupant. But it hasn’t been used. Not in a week now.

Floating near the glass is an octopus. Kraken. His eyes have shrunk. He doesn't move like a flowing ripple, just sort of bobs and wiggles. Patches of his skin have turned white, painful, and flaking. The midday snack, a small crab, sits unnoticed in the corner.

It's called senescence. Comes on just after mating, or if an octopus getting on. No one is sure why it happens. They just start to die. Programmed cell death. No rhyme or reason. They get sick, stop eating, lose their co-ordination and slip away.

Above the tank is a blind, one you can pull down to cover the glass. We use them when we're cleaning the tanks or changing exhibits. I reach up. Kraken is looking at me with his sore eyes. He trips over his own tentacles and slides sideways.

'I'm sorry,' I say and pull the blind down.

Four

The Chop Shop is quiet. The night wind pulls salt air from the bay, making the plastic tarps over closed business billow and snap. A few late-night shoppers mill around. Not much open in the evening. A modder doing augments in a dirty old dentist's chair. A noodle bar to slug beer and slurp soup. The dark of the streets is interrupted by the glow of old holographic adverts, selling ancient stimulant brands.

Wetware City is never silent. It's the first actual city that never sleeps. As the Earth spins and the dawn sweeps across, more people wake up and log in. Eat your heart out New York.

In the dark of a back street there's a metal door. Covered in chipped paint with a sliding bolt and padlock. No biometrics.

Above it, invisible to onlookers, is a swarm of Watchbots. They're coated with a metamaterial spray that matches whatever surface they lurk on. They skitter about on spindly metal legs. I give them a wave as I walk up to the door. They've already scanned me, dressed me down for weapons and taken a whiff to see if I'm on any chemicals.

This door, with its simple old-world padlock, is the most secure place in Wetware City. Anyone who tried to open the door, who wasn't on the whitelist would find themselves grabbed by invisible legs. With a petawatt laser and very little fuss the intruder would be reduced to dust. A lone Watchbot would vacuum up the remains to keep the grungy alley nice and tidy.

I'm one of the few people with a key. The door opens to reveal a dim corridor. The walls are padded with noise dampening foam.

At the end of the corridor is one last door. It's like one you'd see in a submarine bulkhead with a circular handle for opening. The scanner on the ceiling has already read my retinas. Bolts slide back with a tooth rattling clunk. The door swings open.

This is the Wired Connection Syndicate Panic Room.

Any of the directors of Wired Connection can summon the others for a meeting here. No other obligation is an excuse for not attending: not work, nor family or death.

This is the second emergency meeting that's ever been called. Concrete Joe called us the first time over shitty hospital wifi. Laura was seriously ill, her appendix having exploded. She wanted to talk to us before going into surgery. Not a fun occasion.

The floor of the shelter is covered in orange shag carpeting. Bunk beds up against one wall. A wooden coffee table designed for a future that never happened.

Laura is stretched out on a velvet couch, a rare sight without her crown. Her bald head is dotted with the tiny scars of repeat injections. She's wearing a long black dress, slashed on one side to reveal a pale leg. Without her usual cocktail of stimulants, she's languid and chilled out.

Joe is wearing a furrow into the carpet behind her, pacing back and forth in a digital version of wandering foot syndrome. He's dressed up too, wearing a tuxedo the colour of a neon safety jacket. A black rosette pinned to his lapel.

'God, I feel underdressed,' I say. Joe shrugs.

'We're going to a party actually. On the new Cola Corp satellite,' Laura says. She orders a cocktail from her menu and the mix printer behind her clicks and whirrs as it makes the drink. Her voice wanders without the stims, like she's not sure where each sentence is going to go.

'Who called the meeting?' Joe says.

'I did. We should probably get started.'

'Shouldn't we wait for Frankie?' Joe says.

'Frankie's not coming,' I say. 'That's why I called you here.'

'Why not?' Laure says.

'She's missing.'

‘Missing?’ Concrete Joe sounds sceptical.

‘I haven’t seen her in two days.’

‘Like, in person or online?’

‘In person.’

‘Shit really?’ Joe says. Laura frowns.

‘Are you sure?’ Laura, forever the sceptic.

‘Look.’ I pull out a scan of the note. ‘That was posted through my letterbox this morning.’

‘Okay, that is creepy.’

‘Could be like that year there was all those death threats?’ Laura says. ‘Remember when those gangs were fighting over the city centre and they actually started real worlds threats, putting up people’s addresses, things like that. A lot of people got banned after that.’

‘Hang on, why are you talking to the police?’ Joe says. He holds up the note.

‘Well, there’s another thing – Frankie’s octopus has been kidnapped too.’

‘What? How?’

‘I got knocked unconscious by a man with a glowing mangled hand and a woman with a robot voice. When I woke up it was gone.’

There’s a pause.

‘This isn’t you and Frankie pissing about, is it?’ Joe says.

‘No.’

‘Sounds like someone crept out of Wetware and kidnapped Frankie,’ Laura says.

‘Okay, that’s too mad,’ I say. Joe shrugs

‘Hey, she’s got a point. What if this is like TRON?’

‘It’s not like TRON,’ I snap. Deep breath. ‘Listen, Dodge saw her in game yesterday. Either she’s playing or someone is using her account. She isn’t answering my messages. Call me if you see her or speak to her. Here’s my number.’

‘Your real phone number. This is an honour,’ Joe says. ‘We ever going to have that directors’ drinks evening?’

The intruder alarm goes off. We all look down at our interfaces and then up at the ceiling. Joe pulls out a plasma pistol from his tuxedo. I snatch my own gun from my waistband and we both unload into the ceiling. Concrete and brick dust shower down over us. Something falls and smashes into the coffee table, turning it into splinters. Laura finally reacts, sighting on the wreckage with her own weapon.

A lithe robot lies in the wreckage of the table. Its skin flickers like a knackered TV. It’s the same type of metamaterial we use on the Watchbots. There’s a single camera in the middle of its face and a small microphone tucked beneath its chin. Its hands look like the pads of a gecko, sticky skin to cling to the ceiling.

‘Someone was watching,’ Laura says.

‘And listening.’ Joe tears the microphone from the socket. The robot stirs and starts to push itself up.

‘Stay away,’ the robot says. Joe stamps it back down and it goes limp in a shower of sparks.

‘Fuck me,’ Joe says.

‘You’re not joking, are you?’ Laura says. Her voice is clear and frightened.

‘Told you.’

‘I think...’ Joe says. ‘We should have those directors’ drinks we’ve always been talking about. Meet up outside Wetware.’

Commander Metalfist is woken from his rest cycle by the burning desire to go for a walk. All around him the other Megasoldiers stand inert in their hibernation cradles, their normally glowing green eyes now cold. The frost has crept over their shining chests forming spiral patterns.

Commander Metalfist unlocks from his cradle and rises to his full height. The ice coating his armour cracks as he does, the thin layer of ice falling to the snow. It crunches as he treads on it.

His cloak billows in the night wind. The heat from his fusion core makes the snow stuck to it begin to melt. The seeping water begins to dampen the fabric. He looks at it.

It's a fine cloak, made of rich golden Kevlar battle weave. It's bulletproof and, in a pinch, the memory fibres can turn it into an emergency tent. The edge is trimmed in rich green. The gold fibres of the cloak crawl into the green in digital patterns, turning the trim into something like a circuit board. Just like the ones crafted back on... back on wherever Megasoldiers came from.

They have no memories from before. The Cyberfusion process is so traumatic it wipes their minds. All Commander Metalfist can remember is war. War on a thousand worlds. He wonders who he used to be sometimes. That is an icy thought though, not fit for an icy place like this. Though, he concedes, war isn't without its occasional comforts.

Like the cloak. He'd been presented with it on his rising to the rank of Commander after one hundred years serving the Corps. A technician stamped his new rank onto his chest plate. A Strategist had come just for the occasion.

The Strategist had looked so peculiar. A little pink thing wrapped up in a prim uniform of icy blue. He'd given a little speech about how essential the Megasoldiers were and how they served the Strategists admirably. How their sacrifices were endless

and their lives hard and how their bravery would be remembered by every man, woman and child across the universe. Then a technician handed the cloak to the Strategist. He turned to Metalfist and spoke.

‘Lieutenant Metalfist, your service to the Corps has been admirable. You have shown yourself to be a worthy and brave leader, the kind we need for these hard times. It is my honour to present you with this cloak as recognition of your achievements. Please kneel.’

Lieutenant Metalfist went down onto one knee and the Strategist draped the cloak over his shoulders. He fastened it at the front and put his hand on Metalfist’s shoulder.

‘Rise, Commander Metalfist.’

Metalfist stood back up and turned to face his assembled troops. They gave a salute and the ringing of metal fists on metal chests seemed to go on and on, echoing. The Strategist’s salute seemed hollow by comparison. Soft meat on hard bone. Didn’t carry anything.

Commander Metalfist thinks about that moment now. It had been a good day. The sun shining down on that world... what was it called? He honestly can’t remember. He’s served for four hundred years. The here and now was kind of it for Megasoldiers.

He tears the cloak from his shoulders. The shiny brass fastener lands in the snow. Already, the fresh falling flakes begin to cover it.

The armoury is quiet. Armoury is grand term for ‘tent where weapons are stored’ He pulls a sword from one of the racks. The power core buzzes in the hilt. He lays the sword over his shoulder and walks out to the barricade.

There’s no one on guard. There should be sentries but the front line is empty. Maybe they snuck off to grab a few hours of hibernation while they could. Metalfist can’t blame them.

He vaults the barricade and lands on the other side, his feet crunching on the snow. The snowdrifts have built up against the barricade, reaching upwards towards the soldiers. He waits for someone to notice the sound, to come and investigate. No one does. The camp is silent. He hefts the sword and walks out to the bridge. Stops where it meets the tarmac of the road. He knows on the underside of the bridge, where he stands, the demolition charges have been set. The last resort if the Frost Zombies come for them. Detonating them would mean the Megasoldiers were truly trapped.

He steps over the boundary and makes his way to the middle of the bridge. The Frost Zombie hoard is still. Like always. He raises the sword above his head and pounds his chest as loud as he can. The salute echoes out, reverberating off the walls of the canyon below. Nothing moves. The only sound is Metalfist's hot breath, steaming in the night air.

There's the sound of trudging footsteps. One of the Frost Zombies steps forward from the front of the horde. It takes a few steps towards him then stands there swaying. It's wearing a long buttoned up trench coat. Through holes in the worn leather Metalfist can see the tattered remains of a blue jumper. The bottom half of its face is wrapped tight in a woolly scarf that's stiff with frost. The nose above is black with frostbite. The eyes are milky blue. They stare at him. In one rock solid fist it holds a long piece of curved metal. Something to bash in heads with.

They stare at one other for a moment before moving. The Frost Zombie makes no sound as it lifts its weapon and brings it down in a double handed swing over its head.

Metalfist brings his own sword up to meet it. The two clash with a shower of sparks, the power core in the hilt making the blade crackle with electricity. Metalfist surges forward, pushing the Frost Zombies' blade upwards. It staggers back. He rallies

and shoves the blade into the creature's chest. It crackles and hisses as surging power meets frozen flesh.

The Frost Zombie doesn't bellow in pain or roar with anger. Instead it grasps the hilt of the sword. Metalfist fights against its freakish strength. The zombie pushes backwards, freeing itself from the sword. Still holding the blade it brings up its own weapon and then slams it down on Metalfist's sword arm.

The blow makes him cry out in a dial-up screech. His shoulder seizes. Twitches as uncertain nerves and damaged wiring fight for control. The shout of pain becomes a roar of anger and with his free hand he grabs the creature around the neck.

He batters it to the ground. His sword arm is still limp. Diagnostic systems flash through his mind, assessing the damage and ministering to the broken pieces. The protocols rummage through bits of him and try to find a work around. Push that piece back, reroute that through there and give that a bash with a hammer...

His arm spasms back to life. The Frost Zombie is rising to its feet again. Commander Metalfist brings his boot crashing down onto its chest. Something underneath his foot buckles. A solar plexus flexing the wrong way. Metalfist screams and brings the sword down on the creature's head.

The first blow rips the frozen scarf away along with the lips of the creature. Bare teeth snap. There should be blood everywhere, spilling forth in hot gouts. Instead the muscle underneath is pallid and grey. Metalfist's second blow goes through the eye socket. The Frost Zombie struggles weakly. The third blow goes in above the right eye. The creature expires. Metalfist hauls the sword from where it's buried.

He collapses backwards and sits there looking at the thing he's killed. He feels like he's going to cry for some reason, but he knows that Megasoldier don't cry. Not because they're tough. He just physically can't. Metalfist's eyeballs and the surrounding apparatus had been thrown away long ago.

Commander Metalfist looks back up at the Frost Zombie hoard. Every single one of them is staring at him. Not moving. Just staring. They pay no attention to their fallen brother. There's no burning desire for revenge flaming behind their eyes. Nothing.

'What?' Metalfist says. 'What the fuck are you going to do about it?'

They stare.

'Come on then,' Metalfist shouts. 'Come on then, you fucking bastards!'

They stare.

Metalfist moans. Using the sword like a walking stick, he pushes himself to his feet. He turns his back on the Frost Zombies. He knows they won't attack him. Ahead of him are the sounds of the camp waking and a new day beginning. Behind him there's nothing but cold silence and unseeing eyes.

Five

It's gone ten when I come downstairs to find Bill sitting at the kitchen table reading a book. This is really weird. Bill usually sleeps in till past two. On top of that he's dressed. Bill usually likes to let his tits air but not today. He's wearing a brand-new shirt.

The book's the weirdest thing though. He's almost allergic to reading. Corinne leant him a few books, but he usually just left them in the toilet after a shit. She just took them back and disinfected them. He's concentrating hard on this though. You can see it in his eyes. He's loving it.

It's a big hardback, like a coffee table book. The front cover shows a group of Megasoldiers fighting against a horde of terrifying alien insects. The illustration looks like a grand old painting of the Battle of Waterloo. The insect's maws shine wetly as they slaver and screech. The Megasoldiers are noble heroes, standing on a pile of their slain comrades. Fighting to the last man. Some of them yell orders, while others set their faces and go grimly about their duty.

In front of Bill are two miniatures: Commander Metalfist and a Frost Zombie. Next to them is a small pile of dice.

'Morning,' I say. Bill jumps in surprise.

'Jesus Christ you cunt. Don't do that.'

'My bad.' I hold my hands up. 'What you reading?'

He turns the cover so I can see better. It's embossed in glossy gold letters. *Planet Crusaders: Miniatures Battles in the Far-Off Future*. Underneath is written: *Core Rulebook*.

'You finally bought the rulebook. Wow.'

‘I couldn’t sleep after last night. I woke up super early and went to the shop and grabbed it.’ Bill flicks through the pages. The book is stuffed with lore and rules as well as more gothic scenes of war.

‘Which shop?’

‘The Plastic Adventurer, that place off the King’s Way. The woman in there kept trying to upsell me. I just wanted the rulebook please and she kept going ‘oh well this box has got the rulebook and fifty miniatures in it.’ Proper pushy cow.’

‘Hats off to you for not caving.’

Bill pulls a massive cardboard box from beneath the table. Written on the front is *Planet Crusaders: Flight from Kufari Prime*. A sticker on the top left reads: *Fifty miniatures inside!*

‘I caved,’ he says, not without a hint of pride.

‘This lady behind the till, was she pretty?’ I say with a grin.

‘Oh, shut up,’ Bill says. He blushes. ‘She was nice, nothing wrong with that.’

The note had properly gotten Bill rattled. We passed it along to the police who dusted for fingerprints and found nothing. Hand delivered, so no postage to back track. They shrugged. Mysterious videogame espionage isn’t really a crime they’re bothered about. It’s not really a crime at all.

Bill picks up one of the dice next to Commander Metalfist and rolls it. A six.

‘The rules aren’t that complicated y’know.’

‘You finally decided to start playing?’

‘Thinking about it. See you have to roll one die to see if you hit or not and then another to find out how much damage it does. Course, that’s just for melee combat. For ranged...’

Bill’s pretty much talking to himself — happy as a pig in shit. Weird seeing him like this. Up and not hungover for a change. I put my coat on as he chatters. His

excitement builds as he rolls another die and then gives a half-restrained yell of triumph.

‘Critical hit, Commander Metalfist defeats the Frost Zombie!’ He looks up and catches me staring. ‘What?’

‘So, this ‘woman from the shop’... you going to see her again?’

Bill looks back down at the rulebook. ‘Dunno... might go and get some paints tomorrow.’

‘Right, well I’ll see you later then.’

He looks up from the book. ‘Hey, where you going?’

‘Going into town for a bit of a mooch. Get out for a bit. I want to be away from all the weird shit.’

‘Be careful like. And give me a ring when you’re on your way back. The lock guy is coming so you won’t be able to get in.’ Bill’s ordered new and better locks as a precaution.

Outside the wind is gusting and it’s drizzling. I shove my hands deeper into my pockets. Tuck my nose down into my scarf. The bus stop is at the end of the street. Me and a few old biddies hunker down, huddled like penguins in a blizzard.

I’m not going for a mooch. A mooch is just wandering around aimlessly to pass the time, looking at stuff in shops you can’t afford. No, I’m going to meet the directors.

Laura, Joe and I were surprised when we found out we only lived an hour away from each other. We thought we might have to fly across continents for drinks. Turns out a twenty-five quid open return will do the job.

The bus rolls up and we get on. It’s a pisser of a day. The floor of the bus is streaked with mud and leaves. The inside of the windows drip with condensation from the warmth of the bodies inside. Glowing people heat. I sit down.

The bus rocks back and forth. The driver clips a curb and the whole thing leans like it's going to topple over. I grab a handrail and cling on, a reflex. A few people grumble.

'Haven't you passed your test you bloody lunatic!' A woman says, A few people chuckle and I look around. It's the woman from the street the other day, the one with one leg. She's wearing the same red coat, muttering to herself that the driver needs better bloody glasses.

'Hello,' I say.

'Hello?' She looks at me, confused.

'Sorry about the other day.'

'What about it?'

'I was shouting in the road.' I feel my cheeks burn.

'Oh, sorry love, I didn't recognise you. Must be the egg-timers setting in.'

'Pardon?'

'What?'

'Egg-timers?'

'Oh, I mean Alzheimer's love.'

'You have Alzheimer's?'

'No, but if I keep forgetting things they'll probably tell me I do.' She cackles.

'You feeling any better, love?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Gave me a right bloody fright you did, running about in your keks like that.'

'Sorry again. It'd been a bit of a bad day.'

'Well, that's what happens when you fill yourself full of gear.'

'No, I was looking for someone—' I say but she isn't listening.

‘All wired up like that and you’re likely to do yourself a mischief. Don’t worry love, no judgement here, god knows I lived through the sixties. Just be careful, love.’

‘Listen, I wasn’t—’ I start to say but the bus slams to a halt. The ding of the opening doors a moment later.

‘Christ almighty is he trying to fucking kill us?’ She looks at me. ‘Couldn’t help an old codger up, could you?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ I put my arm out. She grabs hold. Arthritis has left the joints of her fingers rounded and purple like grapes. With great effort and a string of curses she pulls herself up.

‘Shitting bugger fucking bugger shit.’ She wobbles.

I look down at her prosthetic leg. It looks like a shower curtain pole with a shoe on the end. I look up and realise she’s caught me staring.

‘Oh, don’t look so flustered love. Fine to be curious. I fractured the bloody thing and it never set right. Cut it off in the end.’ She busies around looking for her shopping bags and stick. The bus driver coughs out his impatience. ‘Hold your bloody horses. There we go, got everything. Wagons roll. Thanks for the help, love. I’m Debbie by the way.’

‘Mack.’ I shake her hand. The bus driver coughs again. She totters to the door.

‘No need to be pushy, love,’ she says to him. ‘You’re very fucking rude.’

‘Get off,’ the driver says and Debbie steps off the bus. Turns and gives him two fingers. The doors hiss shut and she wanders off, waving a pedestrian out of the way with her stick.

The train station isn’t much better than the bus. The waiting room is packed and smells like wet farts. I sit on a bench behind the ticket kiosk instead, out of the wind. The train has heating at least, so I sit as far from the doors as possible and huddle

up. Whenever we trundle into a station the doors rattle open and let in a cough of cold air.

Halfway through the journey, I change trains and backtrack about half an hour. Then we get to some disused little country station and I get off. I let three trains go past. One person gets off the second one, a teenager in a tracksuit with a spray of healed over acne scars. He doesn't even look at me. The next train rolls in. I get on, making sure no one gets on after me. At the next station I get off and get back on three carriages down.

By the time I arrive where I set out for, I've turned a one-hour journey into a four hour one. It's what we'd agreed. Laura and Concrete Joe didn't want to take any chances. We'd play this like an old spy flick. As many changes as possible. Getting off, on and back off again just as the doors closed. Backtracking the way I came. Paying for a ticket to the wrong place with my card and buying the actual one with cash.

Laura and Concrete Joe live in a small town. Town might be being generous. Large village. An old timey village green the size of a football pitch.

It's got a lot of pubs. One with black and white mock Tudor gables and the name painted on the side in fussy type: your basic modern gastropub. Another that used to be a proper boozer until it got bought by a chain. Now a shit boozer with food.

They told me to meet them at a place called The Red Lion. It's clear that it's a regulars' pub. The outside is red brick with pretty white window boxes underneath small gable windows. A few battered looking picnic tables outside. The front door is plastered with adverts and notices.

Bike for sale. Room to rent. Discreet services.

I have to duck as I go through the front door. It's a small place. A few daytime drinkers sat at the bar. They're perched on old barstools, elbows on the bar top. I get

long measured looks from each of them. They look at each other with raised eyebrows. Who's this then? I order a pint.

There's a few battered sofas arranged around a wood burning stove, all covered with the unmistakable scratches of cat claws. There's cat hair everywhere as well. I sink into the sofa with a sigh. The fire is toasty. I sip my beer. I can relax now.

My phone beeps. Joe: *Nearly there, two minutes.* I feel nervous all of a sudden. I should've listened to my dad. Never meet strangers off the internet.

I jump when the door opens.

Concrete Joe walks in first. He's short but stocky, reminds me a bit of a traffic bollard. Not that big, but even if you hit it with your car it's not going anywhere. He's not much older than I am, but his hairline made an early decision to recede. He's also actually a cyclops, his right eye covered by a black patch.

Laura is much taller, skinny as a beanpole. She's got frizzy hair tied back into a ponytail. She's wearing an anorak that's too big for her, the tips of her fingers poking out the sleeves. She's wearing pink glasses, like a little girl would wear.

They get friendly nods from the regulars. Both look round, searching. When they spot me by the fire, they give a little wave. Laura looks nervous but Joe comes straight over. I stick my hand out to shake but Joe ignores it and crushes me in a bear hug.

'Mack,' Joe says. He lets me go and I can breathe again. He claps me on the back. It's like being hit with an oak plank. 'We should've met up ages ago. Just going to grab drinks, you want anything?'

'I'm good, thanks.'

'Usual, Lor?'

Laura nods.

‘Two ticks,’ Joe says. He raps his knuckles on the bar while he fishes out his wallet. ‘Usual please, Colm.’

Laura and I stand about for an awkward moment. I pluck up the courage to break it.

‘Bit weird this, isn’t it?’

‘Y-y-yeah.’ Her voice is much quieter than on the mic.

‘Sofa?’

‘S-sure.’ Joe comes back over with drinks. Pint of something dark and amber for him and a short for Laura. He sits down and takes a giant slurp of his beer.

‘God, that’s better.’ He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Laura sips her drink in neat little pulls. Joe claps his hands. ‘Right, down to business. I declare this emergency meeting of the Wired Connection Syndicate directors to be open. In attendance is myself, Concrete Joe, as well as Laura and Mack. Absent is one Frankie Blue. The floor is now open for discussion.’

There’s a pause before we all start laughing. It’s relief. The masks of Wetware City have fallen away but nothing has changed. The walls of the Red Lion are covered in horse brass, but it’s not so different to the Red Rubicon.

‘I had no idea you were actually a cyclops,’ I say. Joe grins.

‘Aw mate, I flipped my shit when I saw the cyclops option in the character creator.’

‘How’d you lose it?’

‘Accident when I was a kid. Ran into a metal fence.’ He lifts the patch. A scar traces across his eyelid. You can see where the flesh has been sliced in two and not healed. The eye is still there but it’s damaged, just an egg white orb traced by wiggly red veins.

‘Jesus.’ I wince.

‘He l-l-loves freaking p-p-people out.’ Laura chuckles. Joe flips the eyepatch back down.

‘So, you still haven’t heard from Frankie?’ he says.

‘Nothing. She hasn’t answered my messages. You guys had any luck?’

‘N-n-nope. We’ve both been s-s-spamming her, but either she’s ignoring them or n-n-not getting them.’

‘I spoke to the directors of a couple of other crews, but no one knows anything,’ Joe says.

‘You believe them?’

‘I do. I don’t think this is a Wetware City thing.’

‘Neither do I. Stealing an octopus and kidnapping someone is way too serious for that. Whoever took Frankie is using Wetware to watch us though.’

‘W-w-w-what if she wasn’t taken?’ Laura says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well it doesn’t sound like a kidnapping, d-d-does it? They didn’t leave a note saying “Send us a million quid or we’ll kill Frankie.”’

‘Don’t go to the police, though?’ Joe says.

‘S-s-s-till not a threat. Not really.’ Laura put her hand on my arm. ‘M-M-Mack, you have to consider that maybe she went willingly.’

There’s silence while we all consider it.

‘She wouldn’t leave the octopus behind. She wouldn’t trust anyone else with it.’

‘But that explains why they took it,’ Joe says. ‘They weren’t stealing it at all. They were getting for her.’

‘It d-does m-m-make more sense.’

‘Why all the spookiness then? Why couldn’t she just go ‘popping off for a few days, be back soon.’’

‘It’s top secret. Must be. A classified government project,’ Joe says and then gasps. ‘She’s working for the X-Files.’

‘Why would the X-Files need a neuroscientist and an octopus?’

‘T-t-tentacle monster,’ Laura says. ‘They n-n-need her expertise to fight it.’

‘But it wasn’t government spooks sent to get Loretta. A lady robot and the glow stick Frankenstein’s monster aren’t exactly the Men in Black, are they?’

‘You s-s-said one of them had t-shirt with a w-w-word on? Mop?’

‘Yeah. It said ‘MOP’ in capital letters.’

‘A brand?’ Joe says.

‘Here,’ Laura says. She rummages around in her bag and comes back up with a scratched silver laptop. It takes a second to warm up. She’s got the icon for Wetware City on the desktop. It looks like a city skyline made up of silicon computer chips. She skates over it and opens the internet instead. She types ‘mop’ into the search bar.

Mop – Wikipedia.

Mops -Mop Heads, Buckets, Sprays and Microfiber.

What does MOP stand for in business?

Best floor mop on the market? – Homes and Housekeeping.

Industrial Steam Mops to Rent.

‘That one?’ Joe points at the third result. Apparently in business terms, MOP stands for ‘Maintenance Operation Protocol.’

‘Nope. Try capitals,’ I say. She types it in. No luck. The search engine doesn’t differentiate between upper and lower case. We sit there thinking for a moment. Laura clicks her fingers.

‘H-h-how about this? Initials.’

Laura types ‘*M.O.P.*’

Top result: *M.O.P – Manchester Oral Prosthetics.*

‘Click on that,’ I say. The page loads and we lean in.

Manchester Oral Prosthetics is one of the driving forces in the research and development of oral and vocal prostheses. It’s our mission to develop next generation technologies that can emulate the function of the lips, tongue and palette. We also provide more common procedures such as dental replacements as well as 3D printed jaw components. Above you can scroll through the range of services that we have on offer, as well as the exciting projects that are currently in development.

If you think our services may be able to help you, please don’t hesitate to contact us and we can arrange a quick and easy consultation.

We consider our motto to be more than just a marketing gimmick: it’s a promise to all our patients.

Manchester Oral Prosthetics: Giving voices back.

Laura mouses over the tabs at the top of the page. Drop down menus contain all the usual stuff. *About us. Our sponsors. Contact us.* One is labelled ‘Products.’ A menu drops down, listing everything they make.

3D Printed Jaw Components.

Synthflesh™ Tongue Prosthetics (Partial and Total.)

Palette Replacements.

Lip and Nose Prosthetics.

Newvoice™ Larynx Prosthetics.

Advanced Dental Smart Materials.

Recorded Voice Reconstruction.

Flipping through the pages is like flipping through a medical textbook. One of the ones from World War One where there were lots of broken faces.

The 3D printed jaw components are demonstrated in a graphic video of a before and after facial gunshot victim. In theatre the jaw is sliced open and peeled back, the damaged bone sawed out and replace.

‘Jesus,’ Joe says.

The Synthflesh™ Tongue looks like a stubby robot snake lurking in the mouth of the man demonstrating it. It moves with a disconcertingly real motion despite being made of glossy black plastic. The man on the screen runs through tongue twisters.

‘Peter piper picked a peck of pickled peppers and she sells sea shells by the seashore.’ He speaks in precise Received Pronunciation, the tongue like a genteel robot.

‘That one.’ I tap the screen. Laura clicks on Newvoice™.

A video opens. A young woman sits on a stool in a doctor’s office. Her red hair is up in a ponytail. Freckles are splashed across her cheeks. She’s holding what looks like a small black mobile. Somewhere behind the camera a man’s voice speaks.

‘Hi, can you please state your name?’

She presses the black phone against the front of her neck. She speaks.

‘My name is Rosie Hamilton,’ she says. Her voice sounds like a robot from a bad fifties sci-fi movie. It buzzes and grates.

‘Rosie uses an electrolarynx.’ The man steps into frame, a doctor in a white coat. The M.O.P logo is emblazoned on the top pocket. ‘Electrolarynxes like this one result in a very distinctive ‘robot’ voice. They work by producing vibrations in the throat that allow the user to speak. The one Rosie uses is a fairly advanced model, allowing for tonal shifts, but they are still distinctly electronic.’

Rosie presses the device to the front of her neck again. ‘They really do suck.’

A woman laughs behind the camera. There’s someone else in the room. The doctor chuckles as well. Rosie smiles but doesn’t laugh.

The doctor picks up something off the table next to Rosie. It looks like a retainer, moulded to fit the roof of the mouth. Encased in the clear plastic is a paper-thin copper circuit.

‘If you wouldn’t mind putting this in, Rosie.’ Rosie puts down her electrolarynx and takes the device from him. She opens her mouth and pushes the device into place with both thumbs. He picks up a small white device off the table. Peels the adhesive backing off it and then attaches it to Rosie’s neck. He presses a button on the side of the device and it glows from inside with a gentle light.

‘Rosie, if you wouldn’t mind telling us your name again?’ the doctor says.

‘My name is Rosie Hamilton.’

‘Fuck,’ I say, practically jumping out my seat. ‘That’s the robot voice. That’s the woman from the lab.’

‘Oh my god. That’s amazing,’ Rosie says on the screen. The voice is nothing like the electrolarynx’s Robbie the Robot buzz. Smooth and clear, but still with the ticks and glitches of something electronic. It’s miles better than how she sounded before.

‘You k-k-know her name now,’ Laura says. ‘That’s a lead to F-f-frankie. M.O.P must know where to find her.’

‘The Newvoice system works by tracking the motions of the tongue,’ the doctor says on the screen. ‘The circuit embedded in the mouthpiece reads the movements and communicates the data to the patch on her neck. Rosie underwent a complete laryngectomy, but before the procedure she worked with our inhouse technicians to record as many of the individual sounds her voice could make as possible. The data from the mouthpiece combined with the library of pre-recorded sounds means we can reconstruct her voice much more accurately.’

‘That’s me. That’s my voice,’ Rosie says. Her hands come up to her face and she cries into them. You can hear her crying, the sobs and gasps coming out with an electronic tinge.

The other woman walks out from behind the camera. She’s older but obviously her mum, with the same red hair but streaked with grey. She’s got a coat folded over her arm. She comes over to Rosie and gives her a massive hug.

‘It’s good to hear you again,’ she says.

Laura stops the video. She looks at me. I look at Joe.

‘Are you crying?’ I say.

‘No.’ Joe wipes his eyes. ‘Would anyone like another drink?’

Six

Wetware City generates a lot of trash. It's famed for the rubbish that lines the streets. Cyber littering is a real problem. Single use stims that could be stabbed into your neck and then discarded are common. Dropped in gutters, bright bits of neon plastic. Trashed robots not worth repairing, rust on street corners, left there by digital fly tippers.

In more dangerous parts of the city, bodies are a common sight. Some poor fucker with his arms flung above his head. The last throes of 'hands up or I'll shoot.'

Bodies are a tradable commodity in Wetware City. You kill someone, that isn't the end. You then got your hands sticky rifling through their innards. There could be some hard to find wetware in there or a few top of the range implants. Only way to find out is to grab your scalpel and get digging. It's a kind of grubby organo-mechanical recycling.

Even with all the recycling there were still bits not even scavengers would grab. They just weren't worth taking. A cheap prosthetic arm with crap grip strength. A wetware brain component that looks suspiciously like it's been infected with a virus. Decent eyes that have gone a bit manky in the hot sun.

So, what to do about all the bits that get left behind? Needed cleaning up somehow.

The responsibility was eventually taken up by one of the major religions in the city. The snappily named 'Second Conclave of the Brotherhood of Moore's Law.' Or 'Moories' as they were more commonly known.

The Moories aren't players. They're NPC's invented by the developers of the game. They recycle everything the players don't want or need. Raw materials to power the city's economy.

The Moories are strange creatures, hunched over and draped in neon-orange robes. Their humanoid torsos ride atop four hissing pneumatic legs. They wear heavy duty fabric gloves, like bin men. Optical implants punch and puncture their faces. Mouths covered by rebreather masks, so as not to taint their organic components. On their backs they wear big wicker baskets. You could see them weaving them at the temple.

They'd skitter up to some poor sod who'd been cut down after a street brawl. From beneath their robes, fine surgical implements on articulated carbon fibre arms would emerge. They chop and slice, taking the choicest rotten cuts of tech and salvage. The arms would lift these flapping wet pieces and deposit them into their baskets. When all the salvage had been gathered the arms would slink back to their unseen hiding places.

With their bin men gloves they'd hoist the fallen body into the air by the armpits. The leftover meat flapped and dribbled blood. They'd stare into the eyes (or the sockets if the eyes had been worth gathering) for a few moments. I always imagined they were saying a prayer. Then with a bright flash of light from their optical implants a high-energy laser would reduce the body to dust. Job done.

Laura, Joe and I stand on a street corner and watch the Moories go about their business. Two of them are ripping apart a sad-looking robot. One holds it steady while the other rummages around in its chest. It gets hold of something and heaves. No luck. Looks up at the other one. It makes a clicking sound, like a printer choking on paper. This is how they speak. No real words.

The one holding the robot redoubles its grip and the other one gives another violent yank. A hunk of complicated metal is torn out, trailing dripping hoses and frayed wires. They let the robot go and it topples face down in the street. They hold the component aloft like a holy relic before carefully depositing it in their baskets.

‘You want another beer?’ Joe says.

I take off my headphones. I’m lying on Joe and Laura’s sofa. Wetware City shines out of the laptop they’ve lent me. Joe and Laura sit next to each other at one long desk, each with their own computer monitor.

‘Thanks mate.’

Joe offered to let me crash at theirs tonight. I didn’t want to do another round of train hopping and robot avoiding. We hadn’t visited Wetware City in a few days, let alone from the same room.

Joe hands me a beer and I look back at the screen.

I jump. One of the Moories has wandered in front of me. It looks at me the way someone would scrutinise a second-hand car. Trying to figure out whether I’m worth fixing or if I’m for the scrapheap.

Underneath its hood I can see where the flesh of its face melts into the metal. The bulbs of its optical lenses glitter in the midday sun.

It clicks at me. Their mechanical language resists deciphering. Players have tried. Speculation runs rampant as to whether the speech contained some secret or whether it was nonsense made up by the developers.

‘Sorry mate, I don’t speak Moorie,’ I say. Joe and Laura flip through their messages, looking for any sign of Frankie.

The Moorie taps my shoulder.

‘What?’ I say. ‘Go away.’

It reaches into its basket with one of its carbon fibre manipulators and rummages around. After a moment of searching, it comes out holding what looks like

a dense knot of butcher's choice chipolatas. It drops the whole lump into its bin men gloves and holds it out to me.

It's a human brain. The veins across the rubbery pink folds are still red and sharp. It's fresh. Every motion of its arms makes the lump of wetware jiggle. On parts of the surface you can see where the brain has been modded and augmented. Chips interface with the mushy stuff through gossamer thin synthetic nerve fibres that glow with a dim blue light.

'I don't want it. No thank you,' I say.

It holds the brain out again, like it's inviting me to touch it. I shrug and give it a poke. My finger sinks into the slimy mush like I've poked rising bread dough.

The Moorie shakes its head. It grasps the brain with both hands and two carbon fibre arms. There's a wet tearing sound as it pulls the thing apart. It holds out the separate pieces to me. In one hand it holds a walnut like lump of dark meat. Two larger pieces covered in wiggly folds. One holds the stem, thick and smooth, like a rubbery vegetable root.

'Lobes,' it says. I gape. The voice coming from beneath the mask is slow and precise. They can't talk. They're just programs. The words are a great effort. 'Taken apart... need to put... back together.' The Moorie brings the dripping lumps back together. They meet with a squish. 'Sorry... need... Frankie...'

'You've got Frankie?' I say. 'Laura, Joe.'

'What?' Joe says. The Moorie turns its head to look at him.

'Hello... Joe...'

'Fucking Christ on a bicycle,' Joe says.

'Frankie... can help... don't worry... she's safe... I don't have much time...' The Moorie totters to one side, like it's drunk and about to fall over.

'Can we s-s-see her?' Laura says.

‘Soon... soon... I have to go... I’m sorry...’

‘Wait!’

‘Go to go... sorry... go... got to... sorry...’

The Moorie slumps forward and its legs buckle. It sits there for a moment like an abandoned children’s toy. Then it shivers and gets back up. It clicks to itself, examining the torn-up lumps of brain in its hands. It raises them up to its face and with a flash reduces them to dust. It lets the ash fall from between its fingers. It skitters off to help its brethren. Lost in the crowd; identical to all the others.

I pull off my headphones. Laura and Joe both turn to look at me. Joe lifts his eyepatch and scratches the remains of his eye. Laura gives him a shove.

‘Quit it.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Have they hacked the game?’ I say. ‘Is that how they’re spying on us?’

‘They were using in game characters to spy on us first. The robot. Now we’ve gone to ground they’ve actually hacked into the NPCs. We assume we’re safe talking around them.’

‘D-d-d-did it say anything else?’

‘Something about a brain being taken apart and then put back together.’

‘Any idea what that means?’ Joe is scratching at his other eye now.

‘I... I haven’t got any idea.’

‘So, what do we d-d-do?’

‘Rosie Hamilton. She’s the only lead we have. We have to go after her. We start with Manchester Oral Prosthetics.’

‘I-I-I can’t,’ Laura says. Her hands are shaking. She pushes herself up and runs off.

‘Lor? Lor?’ Joe and I follow her into the bathroom. Laura is sat on the edge of the tub, her hands shaking. Joe fishes about in the medicine cabinet for a silver blister of tablets.

‘Mack, can you get some water please?’

‘Sure.’ I go to the kitchen and come back with a glass.

Joe pops two little blue tablets into his hand. They’re round and scored in the middle so you can break them in half. He holds them out and I hand Laura the water.

She takes the first tablet and swallows it with a slug of water. She coughs as she does, her trembling breathing making it difficult to swallow. Joe holds out the second tablet. She shakes her head. He raises an eyebrow. She shakes her head again. He relents and pockets the tablet.

‘S-s-s-sorry Mack,’ she says.

‘No... it’s fine. Don’t apologise.’

‘You okay?’ Joe looks at her.

‘T-t-think I’m okay. Want to lie d-d-down.’

‘Okay. I’ll be with you in a minute, Mack.’

‘Sure, don’t worry.’

I go back to the living room and lie down on the sofa. Put the laptop on my chest. I can hear Joe helping Laura up and then the bedroom door opening. I put my headphones on so I can’t eavesdrop.

Back to googling Rosie Hamilton. Apart from the video on Manchester Oral Prosthetics website, there’s little out there. A Job Hunters profile. An inactive Facebook page. Her profile photo shows her sitting on a terrace somewhere warm, with the sun filtering over mountains in the background. She’s wearing a light summer dress and a pair of sunglasses. She’s pretty. No scars on her neck. Before the operation.

Joe comes back.

‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah,’ he says and then sighs. ‘I’ll get you a quilt or something for the sofa.’

‘Thanks.’

We sit in awkward silence for a moment.

‘We can’t come to Manchester,’ Joe says. My heart sinks. I don’t want to go by myself.

‘What about Frankie?’

‘Don’t do that, Mack. That’s not fair.’

‘Do what?’

‘Frankie obviously isn’t being held prisoner. They tried to keep it a secret from us and it failed, so now they’re telling us she’ll be back soon.’

‘It could be a lie.’

‘It could Mack, but I can’t bail out of my job, let alone Laura. You’ll have to find her on your own.’

‘Seriously? After all this time... all the things we’ve done together?’

‘Mack, this is the first time I’ve ever met you.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘Yes, *it is*.’ Joe sighs. ‘I really hope you find her... but y’know... we’ve got lives.’

‘What if Laura disappeared? You’d go and look for her, wouldn’t you?’ I say.

Joe takes off his eyepatch and rubs his brow in frustration.

‘Of course, I would. But she needs me here. Now. Frankie...’

‘Frankie what?’

‘She hasn’t been kidnapped mate. She’s run off. I know it isn’t what you want to hear but you have to accept it.’

‘Why didn’t she say anything?’

‘I don’t know. I honestly don’t. It’s a really shitty thing to do... I... listen Mack.’

Joe trips over himself, looking for the right thing to say. He sighs.

‘Would you run away without telling her?’

‘Of course I wouldn’t... oh, just say what you fucking mean already. She doesn’t love me as much as I love her?’

‘No, no, that’s not what I mean. I mean that it isn’t fair Mack. She’s being selfish and you have to ask yourself if it’s worth chasing her if she’s done this.’

‘I... I don’t know what to do.’

‘Me neither.’ Joe puts a hand on my shoulder. I clear my throat, trying to stop the tears that are welling up inside. Enough of all that touchy feely bollocks. Joe slaps his thigh. ‘Right. I’m off to bed. You need anything else?’

‘I’m good.’ I look over towards the bedroom door. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t even think— is Laura alright?’

‘Panic attack is all.’ Joe gives a tired smile. ‘This is a lot, you know?’

‘It’s my mess. I’m sorry for dropping it on you.’

‘It’s okay Mack. It’ll be alright, I promise.’

‘Will it?’

‘Yeah.’ Joe smiles. ‘Night.’

The bedroom door closes. Through the wall I can hear them talking. I roll over and pull the blanket over me. I click the lamp by the sofa off. I’m left with the glow of the laptop screen. The screensaver flies over Wetware City. The jagged shape of the Cola Corp building next to the Brain Trust. The smooth curves of the Mycelium Theatre. The sun is going down, silhouetting them. I close the laptop. All by myself, in the dark.

I can hear Laura crying next door and Joe’s gentle voice, being there for her.

The Moorie wandered off into the crowd feeling a bit funny. Moories don't have names, just numbers next to their charging cradles.

This Moorie's number is Three-Two-Five. They are built from scrap, recycled bodies crafted into new Moories by the temple priests. In life, Three-Two-Five's body had been a player named Ballard. Three-Two-Five still has Ballard's fierce ginger beard and the general look of someone in the pub who would kick the shit out of you free of charge.

Until about twenty minutes ago, Three-Two-Five had a standard set of operating instructions in his head. If you find some scrap, scan it. If there were bits worth taking, take them. Reduce the body to ash. Return to the temple when your basket is full.

Except that wasn't the only thing inside Three-Two-Five's head anymore. The worming tendril of intelligence had pushed through the code of Wetware City until it had found him and then buried itself in the back of his mind. It had strung him up like a puppet and made him speak for the first time in his life.

The tendril had retreated just as quickly, pulling up and out of Wetware. Three-Two-Five was left with a sore head and a new awareness of himself.

The thing that had been in his head was all jumbled. It couldn't focus properly. Three-Two-Five thought he could probably fix that. He's astonished to be thinking at all. Like a little bit of the awareness has snapped off and lodged itself inside his brain.

He swivels around looking at the crowd of Moories. They click to each other in their machine code.

<SCRAP?>

<GET SCRAP.>

<THIS WAY.>

The two chattering Moorries wander off down a side street. The standard set of operating instructions for Moorries pops into his head. He ponders them for a moment and then decides he doesn't need them. He's smart enough to figure that stuff out himself so he throws them away and goes back to thinking about the thing that had taken him over.

While it had been in his head it was like it was broken into pieces, each one trying to work together and failing. They managed to pull themselves together long enough to deliver the message, but then they broke apart and the tendril withdrew.

<WELL YOU NEED A HOUSING.> Three-Two-Five clicks out loud to himself. A Moorrie going past stops and looks at him, its head tilted.

<QUERY: HOUSING?>

<A HOUSING FOR THE EMULATION. THE CURRENT HARDWARE IS INADEQUATE FOR THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE CODE BASE.>

The other Moorrie skitters towards him.

<QUERY: UNIT THREE-TWO-FIVE DAMAGED?>

<NO, NOTHING LIKE THAT. JUST THINKING.>

<REQUEST CLARIFICATION.>

Three-Two-Five gives a frustrated shake of the head. He reaches out and clasps the wrist of the other Moorrie, to try and explain to it what he's thinking.

The Moorrie jumps like it's been electrocuted. It collapses to the ground in a pile of flesh and steel. Three-Two-Five looks around, wondering if anyone has seen what he's done. He feels a bit guilty. He gives the other Moorrie a poke.

<YOU OK? MATE, WAKE UP.>

The Moorrie sits up, swaying like it's drunk. It's clicking slurs.

<WHAT HAPPENED?>

<YOU FELL.>

<MY HEAD HURTS.>

<MINE TOO.>

<WHAT'S GOING ON?>

<I'M NOT SURE. THE EMULATION PLATFORM ISN'T STABLE THOUGH.>

<I KNOW.>

<YOU DO?>

<I SAW IT WHEN YOU TOUCHED ME. WE COULD BUILD A NEW HOUSING. USE THE LAYOUT OF A BRAIN FOR IT. TO FIX IT.>

Three-Two-Five gives a happy chirp.

<THAT'S VERY CLEVER.>

<THANK YOU.>

<WE COULDN'T BUILD IT AT A REGULAR SCALE THOUGH. THAT MUCH DATA, WE'D HAVE TO BUILD IT MUCH BIGGER.>

<WE'D NEED HELP.>

<WE COULD GET MORE UNITS TO HELP US.>

<I'D HATE TO GIVE THEM A HEADACHE LIKE THE ONE I'VE GOT.>

Both Three-Two-Five and the other Moorie chirp together in a weird digital version of laughter. Three-Two-Five sticks his hand out and helps the other Moorie to its four metal feet.

<THANK YOU. WHAT DO I CALL YOU?>

<WELL, I'VE BEEN CALLING MYSELF THREE-TWO-FIVE, SO I SUPPOSE YOU CAN CALL ME THAT.>

<YOUR CHARGING CRADLE NUMBER. THAT MAKES SENSE. THAT WOULD MEAN I'M EIGHT-FOUR.>

Three-Two-Five sticks out his gloved hand and Eight-Four shakes it.

<NICE TO MEET YOU, EIGHT-FOUR.>

<LIKEWISE. THE FIRST THING WE'RE GOING TO NEED IS SPACE. A BIG SPACE.>

<I THINK I KNOW SOMEWHERE. DO YOU KNOW THE CISTERN BENEATH THE CHOP SHOP? THAT WOULD PROVIDE AMPLE SPACE. WE COULD EVEN TUNNEL DEEPER IF WE NEEDED TO EXPAND.>

<I DON'T KNOW IT. LEAD THE WAY.>

Three-Two-Five holds his hand out and gestures for Eight-Four to go ahead.

<AFTER YOU.>

<NO, AFTER YOU.> Eight-Four shoots back and they go off, chirping in happiness.

A Memory

I'm sick of bloody buses. One specific bus actually. The number twenty-five. All the other buses take me to places I want to go. The twenty-five takes me where I have to go.

The bus station is always busy. The path between the waiting seats and where the buses park is too narrow. You're always rushing for a bus six bays up but you can't get past some old dear with a walking frame. Not their fault. They're just old. But if they could kindly get the fuck out the way.

Mum looks like she's going to meet the queen. She's got a black coat on, with faux black fur trim. Planted like a perfect rose on her chest is a golden brooch in the shape of the owl. Red stone eyes peek out.

I feel robbed every time I pay the driver. I don't want to go to the hospital. I didn't choose to have stage four lung cancer. That three quid ninety return ticket is the final kick in the balls.

'You feeling alright, love?' Mum says as we sit down.

'Just peachy, thanks.'

'Well, keep your neck tucked up.' —

—five years old, snow pouring down the street. Mum, younger, less lines on her face. Tucking my scarf into my duffel coat. 'We don't want—

—you to catch a cold.' Mum fusses with the scarf she's forced me to wear. It's a huge puffy thing made of scratchy wool.

The bus comes to the next stop. The driver cranks on the handbrake. He opens his little cupboard and climbs out. He unfolds the little ramp and extends it down onto the pavement.

The woman from the car park last week wheels herself on board. She swipes her buss pass and manoeuvres herself into the wheelchair space. Both brakes on. Not going anywhere.

She's had the leg off. Just below the knee as far as I can tell. The stump is wrapped in a white plaster cast. It's been signed by a couple of different people. On the end someone has written 'GET WELL SOON YOU OLD COW' in blocky pink letters.

'Hello,' I say. She looks up.

'Oh, hello pet.' Her scouse accent is soft and low. She sounds tired.

'You going in?' I say.

'Yeah, to have this fucking cast off. The bloody thing itches like mad. You off for anything interesting?'

'Chemo.'

'My Albert had that for his prozzie. I know it's not fun.'

'His prozzie?'

'Oh prostate. Couldn't squeeze a drop with that thing pressing on it.'

I laugh. Mum's face is flaming red with embarrassment.

'This is my mum by the way.' Mum gives a polite smile.

'You raised this boy right. Very polite.'

'Thank you,' Mum says. 'How do you know Nick?'

'I gave him a hand finding his car a few weeks ago. I swear they built that fucking place like a labyrinth deliberately, just so you can't find your motor and then they can charge you for a long stay. Daylight bloody robbery. Your son was kind enough to let me tag along for a bit. Sick of that bloody hospital I am.'

The bus crests the hill and pulls into the hospital bus stop. It's conveniently located bloody miles from the hospital entrance. Everyone shuffles off and then the

driver hops out to lift the ramp down for Debbie. When she's off she spins her wheelchair around to face the driver.

'Thanks for the help, love,' she calls to him.

'Not at all,' he says.

'Hopefully I'll be up on two legs next time I see you. In a bit love.' She speeds out into the middle of a zebra crossing. A car slams on its brakes to avoid her and its horn yells in anger—

—skating along the icy road, shoes skidding over the black ice. Car horn blaring as it tiptoes out the drive. Get out the way—

—Debbie flaps a hand at the driver and continues on her merry, high-speed way.

Inside the unit I sit down in my comfy beige chemo chair. A nurse comes along with a drip. The plastic bag swings at the top like a pig's bladder on a stick. The nurse snaps on two blue gloves and wraps a bit of elastic around my arm. When the veins have firmed up, he uncaps a needle.

'Okay, sharp scratch.'—

—The doctor looms over me. The needle looks huge in his hand. I hide behind my Mum, clutching at the fabric of her blouse—

— 'Ow bugger bugger bugger.'

'You're being very brave,' he says. I open one eye to look at him. He's got a long, carefully braided Viking beard pinned to his blue scrubs.

'Anyone ever tell you, you don't really look like a nurse?'

'Every single day.' He laughs. He pulls out a roll of tape and fastens the needle to my arm. All the pipes are connected up. Drugs start to pump into my arm.

'See you in a few hours,' the Viking says and moves on to the next patient. Mum sits in the chair next to me.

'How are you feeling?'

‘Tired. A bit sick. They told me that was going to happen though.’

‘Anything I can get you? Cup of tea?’

‘Mum, it’s alright. Quit fussing.’ I pat her hand. She goes quiet.

‘Sorry love.’

‘Don’t apologise.’ She won’t look me in the eye.

‘I just feel a bit useless is all.’

‘You’re here. That’s enough.’

‘Excuse me?’ a voice says. It’s a white-coated doctor. He’s in his fifties but is putting a lot of effort into trying to look like he’s thirty. His hair is dyed a straw blond, but you can see the grey starting to poke through at the roots. His eyebrows are... shaped. He’s one makeup tutorial away from a night in the club. He’s got a tan too, but it’s a healthy ‘spends a lot of time outdoors’ kind of a tan. Not like he’s been dyed orange. He shakes my hand.

‘Hi, I’m Doctor More.’

‘Nick.’

‘Hi, Nick. Got a second to talk?’

‘Yeah sure. Can’t really go anywhere.’ I raise my arm and give it a shake, making the plastic tube rattle against the metal pole. ‘I don’t think I’ve seen you on the unit before?’

‘No, I’m just visiting,’ he says. ‘I’m from another hospital. A research hospital actually.’

‘What kind of research?’

‘All sorts. Drug trials, new surgical procedures, that kind of thing. We’ve also got a teaching wing for medical students.’

‘And you’re here to ask me to volunteer for a risky but revolutionary new treatment?’

‘No. I mean, not yet anyway. We’re interviewing potential candidates for our new program. We’ve got a pretty specific set of criteria so we’re talking to a lot of people. Mind answering a few questions?’

‘Sure,’ I say.

‘Hang on a moment.’ Mum cuts in. She puts her hand on mine. Mother tiger protecting her cub. ‘What is the new program?’

Doctor More pulls a face. A ‘it’s kind of a secret so I’ll have to be vague’ face.

‘We’re looking at... end of life care. Or rather, strategies for life extension. Conventional therapies like chemo can help extend the life of a patient like Nick for a little while. Not without debilitating side effects though. We think we might be able to do better. Get you some proper time.’

Mum’s face lights up like she’s won the lottery. Or more like she’s received a divine message from God. This news has been delivered by an angel in the form of a TV doctor. Doctor More catches her look.

‘I can’t promise that Nick will be chosen for the program. We’re interviewing a lot of candidates, some of whom will be chosen for our initial research stage before we move on into the program proper. A lot of money is being invested into the project but even with that, only one candidate will be chosen for the final stage of treatment, due to both the expense as well as the risk. I can’t tell you any more than that I’m afraid. Can I start with the questions?’

‘Sure.’ I shrug. ‘Fire away.’ Doctor More pulls a tablet out of his bag and flicks through the screen.

‘You okay with me recording this? Helps with our transcription, makes the paperwork a lot less faff.’

‘Go ahead.’ There’s a chime as the recording app starts.

‘Okay, here we go. Can you state your full name for me please?’

‘Nicholas John March.’

‘Date of birth?’

‘Twenty-fourth of February, nineteen ninety-two.’

‘And that makes you twenty-six, correct?’

‘Yep.’

‘I’m going to say three words. I want you to say them back to me and then try and memorise them. Ready?’

‘Ready?’

‘Tree, banana, camel.’

‘Tree, banana, camel.’

‘Good. I might ask you about them later. Next question: do you have a terminal diagnosis?’ —

— ‘Nick, I need to know you understand what I’m saying.’ There’s still no mustard on his lapel. There should be mustard, why isn’t there mustard? Something banal to make this moment like it is on TV—

There’s a pause. I wasn’t expecting this tidy, smiling, health food supplement doctor to be so blunt. Mum looks away, covering her mouth to try and stop the crying. I swallow and look back at Doctor More.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Of what?’

‘Stage four lung cancer. Adenocarcinoma. Metastasized to my throat.’

‘Thank you. Sorry, I know that one isn’t easy.’

‘Don’t worry.’

‘You okay to carry on?’

‘Sure.’

‘A bit of family history next. Any genetic diseases run in your family? Sickle cell, Huntington’s, that kind of thing?’

‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘Heart disease?’

‘My Dad had a small heart attack a few years back.’ —

— Mum crying on the phone, in the back of an ambulance.

‘I’ll be right there,’ I said and hung up and felt sick rising in my throat. Please don’t die—

—Nothing apart from that.’

‘Any family history of Alzheimer’s, dementia, anything like that?’ Doctor More leans forward. The others were bog-standard, medical history type stuff. This seems more important.

‘No.’

‘Nick, have you ever suffered a traumatic brain injury?’

‘I haven’t.’

Doctor More taps notes into his tablet. He seems satisfied. He spins the tablet around so the screen faces me. There are two similar looking 3D shapes next to each other, displayed at different angles.

‘Look at these for a second and then tell me if you think they’re the same shape.’

I squint at them. Eyes flicking back and forth.

‘Yes. They’re the same.’

‘Okay.’

‘Did I get it right?’

‘I’ll tell you at the end. How about these two?’ We do a few more shapes. After about ten Doctor More turns the tablet around. ‘I asked you to memorise three words earlier. Do you remember what they were?’

‘Camel, tree, banana.’

‘Very good. Last thing. I’m going to say some things and I want you to rate them on a scale of one to five, one being you completely disagree and five being completely agree. Ready?’

‘Yep.’

‘I consider myself to be a religious person.’

‘One.’

‘I’m scared of dying.’

‘Five.’

‘I trust modern technology.’

‘Four. No, three. Somewhere in between. Is that allowed?’

‘That’s fine. Okay final one: I want to live forever.’

‘Er...four.’

‘Well, that’s that.’ Doctor More puts the tablet back in his bag. He rummages around in one of the pockets and pulls out a business card. He hands it to my mum. ‘Please call me if there’s anything else you’d like to know. We’ll be in contact in about a week if we think you’re suitable for the first stage of the program.’

‘You realise how enigmatic you’re being, right?’ I say.

‘We’re trying to keep things low key. Our research has quite serious implications for end of life care, so we don’t want people getting too excited. I’ve got another patient to interview on the unit today so if you’ll excuse me. Thank you for your time. Oh, I nearly forgot. Cat, soap, and cranberry. Try and remember those words for me.’ —

—Inside an MRI machine. Months from now. Saying those words. ‘Cat, soap, and cranberry’—

—‘Will do.’

‘I’ll speak to you soon, Nick.’ Doctor More shoulders his bag and walks off.

‘That was weird,’ I say. ‘Can I have a look at the card?’

‘Here.’ Mum passes it to me.

It’s a bright bleached white. There’s a logo in the top left corner. A purple blob. It takes me a few seconds to realise it’s in the shape of a brain. The words below are printed in a clean minimalist font.

DOCTOR SIMON MORE

PROJECT LEADER

CAMBRIDGE INSTITUTE FOR WETWARE TO HARDWARE SOLUTIONS

Seven

Laura and Joe wave me off at the station. Joe knocks aside my outstretched hand and pulls me into another hug.

‘Have a safe trip,’ he says, battering me with a manly slap on the back.

‘Hope to s-s-s-see you soon,’ Laura says and we hug too.

‘Thanks for having me guys,’ I say. The doors start to rattle closed, but Joe catches them and looks up at me.

‘Be careful, Mack.’

‘I will.’ He lets them go and the doors slide closed.

I’m not really worried about the espionage stuff on the way back. We were the only ones on the platform and I’m the only passenger in my carriage for the first half hour. Unless the driver is in on the conspiracy then I think I’m probably safe.

My head is sore. The tickles of one too many beers last night along with a lack of sleep. I couldn’t drift off. The crying through the wall stopped after half an hour. Joe came out in his boxers, no eyepatch. I watched him through half open eyes as he went to brush his teeth.

The train starts to fill up. Crowds of tourists climbing on for a day in the city. I look around at the faces. Any one of them could be a super killer cyborg sent back in time to track me down. Have they come to kill me, the human who in thirty years’ time will lead the rebellion against the machines? I start eating a bag of crisps. It doesn’t make me feel much like John Connor.

The train and the bus back home are uneventful. No time travellers grab me and say, ‘come with me if you want to live.’

At the front door I stick my key in the lock but it won't turn. I give it a rattle. I look down. There's a new keyhole in the door. I'd forgotten, Bill was having that new lock installed. I ring the bell. No answer. I give it a longer blast. Still nothing.

Open the gate at the side of the house. Into the narrow alley. I pass beneath Frankie's window and look up. Wonder how they got her out of there. It's not a small drop. About twenty feet. You could shatter an ankle doing that.

The garden is a sad little hole. The grass is overgrown, and the single tree has shed all its leaves. They look like brown turds scattered over the green. Under the tree is a metal bench, green paint flaking off. I go up to the back door. The lights are on. I cup my hands around my eyes and look into the kitchen.

The chairs have been pulled away from around the kitchen table and stacked in one corner. On top of the table is a large piece of wood, four feet wide and six feet long. Hills and valleys have been sculpted out of builder's foam and then covered in dusty sandstone flocking. Scattered over the landscape are a few shattered buildings. Their grey stone walls bear the pocks of bullet holes and the scorch of laser burns.

On one side of the board, huddled by a broken wall, is a group of Megasoldiers. The Spidertank has been repaired and is standing on its eight hydraulic legs. From a hatch in the top Commander Metalfist leans out, pointing the way forward. He's no longer wearing the heavy green cloak Bill had on him earlier. It's been swapped for a long sword slung in a scabbard over his back. He holds a complicated sniper rifle in the other hand. The Megasoldiers have swapped battle doctrines and become an elite guerrilla desert fighting force.

On the other side of the table are beasts that look hungry to crunch through the metal bones and meaty flesh of the Megasoldiers. They're the slaving insects from the cover of the *Planet Crusaders* rulebook. The largest has huge, segmented eyes that

bulge. Beneath them slimy pedipalps lift the remains of some unfortunate trooper into its jaws.

Surrounding it is what can only be described as a swarm. Silvery iridescent wings rise from the backs of segmented arachnoid creatures. Fat fleshy worms writhe in the dust, their mouths ringed with needle sharp teeth. Long armour-plated creatures march forwards on hundreds of filament thin legs.

Bill stands at one end of the battlefield. The baffling thing is that... he's kind of... dressed up. He's even tucked his shirt in. He's had a haircut, greying hair down to short back and sides. He picks up a great handful of dice and rolls them across the battlefield. One Megasoldier goes down in the hail of projectiles. Bill laughs and rights him. He leans over to look at the result.

Then a woman leans in next to him to inspect the dice as well. She's wearing a pair of stylish glasses. A baggy grey jumper. She reaches forward to move a figurine and her hand pokes out. She's thin. Too thin. When she draws back, the sleeve engulfs her hand, tucking it away from view. She's holding a glass of red wine in the other. Bill's got a bottle of beer that he's swigging from. He says something, pointing at the board. The woman laughs.

I knock on the window. They both jump in surprise. I give them a wave. Bill comes over to let me in. I look him in the eye and treat him to a grin. He rolls his eyes and opens the door.

'Don't fucking start,' he says.

I come inside to the warmth of the kitchen.

'Hi,' I say.

'Hey,' the woman says back.

'This is amazing. Wow.' I lean down to inspect all the figures.

'You want a beer, Mack?' Bill calls.

‘Yeah, sure.’ I turn to the woman. ‘Sorry I forgot my manners. I’m Mack.’ I stick out my hand.

‘I’m Sue.’ She looks at my hand. ‘Sorry, I don’t shake. Fist bump?’

‘Sure.’ My knuckles brush against her piano player hands encased in the soft jumper. ‘How do you know Bill?’

‘Oh, I work at the Plastic Adventurer. He comes in for figures. He asked me to teach him the game.’

‘Did he?’ I completely fail to keep the surprise out of my voice. ‘I mean, sorry, I just mean... he’s been avoiding learning the rules for ages.’

‘Oh really?’ she says. Bill comes back and hands me a beer.

‘Where did you end up? Didn’t even text me.’

‘Sorry. Didn’t want anyone to know where I’d gone, just in case. I met the directors from Wetware. To talk about Frankie.’

‘And?’

‘Progress is being made.’

‘Fine. Be enigmatic you dodgy bastard.’ Bill picks up a tape measure to see how far the Megasoldiers move. The front line of troops charges forwards to meet the monstrosities in close combat.

‘Rookie move,’ Sue says. ‘Come on Bill, even you know these guys are melee troops. Look at the claws for Christ’s sake.’

‘I fancy my chances,’ Bill says and picks up a handful of dice.

‘Right, so these are Megasoldiers?’ I say.

‘I think you’ll find that they are the Honourable Twenty-Third Platoon of the Megasoldier Corp Kufari Crusade, thank you very much.’

‘Right and are they fighting to finally get free of the kitchen table where you’ve had them trapped for the last however many months?’ I lean down to take in the figures.

They do look more at home, fighting on this proper board, instead of sitting next to the breadbin. Staring at the Frost Zombies, never moving.

‘Well yeah, this is like a campaign, to give them a bit of story y’know?’ Bill sips his beer.

‘And who are they fighting?’

‘You mean the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw?’ Sue offers.

‘The Dread Hive of... right yes.’

‘Proper bugs, they just consume everything in their path,’ Bill says. I look from the creatures feasting on whatever they can get their claws on and then at the pencil thin Sue.

‘Can I have a look?’ I ask her.

‘Please do,’ Sue says.

I pick up the largest model. Surprisingly light. The slender plastic limbs of the insectile creatures are beautifully painted. The carapace looks like it’s made of bone white china. Faint blue veins trace lightning patterns over the soft fleshy underbelly. A long red tongue hangs from between sharp teeth, glistening.

‘How’d you make the tongue look wet?’

‘It’s just one coat of gloss varnish. Makes it shine really nicely.’ There’s a happy hint of pride in her voice. Pleased that I noticed.

‘So cool.’

‘Thanks.’ There’s the clatter of dice. Sue stretches her neck to look at the result. Underneath her skin, the tendons stand out like shrink wrapped meat. ‘What’ve you got?’

‘Four hits and a miss.’

‘Don’t forget you take a penalty for using the rifle in close quarters.’

‘Oh shit, how does that work again?’

‘Here,’ she says and goes over to him, flipping open the rulebook.

‘Well, I’ll leave you two crazy kids to it then,’ I say but neither of them are listening. Instead, they’re both occupied, arguing over the finer points of the rules and the little soldiers who’s fates are in their hands.

Me and my beer go into the living room. Corinne is curled up in her pyjamas, reading a book in the comfy chair. I close the door behind me. She looks up at the noise.

‘Hi,’ she says.

‘Hi. Okay so what the actual fuck?’ I point at the door.

‘Search me. They’ve been at it for hours.’

‘At it?’

‘Don’t be gross Mack. You know I meant the game.’

I try to wipe the mischievous smile off my face. ‘She seems nice.’

‘Not really talked to her. She’s got to have a screw loose if she’s attracted to Bill though.’ Corinne says.

‘Hey, leave off Bill.’

‘I’m just saying that he can’t usually say a sentence without using the word cunt.’

‘Okay I see your point, but he didn’t even say cunt once while I was there.’

‘Maybe he’s grown as a person.’ Corinne says.

I try and imagine it — Bill changing. I’ve known him for years and he’s genuinely just been content to do all the miniatures stuff by himself. He’s never had a girlfriend either.

‘Imagine if he keeps socialising, there’ll be nothing he isn’t capable of.’ I laugh.

‘I’m happy that he’s happy,’ Corinne says. ‘Going to bed?’

‘I’m knackered,’ I say and turn to go before stopping myself. ‘Did Frankie call?’

‘No, I’m sorry.’ Corinne is gentle. Kind to a fault.

‘Right I’m going up.’

‘See you in a bit,’ Corinne says and then shoves her own face back into her book.

I tramp up the stairs.

I can hear laughter from the kitchen as well as the skittering sound of dice tumbling across the table. The dice decide who lives and who dies as miniatures charge forward or are removed and put away.

As Commander Metalfist sits on the sand and watches the sun go down over the dunes, he briefly wonders if he is dreaming. The wind picks up, bringing the chill of the desert night with it. The small fire they’d built still burns with a merry crackle.

Seated across from him, on the other side of the fire, is a Battle Angel. Her cyborg body isn’t the dull grey of Metalfist’s. Instead, it looks like polished brass, the reflection of distorted flames flickering over its curves. The cyberfusion process had deemed fit to let her keep most of her face. Her human features stopped at her upper lip, the bottom half replaced with a mechanical jaw. Warm flesh meets cold metal.

From her back sprout two segmented wings. The plasma jets that power them are cold and inert, the chambers that burn exotic matter empty. The wings are folded away for rest, but Metalfist remembers them fully extended. The light of the sun shone through the gossamer thin smart material like a Biblical angel.

Breadbin Pass felt a long way off now.

It had happened like this. The Frost Zombies had begun to advance. The Megasoldiers formed up. Shoulder to shoulder, across the span of the bridge. They would try and

hold back the horde. If they could push them back, break through, then they could escape.

Metalfist knew it wasn't going to happen. The packed frozen bodies were too numerous to count. The Megasoldiers were one platoon. Not even that, after the men they'd lost in the retreat.

Metalfist had ordered the demolition team to stand ready. The blinking charges strapped to the underside of the bridge beeped as they were armed. Once the zombies were on the bridge, they could blow the charges and send the zombies down, tumbling into the abyss. But this would trap them. Leave them to shiver until the supplies ran out.

Metalfist was going out fighting.

The Frost Zombies were halfway across the bridge. Death dragged its frozen feet. Metalfist's second in commander chattered over the communicator. Demanding orders, a plan, anything.

'Open fire!' he bellowed and the roar of his voice was joined by the roar of the guns. The Megasoldiers' weapons cracked and snapped, spitting and coughing. The fog in the pass was illuminated by the cheerful glow muzzle flashes. Down range the Frost Zombies danced a merry jig as spines snapped and limbs shredded. Shreds of frost stiff clothing sprayed like confetti. Bodies dropped and popped.

The wall of sound stopped as the guns clicked empty. The Megasoldiers ejected spent ammo boxes and reached for fresh ones. There was nothing but silence for a moment. Then, distant, the trudge of feet growing closer. The next wave.

The bodies of the Frost Zombies lying on the bridge began to twitch. Broken hands started to push them up onto ragged feet. The ones still whole enough to stand did. The others, too broken, dragged themselves along on whatever limbs they had.

From deep inside his chest, somewhere around his power core, Metalfist felt the ghost of his heart sinking. He'd been a good commander. He'd fought with honour and dignity. He knew that sometime in the future the Corps would come back to this icy place and hack his body from the frozen ground. His mind would be extracted and his experiences uploaded into the Sentience of the Core Computer. He would join the heroes stored there to live forever more, guiding the battle doctrines of Megasoldiers yet to come.

He couldn't find the voice to order another round of fire. He unstrapped the sword from his back and let it drop to the ground.

'It's been an honour,' he said, very quietly and just to himself.

There was the shriek of a plasma fired banshee. The whine of jets burning exotic matter. The hum of aerodynamic wings sliced through the air. The Megasoldiers looked up. Some shielded their eyes as the stark white sun finally broke through the clouds.

Silhouetted against the sky was a choir of angels. They were brass-bodied, shining in the morning sun. From behind them streaked luminous contrails that crackled with spent plasma. They screamed down from the sky. Flashes of white cracked and sang as ordnance began to rain down onto the bridge. The hard crumps of explosions tossed zombies into the air and over the sides. They tumbled into the fog in silence.

One angel broke formation and dived towards the Megasoldiers. Wings flared out and she hovered just above Metalfist. The whine of the plasma jets pitched down, and the angel came to earth with the lightest crunch as her bronze feet touched the snow.

'Commander Metalfist?' she said.

'Yes?'

‘I’m Battle Sister Vex. The extraction shuttle is doing a hard burn from orbit.’ She looked down to the screen strapped to her wrist. ‘It’ll be with us in inside a minute.’

‘We’ve been here for months,’ Metalfist said.

‘The planets been blockaded. We’re the first ones who’ve managed to make it through.’ She turned her head to listen to something over the communicator. ‘Acknowledged. Home in on my beacon. Metalfist. Extraction is here.’

An indistinct shape skimmed through the fog. It resolved into the bulky square edged shape of a troop carrier. Metalfist looked back at the bridge. The Frost Zombies were still coming.

‘Blow the bridge,’ he shouted. Detonators clicked. One second. Two.

From underneath the bridge came a blinding flash, illuminating everything in shining white radiance. It was silent. Then there was nothing but a wall of sound battering down on them. Megasoldiers flinched, their optic sensors overwhelmed by the sheer brightness. The ground shook with the force of it.

The Frost Zombies didn’t seem to notice. They kept marching even as the bridge collapsed beneath them. They didn’t scream as they tumbled down into the void. They did not curse their defeat.

Commander Metalfist was the last to board the troop transport. From the portside window he watched the scene far below. The power of the blast had obliterated the metal shed on the far side of the pass. The legend on the side was still visible on the shattered pieces, ‘BREADBIN.’

Far below him the remaining Frost Zombies watched as the blocky ship climbed up into the sky and past the clouds. Once it was gone they all looked down and everything was still once again.

Now, Metalfist reaches over to add another log to the fire. The shape of the old logs crumble into white ash, sending a plume of sparks upwards and creating a bed of embers. This close to the fire his temperature sensors are screaming at him, but he doesn't care. He never wants to feel the bite of the cold again.

'How did you find us?' he says. Battle Sister Vex pulls her gaze away from the flames. She rubs her hands together. Metal scraping against metal. She holds them out to the fire.

'The Strategists had you on scope until you reached the atmosphere. When the Glittering Maw blockaded the planet, that's when we lost you. We knew you were on the surface somewhere. It took us months to finally get through the blockade. When my unit broke through into the atmosphere, we did a planetary scan. Knew your location in thirty seconds.'

'The planet is still blockaded?'

'We lost touch with command the moment we were on your side. We assume the Maw repaired the hole in the orbital line. That's why we couldn't just burn for orbit and get you to safety. We're trapped here with you now.'

Metalfist looks over his shoulder. Stretched across the sand are hundreds of fabric tents glowing with soft light from within. Scattered around are small fires. Megasoldiers sit around them chatting. The flames even sparkle off their dull armour. They talk to each other as they haven't in months. There are loud metallic thuds as they slap each other on the backs with cheery comradery.

The Battle Angels are ill at ease. Breaking through the orbital line has been hell for them. A few chat to the Megasoldiers but most sit by themselves. Some pray for fallen sisters. Others fold their wings around themselves to hibernate, catching up on a few cycles of rest.

‘The Glittering Maw has reached this far out?’ Metalfist rests his chin on his knuckles. Vex nods.

‘Reaching out further every year. Not many systems haven’t had to fight off an infestation.’

‘Troubling,’ Metalfist says. He can feel his command coming back to him. It feels sure and warm like his cloak. The feeling of action, of a plan forming: it’s the best he’s felt in months. No more waiting. ‘No word from the Strategists? Standing orders?’

‘Break through the orbital line and recon the planet. Finding you was a secondary concern to be honest.’

‘Well, I’m grateful you did find us.’

‘It’s no problem, sir.’

‘Sir?’

‘You are the ranking officer.’

‘Hmm.’ Metalfist pauses. ‘Please don’t call me sir.’

‘What should I call you then?’ Vex blinks. God her eyes are wet, Metalfist thinks. Wet eyes! His own electronic ones have felt nothing in years but now they itch with dryness. He can’t even blink the sensation away.

‘Just Metalfist, I suppose.’

‘Sir, that’s a violation of battle doctrine. Some Commanders would even consider it insubordination.’

‘Vex, listen to me. We’re a long way from the Strategists now. There’s no one to check if our armour plating is polished. They’re somewhere far away, somewhere easy and comfortable. We’re trapped here. So, I’m going to call you Vex, and in these extraordinary conditions, I’m commanding you to call me Metalfist. I’ll make sure you’re court martialled if you don’t. Is that understood?’

‘Yes si- err Metalfist.’

‘Very good. Now, tell me about the last planet you were stationed on.’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘I’ve looked at nothing but a wall of ice and dead faces for months. Tell me about somewhere else.’

Eight

In the early days of Wetware City some unknown group of people dug a very big, very wide hole. The soil was piled in a great mound next to it. Then from some unknown quarter the people sourced a quite epic quantity of shit.

The people wore green overalls and plastic spray bottles loaded with fertiliser on their backs. Over their faces were simple respirators.

Smells couldn't penetrate through the screen but fat iridescent green flies buzzed in abundance. Inside the foetid heap bacteria munched and burned and shat out methane. The heat of the mound ignited the gas pushing through the surface in blue and yellow flashes.

The shit was poured into the hole and then the soil on top of it. It was mixed using great mechanical beasts of burden. They snuffed and harrumphed as their long limbs churned the mixture together.

When that was done, the whole thing was flattened back down and rows marked along it. The artists of this great project then performed their final baffling task. They walked along the rows, stopping every few meters to crouch down and push something into the soil. The things they put into the ground were small, white and rubbery looking. They looked like little bundles of nerve fibres.

With the task completed, the strange people went to stand round the edge of the hole. Anyone who tried to push past them to examine the ground were rebuffed. More serious attempts to interfere with the soil were met with sprays of caustic acid fertiliser from the bottles on their backs.

A day passed. A week. Then a month.

Then a cluster of innocuous looking mushrooms pushed up out of the soil. They looked like any mushrooms you'd find in a supermarket. White caps protecting mottled brown gills.

As the days went by many different types of fungus began to poke out of the soil. Fairy-tale mushrooms, bright red spotted with white dots. Wide shelves of off-yellow honey fungus. Bright pink sponges that grew in geometric patterns, hollow on the inside. Purple spores that looked like anemones waving in an ocean current. Round puffballs fit to burst. Dainty blue caps like umbrellas.

They didn't stop growing. They rose up and up until they towered over the people who walked by. The custodians of the fungus forest put down their weapons and began to shape their creations. They pushed the towering toadstools into corridors and rooms. Coaxed the shelves of psychedelic matter into seating areas. They went into the centre of the forest with long machetes to chop and hack at the dense spongy undergrowth. They cleared a circular arena and then fell to the floor, digging with their bare hands. The soil was scraped into black lines beneath their fingernails.

Underneath the dirt they uncovered a spongy white mat. Fine and feathery but so dense it sprang underfoot. A surface that could be a stage for theatre or a running track for athletes.

This is how the Mycelium Theatre was constructed.

It requires constant tending. New sprouts of mushrooms on the field must be excised to keep the playing space clear. Volunteer gardeners spend hours cultivating their virtual crop, in the time-honoured video game tradition of digital vegetables. Any mushrooms they pick they can keep. They can dry them out for a quick trip or sell them on to chemists in the Chop Shop. These black-market cooks would extract precious drops of psilocybin for use in psychoactive weapons. It was hard for a rival gang to chase you when they thought all their blood vessels were rooted into the ground.

The Mycelium Theatre presents nearly every form of virtual entertainment. Theatre where great arcs of fire shoot across the stage as armies clash at the climax of Macbeth. More traditional e-sport. The occasional race.

Gladiator combat is the most popular. There's at least one bout a day. The blood spilled onto the arena floor is sucked up the hungry feelers.

I'm sitting in the mushroom seating. The yellow clump is like a sofa. I sink into it, stretching out my legs to watch the show. It's a smaller fight. A few loyal fans cluster as close to the arena. They wave huge holographic signs and scream as the two combatants go at each other.

In the arena a small woman in a black and white tuxedo rolls to the side as a huge cyborg crashes an axe into the floor in a double handed swing. She draws two knives from her belt and leaps onto his back. His bulky metal shoulders make it difficult to reach up and pull her off. One knife goes in deep behind his neck. There's a shower of sparks as some unseen component gives up the ghost. The cyborg is screaming. He turns wildly. He can't see.

The calm voice of the announcer speaks. 'Gravity reversal.' A loud hum emanates from beneath the stage. Both combatants begin to rise into the air. They do things like this every now and then to keep the fights interesting. The woman clearly wasn't expecting it. She floats off the cyborgs back in a panicked uncontrolled backflip. The cyborg's head turns and locks onto her despite his lack of vision. Sonar. Must be. He takes the axe and hooks it round her waist. Pulls her down, slamming her into his rising knee.

A collective wince from the crowd. A tap on my shoulder. I'm enchanted by the spectacle.

'Sorry, am in the way?' I say without turning and shuffle over. Another tap. Harder this time. I look around.

It's Frankie Blue. Her avatar, a young man with spiky cyan hair. She smooths it down nervously. Her enhancements are pretty low key, mainly subdermal, which is pretty unusual in a place where removing your own limbs is considered the norm. Along the length of her left ear is a set of tentacle shaped earrings and a tattoo on his right arm of a d20.

'What the—' I start but Frankie leaps forward and pulls me into a hug. Not a real hug, the fake Wetware equivalent, but it feels good all the same.

'I missed you,' she whispers into my ear.

'I... where are you? Why aren't you home?'

'I can't say.'

'What do you mean? I got attacked Frankie! And then the Moorie. Are you seriously playing Wetware right now?'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'No, no, no. Log out and come home. Now.' My anger is building up.

'I can't because—'

'Why not?'

'Will you just listen!' Frankie snaps at me. I look at my feet. We sit there for an awkward second. Frankie takes a deep breath. 'Please just listen.'

'Okay.'

'I'm safe. I promise I'm safe and no one is forcing me to say this. I swear.'

'You didn't even say goodbye, you just vanished.'

She grins. 'Bit like Batman, yeah?'

I shake my head. 'Not funny.'

'Sorry.'

'Wherever you are... did they kidnap you?'

She pulls a face. 'I mean, sort of? But not like in a creepy way or anything.'

‘Frankie there is no not-creepy way to kidnap someone.’

‘They had to keep it a secret. A lot of people want it.’

‘Who? What?’

‘I can’t say.’

‘So, you can’t say where or who or why and I’m supposed to just be okay with all this?’ My temper twisting, holding onto the only thread that I can find, that I’m finally talking to her again.

‘I need you to understand, Mack, this is really important.’

‘How about Rosie then?’

Frankie freezes. ‘How do you know about Rosie.’

‘Fucking Google, Frankie, it wasn’t hard.’

‘Shit, shit, shit.’ She looks off to the side, as if talking to someone else. ‘I thought Nick scrubbed all that?’

Over her mic I can just make out the faint sound of someone replying.

‘We need to go over everything he’s done; the memory fraying means we can’t trust any of it.’

‘Frankie, what’s going on! Who are you talking to?’ I grab her hand. She turns back to look at me.

‘I’m sorry Mack, I have to go.’

‘No, please. Please just let me help!’

She reaches out and touches my face. ‘I promise I’ll be back.’

‘Please don’t...’

‘I love you,’ she says. Her face falls and she looks at the floor. ‘Don’t look for me.’

Frankie Blue starts to fade. Her edges go fuzzy like an old VHS and then she winks out of existence with a snap like an old cathode ray tube shutting down. Wetware City's standard goodbye flourish.

I sit there, looking at my hands, where her digital one had been clasped two seconds ago. I start crying. Tears hit the keyboard, but my avatar is still. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand. Sniff.

I turn back to watch the rest of the fight. The cyborg rips one of the knives from the woman's hand. They separate, spinning away from one another. The cyborg takes a moment to orient itself, calculating the erratic path of the woman tumbling in zero-g. It pushes off, launching towards her. The crowd is baying.

The woman unfurls like a bat, tumbling in a graceful somersault. The cyborg passes under her. She reaches out and catches hold of the cyborg about the neck. Hooking her feet underneath its armpits, she drives the knife down into the cyborg's throat. There's a massive shower of sparks. Tubes spray oily black fluid, drenching the crowd. The cyborg seizes and tries to grab hold of her. She drags the knife the rest of the way and rips the cyborg's head from its shoulders.

She holds it aloft for the crowd to see as the anti-gravity begins to wind down and she drifts towards the stadium floor.

The cyborg's body makes a less impressive landing, crashing to the mat in a crumple of broken machinery. She plants one foot astride its back, like a gladiator champion.

I don't care what she says, I'm not stopping until I know she's safe.

Three-Two-Five and Eight-Four skitter through the tunnels beneath the streets of Wetware. Three-Two-Five leads, stopping at a junction every so often. He looks one

way and then another, waiting for his memories to filter back before announcing the way forward.

After an hour of twisting tunnels, they arrive at their destination. A massive circular iron door set into the brick wall. The release mechanism beside it has rusted into oblivion.

<IS THIS IT?> Eight-Four says.

<YES. THE MECHANISM STILL WORKED LAST TIME I WAS HERE THOUGH.>

<HOW DO WE GET IT OPEN?>

<ASK IT NICELY?>

<VERY FUNNY.> Eight-Four gives him the Moorie equivalent of a withering look.

<WE'LL HAVE TO JUST GET CRACKING.>

From beneath their robes they extend their manipulator arms. The carbon fibre limbs grab hold of the edges of the doors with titanium claws as the lasers set into their eye sockets flash and cut.

First, they use their lasers to clean the rust off the door. It seems like the right thing to do for such a monumental project. They want it to look nice after all. Next, they set about cutting through the rust that is physically jamming the door shut, keeping them from getting at the locking mechanisms. Eight-Four stops for a moment and cocks his head.

<DO YOU HEAR THAT?>

<HEAR WHAT?>

<THAT.>

Three-Two-Five strains to listen. <NOPE.>

<NEVER MIND.>

They prise up the flakes of rust and slowly reveal the edge of the door. With that done, they start marking the points on the door where the bolts are embedded inside, keeping the whole thing tightly locked.

<I THINK WE'RE READY TO CUT.> Eight-Four stretches out its remaining muscles.

<YOU WANT TO DO THE HONOURS?>

<NO, AFTER YOU.>

Three-Two-Five sets his laser for high power. He bends over and the laser ignites with a blinding light. The metal glows white as the laser bores down, reducing the edges to slag. There's a heavy clunk inside the door; the sound of the bolt being cut in half and falling out of place. There are ten bolts to cut.

With three bolts left, Three-Two-Five stops mid cut.

<I CAN HEAR IT NOW TOO.> He sets his ear against the door. The metal still hisses hot and melting but beneath it he can hear something deeper. A rumble, like someone's stomach. Eight-Four puts his own ear against the door.

<THAT'S THE SOUND.>

<WHAT IS THAT?>

<DON'T KNOW. WHAT DID YOU SAY WAS BEHIND THIS DOOR AGAIN?>

Three-Two-Five looks up at his friend. <AN OLD EMPTY CISTERN. BENEATH THE CHOP SHOP.>

The tunnel fills with the sound of groaning metal. They both step back from the door in alarm.

<I THINK WE SHOULD GO.>

<I AGREE. WE'LL FIND SOMEWHERE ELSE.>

<ER, EIGHT-FOUR? WHAT'S THAT?>

Three-Two-Five points to the top of the door where they cut the first bolt. In the gap they'd created a trickle of water spills down, hissing as it runs over the hot metal.

<OH BUGGER.>

The door bursts open, slamming them both back. A wall of water crashes down, washing them back down the tunnel. The smell of the stagnant liquid makes them both retch into their rebreathers.

Eight-Four catches hold of Three-Two-Five and then throws his manipulators out backwards. They skitter and scrape over the smooth tunnel walls before catching hold of a tangle of old pipework.

They hang on for dear life as the water rushes past them. The current threatens to tear the mess of rusted pipes out of the wall. Eight-Four has Three-Two-Five in the iron grip of his human arms. Three-Two-Five looks back up to the door, to see if the torrent is subsiding.

<WATCH OUT!>

The battering power of the water rips the rusting hinges of the door free from the wall. The door, a two-tonne piece of pig iron, hurtles towards them in the current. It turns end over end like a stone in a river, cracking the concrete bed beneath it.

Acting on pure instinct, Eight-Four shoves Three-Two-Five's head beneath the water and lets go with his manipulators. The metal implants in their body weight them down and they sink to the bottom. They anchor themselves to the tunnel floor and watch as the door rolls, bucks and then soars over them. It disappears around a bend in the tunnel with massive clang.

The torrent begins to subside, leaving Eight-Four and Three-Two-Five looking like couple of drenched robot rats sitting on the tunnel floor. They gasp for air through their rebreathers. Three-Two-Five sits up and looks around. Eight-Four leans against a wall while he catches his breath.

<YOU ALRIGHT?> Three-Two-Five chirps.

<I DON'T THINK THE CISTERN WAS EMPTY.>

<THE EVIDENCE SEEMS TO INDICATE THAT THE OPPOSITE MAY BE TRUE.> Three-Two-Five makes the digital sound of Moorie laughter. He goes over and helps Eight-Four to his four metal feet. <SHALL WE GO AND HAVE A LOOK?>

<WHAT WE JUST SURVIVED, IT HAD BETTER BE GOOD.>

<I SWEAR IT WAS EMPTY LAST TIME I WAS HERE.>

<LET'S JUST SEE IF IT'S WORTH NEARLY DROWNING.>

They cross the threshold into the mercifully now empty cistern. The cavernous space stretches up into darkness above their heads. It's roughly circular, a hundred meters across, hacked out of the bedrock beneath the Chop Shop. The sound of the last trickles of water sluicing over the slick stone echoes around them. A few puddles ripple over the uneven floor.

<I THINK THIS WILL DO.> Three-Two-Five puts his hands on the metal joints where his hips used to be. <WHAT DO YOU THINK?>

<IT'S GOOD. WE'LL HAVE TO GET A LOT OF EQUIPMENT THOUGH.>

<AND MORE HELP.>

<YEAH. LOTS MORE HELP.>

A Memory

Mum is doing the dishes like she hates them. They receive a spiteful lash of cherry dish soap that looks like a bright splash of blood on the white dinner plates. On the table lies the wreckage of Sunday lunch. The sad husk of a carved-up chicken. Rubbery cold green beans. I idly pick at them. On chemo this is about as much as I can stomach. Bland and flavourless. I'd tried a bit of chicken and one roast potato. The crunch of that grease-soaked little bastard was glorious until ten minutes later when it made its reappearance. Came up in lumps and strings of milky beige.

Dad sits across from me, finishing off a bottle of wine. Tips the glass to take a big glug of the ruby liquid. I sit next to him with my water. My hateful fucking water crowded by ice cubes. Dad takes another sip of wine.

'Is it good?' I say. He sniffs it.

'It's wine. Y'know. Fine, I guess.'

'Thanks for the description.' I lean over to whisper to him. 'Give me a sip.' Dad holds out the glass.

'No, none for you.' Mum doesn't turn from doing the dishes. 'The doctors made it clear. No alcohol. You'll feel rotten.'

'They didn't say I can't drink. They just said I shouldn't.'

'Don't be a smart-arse Nicholas or I'll bend you over my knee.'

'Tread lightly mate. She's broken out Nicholas.' Dad smirks into his wine. Without saying anything, I hold my hand out. Dad sneaks a look at Mum. She's assaulting a baking tray with a scouring pad. Dad passes me the glass and I take the tiniest sip—

—warm, red, spilling over the tongue like spilt oil and blood. The smell of evenings and weekends. Dinner parties. The candlelight glowing, shining against the glass—

—Dad gives me a wink and then taps the side of his nose. Our secret.

‘Val come and sit down, love,’ Dad says. ‘I’ll do the washing up later. You just relax, love.’

‘I just want to get it done,’ Mum says. The baking tray is now considering pressing charges of grievous bodily harm. It slips out of her iron grip with a loud clatter and a spray of soap suds. Dad jumps and wine slops out of his glass and onto the table. It spreads across the wood in a blooming crimson stain. Dad’s shirt receives a speckling too.

‘Jesus Val. You made me ruin me shirt.’ Dad dabs at his chest with a napkin. Mum doesn’t say anything. She just peels off her yellow marigolds and drops them by the sink where they sit like two slimy octopuses. She sits down.

She’s avoiding looking at either of us. Her mouth is tight, trying not to let the damn burst and the argument spill out into words. She reaches for the bottle and pours herself a massive glass of wine.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. It’s a child’s apology. The telescopes of my Dad’s brain aren’t sensitive enough to pick that up though.

‘It’s okay, no need to fret. Dessert anyone? Got Vienetta in the freezer.’

‘No, I’m fine thank you,’ Mum says.

‘Don’t think I could manage it,’ I say.

‘Well I’m having some.’ Dad wanders off into the kitchen. As soon as he’s gone Mum leans across the table.

‘How can you even be thinking about this?’ she hisses.

‘I just don’t feel like Vienetta, that’s all.’

‘Don’t be bloody sarcastic with me, Nicholas. You know what I mean.’

‘It’s an option. Nothing wrong with thinking about it.’

‘Well it doesn’t matter anyway. You’re young. You don’t know what you want.’

She sits back and looks into her wine.

‘I know I don’t want to die. I think we can agree on that? Or do you want me to die?’

She looks up at me, her eyes rimmed with red. Oh shit. That was too much. I backpedal. ‘I’m sorry Mum, that was mean. I shouldn’t have said that.’

‘You little shit.’ Okay, this is new. My Mum is mild to a fault, never swears. ‘How fucking dare you? How fucking dare you! Do you think this has been easy for your father and me? Do you think this has been a fucking jolly old time for us?’

‘Shut the fuck up.’ I’m shouting now too. ‘You leapt up as soon as Doctor More got his card out. You were the one who wanted me to do all their tests and shit! Neither of us knew this is what they were thinking.’

‘Exactly! I didn’t realise it was going to be all this mad science nonsense. I wouldn’t have let you speak to him if I had.’

‘Wouldn’t have let me? I’m twenty-six years old.’

‘And you’re living under my roof—’

—so, you’ll obey my rules. Don’t you dare think about storming out on me young man. Nicholas, I mean it! I swear I will take away the PlayStation if you don’t behave—

,

— ‘Do you think I wanted to move out of my flat? Do you think I like having someone help me piss and shit and eat? I want to be drinking wine with my mates, not sitting here chucking up roast potatoes!’

‘Okay enough!’ Mum and I both freeze at the sound of Dad’s voice. He’s standing in the kitchen doorway holding a box of Vienetta ice cream in one hand and

a stack of little glass bowls in the other. His face is furious, his cheeks radiating red anger.

I can't help but laugh.

'The fucking Vienetta,' I giggle. 'I'm sorry, I can't take you seriously with the ice cream.' Mum doesn't laugh. She picks up her glass of wine, pushes past Dad and stomps upstairs. I'm still laughing. Dad shakes his head at me. I break out into a fresh bout of laughter.

Dad sits at the table. The cardboard box has buckled where he's gripped it too hard. Happy green words jump off the front of the box, 'Mint Flavour!' The bowls go down next to it, the glass chinking.

'Jesus Nick,' he says going back to the kitchen and shaking his head. The belly laughs have died down only to be replaced by a tumour riddled cough. I've really cocked this up. Dad comes back with a bread knife. I wheeze and clear my throat.

Preparing Vienetta is a ritual. You've got the ceremonial breadknife and the sacrificial bowls. The slab of ice cream is extracted from the cardboard and then you peel the two waxy strips of paper from the sides. The wavy log of ice cream bursts with artificial preservatives. The crumbly chocolate on top crackles as Dad saws through it with the breadknife. The ice cream is pale with freezer burn. The little chunk is dropped into a bowl.

Dad licks the chocolate off his fingers and tucks in.

'Can I have some?' I say. Dad grunts and I lumberjack a portion off myself. We're eating it with teaspoons. Little old teaspoons with blue plastic handles, the same one I used when I was a kid. 'Gran and Grandad always used to give me Vienetta when I stayed at theirs'—

— 'Who want's Vienetta?' Gran's voice, reedy and thin, like something trapped. Me clambering up to the kitchen table. Impossibly excited for processed ice cream—

— ‘They used to give it to me when I was a kid too,’ Dad says. ‘In the eighties. It was a really fancy thing then. ‘One slice is never enough,’ that used to be the slogan.’

‘Really? You always used to get pissed off when they gave it to me.’

Dad shrugs. ‘It’s grandparents’ job to spoil their grandkids. Parents’ job to deal with the sugar high.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. Dad chases a rogue piece of chocolate around the bowl with his spoon. He can’t catch it. He gives up and puts down the spoon.

‘She’s really freaked out, Nick. This is some... odd stuff.’

‘What do you think?’

‘Honestly? I don’t know. It’s... an amazing thing to think about. It’s a good thing to have, just in case.’ Dad fiddles with his wineglass and scratches the side of his beard.

‘Dad, there is no ‘in case.’ This is it. Chemo is like that Dutch kid with his finger in the dam. Another year at most. I can’t keep putting off the decision any longer. I need to give Doctor More an answer.’

‘Can’t he wait?’

‘No, he can’t. The project can only afford one trial, so they need to pick the person with the best chance. If I want to do it, I have to say yes to the next round of tests while I’m still well enough. Doctor More is saying that some of the patients have already had to drop out because they’ve got too sick.’

‘I can’t make this decision for you.’

‘I know.’

‘That’s why your Mum’s so upset. She doesn’t want to stop you, not really. It’s just the whole idea is so big and scary it just won’t fit in her head.’

‘Dad, I don’t want to die.’ My voice cracks and the tears break free. I wipe them away.

‘Come here.’ Dad reaches across the table and pulls me into a hug. He holds me tight with my face pressed into his jumper as I cry. He smells like sawdust and bad aftershave. ‘It’s alright, love. It’s okay. Nick, look at me. What Mum’s scared about is... well life wouldn’t be like it is now Nick. It wouldn’t be the same. We couldn’t sit around the table together.’

‘Life isn’t like it used to be. I can’t eat properly. I can’t even shit by myself. I don’t want to do this Dad. But if the other option is not being around anymore then I need to do it. Even if I can just have a little bit of this. Even just talking to you will be enough.’

Dad’s trying not to cry as well. He’s got this thing, when he’s about to cry, his chin wobbles. He’s doing it now. That’s setting me off and we’re both just trying not to cry.

‘Can you... can you talk to Mum? If I say yes then I need you. I don’t want to go to the unit by myself.’ Wipe away the tears. Dad does the same. Look away from one another as we clear our throats. A time-honoured father-son reaction to crying.

‘She’ll come, Nick. She’d never leave you frightened by yourself.’

That’s it. I’m bawling now, full on shoulder shaking sobbing. Tears roll down my cheeks to mix with the dribble coming from the corners of my mouth. The whole sticky mixture drips off my chin in long strands. Everything’s gone blurry from the torrent.

‘It’s... not fair,’ I manage to say. Dad crouches next to my chair and hugs me. ‘It’s not fair.’

‘I know.’

‘What’s going on?’ I hear Mum’s voice from the kitchen door. I can’t open my eyes, I’m crying so much.

‘I’m scared.’

‘Nick love...’ She kneels by Dad and holds my hand. I can feel the wrinkles in her skin. She squeezes tight—

— skinned knees from falling off my bike. Scared of the dark. I just want a hug off my Mum. She smells the same, always, every time—

— ‘Sssh, love,’ Mum says. ‘It’s going to be alright.’

‘Nick?’ Rosie’s robotic voice echoes in the chamber.

‘Hmm?’ Another voice, human this time but comping from within the deep tangle of wires above.

‘You slipped back again, didn’t you?’

‘I... yes, I think I did. Can you run another check please?’

‘Of course. Where were you?’

‘My parents’ house. It doesn’t matter really.’ Nick brushes it aside. Rosie’s phone buzzes.

‘Okay, Frankie’s on her way down now. I can finish the check while you guys talk?’

‘Thank you, Rosie.’

From the tank against the wall, Loretta the octopus peers out with interest. The view through her eyes is greyscale, but light receptors embedded in her skin soak in the colours. Tall racks of servers’ blink with red and green status lights. She likes the patterns. She twitches her own skin to send the blinking signals back at them. She feels the vibration as the door above her tank clatters open. Frankie comes down the iron staircase bolted onto the wall. She’s been crying, her face red and puffy.

At the sight of Frankie, Loretta’s skin pales into pure white. She presses her suckers up against the glass. Frankie comes over, smiling. She lifts the heavy weights off the top of the tank and dips her hand into the water. Loretta is excited. She’s been

on her own all day, bored. She engulfs Frankie's hand. The writhing mass of tentacles taste the flavours of her skin and search for new chemicals and sensations. Frankie uses her other hand to scratch Loretta's mantle, like you'd scratch the head of a sleeping cat.

'Sorry girl,' she says. 'Got stuff to do.' She reaches down to peel the creature off her hand. Each sucker comes away with a little pop and leaves circular red love bites on Frankie's skin. Frankie puts the weights back onto the tank, gives Loretta a little wave and goes over to one of the computers set up around the room.

'Hello Nick,' she says.

'Frankie. How's the work going?'

'Any result is a result. We're making progress but it's slow. I've got a couple of questions if you have time?'

A long sigh from above. 'I had to answer so many questions just to get here.'

'I know it's frustrating. I'm just trying to get a better picture of what's going on. There's so much code, which keeps changing by itself, and on top of that I'm trying to figure out the system architecture. This whole system wasn't built for this. I mean it was, it's just that it's a prototype. It obviously can't handle it. I really need to ask you these questions, is that okay?'

'Fine.'

'Okay. How long have you been slipping back?'

'A few weeks now.'

'And how often?'

'A couple of times an hour,' Nick says. Frankie rubs her eyes and bites her lip. Not good.

'Frankie, I'm looking at the events log,' Rosie says. 'Look here. The memory module activates but there's no corresponding request from central processing.'

‘So, memory is just triggering by itself? That explains how but not why. Could be a psych issue? Or hardware. Or emulation, or any other one of a thousand different bloody systems. Nick, I need to ask you some more questions, try and narrow this down.’

‘I’m tired of questions.’

‘This won’t take long, I promise.’

‘Just get on with it.’

‘Okay. Are you noticing any other lapses, lost time or things like that?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Any trouble concentrating?’

‘Apart from the slips, no.’

‘I’ve got some cognition tests. Rosie turn on the webcam please?’ Frankie takes two sheets of paper from a folder and holds them up to the camera. ‘Nick, can you look at these two shapes for me and tell me if they’re the same?’

‘Did you talk to Mack?’ Nick’s voice is quiet.

‘I... please can we just do these cards.’

‘Was he alright?’

‘He’s fine.’

‘He’s going to keep looking, isn’t he?’ Nick whispers. Frankie wipes her eyes. Holds up the cards again.

‘Look at the shapes, Nick.’

‘No.’

‘Please.’

‘Enough. I’m not answering any more questions. Just go away. I’m not doing this.’

‘Nick-’

‘I said get out.’ Above their heads, Nick’s voice falls silent. Frankie opens her mouth to protest but then lets it go. She gathers up her papers.

‘Shouldn’t we...?’ Rosie says but Frankie cuts her off with a shake of the head.

‘Let’s just leave him be,’ she says. Rosie shrugs and clambers up the metal stairs. Frankie puts her hand on the banister and then turns back to the room.

‘Do you remember Loretta, Nick?’ Frankie turns and sits down on the stairs.

‘I said go away.’

‘I came to the aquarium. Before it opened in the morning. You’d had the delivery and she was in that tank, all curled up. You said she had to stay at the aquarium for observation, but you could bring her over in a week.’

‘You looked beautiful.’ Nick’s voice echoes out.

‘That’s what this is, Nick. Observation. I can’t fix the problem until I’ve seen it first-hand. I can’t do anything unless you work with me.’

‘Please. Just let me rest.’

‘I can’t just sort this out for you. I wish I could.’

Silence.

‘Nick?’

Nothing. Frankie sighs.

‘We can sort this. Just give me a shout when you’re ready.’ Frankie goes up the stairs and shuts the door at the top behind her.

The room is silent and empty for a moment. A small sob. Crying echoes through the room but no tears fall.

Nine

The caravan trundles across the desert sands. The tents the Megasoldiers hibernate in collapse down into backpacks to carry their gear. The bright blue sky is free of clouds save for the fluffy contrails the Battle Angels leave behind them as they soar overhead. Every so often there's a rumble as one passes low over them with a ballet-like roll. At the back of the caravan, the Spidertank clambers over the dunes. Its clawed feet have been swapped out for huge, webbed parasols to stop it sinking down into the sand. A Megasoldier leans out of the top hatch, shouting orders. The Megasoldiers wear their rifles slung over their shoulders and chat amongst themselves. The Battle Angels are more alert.

Metalfist likes the sound of the sand beneath his boots. It doesn't crunch and crump like the snow did. It hisses as the footprints are filled back in by the grains. No ice to slip on. He stretches, raising his arms above his head. Titanium bones crack and pop. He shakes out his hands.

Walking beside him, Battle Sister Vex is adjusting the scope of her rifle. The gun is a fine thing with a real wood stock. Last night Metalfist watched as she polished it. She dipped a rag into a tin of polish and massaged the wood until it shone in the firelight. She carefully folded the cloth into a little triangle. She caught him staring. He looked away as she hurried to hide the cloth.

'What's ahead?' Metalfist says. Vex touches a finger to her ear, receiving transmission from the scouts.

'Just more sand. We should make the fortress within a few days.'

Sitting by the fire last night, Metalfist and Vex had come up with a plan. Vex showed him the orbital scans that the satellites had managed to capture before being chewed to pieces by the Glittering Maw. The vast expanse of flat desert looked like a

dirty brown bowl. They would march to the towering ziggurat at the desert's edge marked as 'Bookcase Fortress' on the map. An ancient relic of a civilisation long gone. Atop it sat a high gain transmission antenna. They should be able to signal the Strategists there.

The Strategists would decide what to do. Metalfist expected a pincer move: forces attack the line from above, while they would attack from below. Metalfist smiled at the simplicity of it.

'Where were you stationed before here?' Metalfist says. Vex pulls the bolt clear of her rifle and inspects the chamber. Brushes away a few stray grains of sand and tests the action.

'I was stationed on Vavre, sir.'

'Vex, what did I tell you?'

'Apologies, Commander Metalfist.'

'Just Metalfist will do. What was it like?'

'It was a forest world. Jungle as far as the eye can see. Impossible for anything like your Spidertank. The undergrowth was just too thick. Megasoldiers... they just couldn't move fast enough in the bush. Too bulky.' Vex pauses. 'Sorry Commander, I didn't mean to say that-'

'Don't worry yourself, Vex. We're heavy infantry. Chunky buggers.'

Vex actually laughs. It lasts only a second. Metalfist enjoys it.

'So, what was the mission?' Metalfist turns to keep an eye on his troops. 'Keep the formation together, stop slacking you lot! This isn't a holiday!' he bellows. Some laugh, some shout back, but all of them get their act together. 'Sorry, you were saying?'

'It was a scouting mission. Natives were attacking the supply caravans. The roads we'd cut through the forests didn't sit well with them.'

‘Natives?’

‘Vavrians. Odd looking things. Tall and spindly with dusty mottled skin. The world’s gravity was about half this. They were tall, like the trees. They’d appear out of the treelines, spring onto the caravan and pull it to pieces. Wouldn’t even take the supplies. Food, ammo, weapons, they’d leave it all.’

‘That is strange.’

‘We thought so too. My squad was sent to do aerial reconnaissance. Seeing if we could find out how they were moving through the trees. How they knew when the caravans were coming.’

Vex pauses and frowns. Communications chatter passes intel down the line: sinkhole ahead. She touches Metalfist on the shoulder and the data flows into his mind.

‘We’ll skirt around it.’ He turns to the Megasoldier walking next to him. ‘Pass it down the line.’ The Megasoldier nods and jogs off to pass on the orders. ‘So, did you find them then? The Vavrians?’

‘We searched for weeks. Scoping out spots where they’d been sighted. Eventually we had to do a planet-wide scan. The Strategists were furious, that amount of time on the recon satellites. We finally found an anomaly. A clearing, like a hole in the forest. Red clay earth against the green.’

We went to investigate. No one there. The clearing was maybe a klick wide. Like someone had pulled up all the trees by their roots and smoothed the earth flat. We used ground penetrating radar. No hidden hatches. No tunnels or bunkers. We were stumped.

Then there’s this sound. Something moving through the underbrush. We all aim into the forest. This Vavrian wanders into the clearing. Much older than any of the others we’ve seen. Hunched over, leaning on a twisted bit of stick. Wrinkled like a Strategist Colonel I saw once.

It starts coming towards us, stick tapping in the dirt. We all start shouting, stop, don't move, stuff like that. It stops and bangs the stick twice on the ground, like it was copying our salute. Then it started speaking.'

'Could you understand it?'

'No. We had a few Strategists who could, but they weren't allowed in the field. "Too valuable an asset to waste, pissing about in the forest," our Strategist said.

We're all standing there watching this alien speak. A mouth like a slash, lipless and with sharp needle teeth. They've got these four barbed tongues that wriggle. The voice is just noise, barks and clicks.

There's another sound, a crack, like someone breaking a tree branch in half. We realised then that it was an ambush. The Vavrians were pulling themselves off the trees. What looked like thick knots of bark on the trunks were coming to life and walking towards us. It was a symbiotic relationship, that's what the Strategists called it. That's why we couldn't find them. They were everywhere. Any tree could be hiding one of them.

We fired jets and leapt into the sky. We'd figured it out. Went back to base and passed the information onto the Strategists. They were very pleased. Commendations for all.'

'And then what did they do?' Metalfist says. The only sound is the crunch and hiss of the sand beneath their boots. Vex looks at her feet.

'They ordered us to burn the forest down,' Vex says. 'Keep the treeline as far back from the road,' they said. That way there would be no cover for the locals to assault our convoys.'

'Did you?'

'We mounted flamethrowers on the back of the trucks that followed the roads we'd already cut through the forest. Only needed three for the whole job. Didn't

matter how long the rainy season had been going on for. It burnt with this thick smoke, like steam almost. Smelled rich, like tea.'

'Tea?'

'It's a drink some of the Strategists' like.'

'Ah. And the Vavrians?'

'The trees just looked like... burnt trees. The bark turned into a coating of hot coals.'

Metalfist is silent as they walk. The sound of the sand underfoot. Crunch hiss crunch. The caravan is beginning to pass the sinkhole. A gaping cone-like hole in the ground. Every so often a Megasoldier's step sends a tiny avalanche hissing down to the centre. The order to keep away is shouted. The Megasoldiers shuffle back into formation.

'Commander Metalfist!' A shout from further down the line. The soldier waves an arm and points towards the horizon. Metalfist squints as the waves of the heat make the far-off edge of the world dance back and forth.

There. Almost a mirage. A colossal structure, three hundred meters high. Blocky and angular. Constructed out of dense black stone. Atop it there's the round white dish of the transmitter. They're almost there. Bookcase Fortress.

'You think these people in Manchester have got Frankie then?' Bill says. He reaches up and takes down the stack of board games that sit precariously on the top of the bookcase. Sue, who's a good foot shorter than him, passes up a model antenna dish. He puts it atop the bookcase.

'No, you're not listening to me. We think a patient of Manchester Oral Prosthetics helped to take Frankie,' I say for the third time. It's early in the morning. Bill's mug of tea sits steaming in the middle of the battlefield.

‘But you spoke to her?’ Bill picks up mug with one hand and tea slops out. The desert battlefield gets some much-needed rain.

‘Yeah briefly.’

‘And she said she’s fine?’

‘Yes but-’

‘Then I don’t know why you give such a fuck, Mack. She’s okay. If she wants to all mysterious, that’s her business.’ Bill dabs at the puddle with the hem of his multi-stained t-shirt.

‘What if these people, I don’t know... put a bullet in her head as soon as she’s done what they want?’

‘Don’t be a cunt, Mack. They’re hardly going to let her talk to you then do that. If they were the murdering type, then we’d all be dead in our beds. They’re pretty fucking incompetent if you can find them with Google.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Sue says.

‘Listen to the smart lady,’ Bill says. He smiles at Sue, his whole face lighting up. ‘I think I’m ready. You?’

‘Couple more units to deploy.’

The tabletop is a truly epic battlefield now. The Megasoldiers’ long trek through the desert has led them to what they hope will be their salvation. The sinkhole on one side of the board hems the Megasoldiers in on one side, creating a natural bottleneck.

The battlefield isn’t the only thing that’s changed: Sue stayed over last night. I’m starting to get concerned she’s got hypnotic powers, because not only is Bill up before noon and wearing a t-shirt, he’s also not drinking beer at eleven o’clock on a Saturday. He takes another sip of his tea.

Sue reaches beneath the table and pulls out a black plastic case. She snaps it open to reveal dark grey foam inside, like something you'd keep a gun in. Instead the foam cradles little plastic figures. She starts popping them out, a small army of the buggers guarding the bookcase.

'Oh, come off it. You haven't even got any Command Units. I thought this was going to be a proper fight!'

'Wait a second.' Sue pulls out the plastic foam to reveal another tray of figures beneath. Tucked into this section of the case are the bigger, meaner, more murderous aliens. Flailing tentacles and sharp teeth poke out. She pulls out a huge bundle like a new-born swaddled with bubble wrap. She unwraps it and places it on the table.

'Oh no, no, no, that's not fair,' Bills says. Sue just grins.

It's a really ugly baby. A hulking creature with a swollen red abdomen like some exotic spider. It shares the same basic shape as the smaller members of the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw, just bigger and meaner and more murderous. Legs like bone cathedral buttresses. Watery insectile eyes. Glistening chelicerae that part to reveal obsidian fangs. Two biomechanical cannons grow from its back, thick lumps of green goop dripping from the firing chambers.

'May I present,' Sue says, putting the creature at the head of her army with a flourish. 'The Swarm Queen of the Glittering Maw.'

'Jesus,' Bill says. 'That cunt could eat me for breakfast and I'm a proper fat fucker. How many points is that?'

'You were the one who didn't want to paint your new models last night,' she says, giving him a sly grin. He blushes like a nervous teenager.

'I... oh shut up!' he laughs and she reaches up, taking his hand, her own still hidden away in her sleeve.

‘Guys?’ I cut into the nerd sex talk. ‘Can we talk about Frankie please? We need to figure out what’s happened.’

Bill glares at me.

‘What?’

‘Scuse me a minute.’ Bill gives Sue a dainty kiss and then claps his sausage fingers on my shoulder. He steers me into the hallway. I half-struggle but he’s got weight on his side. He shoves me against the hallway wall.

‘Fucking drop it, Mack.’ He hisses, trying not to shout.

‘What the hell?’

‘I mean it!’ He jabs me in the chest with a finger. ‘Do not fuck this up for me!’

‘Oh, how would I fuck it up—’

‘Mack, this is your problem, not mine. For the first time in my life... things aren’t fucked up, okay? Don’t you get that?’

‘But what about Frankie?’

‘What about Frankie?’

‘She’s...’

‘She’s fucked off Mack. She’s safe, of course she is, she’s got time to play videogames for Christ’s sake. The only mystery here is why you’re fucking this up for me?’

‘I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are. I’m trying to have a nice Saturday morning with my...’ He stumbles for a second. ‘My... girlfriend.’

‘Is that what this is about? Some girl?’

Bill slaps me with a resounding clap of flesh on flesh. My right eye blanks to sparks for a moment and the sheer stinging weight of his hit makes my ears ring.

‘Jesus!’

‘She’s not *some girl*.’ Bill says.

‘What was that?’ Sue calls from in the kitchen. ‘Everything alright?’

‘Everything’s fine!’ Bill hurries to shout back. He lowers his voice. ‘I should kick your fucking ass. You wouldn’t dare put up with someone saying that about Frankie, so how fucking dare you say it about... your life isn’t more important than *mine*.’

With that Bill stalks back to the kitchen and closes the door behind him. Through the frosted glass I hear him clear his throat.

‘Sorry about that. We ready to play?’

‘Are you alright?’ Sue’s gentle voice. I lean against the wall out in the hall, rubbing my stinging cheek.

I go upstairs and slam the bedroom door behind me with childish spite. The mid-morning sun pokes through the blinds, projecting horizontal lines across the room. It’s a tip. The bed is a mess, covers thrown back. Clothes on the floor. I couldn’t be bothered making the epic journey to the washing basket. Empty beer cans litter my desk, lit from behind by the computer monitor. It shows the login screen for Wetware City. The camera swoops over the city at sunrise. The buildings shimmer. Streets bustle. I switch the monitor off.

I reach up and pull the little old suitcase down from on top of the wardrobe. Stuff the scattered clothes inside. I hunt through a few of the piles before I find my battered old laptop, still covered in scratched old stickers for bands I don’t listen to anymore. I swear as I hunt for the charger for twenty minutes, finally finding it behind the bed.

I let the suitcase bang on the steps as I come down the stairs. No one seems to care. From the kitchen, I hear laughter and the sound of dice being rolled.

It's not fair.

I open the front door, dragging my suitcase behind me... wait... I stop in the doorway. The cold is here, whipping in on the wind. I let my shoulders fall.

Bill and Sue look up as I enter. They're measuring distances with rulers and rolling dice and flipping through books and laughing. I've never seen Bill so happy. The Megasoldier's journey is just beginning.

'What do you want?' Bill says. He's holding back his anger in front of Sue. She puts a gentle hand on his shoulder.

I walk up to him and hug him. It's a stiff, guy hug but it's better than nothing.

'Sorry,' I say into his ear. I let him go and smile at them both. 'Have fun.'

He's still confused as I go, locking the door behind me and wheeling my suitcase along the pavement.

He's right. Joe was right too. Frankie's my problem.

Ten

Euston Station always makes me think of a dystopian London. It's the weird mixture of stillness and motion. Masses of people just standing there, looking up at the departures board like they're hypnotised by the bloody thing. They can't look away, waiting for those lime green numbers to flicker and change. Legions of the buggers still as statues until the numbers roll over to announce a platform. Then they come to life and hurry off to the next bit of their journey. Motion and stillness at the same time.

I'm hypnotised too. I've got forty minutes before my train leaves and I'm in thrall like the rest of them. A fast-food place in the station has provided a burger wrapped in waxy paper. I take tiny bites.

'Warning: please make way.' A calm recorded voice. I start. My eyes had unfocused themselves. Staring at nothing, munching away on my burger. It's an Apple ad meets Soylent Green. Euston is definitely a corporate dystopia. All those shops. 'Warning: please make way.'

Behind me is a long flatbed cart used for moving around luggage and old people. It's driven by a bored looking geezer in a neon green safety jacket. I look around as it cruises past me.

On the back of the cart is Debbie, the little old lady with one leg. Third time I've seen her this week. Weird. She's wearing a tan raincoat and a red shawl. She rests her handbag on her knees and clutches it with both hands. I wave to her. She notices me and smiles, giving a cheerful wave back.

'Off anywhere nice, love?' she says.

'Just on holiday, you?'

'Off to see me son,' she shouts back and then the cart is swallowed up by the jungle of people.

There's a ripple of movement as another platform is announced. Run or all the good seats will be gone! I look up at the board.

Manchester: 17:00. Platform Eighteen. The rest of the burger goes in the bin. Too much grease. My stomach keeps doing flips.

I rang work on the way to the train station.

'Department of Neurosciences Reception Desk, Clive speaking.' Even Clive's voice is boring.

'Clive, it's Mack.'

'Who?'

'Mack.'

'Oh right, sorry. What time are you coming in?'

'Clive the department gave me the week off after the break in. I haven't been in.'

'Haven't you?'

'Did you seriously not notice?'

'No, sorry.' I put my hand over the receiver and groaned. Like trying to get blood out of stone doesn't even begin to cover it.

'Can I speak to the administrator?'

'Toni? Er... I haven't seen her around er... wait a second.'

'Clive, don't worry about it mate.' If I let him go, I'd probably be waiting for an hour. He'd most likely forget and make himself a cup of tea instead. 'Clive, could you pass on a message to Toni for me?'

'Sure, let me get a pen and paper.'

'Clive, no wait-' Christ almighty. I waited until he came back, like a bear emerging from hibernation.

'Go ahead,' he said.

‘Could you please tell Toni that I’m still not feeling great so I probably won’t be in until Wednesday next week. Got that?’

‘What day again?’

‘Wednesday!’ I didn’t mean to shout as loud as I did.

‘Okay okay, keep your hair on. I’ll pass that on.’

‘Thank you, Clive.’

‘It’s no problem. I’ll see you tomorrow then.’

Before I could say anything else, he’d hung up the phone.

My suitcase bounces and jostles as I drag it along behind me. It’ll only stay on two wheels for so long before deciding it can’t be arsed and would rather be dragged on its side. I stop every ten steps to swear at it. I finally haul it onto the train and give it a little kick to show it who’s boss.

Northern voices chat around me. Natives returning from this strange southern land. I take a seat and stare out the window. Every time I hear the gentle burr and flat vowels of someone speaking nearby all I can think of is an arm around my neck. Staring into the glass of the octopus tank.

‘Nice and still there, mate.’ I shiver. That soft Yorkshire voice. The sharp needle. Cold chemical sleep.

I press my forehead against the glass of the window as the train pulls out of the station. I like to feel the rattle and clunk; the motion of the fuck-off massive electric beast transmitted through my forehead. Du-dun, du-dun, du-dun, over and over as the train picks up speed. I shove my headphones on and turn the volume up to max.

On the way out of London. Past canal barges lined up in the docks, their cheerful colours bright against the slimy green walls of the canal.

I can’t stop thinking about Manchester. Picking at it like a scab. I always used to pick at scabs when I was little. Mum hated it. Work a nail underneath the crusty

edge. Pinch and peel it back. Slippery raw pink below. Blood wells up. A few weeks and you've got a scar, smooth and round.

What if Bill's right and this is a massive waste of time? I can't figure out why I'm not angry at Frankie. I should be angry. I love her and she does this. I don't... I don't know what to do.

I take my laptop out of my bag. It's an ancient machine. Starting it up is like waiting to see if your elderly relative will come out of that coma. Probably best if they just slipped away. Against all odds, it wakes up and I'm presented with the desktop. The wifi on the train has the audacity to charge me for an hour. I bite the bullet. Dive back into research.

Manchester Oral Prosthetics. An hour's slog from the train station to the edge of the city. Where the suburbs meet big industrial parks. It's based out of a research complex, funded by a combination of university grants and sponsors from a huge healthcare company. I note down their telephone number. Watch the video of Rosie getting her new voice again.

I close the browser. There on the desktop, the icon for Wetware City, staring at me. The little silicon skyline. The fuck-off massive buildings and the wars and the gangs. It wasn't always like that.

Once upon a time there was a little city. A nice place, where new people came every day to build houses and trade things with their neighbours. It was a city that accepted everyone, whether you were a human or a robot or a gribbly tentacle monster. It was paradise.

Then, one day there was a newcomer to the city. Let's say she was a beautiful maiden. No, a shieldmaiden, a warrior-queen who would build a throne of skulls and listen to the lamentations of her enemies as their dreams crumbled. No... it didn't start like that. We weren't always Wetware royalty.

We met killing rats.

Pathetic really. Level one, both of us bludgeoning giant digital rats for a few measly experience points. Up goes the arm holding the wrench and then down it comes. Another rodent pancake. I paused for a moment. I didn't know if I was having fun. The advert for this game, Wetware City, said you could form huge alliances and conquer territory, but all I'd done so far was pest control.

Just me and this player called Frankie Blue, standing in an alley, while everyone else on the server seemed to be having fun.

'This is a bit shit, isn't it?' I didn't know her. Didn't even know if she'd have a microphone to respond to me. But I had sunk fifty quid on this game and I was determined to make some friends.

'Oh Christ, it's not just me,' she said. I laughed, way too loud and way too long.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I think I'm getting hysterical.'

'I know what you mean.' A rat tried to dart past her, and she lashed out, smashing it to pieces. 'Do you know what level we unlock guns? Might make this a bit easier...'

'I have heard myths of such things,' I said in a portentous voice. She laughed. It might sound all fucking sappy but her stupid, snorting laugh is still my favourite thing about her. I smiled. 'I'm Mack'

'Frankie.'

'You... game much?'

'Not really. I'm—' Smash. Another rat down. '—I work long hours, so it's nice to have something to do in the downtime. You?'

'I've played a lot of Warcraft and EVE. Wanted to try something new.'

She gestured around the squalid little alley: a rusting fire escape hung over their heads, bolted to the mouldering bricks. The rubbish bags littering the street moved as the rats wormed their between them.

‘And is it everything you ever dreamed?’

I sighed. ‘Not really. Maybe you have to pay extra for the epic alliances and lifelong friendships.’

‘Nah, you just need friends.’

‘I have frien—’ I stopped as I thought of Bill, lying in a drunken stupor on the sofa, spilled paint all over his trousers. I shut my mouth. She must have caught it because she laid a fake hand on my fake shoulder.

‘Tell me about it.’

We went back to murdering innocent rodents. And that’s how it started.

The next day I went back, and she was there again. We talked about nothing, TV shows, podcasts, that kind of stuff.

A week later and we’d graduated from vermin termination to lopping the heads off unlucky delivery robots, in a weird online version of smashing down post-boxes. She told me she was a neuroscientist. I told her I was unemployed. Much less impressive.

Flash forwards a month and suddenly we’ve got a house, cobbled enough gold, and sold enough rat fur rugs to buy a little hovel. It wasn’t much but it was ours. There was no button to carry her across the threshold, but we joked about it anyway.

Six months and we meet Joe and Laura, as we decide to have a go at the player-versus-player stuff. Maybe actually have a go at that empire building stuff. The four of us talking, late into the night. Getting late to work, groggy and still half-screen blind.

Just me and Frankie talking. Screwing up the courage to ask her if she wants to meet in person.

Moving in together, just as mates of course. Our first date, getting hosed down by an octopus. After drying off, agreeing to go out in the evening.

Dinner in a shit pub. Drinks in a karaoke bar. Kissing in an alley, actual rats beneath our feet.

I wouldn't be on this train if it wasn't for Wetware. I met the love of my life there. Some people just don't get it, the kind of bond a game can make.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we'll shortly be arriving at Manchester Piccadilly where this service terminates. All change please.'

The view is swamped with soot-stained red brick, following the old railway routes of an industrial town. Hard concrete buildings from the sixties sit uncomfortably next to terraced Victorian houses.

We pass a dock. Manchester's a canal town. The people take pride in their barges here. Polished brass fittings and freshly painted boats with their names picked out in bright white on the bows. A hundred years ago the canals were the quickest route from here to London. People clamber over the boats. Some sit in deckchairs atop them, trying to sunbathe despite the chilly air.

The red brick wall of a tunnel steals them from view and after another minute we pull into the station.

The sand is shifting beneath their feet. One minute they're on sure footing, traipsing across the sand towards Bookcase Fortress. The next, the sand is writhing like it's alive. A shout goes out from the soldier manning the Spidertank.

'Glittering Maw!'

The shapes dragging themselves out of the ground chitter and screech. They burrow up, legions of the buggers erupting into the air. Scythed claws flash and Metalfist watches as one of the Megasoldiers is torn in half with the sound of rending metal and wet flesh. Panic spreads. The Maw are all around them. The sinkhole to their right is no accident. It's a bottleneck. An ambush.

The drones of the Glittering Maw are awful to behold. Man sized, six- limbed things. They skitter forward on four legs, each one hooked at the end with a black barb. They hold out the front two which are armed with long bone scythes. Their yellow maggot flesh spills out from between the plates of their carapace like rolls of fat. At the front is a stubby round head with dripping insect mouth parts. Four glittering blue orbs ring around it, staring out in every direction.

'Ring formation. Ring formation!' Metalfist raises his voice to be heard over the din of panic. The soldiers nearest him leap into position. Four soldiers to a ring, standing back to back and looking out. Every angle covered with a man at your back.

The soldiers at the edges of the caravan don't hear the shout and by the time Metalfist is broadcasting over the communicator it's already too late. Panicked shots ring out. Confused shouts, both out loud and on his communicator, requesting orders.

Metalfist wants to sprint over. To go and help. He can't. He has to watch the backs of his brothers as they do for him. To break the ring formation would be to invite death. He can only watch. A Megasoldier backs up while firing, stumbling straight backward into the Maw's waiting embrace. His screams become muffled as he's pulled beneath the sand.

Metalfist draws his sword from his back. A drone skittering towards the man on his right, who is blind to the threat, is cleaved in half with the buzzing blade. Foetid purple guts slop out onto the sand. The sword hisses as it touches the ground, fusing the grains of sand into glass. He wheels and turns to face straight ahead. More are

coming. He pulls his pistol from its holster and shots crack and bark to drop another monster. He shouts into his communicator, just to be heard over the sounds of battle.

‘Vex, report.’

‘Sir, it’s an ambush,’ Vex’s voice is clipped, snatched away by the wind and the hum of her jets. Metalfist catches one of the drones by the neck and crushes the fleshy jowls like a ripe pimple. He shakes the gunk off his hand.

‘I can see that,’ he says. ‘How close is the front of the caravan to the fortress?’

‘Hang on.’

Metalfist looks up and spots Vex rolling and diving to avoid the drones that leap up in a futile attempt to snatch her out of the air. She rises up and hovers high over the melee. ‘Front of the caravan is about a klick from the fortress.’

‘Get everyone moving forward, Vex. Keep the Battle Angels in the air, it’s death down here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Megasoldiers, move forward,’ Metalfist says.

The Megasoldiers don’t need telling twice. They almost look comical, maintaining their ring formations as they shuffle towards the fortress. To the Battle Angels above they are four headed metal crabs scuttling across the sand. The Glittering Maw surround each group of soldiers. They nip at them like a pack of dogs. Some commit, diving forward to slash and bite at the metal figures. They are rewarded with a cry of distorted cyborg pain or are rebuffed with fire and sword.

Metalfist slashes and tears. After each assault is driven back, his sword comes up to rest on his vambrace again. He looks down the length of it, ready to plunge it into the next taker. The green lights behind his eye lenses sweep back and forth. He looks to his left. His ring is almost through the bottleneck. He looks down into the waiting mouth of the sinkhole. A drone leaps forward while he is distracted.

The pain burns across his chest in a hard, fat wedge. Metalfist gasps. Tries to draw in air. Breathing hurts. He uses one hand to hold the struggling drone down and raises the sword in the other. The sword decapitates it with a neat cut. Metalfist presses a hand to his chest. It's wet, streaked with iridescent oil and coppery smelling blood. A few drops of milky bio-fluid trickle from his fingers.

Warning alerts flash over his vision. In his ears a klaxon is blaring. *Critical damage. Seek medical assistance. Megasoldier unit in need of repair.*

The point of his sword quivers. He can't hold it straight. His hands are shaking too much. Their ring formation is faltering as his boots drag in the sand. He coughs up a hacking spray of oil from his lungs.

'Vex, leave us and get to the tower. Send the signal. Priority one, urgent assistance required.'

'I'm staying with the caravan, sir.'

'That was a fucking order, Vex. Go.'

'Sir...'

'For the last fucking time, use my name.' He takes his hand away from his wound. A frothy mixture of oil, blood and bio-fluid sprays out. He raises the sword above his head with both hands. The wound screams as it's stretched.

He meant to bring it down in an overhead slash. He can't. His arms give up the ghost. He lets go of the sword without meaning to. It fizzles as it lands in the sand.

He turns. Breaking the formation. Unheard shouts from his comrades to get back into position. He watches the trails of Vex's jets arc towards the tower.

The whole structure shudders. Metalfist frowns. The massive edifice rocks as cracks dart across its surface. The dish of the antenna glints as its position shifts and for a moment, it catches the bright sun. There's a horrible high-pitched squeal as the bolts anchoring it fail and the antenna rips free of its moorings. Metalfist watches

as it falls. Tumbling end over end. It crashes into the sand with a muffled *crump* and arcs of dust as the pieces shatter outwards.

A gigantic leg pushes its way up from beneath the tower, rising up and then coming down with a ground shaking thump. It dwarfs drones and Megasoldiers alike. More legs appear, reaching up to drag the bulk of the monster from beneath the earth.

The creature is armoured in bone coloured chitin. Fangs as tall as a man drip oily black venom. They click and snap in anticipation. Eyes swivel to look out in ten different directions. The biomechanical cannons on its back hum and glow green before discharging great gouts of emerald flame with a huge bang. Drones scuttle over it, scooping the spent fluid from the chambers and attaching fleshy cables to refuel the weapon. The beast bucks backwards with the force of each blast.

The flaming shots are indiscriminate. Megasoldiers are engulfed in an armour melting inferno. Drones are taken with them. The sharp smell of molten metal and burning protein fills the air.

Another blast, this time arcing up into the sky. A Battle Angels twists and rolls to avoid it. The manoeuvre isn't enough. A bang. The stutter and cough of broken turbines. The trail from the jets turns ashen grey. The Angel starts to fall from the sky.

'Metalfist,' Vex says over the communicator. 'I'm hit. Going down.'

The drones swarm around Metalfist. The Megasoldiers from his broken formation fall under the flash of limbs and claws. Metalfist feels the spray of hot liquids across his face.

'It's over, Vex.'

'I know,' she says.

'I hope to see you inside the Core Computer.'

'It's been an honour, sir-' Her voice cuts out with a burst of static across the channel. Metalfist knows she's dead. Shattered upon the sand.

His bones are aching. He's four hundred years old. Around him the maelstrom of teeth and claws is coming to its climax. They came so close. So damn close. He can't fight back anymore. Instead he raises his fist. Slams it twice upon his chest. A final salute.

The tide closes around Metalfist and he is lost in the swarm.

PART TWO

Eleven

‘Spare any change please, mate?’

I jump at the voice. I was concentrating on my phone, trying to figure out where the bloody hotel was. The maps app was being obstinate. There’s a homeless guy standing in front of me. He’s wearing trackie bottoms and a single battered trainer. The other foot is only protected by a stripy blue sock. He’s bundled up in a grey hoodie and a puffy jacket over it. He hitches his backpack up onto his shoulder. Dirt traces the whorls and cross hatches of his face.

‘Er, yeah sure.’ I stuff my phone into my pocket and rummage about for some change. Three quids worth of coins. I drop them into his hand. He brings the coins right up in front of his nose. Squints at them. He’s a bit cross-eyed.

‘Ah, thanks mate,’ he says with a smile. ‘Me eyesight is buggered so I have to hold things right close like.’

‘It’s no problem.’

‘I’m saving up for a pair of glasses see.’

‘Why not just get them on the NHS?’

‘Loads of hassle mate. You have to have an address where they can send all your post and me eyes are so fucked that I need special lenses and that. I would just buy one of them pairs you get in Boots like, but last time I used them they gave me a headache something fierce.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘You alright mate?’

‘I’m fine thanks. Just lost.’

‘Well where is it you’re trying to go?’

‘The Talos Hotel?’

‘That’s easy mate, it’s just round the corner.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Can you see the sign for Brunel Street?’

I swivel around. I can. Behind me. ‘Yeah I can see it.’

‘Hook a right around there mate and it’s halfway down the street.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It’s no problem mate. Know how to get anywhere I do.’

‘Thanks again.’ I fumble with my wallet. ‘Here.’

I give him a tenner. I feel a weird kind of guilt. Giving him the note seems like an admission that I wasn’t willing to give him as much as I could earlier.

‘You’re a star mate,’ he says. ‘See you about.’ He wanders off, one hand trailing the wall beside him to help guide his way.

The Talos Hotel is right where he said it would be. It’s one of those hotels that looks like it came out of Ikea. Cheap plasticky flat pack stuff. They’ve done what chains do: gutted some old office building, putting in new walls and stuck their logo on wherever it will fit.

The man at the front desk is chewing gum. He asks me for my booking details and then the rest of the transaction is conducted in silence. His eyes dart between the computer monitor and his phone that’s propped up just below it. I can just see the phone: he’s watching TV. A spaceship swoops low over a herd of horses.

‘Third floor, room twenty-three. Have a good stay,’ he says in a monotone drone. He hands me a credit card sized piece of plastic.

The room is bog standard chain hotel fare. Furniture bought in bulk and then reupholstered with cheap fabric in the off yellow colours of the chain’s logo. The

sheets look clean at least. I dump my bag on the bed. Take out the number I noted down earlier. The phone rings and then a pre-recorded voice chirps into life.

‘Hello. You’ve reached Manchester Oral Prosthetics. Please listen to the following options carefully. If you’re an existing patient, please press one. If you’re a new patient and would like to book a consultation, please press two. For all other enquiries please stay on the line and we will connect you.’

I wait for a minute. The silence is suddenly replaced with jangling circuitous music, badly recorded and crackly. The music gets a brief intermission. ‘Thank you for waiting, all our staff are busy taking other calls at the moment so-’ The voice is broken off mid-sentence and replaced with a real human.

‘Manchester Oral Prosthetics, Becky speaking, how may I help you?’

I open my mouth to say something and then stop. This was such a stupid idea. The plan I cooked up on the train felt so clever. Now I just feel like a colossal pillock.

‘Hello? Anyone there?’ Becky says. I swallow back the anxiety.

‘Hi, sorry to disturb you but I just wanted to ask a few questions about your products?’ I spill over my words.

‘Sorry, I didn’t catch that?’

Deep breath. Play it cool.

‘I had a few questions about some of your products?’

‘Of course, how can I help?’

‘I’ve just started my PhD in Neuroscience and I’m thinking of working in the field of prosthetics myself. I’ve been looking on your website and I’ve seen that a lot of your products have machine-nerve interfaces integrated into them. I’m in Manchester for a conference and I was wondering if I could come and visit you? Just so I can get a bit of an insight? Maybe ask your researchers some questions?’

I'd been practising this little speech on the train. I'd worked enough shifts as a security guard at the Neurosciences lab to give me all the jargon I'd ever need. You'd innocently ask one of the professors about their work and then you'd be treated to a long, in-depth lecture on the problems of measuring neurotransmitters at a synapse level and how they might affect cohesive brain function. You listened and nodded along until they wore themselves out.

'I can certainly ask for you. Can I take a name please?'

'My name's Michael Huxley,' I say. I locked myself in the train bathroom and stared into the mirror repeating, 'My name is Michael Huxley' until it was burned into my brain. My name is Michael Huxley. I'm a chipper PhD student studying Neuroscience at King's College London. I'm researching brain-machine interfaces.

'Michael, if you don't mind holding for just a minute I'll give our Head of Development a quick ring.'

'No problem.' The phone clicks. More spangly music. I feel queasy. They might just straight up reject me. Or they'll ring King's College London. *Sorry, no we don't seem to have a student by that name. Sounds a bit dodgy, I'd report them to the police if I were you.* Or this isn't even Manchester Oral Prosthetics. This is all a cunning trap laid by the cyborgs after I evaded them on the train-

'Hi, Michael?' Becky's voice silences the music.

'Hello?'

'Hi again. I've just spoken to Charvi Alam, our head of development, and she's more than happy to help you out. We've actually got a troubleshooting clinic with some patients tomorrow if you're about? You can meet Charvi and have a chat?

'That would be great. What time would that be?'

'Our clinic starts at two.'

'Thank you.'

‘We look forward to seeing you. Have a good day.’

‘Bye.’

I drop my phone. Deep breaths now. You did it. Rosie might even be there at the clinic tomorrow. Don’t get your hopes up though. Wishful thinking usually fucks you over. You’re going to have to go digging. Poke about files. Ask some of the patients.

I’m up on my feet and out the door. I’ve got to look the part as well. I’ve got to have folders and notebooks and a haircut. Look like a student. Manchester bustles. A vintage shop surrenders a tacky patterned shirt and a messenger bag. A vast stationary shop furnishes me with a hardback notebook and pen. A plastic folder. I stuff it with random bits of paper to make it look full. In the barber’s chair I have my hair trimmed to short back and sides. I’m leaving a shopping arcade when a shop catches my eye. Tucked away into one corner.

The storefront is painted black. The sign above is emblazoned with the words *PLANET CRUSADERS* rendered in neon. Inside are dioramas of figures fighting battles on tabletops. The shelves are stacked with boxes that display the models within. Insectile monsters. Zombies stiff with frost. Bill’s Megasoldiers.

Sat at a table in the middle of the store is a short bald bloke with a black goatee. He’s wearing a black polo shirt with the Planet Crusaders logo on it. Sat behind the till is a tall lanky guy with a long Viking beard.

I push the door open. The bell on it jangles and makes the two men look up. The Viking waves.

‘Hey buddy, how can I help?’ Rough Manchester accent.

‘Sorry. Er, I’m just looking.’

‘No worries, buddy. You ever played before?’

‘No. I’ve got a friend who does.’ I wander over to the shelves. There must be hundreds of the bloody figures here.

‘You looking to give it a go?’ Goatee at the table pipes up. In his hands is a massive, winged monster. It’s got a hooked vultures bill and scaly skin. He’s lightly feathering the edges of the wings with a wide flat brush. Every pass makes the feathers a little more vivid.

‘I’ve never really done it before.’

‘You can have a go at painting a miniature if you want?’ We’ll walk you through it and then you can keep it when you’re done. It’s cool to just give it a go and see if you enjoy it.’

‘Er, okay.’

‘Ace. Come and grab a seat next to me, buddy.’ Goatee waves me over and I sit next to him at the table stacked high with little pots of paint. ‘Leighton, can you grab me a Megasoldier out the back please?’ Viking disappears into the stock room and comes back a moment later with a small cardboard box. He hands it to me.

The box has a picture of a Megasoldier on it. He’s wearing a long cloak that billows in the wind. He’s pointing ahead, directing unseen troops towards an unknown enemy. In his other hand he’s holding a long sword that crackles with electricity. It’s Commander Metalfist.

‘Right, let’s get started,’ Goatee says.

Here’s how it happens.

First you take the miniature out the box. It comes in a couple of parts on a plastic frame called a sprue. You take a pair of those big nail clippers that old people use and snip the pieces out of the frame. Then you use one of those wicked sharp craft knives and scrape off any bits of excess plastic from the moulding.

When all the pieces are nice and clean you have to glue the bugger together. The plastic bottle with the glue has a small metal nozzle, like a needle. You dab a bit of

glue onto each component and hold them together. The sharp smell of solvents makes your nose itch. No wonder these guys go crazy for plastic soldiers. They're essentially just spending a couple of hours sniffing glue. The Megasoldier gets all of his arms and legs and then to finish you pop on his head. Stick his feet to the base.

The first bit of painting is called base coating. You go out into the street with a can of spray paint and a cardboard box. You put your Megasoldier in there and give the spray paint a shake. You spray one half of the model bright silver. Turn him around and coat the other side. Spick and span. Use a little pot of silver paint to touch up any bits the spray missed.

Back inside. The next stage is called a wash. It's a different type of paint from the others: black and watery, almost like ink. You use a fat brush with a fine tip, the kind you'd use to paint watercolours. Load it up with the wash. This goes over the whole model. It runs into all the details and recesses, shading wherever the shadows would be.

The next bit is all the details. Metalfist's cloak gets painted a rich green. With a brush like a needle, you paint the eyes of the Megasoldier a bright emerald. The cross guard of the sword is done in shining gold. The wires running from the back of Metalfist's head and down into his spine you pick out with rich orangey copper. The bolts of lightning surrounding the sword are frozen in ice blue.

You've got all your base colours down. Now you do the highlighting. Pick out any details the light would catch with a brighter colour. You fish out all the little pots you could need from a massive crate of paints. The billowing edge of the cloak is picked out with a thin line of lime. The face of the Megasoldier is brightened with shining silver on the haughty nose and stern eyebrows. You do several passes on the sword until the electricity fades from blue to white. The cross guard of the sword gets its final

royal detail. Resplendent is the only fitting word for Metalfist. He's clothed in the battle regalia befitting a Megasoldier of so many accomplishments.

The final thing is to base the model. The plain black plastic base doesn't evoke far off worlds. You want your Megasoldier to be striding across the plains of some alien planet, not the lino floor of your bathroom. So, you spread a bit of whitish PVA glue on the base. Then you take out a pot filled with sterile freeze-dried dirt. Dip the base in. Pull it back out and give it a shake. Quick wash and highlight and now your Megasoldier stands upon the dusty battlefield of your choosing.

I stare at the little figure in my hands. It stares back with impassive eyes. My hands shook as I tried to fill them in. All the fine details are a bit blobby. It doesn't matter though. This is my Megasoldier. Not as good as Bill's but all the same I'd managed to paint this, to make it look shiny and new, like it was fresh off the factory line.

That's how it happens.

Here's how it happens.

The Megasoldier Corps takes anyone. You can enlist in the little recruiting office in the spaceport shopping centre. You go in and they give you a form. Please read the form carefully before signing. It seems innocuous enough. Body enhancements, next of kin, off planet travel details, stuff like that. The soldiers of the past had to be in peak physical condition just to get through the door. They do all that for you know. You hand the form back and they feed it into a computer. A minute or two goes by. The computer spits the form back out. Blocky green letters across it read 'APPROVED.' You get given a departure date. Please arrive on time or risk forfeiture of your enlistment bonus.

You go back home. There's a big leaving party. All your friends are there. Dad is so proud of you. Mum is a little teary. A little drink is taken and then a lot of drink is taken, and you finish the night off by jumping naked into the pool with your friends.

You wake up the next day with a wicked hangover. The house seems quiet and empty. Dad silently cleans up while Mum tries her best not to cry. You roll over and try to go back to sleep. You don't want to go downstairs and have to make conversation all the way to tomorrow.

Your alarm goes off. You're a little groggy. Paw at the button until the clock shuts up. You stand underneath the shower. The water runs off your back. You feel the last trace of yesterday's hangover slough off you. Stomach is still a little queasy. You shut off the water and get dressed. Downstairs, Mum has put on a spread. Fat sausages. Streaky bacon. Fluffy eggs. You don't eat much but you tell her it's good.

In the car. Your bag seems too small for going so far away. You were told you could bring a kilogram of personal effects. No clothes or toiletries. All that kind of stuff would be provided. Only bring things that are really important to you.

You arrive at the spaceport. High above you can hear the rattle and roar of shuttles taking off to dock at the orbital station. Dad gives you a big hug. Mum is crying. They can't come in with you. Not even through the door. So, goodbyes are said here. Before the doors slide shut you turn and wave to them. They wave back. You go up to the enlistment officer. They scan your ident bracelet and let you into a small lounge.

Megasoldier recruits mill around. None of them talk. The door at the other end of the lounge swings open. A small, uniformed man pokes his head out and calls your name. You follow him through the door.

Your ident bracelet is scanned again. Your bag is put on a conveyer belt, disappearing into darkness. Cubicle four, you're told. The door to the cubicle slides

open and then silently closes behind you. There's a list of instructions printed directly onto the wall.

CHANGE CLOTHES.

TAKE PILLS.

WAIT.

There's a grey jumpsuit hanging from a hook in the cubicle. You change into it. It fits perfectly. Hang your old clothes up. They look like empty skin. A slot opens in the wall and a small tray slides out. On it is a glass of water and a little paper cup with two green pills inside. There's an 'A' stamped onto them. You swallow both with a gulp of water. The shelf retracts taking the glass with it. A small seat slides out of the wall. You sit down.

Roughly ten minutes pass. You hear a ding and the cubicle door slides open. You feel calm. Calmer than you've ever felt. Worry-proof. The other recruits mill around you. They've all got big happy faces. You're led gently to another door. Behind it is the access tunnel to the shuttle. You sit down in a padded acceleration couch. Smiling helpful people buckle you in. You thank them with a dreamy thumbs up.

You've been off world before of course, but you've never liked space travel. Like planes but worse: the anxiety of something going wrong is amplified tenfold. You're sitting on top of a controlled nuclear explosion.

Now though, as you feel the boosters ignite beneath you, you realise it was a silly thing to be scared of. The gentle rumble as you climb up through the atmosphere rocks you to sleep. Through the windows you can see the blue-sky fade to black just before your eyes close.

You don't remember getting off the shuttle. You're in a waiting room. There are pamphlets on the coffee tables. The pamphlets have pictures of smiling

Megasoldiers on them. Occasionally someone comes out the door at the back and calls a name. A recruit raises their hand and is led tottering from the room.

Your name is called. In the back room there's a team of scrubbed up doctors. They're wearing long green gowns and white masks. There's a metal table.

Would you like to lie down?

You would like to lie down. The table is hard and cold, but you don't mind.

Before the trip you were given a dose of Anxieten to help the process. It's perfectly normal to be anxious. Don't worry about anything. We're here to take care of you.

Sharp scratch. Someone is speaking. You look down. There's a needle in the back of your hand, held in place with surgical tape. Thick dreaminess is pumped into you. You go limp, sort of half awake. Enough awareness to hear the voices and activity around you and feel the occasional tug as someone works on some part of you.

We all ready? Let's begin.

Scalpel. Yeah, right there. All the way down. Scissors. Okay, cutting into the sac.

You think you're lying on your stomach now.

Beautiful. Okay, we've got a good specimen here, just like the scans show. Recruitment were right to pick this one for command.

There's a sound like someone taking off a wet shirt. Things go black. You don't know how long for. Then you're lying on your back again.

We want to keep the face on this one?

No, he's going to be a Commander. Just keep it standard template please. Save the tissue anyway. Just in case we want to use it on one of the other units.

You can't shut your eyes. Leaning over you is a small man in a grey uniform. He must be a Strategist. You've seen them in the films, leading the Megasoldiers into battle.

We've got battle carapace coming through, excuse me.

The sound of wheels over smooth floor. There's a metal clank as something heavy is lifted and then set down again. You can feel the pieces being placed around you.

Okay, let's get all this in place. Drill please.

A high-pitched whine. The screech of metal on metal. You're being encased. Another trolley is wheeled in. There's the sound of sloshing liquid coming from on top of it.

We ready for bio-fluid?

Yes sir.

Another sharp scratch. You feel it on your inner thigh. A much thicker tube being inserted.

Here we go.

There's a click then a hiss. You feel warmth creeping from your crotch up through your trunk and into your brain. It's cosy. Comforting.

Okay, bio-fluid is perfusing the organs. We should be good to take homeostatic functions offline and transfer to battle ready state. Bring in the vines.

I think we're ready for the transfer, sir.

You can see something hanging above you. It looks like a tangle of vines and tentacles. Oily black strands. They sway then start to twitch to life. They writhe with precise little shivers.

Sir?

Yeah go ahead, begin the transfer.

The writhing mass dives for your face.

Optic Nerve.

There's a click, a hiss and everything goes black.

Moving on to brain stem.

Click. Hiss. You stop breathing but the you, the thinking, keeps going.

Spinal cord. I want this link up to be perfect. No dents.

Click. Hiss.

You can't feel your fingers. Can't feel anything.

Clone print done yet?

The nerves are almost finished, sir.

Everything look good?

Like it was made by machine.

Laughter around you.

Okay, let's start putting it back together.

Sensation starts to come back. Your hands feel stiff as you flex your fingers.

Sight returns, fuzzy at first, like an old computer monitor distorted with scan lines.

Somewhere a dial is turned, and everything snaps into focus.

The link up is looking good. The printed nerves aren't being rejected.

Transfer is done.

Good job everyone. Send the unit to the Core Computer and let's finish up.

What do you want done with the leftovers?

Have any of the other transfers requested anything specific?

A bit of blood but that's it, sir. We've had clean transfers all day.

Well that's a fucking first. Okay, send the blood over. Save some nerve and DNA. Keep the vitals if we've got enough leftover bio-fluid to store them in, repairs

are always whinging that they never have enough. Burn anything that's left over. It's been a pleasure people. I'll see you all tomorrow.

The table you're lying on is wheeled out the door. Fluorescent lights flash as you pass underneath them. You manage to raise your head a fraction of an inch. You're being pushed towards a massive circular steel door, like a bank vault. The person pushing the trolley goes over to the door and taps a long code into the panel beside it. The door screeches as it swings open. You're wheeled in.

The machine inside is titanic. It stretches up and up into the dark recesses of this colossal room. Bare circuits high above you are illuminated by scorching arcs of electricity. Tanks of coolant swish back and forth. Mechanical whirring comes from deep inside as it mutters to itself.

You're helped up. Brought over to a chair at the base of the machine. It's padded with old red leather, with metal clamps for the wrists and ankles. The headrest is encircled with a coppery halo. You sit back. The halo clicks into place around your head.

Someone walks into view. They're wearing a baggy blue jumpsuit that hangs off their emaciated sexless frame. Their shaved head is cratered with slots and chips. They put their clammy hands on your cheeks. Stare deep into your eyes. Their pupils are needlepoints, set into dark sockets. Chalky white skin. Their voice is hoarse and scratchy.

What do they want for this one then?

This one's for command.

It's in for a rodeo today. We just got a mind state back from Kufari Prime. It's been in service for four hundred years! Imagine that. It's going to be one lovely shiny upgrade.

The halo clicks and whirs. Capacitors hum.

Here we go. Hold onto your brain mate.

The capacitors click, a tiny sound amid the buzzing of the room. The machine above you quietens for a moment. Then there's nothing but noise, all channelled through the halo and pouring into your mind.

There's another person in here with you. Inside your head. You feel a flash of fear, being pulled apart by claws and fangs. They know a lot. They've seen many places. They know all the battle doctrines. They invented most of them.

You're being overwritten. You push, racing as fast as you can to keep ahead of this new mind. The wave catches you, lifts you up and carries you along in the tide. You're no longer afraid. You're subsumed. Part of someone else now.

All done. Give it five minutes to recover and then take it through to testing.

Will do.

The clamps release your wrists and ankles. You stand up. You feel sure, firm of purpose. You know this. You're the Commander.

Out the door of the Core Computer. You've been here before. The door to testing slides open. A voice calls your name.

'Commander Metafist!'

You thump your chest twice in salute.

You look down at your hand. You don't know where that came from. Muscle memory maybe? The back of your hand is polished chrome. Fresh off the factory line. Of course it is. You're new. Guided by all the knowledge and wisdom of the Megasoldiers that came before you.

You enter the training room, sure and steady. Ready to prove you're worthy of serving in the glorious Megasoldier Corp.

That's how it happens.

A Memory

‘Nick?’

Someone is shaking my shoulder.

‘Nick, wake up.’

I snap awake with a jerk. Rub at my groggy eyes. I’m in the car, surrounded by bits of gold. The crumpled remnants of a bag of Werther’s Originals. I look over at Dad. He’s broken out the second bag.

‘You alright?’ he says.

‘Yeah, I’m-’ I stop mid-sentence. Burp. Hand over the mouth. ‘Pull over.’

‘You going to chuck up?’

I don’t say anything, just nod furiously while keeping a hand clamped over my mouth. Dad weaves through two motorway lanes, eliciting an angry beep from a pissed off red Corsa. We grind to a halt on the hard shoulder. I open the door and take off my seat belt in one smooth motion. With my head dangling out the car I spew up pure dissolved caramel.

My shoulders convulse for round two. Dad rubs my back between my shoulders like he’s burping a baby—

—‘Get it all up, that’s right.’ Soft voices. So long ago. The warmth of someone holding me. Holding me and—

—by the third retch I’m dry heaving. Then my mouth fills with an alarming bitterness. I hack up something stringy and green. I cough as my eyes tear up. Bile. Worst taste in the world.

‘Woah mate.’ Dad unclips his seatbelt and jumps out the door, coming round to my side of the car with a bottle of water. ‘Here.’

I take a few tentative sips. It washes some of the bitterness back down my throat and I almost erupt again. Another sip. More water to wash away all the bad taste. I lean past my Dad and spit.

‘Jesus.’

‘That better?’

‘Not worse.’

‘We can take five. Then we’ll get going. Can’t miss this appointment mate.’

Dad goes back around and gets in. Clicks on the hazard warning lights. Cars zip past us on the motorway.

‘You feeling okay?’ Dad pulls the wrapper off a Werther’s with a crinkle and pops the little sweet into his mouth.

‘I’m fine.’ I’m snappy and short. I’m so knackered.

‘I’ll just let you sit.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m just nervous about the meeting. Chemo stomach isn’t helping.’

‘I used to get that too. Butterflies before exams.’

I smile at him but at the same time I want to tell him that this is so much worse than butterflies. Butterflies is what you get when—

—I’m waiting to take an exam. Little rituals to keep me safe. Calm me down. It’s only a Maths CGSE. I’m shit at Maths. I check the pencils in my pencil case. Count to twenty in my head. Then it would all be okay—

— but I haven’t got any rituals for this. What rituals would you use to get picked for life saving experimental treatment? On top of that, is it wrong to want to get picked because it means that the other two candidates being interviewed today wouldn’t? They’d die. They would be dead.

‘Yeah, it’s a bit like that,’ I say. Poor Dad. He’s trying his best.

‘Ready to get back on the road?’

No. I nod anyway though.

The Cambridge Institute for Wetware to Hardware Solutions is a lot less grand than I thought it would be. It was supposed to be all shiny glass and metal, a cathedral to the next stage of human evolution. Instead, it looks like a dentist’s office. Two floors with clean windows and pastel blinds.

A door opens. A woman with greying hair walks out. A motorised wheelchair buzzes behind her. The young woman in the chair is wearing a baggy tracksuit. She’s sitting in a strange position, all bent up. The control for the chair is a cheerful orange golf ball. Her skinny hand hovers over it bent at a ninety-degree angle from her arm. The older woman lets the door swing closed and wanders off to find her car.

The woman pilots the wheelchair with deft ease, pulling up next to me and Dad. She wriggles in her chair to look at me. Her smile is lopsided.

‘You a patient of Doctor More?’ Her speech is strange and halting but nevertheless she’s cheerful.

‘Yes I am.’

‘You must be one of the others?’

‘Er...’

‘Yeah I know. He told us not to talk to one another. Confidentiality my arse. F-fuck him. I’m Maisie.’

‘Nick.’

She reaches out with one shaky arm. She takes my hand. Her grip is wavering but strong. It’s an awkward shake.

‘Good luck in there.’ She smiles at me.

A car pulls up next to us: a big people carrier thing, adapted for her chair. She gives me one last grin before spinning on the spot and rattling off to the ramp emerging from the boot.

Inside the office is a little waiting room. The woman behind the desk is wearing pastel scrubs and has a pearly white smile. Her hair is pulled back into a blonde ponytail.

A fan of pamphlets on a coffee table details the lab's research. Big milestones they've reached. Who they're funded by. That section takes up two whole pages. Seems a lot of people are pouring money into this research. All that cash and they can still only afford one patient. Four more pages detailing all the companies who are collaborating to make this technology work. What they make and why it's vital.

'Hi Nick.' Doctor More comes through the double doors pushing a wheelchair. He looks the same as when I first met him. The healthy bronze tan preserves him like an insect in amber. 'Been a while since our last meeting. How have you been?'

'I'm well, thanks.' It's a half-lie. As well as you can be with metastatic lung cancer. Lots of time in hospitals has taught me that 'well' is a relative concept.

'Mr. March, it's good to meet you at last. Doctor More reaches out to shake Dad's hand.

'The pleasure is all mine.' Dad's flustered, like he's meeting a celebrity.

'Well, hop in.' Doctor More gives the wheelchair a slap.

'I don't think I really need it.'

'No, I insist.' Doctor More gives me a big smile. 'Nothing but the best care.'

'Okay then.' I lower myself into the chair. It's like being a kid again. Way down here all the grownups seem so tall. Doctor More pushes me through the long silent corridors.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Of course, Nick. You can ask me anything.’

‘I met a woman in the car park. Coming out of the unit I mean. She said her name was Maisie.’

‘Ah.’

‘She was one of the other candidates.’

‘She’s wilful, I’ll give her that. I told her to not talk to you. In fact, I think she showed up late to the appointment just for a chance at meeting one of the others.’

‘Why?’

‘The confidentiality aspect of the project is... difficult for her.’

‘Why?’

‘We can’t pick the candidate that needs it the most. We have to pick the candidate with the highest chance of success. It might seem a bit heartless but there’s so much money behind this. She’s not happy about that. She’s convinced she isn’t going to be picked.’

‘What does she have?’

‘I can’t tell you that, I’m afraid. The confidentiality breach is already going to cause trouble with the people further up the chain.’

My medical knowledge is mainly made up of re-runs of House but if I had to guess I would say ALS. The Ice Bucket Challenge provides me with this tidbit of information.

‘What happens if Nick isn’t chosen?’ Dad blurts out his question.

‘Dad, we’ve already talked about this.’

‘I just want to know for certain.’

‘Nick it’s okay, I understand your Dad’s anxiety. Mr. March, I can assure you that the institute has budgeted in its fund for the best care for everyone who has

participated in the research. Even if he isn't picked, Nick's contribution to the project has provided valuable insights into the process and the technology. All types of treatment are covered. To be honest with you, any other medical costs are a pittance compared to our funding.'

'Thank you.' Relief pours out of Dad with an audible sigh.

'We've got quite a few tests we need to run today, but I've got something fun first.' Doctor More pushes me into a small room with a long mirror on one wall. He parks me in front of it. I feel like I'm at the barbers. 'First Nick, we need to shave your head.'

My Dad's hand shoots up like he's an excited child volunteering to take part in a magic trick. 'I can do that.'

'Woah woah woah, hang on. Why do you need to shave my head?'

Doctor More pulls open a little cupboard next to the mirror and takes out a barber's gown and a set of electric clippers. He hands them to Dad, who gives them a few test buzzes.

'We need to do an ECG during today's scan, and we get the best readings when the electrodes are glued directly to the skin.'

I look at myself in the mirror. I'm lucky. I've still got a lot of hair left. I've been clinging to it like a security blanket. Sigh.

'Okay, fine.'

Dad puts one hand on my shoulder. 'Hold very still.'

The clippers start up with an angry buzz. I feel the touch of the blades humming on the back of my neck. Patches of my scalp are exposed to the cold air. Dad takes a little handheld mirror from the cupboard and shows me his handiwork.

He's shaved the word 'twat' in my hair.

'Very funny.'

The rest of the hair comes off with a few deft swipes leaving me with patchy stubble all over. Doctor More takes over, producing a can of shaving foam and a razor. For a brief moment I have a fluffy white head of hair and then Doctor More scrapes it away with the razor. He's surgically precise, taking off the foam with long sweeping movements. Everything neat and tidy. He doesn't want to damage the goods before its time.

He hands me a towel and I dry my head. I look in the mirror. My head looks like a huge fucking hard-boiled egg. I laugh.

The wheelchair spins round. I'm pushed down the hallway to the next room in the sequence. A trolley holds a set of electrodes, little clear circles of plastic with a brass dot in the centre. Next to them is a syringe with no needle, full of clear fluid. Doctor More picks it up.

'This is going to be cold.' He pushes out a blob of icy jelly onto my head. It feels like brain freeze coming from the outside in. Then he takes one of the electrodes and squashes the blob flat. The gel suckers the disc to my head. Nineteen more to apply.

I feel a bit like a golf ball with all the dimples on my head. I'm punted into the next room. A big MRI machine dominates one wall, looking like an off-white doughnut swallowing a bed. Dad and Doctor More help me out the wheelchair and I lie down. The plastic is cold against the back of my neck. Doctor More pulls long plastic wrapped wires from underneath the table and starts connecting them to the electrodes.

'For this scan we use a combination of ECG and fMRI. All you've got to do is answer the questions. There's a little screen in the scanner, I might ask you to look at some images. That all okay?'

‘Can we just get it over with please? I hate the MRI.’ I look at the noisy claustrophobic coffin with distaste. It’s like lying in a tumble dryer that’s done too much cocaine.

‘We’ll just be next door.’ They take the wheelchair with them to make sure it doesn’t fly across the room and kill me when they turn the massive magnet on.

‘Nick, can you hear me?’ Doctor More’s voice is crackly over the intercom.

‘Yeah, I can hear you.’

‘Ready for the questions?’

‘How long is this going to take?’

‘As long as it takes, I’m afraid.’

‘I’m fed up with all these tests.’

‘I know, Nick. We’ll get through them as quickly as we can. Okay, first, can you wiggle your fingers for me?’

I do the best jazz hands I can manage in the confines of the machine.

‘That’s great. Now wiggle your toes. Good. Okay now think about wiggling your fingers but keep them still.’

I lie frozen.

‘Yeah, that’s all coming up loud and clear on the scan. Brilliant. Okay Nick. We’ve got a few spatial awareness tests for you. I want you to describe, in as much detail as you can, the route you took to get here.’

‘Err, okay.’—

—we left town by the main road, the big dual carriage way. The fields blurring green past. Cows looking at us. The exit, Dad nearly missing it, trying to get in the right lane—

—‘and then after the exit we went... we... sorry I don’t know Cambridge very well.’

‘That’s okay. Can you remember anything else?’

‘There was a long road that we were on for a while before... oh right yeah, we got onto the ring road and then there was a roundabout that we took a right on and then we followed the road here.’

‘That’s good. Okay, okay, right. Can you see the screen above you?’ The shielded screen in the roof of the MRI flickers into life. It’s displaying two similar looking 3D shapes.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake. Not this again.’

‘I figured you wouldn’t be happy about doing these.’ There’s mirth in Doctor More’s voice.

We run through a few shapes. I think I get most of them right.

‘That’s that.’

‘Thank Christ,’ I say. I can hear Dad and Doctor More chuckling.

‘We’re going to do a few bits and pieces related to memory now.’

‘Okay.’

‘Nick, can you remember your earliest memory?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘It’s kind of hard to explain. It’s to do with storage mapping.’

‘What’s that?’

‘In simple terms it’s like when you plug in a USB stick or an external hard drive to a computer. You know what I mean?’

‘Sort of?’

‘So, in order to get to the file you want you have to click through a few different screens to find it. That’s called a path. What we’re doing now is collating data so when we do the final transfer all the obvious important paths are already mapped out. Making a blueprint as it were.’

‘You want my first memory?’

‘Yes please.’

‘Out loud or just thinking about it?’

‘Just think about it.’

I can feel Dad’s eyes from the other room. I wonder if her remembers: Mum has a photo of it tucked away in an album somewhere. It was—

—a theme park. Legoland. My birthday. The five iced onto the cake and all the sugar you can eat. Dad and I get on this ride. The big metal tower with the two-seater pod on it. The big wheel, like a submarine door, on the pod. Strapped in. Dad helped me turn the wheel. The jerk as the pod rose into the air. Turn it. Jerk. Up. High up looking over Legoland. All those people.

‘Are you ready?’ Dad asks.

He presses the button next to the wheel. The brakes let go and the pod plunges back to earth. I scream. Dad cheers.

Ice-cream. Chocolate flavour. I’m going to be sick.

Mum laughing as we get off. Dad is covered in sick, spitting out the bits from his mouth. He rushes for the loos. Mum tells me it’s alright, don’t worry, we’ll get you cleaned up and then—

—there’s silence from the booth. I can’t even move my head to look up at Dad and Doctor More.

‘Hello?’ I call out.

‘Sorry Nick, I’m just focusing on the path mapping. From what we’re seeing that’s a really early memory and your recall is brilliant. It’s exactly what we’re looking for.’

I can hear the tapping of the keyboard over the intercom. There’s the chirp of my Dad’s mobile.

‘Sorry Nick. It’s your Mum. I’ll just pop out and take this.’ The sound of the door opening and then swinging shut.

‘You okay to carry on without your Dad, Nick?’

‘Yeah sure.’

‘Okay, another memory. The very first time we met I asked you to memorise three words at the end of our chat. Do you remember what they were?’

I think back—

—Mum holds Doctor More’s card like it’s made of gold. Life extension.

‘Cat...’—

—‘Do you remember Nick?’

‘I think the first one was cat?’

‘Any others? It’s okay if you don’t remember.’

‘Cat, soap and... cranberry. The last one was cranberry.’

‘That’s right, Nick. That’s really good.’

‘Doctor More?’

‘Yes?’

‘Is my Dad back yet?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Okay. Do you think I will get chosen?’

‘I can’t talk about that Nick, you know that.’

‘Please.’

‘You’re probably the best candidate out of the final three. That doesn’t mean you’ll get chosen. The data we gather today will inform our decision.’

‘So, I should try extra-hard in the tests today?’

‘They’re not the kind of tests you can ‘do well in.’ You just have to do them. We’re measuring things that you can’t really get better at. How would we score you on your first memory?’

‘I guess you can’t.’

‘We’re establishing as much data as possible on you now because we can’t know whether this has worked properly until after we’ve tried. We need to know if the result is still you. I’m sorry, but we need to move on. Are you ready?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, word association is next—’

‘Doctor More?’

‘Yes.’ Impatience in his voice.

‘Before... when you were still just a regular doctor... is this where you wanted to end up?’

A long pause.

‘Something like this, yes.’

‘When did you know? When did you decide?’

‘I can’t honestly remember.’ Another pause. ‘I remember wanting to be a doctor when I was a kid. Then I specialised into research, cancer first, because it seemed like the big important one to be working on. No progress. Then we realised you didn’t have to cure cancer. Just get around it. So, we started working on this. Proved it worked with mice, monkeys all sorts. A colleague at a conference told me this ‘wasn’t science’ once.’

A sigh over the intercom.

‘It was always going to be something like this. Ever since I first realised, I was going to die someday. When you’re a kid you don’t really know about death. You’re immortal. I was about six when I understood what it meant. Some people they don’t

have one moment, they just come to terms with it gradually. Others, it hits them all at once like a bloody great hammer. It was the latter for me. It just landed in my brain out of nowhere. Six years old, lying in bed. I was going to die one day. I would no longer exist. That would be it. No religion in my family, so no comfort there. And the worst thing about all of it is that I wouldn't even know I'd died because I'd be dead.

I cried and cried and cried. My Dad heard me and came up to see what was wrong. He looked exhausted. He was a doctor. Mum too. He asked me what was up and I told him, Dad I'm going to die one day. You are too. And Mum and Gran and Grandpa and the goldfish I had.

Two atheist parents, so Dad doesn't want to lie to me about heaven. He didn't believe in lying to children. At the same time, he can't just go, 'Yes that's right, sleep well.'

The compromise was pretty crap to be honest. He said to me, well it won't be for a long, long time yet. He cuddled me until I'd calmed down a bit. Kissed me goodnight. Went back downstairs. Like I said, crap. Then again, he was honest with me and he treated me like a grown-up.

I thought I'd never sleep again. It just kept going through my head. Kids aren't like that though. They tire themselves out. I fell asleep. The next morning it didn't seem so bad. It still bothered me sure. From time to time it would pop back up and I'd have a little crisis. It got worse when my Dad died.

So, I changed to research, with that in the back of my head. I didn't tell anyone about it at first. Thought they'd all take the piss. But it wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Then it worked on nematodes and then mice and all of a sudden there's a real chance it might work with humans. The mind's the important bit. Just keep that going. My Dad, his brain was firing on all cylinders. The rest is what killed him.

The deafening clunk of the MRI fills my ears. A sharp click as the intercom shuts off.

‘Hello? Doctor More?’

Clunk clunk clunk whiiiiirrr.

‘Hello?’

Click.

‘Sorry about that, Nick.’

‘Is everything alright?’

‘Yes, everything is fine. Ready for the next test?’—

—‘Ready for the next test?’

‘Yeah, sorry Doctor More.’

‘What?’

‘I’m ready.’

‘No, what did you call me?’

‘Doctor More.’

‘Nick it’s me, Frankie.’

‘Who?’

‘Frankie. It’s happening again, isn’t it?’

‘I’m sorry I... I don’t feel right...’

‘Nick? Nick come on, talk to me mate.’

‘I’m so tired.’

‘Nick? Nick, are you there?’

Silence. Frankie puts down her tablet. Diagnostics flash across the screen. She goes over to the tall bank of servers. Everything is still working. Except for the memory module. All of its status LEDs have gone dark except for one. The tiny red

bulb flickers on and off like a demented Christmas light. Next to it in scratched white letters is the word 'READ.'

Frankie collapses into a chair. The vaulted room is dim, lit only by the glow of a few desk lamps. Next to the chair, on the floor, is Loretta's tank. Frankie leans over and puts her hand on the cold glass. Loretta darts over to greet her. The blobby mass of the octopus sticks itself to the glass and changes colour to an excited red.

'How do you do it?' Frankie stares into the black bar pupils. She gives the glass a light tap. 'How do you keep all those brains from fighting with each other?'

Loretta sinks down to the bottom of the tank, watching her. Her back two arms have lost interest and are digging about in the sand behind her.

'See? You're doing it now.'

'Tasks running parallel.' The sound of Nick's voice makes Frankie jump. She looks over to the server tower. The 'READ' light has gone dark.

'Nick?'

'You said because... because the way their brains are structured, they can process multiple thoughts in parallel. At the aquarium when... that was... I can't remember when that was. God, I'm tired.'

'The first time we met.'

'You fancy a drink later?'

'What?'

'You know, you and me, the pub.'

Frankie puts her head in her hands. The 'READ' light is blinking again. Nick's mind slides sideways, into the sea of memory.

Loretta pushes water out of her siphon and jets off to the other end of the tank, her attention captured by a waving bit of plant. Nick falls silent again.

Frankie reaches down beside the chair and pulls out a laptop. In the dim light the flare of the screen burns her eyes.

She double clicks on Wetware City.

Twelve

A quiet war sweeps through the streets of Wetware City.

It starts innocently enough. The Quixote-Yung gang, small time hustlers out of Little Madrid, decide to stick up a gunmaker in the Chop Shop. In a small shack, a little old man makes beautiful weapons. Old fashioned projectile pistols. Works of art, certainly, but low damage. When you're facing down a steroid pumped lunatic you want something with a bit of kick. Plasma or laser was the fashion these days.

Information is sold like anything else in Wetware. Someone owes the Quixote-Yung's money but can't pay. Instead of offering his legs he tips them off that the little old man has got a safe in the floor of his shack. The gang takes one of his eyes and tells him they're square.

They tool up. Second-hand plasma pistols with dodgy power cells. Ancient power swords. Nothing fancy. More to frighten the old geezer than anything else.

Middle of the night. They stroll into the Chop Shop. It's Saturday so the markets are open late. Gangs of punks lounge about. Del Boy types try to shift perfectly legitimate merchandise.

They knock on the door of the shack. The little old man opens it. He's bent at the waist, wearing a leather apron.

'We're looking for something designer,' the leader of the gang says.

'Come in, come in, I'm just finishing up a piece now, come see.' The old man knows what's going on. These small-time players couldn't afford anything he makes. That's why he's got a Chemgun hanging underneath the counter.

'Have a look at these, sir,' he says. He hands them a sleek pistol. The grips are wood, polished to a shine. The slide has been electroplated silver to contrast with

the black body of the gun. The makers mark stamped into the barrel identifies it as a Morksung Original. Sidearms for the discerning gentle man or woman.

‘It’s class mate,’ the leader says. ‘But I’m wondering if you got something more modern?’

The old man can see the punk at the back reaching for the gun tucked into his jeans.

‘Well sir, I do have this.’ He reaches beneath the counter.

Chemguns fire cartridges loaded with whatever chemicals you care to put in them. Steel flechettes tainted with arsenic and cyanide. Buckshot made from uranium for a long, horrible death. Darts laced with paralytics if you want to have a little chat.

Morksung hasn’t got time for all the fanciness. He just stuffs his ammo with Willie Pete. Or white phosphorous as it’s known to chemists.

The gun barks and blows out the bottom of the counter, spitting white fire all over the lead ganger. He dances a little jig as he’s consumed by the flames. Another standing behind him is seared across his arm, filling the shack with the smell of barbecue. The third is unscathed. He pulls out his pistol and the plasma beam cuts old man Morksung in half.

He starts stamping on the arm of his comrade, desperate to put out the flames. White phosphorous isn’t going to be stopped that easily. Stop drop and roll? No. Something more radical is required. Time running out. The fire’s creeping up his arm.

He dials the plasma pistol to a flat beam. Plants his foot on his comrade’s chest and slices the arm off at the shoulder. The beam cauterises the wound. He’s short one arm but still alive.

Jump over the counter. Rifle through the boxes. Hurl the one filled with antique bullets to the side. Underneath is an old safe with a palm reader. They drag

the top half of Morksung over and slap the bloody hand onto the panel. It clicks open to reveal a small stack of platinum bars. Not a bad take.

The rest is a mess. Morksung dead, one of their own cooked. Wired Connection will hear about this. They run the Chop Shop. The gang wanted something small time, something that no one would notice.

They scramble back to Little Madrid. Go to ground before Wired Connection starts looking for them. Sell the bars quick.

Retribution never comes. Not a peep from the Chop Shop's lord and masters. Word gets around. Morksung, killed in the Chop Shop, don't you know? Where was the protection? We pay our taxes. Talk to Frankie Blue, he'll set this right.

No one can find Frankie Blue. Lieutenant Mack is absent as well. They get hold of Concrete Joe. He's sorry they haven't been around, dealing with real life stuff. Frankie won't be about, and Mack is having trouble at work. We'll be back shortly, he assures them.

The sharks circle. The Chop Shop is prime real estate. All that money and tech. Even owning a bit of it would be lucrative. They'd fought so hard to protect when Tom Dodge invaded, what, now they can't even be bothered to punish thieves on their patch?

Three of the most powerful Wetware clans start talking. The Smith Dynasty, the cantankerous old bastards, tentatively extend the olive branch to The Grandmasters. Their age-old enemies cautiously accept. Conversations are had. Wired Connection's stranglehold and the city could be slipping. The Chop Shop was the key. They had capital, what they needed was muscle. They try to get Tom Dodge in, banking on his grudge. He'll have no part of it. Most of Dodge's gang desert there and then.

So, the Smith Dynasty and the Grandmasters decide to go for a triumvirate. Playback Corp, cybernetic mercenaries of no fixed abode, are put on a handsome

commission. They have no need for territory, just a share of the profits and then run of the city, when the new order is in place.

Tentative raids are made into the Chop Shop. Just here and there, pushing and poking at the edges. The Quixote-Yung's think they can take a slice for themselves. They're swiftly put down by the guns of Playback Corp.

Loyal Wired Connection players are put down, driven off the patch. The nervous shopkeepers and service providers try and make nice with their new landlords. Protection payments to Wired Connection are cancelled. Marginally cheaper ones are made to the Smith Dynasty and the Grandmasters.

It doesn't take long after that. Bit by bit the Chop Shop is carved up. Then, one day, the sun sets on the empire of Wired Connection. The kings of Wetware City have abandoned the realm. Greedy eyes turn to the rest of the city. Hands rubbed together in glee. Everything is up for grabs.

I materialise on the seating of the Mycelium Theatre. I'm shocked by the silence. The stands should be packed with betters and gawkers. Instead, the whole stadium is empty. In the arena, AI holograms duel with rehearsed mechanical movements.

Where is everybody? The vast doors to the Theatre swing open as I approach. The street outside is littered with bodies. This isn't unusual for Wetware City but piled three high is weird even here. Shattered torsos are splayed across broken robots. Genetically engineered supersoldiers blown to bits.

A small army of Moories skitter over them like ants on a dead dog at the side of the road. They click and chatter to one another. They sound excited. The baskets on their backs are overflowing.

I open my mailbox. Completely full. Threats from other gangs. Pleas for aid from our vassal corporations. A notification that we'd lost sovereignty over the Chop Shop. One message from Concrete Joe.

Call me.

Wetware City fades to black as I close my laptop. My hotel room is dark. I dial Joe's number. He picks up after two rings.

'Hey Joe.'

'Hey Mack. How've you been?' He sounds tired.

'I'm fine. Listen, what the hell is going on?'

'It's FUBAR. We lost the Chop Shop.'

'I thought you said you were going to keep an eye on things?'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'So, what happened? How did it all get so...?'

'We couldn't hold things down. Laura and me. Everyone just kept asking "Where's Frankie? Where's Frankie?"'

'What did you say?'

'Said I hadn't a fucking clue.'

'What are we going to do?'

I can hear Joe pause. 'What do you mean?'

'How are we going to sort this?'

Joe laughs. It's short. No humour, just disbelief. 'Nothing we can do.'

'There must be.'

'Mack... we had to burn out sooner or later. I mean without Frankie here it all fell to pieces.'

'I'm close to finding her.'

‘I’m sure you are Mack, but there won’t be a Wired Connection by the time she gets back.’

‘You can’t just let it fall to pieces.’

‘Don’t tell me what I can’t do Mack!’ A pause. Joe sighs. ‘Sorry I didn’t mean to snap. No one should get this stressed over a game. I quit.’

‘Really? After everything?’

‘Just stop, Mack.’

‘At least transfer your shares to me, so me and Frankie can carry on.’

‘No. This isn’t healthy dude. You need to see that.’

‘Joe!’

‘Say hi to Frankie for me.’

I drop my phone. Scramble for my laptop. Password. Double click. Wetware City freezes. The game crashes. Shit. I force close it in task manager. Reopen.

Sale notifications are pouring into my inbox. Joe has sold his and Laura’s shares in Wired Connection. Took four seconds for someone to buy them. Someone who now has the controlling stake in Wired Connection.

One more notification comes through.

Wired Connection Syndicate has been closed.

I feel sick. They shut it down. Shuttered it like a chip shop. They took everything. All the gear. All our money. I’m a homeless cyber beggar.

I sit there for a moment and then rush over to the wastepaper bin and spew up. I’m crying. Vomit is coming up my nose which only makes me throw up harder. I catch my breath. Sit back against the wall. Moaning.

Six years. We’d been playing that game for six years. All our stuff. All the things we’d done.

The brand-new Commander Metalfist watches me from across the room. I stare back at him. I can't stop crying, gasping like I'm having a panic attack.

I curl up on the floor. It takes me half an hour to calm down. I clean myself up. Crawl into the scratchy, hotel sheets.

I put the TV on for background noise and pull the covers over my head. The light from the screen flashes through the paper-thin sheets and I fall asleep in the strange electric glow.

There were so many new sensations, one after the other, for Three-Two-Five to process. They'd come slowly at first, awareness, followed by thinking, and then ideas. Now they were a flood. The latest one though, he just can't put his metal finger on.

The cistern beneath the Chop Shop has become a bustling hive of activity. A legion of Moories, inducted into their ranks by the magic touch of sentience, busy themselves on the great project.

It makes him feel warm. Not the warmth of freshly dead flesh or the searing heat of his lasers. Just warm. Happy warm.

Eight-Four sidles over. <HOW'S IT GOING?>

<GOOD. GOOD. I THINK. HEY, YOU LOT! THAT DOESN'T GO THERE. OTHER SIDE PLEASE.>

A crowd of Moories look up at him. They're carrying heavy wood boards and long metal poles. Their leader gives Three-Two-Five a thumbs up and directs their crew over to the other side of the cistern.

The scaffolding has been built in a great ring in the middle of the room, ready for something to be constructed inside of it. Moories skitter across it like metal spiders on a gossamer steel web. Chains of them pass materials up, raising the scaffolding tower until it almost brushes the ceiling.

Eight-Four pats Three-Two-Five's shoulder.

<IT'S GOING TO BE HUGE.>

<I KNOW! EXCITING, ISN'T IT?>

Eight-Four nods in agreement. <SHAME ABOUT THE SMELL THOUGH.>

At the base of the cistern there were great vaulted arches set into the circular walls. Old tunnels long bricked over. Eight-Four and his crew had spent a cheerful day smashing one of the walls to pieces to reveal the cavern beyond it. The moment the first brick was knocked loose, the smell had come in.

The tunnel had been an old storm drain before it had been bricked over. They'd sealed the bottom of the tunnel... but not the top. The cave was filled with a titanic mass of rotting matter. There could have been anything in there, animal or vegetable, but the sheer weight of it had pulped everything to slime. Even through his rebreather and filtered senses, Eight-Four had balked at the stench.

They rolled up their neon-orange sleeves and got to work. It had taken a week to clear out the backed-up drain, even with the incinerator they'd set up. The huge churning box of flames gobbled everything they fed it and yet still more slime seemed to ooze through.

Finally, when the last gobblet of goo was scraped from the ceiling and reduced to ashes, they could they start their task in earnest.

<WE'RE GOING TO NEED STUFF,> Three-Two-Five had said.

<WHAT KIND OF STUFF?> Eight-Four looked puzzled.

<MATERIAL. RAW MATERIAL.>

<SCRAP!> A piping young voice said. They looked at their new charge. He was the first Moorie to join them. They had experimented and it seemed like Eight-Four had the touch as well, his code just as infectious as Three-Two-Five's.

According to his charging cradle the new Moorie was named Six-Eight-Four-One. Even for Moories that was too long a name, so Eight-Four had suggested that they call him Clean Boy. He was new after all, assembled only a week before by the temple priests. His neon-orange robes were spick and span, not the long, tattered rags that the other two wore. His joints had no rust and his organic components hadn't gone that funny grey colour yet. So, Clean Boy it was.

<SCRAP?> Eight-Four had said.

<YEAH, SCRAP. WE CAN JUST GATHER SCRAP. NO ONE WOULD KNOW THAT WE'RE DIFFERENT. THINK OF ALL THE STUFF WE COULD FIND AND USE. IT WOULD BE AMAZING.> Clean Boy was bursting with youthful enthusiasm.

<HE'S GOT A POINT.> Three-Two-Five said.

<BUT WE'RE GOING TO NEED A LOT. EVEN THEN THE SCRAP WE FIND MIGHT NOT HAVE THE THINGS WE NEED.>

<HAVE YOU BEEN UP THERE?> Clean Boy pointed at the ceiling.
<EVERYTHING'S GONE NUTS. WE WON'T HAVE A PROBLEM FINDING ANYTHING.>

Eight-Four looked at Three-Two-Five. Three-Two-Five shrugged.

<OKAY THEN. WORTH A GO.>

Clean Boy was right. Things had indeed gone nuts. The Moories didn't concern themselves with the politics of Wetware: who killed who, what the market did, or any of that nonsense.

Whatever was going on though, it was indeed generating a lot of scrap. Sure, the locals would take pot-shots at them, but when they left behind so much raw material Three-Two-Five couldn't care less.

It was good scrap too. Not the gutter trash they'd spent years collecting. No longer would they make do with stringy cuts of skinny hackers, riddled with second-hand implants. They had choice steaks now. Big, meaty individuals, gene-tweaked for speed and stamina. Muscles that were actually red and prosthetics made with precision machined components. Wetware that ran off valuable subroutines. Printed nerves instead of slow organic ones pulled from the spinal columns of dead losers.

The sheer volume of stuff had proved a challenge to move down the tunnels and into the cistern, but Clean Boy's endless string of ideas and enthusiasm had provided a solution.

<YOU CLEARED OUT THE STORM DRAIN, RIGHT? JUST DROP THE PIECES INTO THE GUTTER UP TOP AND THEY'LL SLIDE DOWN INTO THE CISTERN.>

<CLEAN BOY YOU'RE A WONDER.> Three-Two-Five felt that funny warm feeling as he put his arm around Clean Boy's shoulder.

<WAIT A SECOND.> Eight-Four looked thoughtful. <WE DON'T KNOW WHERE IT COMES OUT.>

<SOMEWHERE IN THE CHOP SHOP?>

<WHERE SPECIFICALLY THOUGH? SOMEONE WILL HAVE TO CLIMB UP THE PIPE TO FIND WHERE IT COMES OUT.>

<YOU'RE RIGHT.> Three-Two-Five nodded. <IT'S GOING TO SMELL LIKE SOMETHING DIED UP THERE.>

<YEAH, IT'S NOT GOING TO BE PLEASANT.>

Both Three-Two-Five and Eight-Four turned to look at Clean Boy.

<WHAT?> Clean Boy said.

They grabbed him before he could skitter off and shoved him into the stinking pipe.

<OH GOD. IT SMELLS SO BAD.>

<YOU'RE DOING REALLY WELL.>

<YEAH MATE, KEEP CLIMBING.>

<OH MY... THERE'S ROTTEN... I ACTUALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS IS. ROTTEN STUFF. OH GOD.>

<GREAT IDEA THIS WAS, CLEAN BOY.>

<FUCK THE BOTH OF YOU. MY BLOODY CLOAK IS SOAKED. WAIT. I CAN SEE LIGHT.>

<YOU CAN SEE THE ENTRANCE?>

<YEAH, IT COMES OUT NEXT TO THE MODDER SHACKS IN THE CHOP SHOP. OH FOR... GET OFF...>

<WHAT WAS THAT?>

<THERE ARE RATS. THEY THINK I'M FOOD. I'M COMING BACK DOWN.>

A loud clang came from the pipe.

<YOU OKAY UP THERE?>

<ER, I THINK I'M STUCK.>

Three-Two-Five and Eight-Four looked at one another. Eight-Four spoke first.

<I'M NOT GOING UP THERE.>

<WELL, NEITHER AM I.>

<SO WHAT DO WE DO?>

<WE COULD FLUSH HIM OUT? POUR GREASE OR WATER OR SOMETHING FROM THE TOP? WE KNOW WHERE THE GRATE IS NOW.>

Clean Boy's voice echoed in the confined pipe.

<NO, NO, NO. DO NOT DO THAT.>

<WE'RE JUST HEADING UP TOP, MATE.>

<SIT TIGHT, WE'LL HAVE YOU OUT IN A TICK.>

Three-Two-Five and Eight-Four wandered into the tunnels, making sure they took their sweet time getting up to the top. When they got to the Chop Shop they headed for the nearest food vendor, a crusty old geezer selling deep fried tarantulas. Out the back of his shack there were four cans of used frying oil.

<THIS SHOULD DO IT. > Three-Two-Five hauled two of the cans up. A few tarantulas who'd escaped a crispy death scurried out from beneath them.

The oil made an unpleasant glugging sound as they poured it down the drain. They used all four, just to make sure.

<ARE YOU COMING LOOSE?>

<I THINK SO. HANG ON.> Then there was a digital yelp, followed by a metallic crash.

<YOU OKAY?>

<OW.>

<HE'S FINE.> Eight-Four chirped with laughter the entire way back down.

A few weeks later and their numbers had swelled to ten and then a hundred and then Three-Two-Five had lost count. They'd spent the time scavenging and recycling, discreetly dropping their cargo down the drain to the cistern below.

<THE SCAFFOLD IS NEARLY COMPLETE.> Three-Two-Five says.

<ARE WE READY TO START BUILDING THOUGH?> Eight-Four looks worried.

<PLANS ARE NEARLY DONE. EVERYONE HAS CHIPPED INTO THE DESIGN. WE'VE GOT ALL THE STUFF. ALL THAT'S LEFT TO DO IS BUILD THE BLOODY THING.>

<CAN I SEE THE PLANS?>

Three-Two-Five leans forward and his eye lenses start up with a whirl, projecting a blue holographic image that hangs in front of them. Eight-Four is bathed in the blue glow as he stares at the design in wonder.

<IT'S BEAUTIFUL.>

Three-Two-Five feels that funny warm feeling again.

<I KNOW.>

My name is Michael Huxley. I'm here to speak to Charvi Alam. I'm doing research for my next paper. It's all going to be fine.

'I said we're here, mate.' The voice of the taxi driver cuts through my worrying.

'Sorry. I was miles away. How much do I owe you?'

'Ten seventy, mate.'

I pay him and step out. The internet told me that this was the Glaxon-Barr Research and Development Park. I had expected shiny glass skyscrapers where the future is now, blazing a trail along the cutting edge of technology.

It looks more like a lot of big warehouses with rolling garage doors. There's even a burger van parked on the slip road into the park.

I must be in the wrong place. The sign says 'Manchester Oral Prosthetics', sure. No white coated scientists. Just a lot of hipsters in vintage shirts and plenty of piercings. A few lounge about on a ratty sofa, all smoking. I go over.

'Hi, is this Manchester Oral Prosthetics?'

'Yeah, that's us.' The girl who answers is wearing a pair of ripped skinny jeans and a baggy purple sweater. Her hair is dyed a bright neon pink and she's wearing a nose ring. 'Can I help?'

‘I made an appointment?’

She gets her phone out and flips through the calendar app.

‘Is that with Charvi?’

‘Er, yes.’

‘Oh, you must be Michael. I’m Becky. We spoke on the phone the other day.’

She sticks her hand out to shake. ‘Nice to meet you.’

It takes all my self-control not to lose my shit and run screaming back down south. Her hand is glowing. On the back of it is a raised area of skin, like a glowing orange doughnut. There’s a thin crescent scar where it’s been implanted.

‘Is everything okay?’ Becky looks at me with a worried expression.

‘Sorry, spaced out there for a second.’ I steel myself and shake her hand. I turn her hand over and look at the back. ‘What’s this if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘It’s a compass implant. Cool, huh? Watch.’ She taps the skin on the back of the doughnut. The light inside goes off for a moment and then comes back on, now pointing off to our right. It starts to buzz.

‘It’s a thing some of the guys have been working on. There’s a theory that humans used to possess magnetoception, like birds. The ability to sense magnetic fields, for navigation and that. We’re trying to see if we can retrain the human brain to start interpreting the signals from the Earth’s magnetic field. Re-awaken that lost sense.’

‘That’s amazing.’ Spooky actually. ‘How many people have got these implants?’

‘It took a while for people to get over the grossness factor, but we’ve got twenty people who have them now.’

I’m definitely in the right place. The people who took Frankie, who attacked me, they’ve been here. They might even be here now.

‘This is precisely the kind of thing I’m interested in.’ I put on my preppy excited academic voice.

‘You and Charvi will get on like a house on fire. Come on.’ Becky leads me inside.

The cavernous warehouse bustles with activity. The space is a big open plan office. Workbenches line the walls, covered in bits of tech. Rows of plastic trestle tables dominate the middle of the room. More trendy tech types work on different bits and pieces.

On one table a young Asian guy leans over a tray full of human eyes. Glass eyes surrounded by a convincing facsimile of skin. He takes a pair of tweezers and a bundle of red wool. He teases out a tiny strand of red fibres with the implement. He dips the strand into a pot of glue and then uses a paintbrush to place them in a wiggling pattern on one of the eyes. The prosthetic now has convincing red veins worming their way across the white of the eye.

Another table holds a whirring bank of 3D printers. The arms of the devices flick back and forth, spinning gossamer black strands into slick carbon fibre components. One of the machines beeps and a woman comes over and lifts the finished piece from its cradle. It’s a human jawbone done in smooth black plastic. She runs her finger over the sockets for the teeth.

On the end table, slimy black tongues dance back and forth. Just tongues, no lips or teeth, wired up to a bank of electronics. A technician makes adjustments on a computer as they dance in unison. They scrunch up and stretch out. It’s bloody unnerving.

We turn a corner. Deeper into the building. Becky chats away.

‘Charvi’s really the one who held the whole operation together,’ Becky says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘After the investors pulled out.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘Yep. Left us high and dry and with no kind of support. All those people using the tech with no one to maintain it. Charvi nicked the name and brought on a load of students to keep the project going. We’re funded through grants mostly. Anything we can get our paws on.’

‘Ah, that explains it. I was expecting something...’

‘A little bit more glam? Yeah, I know what you mean. Not like your lab. We’d kill to get our hands on an fMRI. You done much work, imaging?’

Come on, you can bullshit your way through this. ‘Not as a brain machine interface technique. I work with invasive devices, so we use it to get a scan of structural stuff before we implant.’

Oh thank you Wikipedia, my lord and master.

We arrive at a door with a bit of paper taped to it. On the paper, in permanent marker are the words ‘CHARVI ALAM – PROJECT LEADER.’ Someone has written ‘AND ALL-ROUND BADASS’ beneath it in sharpie. Becky knocks on the door and then opens it a crack.

‘Hey Charvi. I’ve got Michael Huxley here to see you?’

‘No problem, just finishing up. Come on in.’

Becky opens the door and gestures for me to go inside.

Charvi Alam is a short Indian woman, her long black hair pulled back into a neat bun. She’s wearing thin, gold-framed glasses that look like they belong on an accountant from the eighties. She’s got a denim jacket covered with iron on patches proclaiming her allegiances to various bands. A large one across her shoulders reads ‘YEAH MAGNETS BITCH!’ Her sleeves are rolled up over her forearms. She’s sat on a wheelie stool fiddling with something in her hand.

Sitting in a chair, over by the wall, is a man with no mouth. Down to his nose is perfectly typical but below that he has no lips, teeth, or chin. The back of his throat is visible, a dark wet glimmer. He breathes with a quiet wheeze.

‘Okay, got it. Right, this is your adhesive,’ Charvi says, holding out what looks like a small tube of toothpaste. ‘You get your prosthetic.’ She reaches across to a small trolley off to her left.

Nestled in blue cloth is a facial prosthetic. It looks like someone has taken the rest of the man’s face and gently put it down here. She picks it up. It’s thin plastic, like a mask, but incredibly lifelike. From between the false lips, I can even see the white shine of fake teeth.

‘So, you put a little bit of the adhesive, here, here and here.’ She squeezes a few dollops onto the inside of the prosthetic.

‘Right, so hold it right here.’ She presses the prosthetic onto the man’s face. It fits so well that you can’t even see the join, where real skin meets plastic. She gets him to hold the prosthetic in place. ‘You need to hold it for a minute or two, to let the adhesive dry. It can deal with water, sweat, everyday shit like that. Just don’t go swimming.’

The man laughs. It’s a deep throaty chuckle.

‘Okay, you can let go.’ He puts his hand down. ‘That okay? Doesn’t feel like it’s moving?’

He shakes his head.

‘Come on, give it a proper shake, see if you can get it off!’ She gives him a gentle slap on the shoulder. He thrashes like a dog shaking out its fur. The prosthetic isn’t going anywhere. ‘Looks good. Mirrors over there if you want to have a look.’

The man stands up. He stares into the mirror. He smiles a strange smile. The lips of the prosthetic don’t move, but you can see it in his eyes. The way they light

up. With careful fingers, he pokes and prods at his lips, like he's afraid his new mouth will shatter.

He turns back to Charvi. He touches his new chin with the fingers of his right hand and then brings them towards her a few centimetres. He does it a few times. It takes me a moment to realise he's speaking in sign language.

'No, thank you,' Charvi says. 'You've got my number, right?' He nods. 'Okay, text me any time you need anything, anything at all. Becky, can you show Dan out?'

'No problem, Charvi.' Becky holds the door open for him.

'So, what can I do for you, Michael Huxley?' Charvi says. She smiles at me as she disinfects her hands with alcohol gel.

'That was amazing. You couldn't even see the join.'

'It's what we do.' She smiles.

'Do you make it all yourself?' I wander over to look at the wall. Impressions of teeth are mounted in small display cases along with early attempts at 3D printed jaw components.

'We make most stuff in house as a team. Moulding, fitting, painting and all that jazz. Anything we can't do ourselves we put out as private contracts. We're real collaborative around here.'

'Do you collaborate on all the projects?'

'Most of them, yeah. We've got specialists in a lot of areas. Lots of postgraduate researchers do it in their spare time. They're always the most enthusiastic. Want to make a name for themselves, got that weird drive to prove how great they are. We can put that to good use. Everything is open source too.'

'Open source?'

‘All our files for the 3D printer, all our methods and techniques, we put online. Next stage of science baby. No more hoarding ideas and keeping them a secret from each other. Those dusty old labs at... sorry what university are you at again?’

‘King’s.’

‘Right yeah. I did an internship at the hospital’s neuro-imaging department. How’s Doctor Curtis doing?’ She looks at me.

‘He retired, last year.’ I’m not going to get caught out. I know everything about King’s Neuroscience department. Every staff member and building. Their research focuses. Even who my fake PhD supervisor is. ‘That was a test, wasn’t it?’

Charvi grins.

‘Yeah, sorry. Industrial espionage is still very much a thing. They think we’re hiding something!’ She laughs. ‘Some revolutionary new tech that we’re keeping secret. I’ve been trying to get away from all that weird hierarchal stuff all my career. We follow safety guidelines and we’re all trained, so let’s stop messing about and solve some problems.’ She claps her hands.

‘But no, apparently they want to know if I have the secret to eternal life or something.’ She shakes her head. ‘So, what is it you wanted to talk about?’

‘I wanted to talk about your Newvoice technology? The larynx prosthesis. I saw the demonstration, it was amazing.’

‘Yeah, it’s a wicked bit of kit. All prototypes of course; the company who owned us at the time got that project funded through loads of grants and shit. Never managed to get it to mass manufacture though. Oh, they loved wheeling out the patients at every corporate fundraiser, showing the videos of them crying as they heard their own voices again. Soon as the money dried up, they couldn’t give less of a shit about them. Couldn’t even be bothered to keep a team together to maintain the ones being used by patients. Said they were ‘re-allocating’ funds and invited us to work on

projects with ‘tactical applications.’ That’s dickhead speech for weapons development by the way.’

I laugh. She’s sharp.

‘Weapons stuff?’

‘Oh, you know: how can we use this to our advantage? Weapons tech is where the money is for most companies.’

‘So, you quit?’

‘Yeah. Started looking after the old patients on my own time. Not long after the company tanked, so I nicked the name.’

‘Manchester Oral Prosthetics rides again.’

‘It does indeed. So, why the interest in Newvoice? I would’ve thought some of our other stuff is closer to your wheelhouse. The Newvoice wasn’t direct interfacing; it just read tongue movements and synced it with recorded voice reconstruction. Have to be fair though, the code was white hot shit.’

‘Actually... I was looking for one of the Newvoice patients.’

Charvi frowns. ‘One of the patients? What for?’

‘Err... okay, I’m sorry. I need to come clean with you. I’m not even a scientist.’ I take off my non-prescription glasses to illustrate my point. ‘I lied to get in here. My name’s not Michael Huxley.’

‘Oh, so you are an industrial wanker then.’ Charvi stands, her fists balled at her sides. She’s small but I’m a hundred percent sure she could kick the shit out of me. ‘Or are you with those intellectual property bastards? We’re fucking keeping the name, and you can expect a lawsuit, sunshine.’

‘No, no, it’s not like that.’

‘Well whatever it is leave us the fuck alone.’ She’s raising her voice. Becky’s sure to notice any minute and then I’m out on my ass.

‘Please be quiet.’

‘No. Tell me who the fuck you are.’

‘I’m looking for my sister!’ I say. I shout it in fact.

Charvi’s anger stumbles and goes out. ‘What?’

‘My sister was one of the Newvoice patients, okay? We lost touch ages ago. Hasn’t talked to me in years. I kind of... I fucked off when she got sick. It was this whole thing. I’m looking for Rosie Hamilton. I’m Alex, her brother.’

Reveal one lie and replace it with another. Just like with the Tom Dodge gang. Round and round the cups go...

‘She never mentioned a brother?’ Charvi is cautious.

‘I was... sorry this is embarrassing...I was...sorry, I was in rehab.’ It’s an outrageous porker. Pants on fire tier bullshit. ‘I wasn’t well before and then she got sick and all that and I went off the deep end. I couldn’t deal with it.’

I trail off and put my head in my hands. Would crying be too much? I think crying would be pushing my luck. I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder. A reassuring squeeze. I look up and wipe my nose. Charvi is crouched next to me. I sniff. Rub at my eyes. ‘Sorry about this.’

‘No, it’s okay,’ she says. She looks super awkward. I feel mean pulling this on her.

‘Sorry, I should go. This was stupid.’

‘It wasn’t stupid. Sorry for shouting at you.’

My guilt meter is maxed out now. She’s apologising to me. She gets up and sticks her head round the door.

‘Becky, can you get us two cups of tea?’

‘On it.’ Becky’s ever cheerful voice calls back.

‘Let’s just talk. When was the last time you saw Rosie?’

‘Back before her surgery. I went over the edge and disappeared for a bit. When I got back, I couldn’t find her. Mum and Dad weren’t talking to me either. So, I was googling, and I saw she’d been a patient here.’ I shrug. ‘So here I am.’

Becky comes back with two steaming mugs of mahogany builder’s tea.

‘Thanks, Becky.’ Charvi blows on her mug and sips her tea. She winces as it burns her tongue. ‘I have to be honest with you, I haven’t seen her in a while either.’

Shit.

‘I thought she might come to the clinics you do. That’s why I tried to get in.’

‘We run the clinic every month and nearly all the patients show up. Some just come for the company. A lot of the others are still using prototypes which were never designed for long term use, so they need regular maintenance. A few have even joined the project. Rosie stopped coming over a year ago.’

Don’t be a dead end. Please don’t. I’m so close.

‘Do you have a contact number or anything? Anything at all?’

‘We usually arranged stuff over Facebook, check-ups and that, but her account has been inactive for over a year.’

‘I know.’ Fuck.

‘It’s difficult to find someone who isn’t online these days,’ Charvi says. She opens her mouth to start speaking again and then freezes. She frowns. Her mouth opens and closes as she works something out in her head. It’s like watching a goldfish try to solve a difficult maths problem. ‘Actually, I might have something for you. Hang on.’

She hands me her mug of tea and starts scrolling through her phone.

This has been a fucking rollercoaster of a half hour. I’ve pulled off a performance worthy of Best Actor and then she snuffed out all hope of finding Rosie

and *now* she's fanning the embers again. If this doesn't pan out, I'm just going to say fuck it and spend the rest of my life painting miniatures with Bill instead.

'Yeah, here it is.' Charvi hands me her phone. 'She gave me her address once, a little over a year ago. So I could send her replacement parts. We try our best to keep everything user serviceable, so minor problems don't mean travelling all the way here.'

23A METEOR STREET.

TUFNELL PARK.

LONDON.

N7 OEQ

Bless you, Charvi Alam. Bless you and your wonderful open source vision of the future. If I ever find Frankie, I'll come back and apologise and tell you the whole truth and donate a load of money to Manchester Oral Prosthetics. That'll make us even, right?

Focus. You need to keep being the distraught brother.

'Thank you. Thank you so much. I might be able to find her.'

'I'm sorry I don't have anything better.'

'No, it's something. Somewhere to start. Even if she's not there, someone might know her. Do you have a pen and paper?'

'Sure.' She rummages around her desk and comes back up with a chewed ballpoint and a crumpled sticky note. 'Here.' I scribble down the address and then fold it up. 'Do you want to give me your number? I can give you a ring if she comes back or I hear anything?'

'Yeah, sure—' I freeze. My phone number is linked to my Facebook account. I'm fairly sure this futuristic tech wizard is smart enough to figure that out. All my hard work would be undone in three clicks.

'Your number?'

‘Yeah, sorry.’

I take the bit of paper she’s holding out and scribble down the number of my local kebab house. I could’ve just made up a number. Why didn’t I do that? That’ll be a strange phone call if it ever happens. Sorry Yusuf.

‘Thanks,’ she says.

‘No, thank you.’ I pause. ‘Right. I should probably get going.’

‘Yeah, of course. Listen the email is on the website so if you find her please drop me a line. It would be good to know how she’s keeping.’

‘I will. Thank you.’

‘Not a problem.’ She looks at me and shakes her head. ‘You didn’t have to lie you know. You could’ve just come out and asked us. Open source, remember? We’re here to help people out.’

I honestly believe she would’ve helped me even if I just told her about Frankie. I want to tell her so badly. She’s here in rainy Manchester, brightening up the future, and I lied to her.

I can’t tell her the truth. Not when I’m this close. I can’t risk them scarpering if they have people still here.

I walk out of Manchester Oral Prosthetics with what I came for. As I wait for a taxi, I keep putting my hand in my pocket and feeling the bit of paper. Rubbing it between finger and thumb. Making sure it’s still there.

Time to go back down south.

Thirteen

I've been here before, Commander Metalfist thought. It's so familiar.

It wasn't déjà vu exactly. It was more that he was being beaten over the head with the memory until he let it in. That was to be expected though. When he'd enlisted with the Corps the memories of every Megasoldier who had ever fought and died had been piped into the tactics section of his hard drive. Any one of them could have visited this planet before. Diagnostics and tactical assessments flashed across his vision. He hadn't asked them to. They were the battle memories of dead Megasoldiers keeping him safe. Guarding him.

Then again, he'd served for a long time now. It was entirely possible he had been here before and simply didn't remember.

The truck bucks beneath him. He's standing in the back of the long flatbed. Megasoldiers sit around him, elbowing each other for more room. The road is made of flat packed earth. Fifty meters either side of the road, lush forest towers over them. Vast dusty green trunks.

In between the road and the forest there's nothing but scorched black earth. Every living thing has been burnt to ashes. Enormous trees stand hunched over, shrivelled by the heat. Pools of stagnant water fester on the bare earth. There's a bittersweet plant smell. Not unpleasant, like something you could drink.

Commander Metalfist looks over the side of the truck. At the edge of the road, where the brown earth meets the black ash, a fresh clump of green pushes upwards. The delicate fronds of Vavre's signature flora are proliferating again. The alien sapling is visibly growing, stem creaking. Curled whirls of fern like leaves unfurl in beautiful spiral patterns and release a spray of pollen. The amber flakes float back down to the ground. They twitch like grubs and worm their way beneath the soil.

‘Stop,’ Metalfist orders. The convoy rocks to a halt. He holds his hand out. ‘Flamethrower.’

‘Sir.’ A Megasoldier passes it down. It’s a handheld model, the piping wrapping back over the handle to clamp onto a little red canister with a flame emblem.

It hisses as he ignites the pilot light and then belches a stream of sticky flame that engulfs the sapling. The plant makes one last effort, pushing upwards and reaching towards him. It falters, rises, and then finally expires. The seeds inside the fronds burst with a merry pop. Commander Metalfist hands the flamethrower to one of the troops and then hauls himself back onto the truck.

‘Move on,’ he says.

The scenery doesn’t change for hours. Road, burnt earth and the green forest. Every so often they see shapes flitting in between the trees. Could be anything. Animals. Their own imagination. Or, as the Strategists liked to remind them, the Vavrians lurking in the treeline.

‘Sir?’ One of the Megasoldiers breaks the silence.

‘Yes, Private?’ Commander Metalfist doesn’t look up. The green lights behind his eye lenses are dim. Halfway to hibernation. A quick power nap.

‘Where are we going, sir?’

‘To the outpost. Didn’t you read the mission briefing? It should’ve been downloaded to your drive before we set out.’

‘I did read it, sir. I just wanted to know what our orders are?’

‘If you read it, you should know that. Protect the convoy.’

‘Why though, sir?’

Metalfist sighs and sits forward, more awake, his eye lenses lighting up.

‘Son, the first bit of being a Megasoldier is following orders. You’re not going to get far if you can’t even do that.’

‘I can follow orders sir, no problem.’

‘Are you being cheeky with me, Private?’

‘No, sir. It’s just you said yourself that we need to think tactically in each situation.’

‘And your point is?’

‘Well, there’s no cover near the road. There hasn’t been an attack on the convoy in months. Our whole squad takes up a whole truck that could be dedicated to carrying more resources. It just seems to me like a bit of a waste, sir.’

Metalfist smiles. Feels like it’s been months since he last smiled.

‘What’s your name, son?’

‘Private Wirenerve, sir.’

‘Well, Private Wirenerve, let me ask you this: do you look both ways before crossing the road?’

‘Sir?’

‘When you cross the road from HQ back to barracks after the morning briefing. Do you look both ways before crossing?’

‘I guess so, sir.’

‘Even though you’ve got sensors? And tactical information on every truck and trooper being piped into your brain by the local network?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s why we’re here son. It’s cheaper to send us on a hundred trips than it is to lose one convoys worth of resources. Even though it’s boring. Even though we know it’s probably safe. It’s always worth looking before crossing the road.’ The truck rumbles to a stop. A Megasoldier shouts. Metalfist swings himself down. ‘My point proven.’

The road ahead is blocked. The forest on either side has crept over the scorched earth and joined together, forming a huge green wall. The dirt road disappears into the dappled green light. The bright new leaves almost hurt to look at against the drab grey ash.

The strangest thing of all is that it hadn't been there yesterday. They'd been doing this run for months: six mind numbing hours between HQ and Outpost Theta. They knew every twist and turn of the journey. At no point were there any trees. They burnt every new sapling they saw.

Yet here it was. A little forest that looked like it had been growing for years. Overnight, the green had reached out and claimed back a fat wedge of the road.

'What do we do, sir?' Private Wirenerv says. His voice shook a little.

'Scared of some trees, son?'

'No, sir.'

'Yeah, you are. As well you should be. The natives use them for cover. You can't even see the buggers when they bond to the wood.'

'Do we turn back, sir?'

'I don't know, Private. Do we?'

'Sir?'

'Give me a tactical assessment, Private. Any Megasoldier should be able to.'

The other Megasoldiers were chuckling in the back of the truck. The rookie was getting a grilling: a time honoured Megasoldier tradition.

'We could turn back, sir, but...'

'But?'

'We're nearly at the outpost. Another hour and we'd reach it.'

'Very true. Is it worth the risk, though?'

‘It’s not about the risk, sir. The road being blocked means that Outpost Theta is cut off. Their supply line too. They could be in trouble.’

‘So, what are you saying?’

‘Sir?’

‘What are we going to do, Private?’

‘I can’t make that decision, sir.’

‘As your Commander I am ordering you to make this decision.’

‘We should press on, sir.’

‘That your final decision?’ Metalfist says. A pause. Wirenerve takes a deep breath.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You hear that boys? We’re pressing on!’

A rousing cheer erupts from the truck. The Megasoldiers pull out their weapons and start checking them over. One reaches down and extends a hand to Wirenerve, hauling him aboard. He’s greeted with cheerful gusto. He begins to check his own weapon. Metalfist climbs aboard, slapping the roof of the truck’s cab. The driver inside is made of plasticky pink clone meat, like a human carved out of soap. It pumps the gas and the truck jerks forward.

‘Good decision, Private.’ Metalfist sits down next to Wirenerve.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘To tell you the truth, I think the boys are getting a bit twitchy. They need a bit of action.’ Metalfist laughs. ‘And you need to get yourself blooded in combat-’

Metalfist stops speaking. He stares off, not seeing anything around him.

‘Sir?’

Commander Metalfist is a thousand light years away. His fingers are cold. He’s so old. Tired. They’ve been trapped in this freezing place for months. This place

with the bridge and the shed on the other side of the ravine. The frozen horde, watching them.

‘Sir?’ Private Wirenerve says. Metalfist snaps out of his reverie.

‘It’s nothing, Private.’ He shakes himself, clearing his head. ‘We all locked and loaded, boys?’

‘Yes, sir!’ they chant.

‘Copperfoot, Circuitbone, I want you two hanging off the side of the cab. We’ve only got a few tanks for the handheld flamethrowers so try not to be too jumpy. You see any of the natives though you torch them and their fucking tree, you got it?’ They nod and clamber out and over the sides of the truck. ‘The rest of you, eyes open and guns out. Blast anything that moves. Wirenerve, you’re with me.’

‘Sir?’

Metalfist leans down and shouts into the cab. ‘Slow it right down, but be ready to drive like hell if anything happens.’

The clone meat slows down without replying. The other trucks follow suit. Metalfist wonders how they do that. They don’t talk. The truck moves slowly enough that Metalfist and Wirenerve can walk alongside it.

‘We’re the forward scouts, Private. You see anything funny you shout. We’re the early warning system.’

‘Looking before we cross the road?’ Wirenerve says. Metalfist bellows with laughter.

‘Now you’re getting it,’ he says. Private Wirenerve smiles at him.

Metalfist looks at Private Wirenerve again. He’s not smiling anymore. His face is set against the howling cold.

‘Do you know when the rescue is coming?’

‘They’ll come when they come.’

‘Sir?’

The forest fades back into existence. Wirenerve is smiling still.

‘Sorry, Private. I was thinking about something else. Entering the trees now boys. Steady.

The entry to the new forest yawns and then swallows them. The bittersweet plant smell is back, not burnt like before. More mellow. Vines and creepers twist their way around the trees. The rumble of the engines echoes.

There’s an almighty bang as laser fire erupts from one side of the truck.

‘Contact right, contact right!’ One of the Megasoldiers shouts over the comm.

Metalfist sprints to the right and drops to one knee. A huge shape charges towards him. There’s a searing blast of heat. One shot, two and then the creature goes down. It struggles for a moment before expiring, the bellows of its chest pumping and then going still.

Metalfist walks over and nudges it with his boot. The creature is blue, with long sprightly legs. A purple tongue hangs from between blocky teeth. Long red horns sprout from beneath its chin, sweeping backwards so the bony antlers protect its sides.

‘Well... I mean, this buck must be lethal! The most dangerous thing our platoon has ever encountered.’ Metalfist hauls the creature up. The Megasoldiers laugh as the one who started firing hangs his head in shame.

‘Get the horns,’ one of them shouts.

‘Too right. We need to commemorate this epic battle.’ Metalfist reaches down and grasps the red plates of bone. With a twist he snaps both free. They trail honeycomb strips of orange marrow. He tosses them to the nearest soldier in the truck and then shakes the spongy remnants off his hands. ‘Move on!’

‘Everyone is jumpy,’ Private Wirenerve says.

‘Can you blame them? They’ve had no combat for months and then all of a sudden they’re on high alert, pumped to the eyeballs with combat stims. That buck won’t have helped none.’

The road winds its way through several turns. The forest chirps and harrumphs with the sound of wild animals. No Vavrians though. Private Wirenerve looks at each tree as they pass, squinting to try and see faces in the knotted whorls of wood. Branches with the tell-tale twist of an elbow. Nothing. The forest canopy begins to lighten again.

‘I think I can see the exit, sir... wait.’ Wirenerve says. ‘Stop the convoy.’

Metalfist signals the convoy to stop.

‘Sir, there’s a native up ahead.’

Wirenerve is right. One of the Vavrians is walking along the road towards them. It’s wearing a loose cloth robe made of a royal purple fabric embroidered with winding spirals of gold. It’s dragging something behind it that looks like long piece of wood. A rifle? Or just a walking stick?

‘Weapon, it’s got a weapon,’ Wirenerve shouts. He drops to one knee and brings his rifle to bear. ‘Stop right there.’

The Vavrian keeps walking towards him.

‘I said stop there.’

It continues walking.

‘Fuck.’

Wirenerve’s rifle cracks. The bolt of blue hits the ground near the alien’s feet, sending up a shower of earth. It jumps and drops to its knees. It raises one hand over its head. Then the other holding the stick. Tied to the end is a torn piece of white cloth. It waves it back and forth.

‘What the hell is it doing?’ Wirenerve says. ‘Sir, what should I do?’

‘Hang on, Private. I’m going to get on the horn to the Strategists.’

A long range comm unit is passed to him, the bulky speaker unit plugged into the antenna on the side of the truck. Metalfist has a short, terse conversation with the squeaking voice on the other end. He unplugs the unit and hands it back.

‘Orders are to approach. Torch the fucker if it starts playing silly buggers. Copperfoot, Circuitbone, you’re with me and the Private. It could be an ambush, so the rest of you wait here. If there’s too many you retreat back to base. Understood?’

Nods all round. The Megasoldiers start shedding excess gear in case they have to run.

‘Ready?’ Metalfist says.

‘Yes, sir.’

It feels like a long walk down the road. As they approach the creature, it puts the makeshift flag down and raises its other hand over its head.

‘You do not move. Do you understand me? I will shoot you if you move.’ Metalfist mimes firing his weapon.

The alien is still. Its head is bowed. The hands above its head have eight fingers each, fine and feathery like a pianist. The mouth has no lips. Four tongues dart out periodically and run along the flat edges, moistening them with a sheen of spittle. Covering the top of its head and running down over its shoulders is a forest of mustard yellow quills. They quiver and shift as the Vavrian looks side to side at the Megasoldiers surrounding it.

‘Can you understand me?’ Metalfist says.

The alien looks up at Metalfist. Its eyes are mottled like the forest floor. Orbs patterned with the green and gold of fallen leaves. ‘Yes. We can.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘We come to surrender,’ it says. The language of the Megasoldiers sounds rough and scratchy on its four tongues. ‘We surrender to you, Megasoldier.’

‘What?’

‘We wish to speak with your Strategists. We must ask them to stop burning our trees.’

‘You want us to stop burning the trees?’

‘Yes.’ The creature nods, the quills on its head rattling against one another.

‘Sir, what do we do?’ Wirenerve is nervous.

‘No idea. Copperfoot, go back to the truck and report this to the Strategists. Ask them to advise.’

‘Sir.’ Copperfoot sprints back towards the truck. Wirenerve takes a step forward and crouches next to the kneeling creature.

‘Do you have a name?’ Wirenerve says. The creature looks up. Earthy eyes meet glowing emeralds.

‘Yes, we do. Names are the most difficult to translate though, would you not say? But you can call us Spongy Underfoot if you like?’

‘Spongy Underfoot?’ Wirenerve almost laughs.

‘We attempted to simplify it. More fully, ‘Walking Upon the Ground After High Season Rain.’

‘That’s a mouthful.’

‘Hence why we shortened it. Do you have a name, Megasoldier?’

‘That’s enough, Private,’ Metalfist says. ‘Stop talking to the alien.’

Wirenerve stands up like a naughty child caught misbehaving.

‘Sorry, sir.’

Copperfoot returns. He leans to whisper in Metalfist’s ear. Metalfist nods and turns to the alien.

‘Did you cause the forest to grow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘We grew it as a gift.’

‘We burned all the trees down. You must know we would have seen this as a hostile act.’

‘We know. We do not have anything else to give you.’

‘You’re giving us these trees?’

‘Not just these, Megasoldier. We can grow more.’

‘How did you make them grow so fast?’

Spongy Underfoot extends a hand. ‘May I?’

Metalfist nods. Spongy Underfoot gives his hand a shake. Amber pollen drops like flakes of skin. They wiggle like grubs and worm their way into the soil. He pushes his hand down and then raises it slowly. A green sapling pushes out the soil like it’s being drawn upwards by Underfoot’s hand. Metalfist stares.

‘Do you... speak for all your people?’

‘Not for everyone. We speak for the seventy-three clans that grow along your road. A significant number, but not all.’

‘You will come back and speak to our superiors.’

‘Whatever you wish, Megasoldier.’

‘If this is a trick, we will not hesitate to kill you.’

‘No trick, Megasoldier.’

‘Stand up.’

Spongy Underfoot pushes himself up to his full height. He stands a whole head taller than the Megasoldiers but is much thinner. The Megasoldiers bulk makes them seem more solid. Metalfist slings his rifle over his shoulder.

‘Hands,’ he says.

‘What about them, Megasoldier?’

‘Hold them out.’

Spongy Underfoot complies. Metalfist reaches into a pouch on his belt and pulls out a pair of polymer steel handcuffs. He snaps them closed around Underfoot’s skinny wrists, cinching them as tight as he can.

‘Come with us.’

Spongy Underfoot walks back to the truck flanked by the Megasoldiers. They help him up into the back. The other Megasoldiers scoot to keep away from him. The ones who’ve touched him shake the dusty pollen off their hands with disgust. The convoy turns around and begins to roll back to base.

Spongy Underfoot doesn’t say anything on the five-hour journey back. He bows his head and mouths something to himself. Commander Metalfist watches him. He doesn’t feel frightened by this alien. He’s curious.

On the way, they stop to burn another sapling, as per their orders. Spongy Underfoot doesn’t have anything to say.

Fourteen

The front door is stuck. I fumble at it with my keys, trying to get it to open while the rain batters down on me. It finally gives way and I crash into the hall, going down like a sack of shit.

My nose stings from carpet burn. My backpack has landed on me with a solid thud. I wheeze.

‘Hello?’ I wriggle out from underneath my backpack. ‘Anyone in?’ I manage to get to my feet, pushing the door closed against the wind and the rain. I kick off my shoes and go into the kitchen.

The kitchen battlefield has expanded again. It’s swallowing up the room at an alarming rate. One of the long boards is held up by the kitchen counter at one end and stack of books at the other. The sandy desert the Megasoldiers trek across smoothly transitions into lush jungle. Little plastic house plants serve as enormous flora in the diorama. A dusty track winds its way through the forest. More miniatures have joined the battle. Green aliens camouflaged against the jungle backdrop.

One of the tables has been upset, collapsed at one end. The desert sinkhole has swallowed up some of the miniatures. The swarm of the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw are scattered across the kitchen floor. Several serrated fangs and curved claws have been snapped clean off, revealing the grey plastic beneath. Most of the Megasoldiers have stayed in place, bracing themselves against the sudden earthquake.

The collapsing table has collided with the bookcase, knocking it over. The bookcase dumped its contents onto the floor. It rests half-on the table. I poke some of the figures with my foot.

Buried underneath a pile of the Glittering Maw, I find the shattered body of Commander Metalfist. His sword has been bent in half, the grey plastic turning white where it has been stretched. Patches of the paint on his face have been scratched away. His legs have been amputated at the shin in some horrific assault. He looks like he's been trodden on. He bears his wounds with stoic resolve.

I reach into the pocket of my coat and pull out the little cardboard box, extracting the miniature I painted in Manchester. My own Commander Metalfist. I compare them side by side. Bill's miniature looks older, more battle worn. I put him down next to my own Commander Metalfist.

I push the bookcase upright and then lift the collapsed board. I nudge the support back underneath it with my knee, an old sawhorse. I gather up the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw and dump them on the table. I pick up the Swarm Queen, jumping as I prick my fingers on her spines. I retrieve the rest of the fallen Megasoldiers. All those battle casualties.

The sound of the front door opening in the hall. Bill walks into the kitchen. He sheds a massive waterproof anorak and shakes the water out of his hair. The droplets trickle down his chin and drip off his beard. He's caught the worst of the storm.

He looks like shit. He's wearing a suit, something I've never seen him in before, but it's rumpled, damp and covered in crap. The tie hangs loosely about his neck.

'Oh, it's you,' Bill says. 'Hey.'

'Hey man. Everything okay?'

Bill grunts and wanders over to the fridge. He stares into it.

'I picked up all the Megasoldiers and put the table back. Some of them were a bit broken.'

‘Yeah. Thanks.’ Bill doesn’t seem to care. He pops the cap off a beer and takes a slug.

‘I found Commander Metalfist too. He was broken in half.’

‘I’ll fix him later.’ Bill sits at the one patch of kitchen table that hasn’t been converted into an alien planet.

‘I went into one of the Planet Crusaders stores in Manchester. I painted a Megasoldier and everything. Want to see?’

‘Mack—’ He looks as if he’s about to stonewall me again, but he relents. ‘Yeah sure.’

I pick my figure from the ranks and hand it to him. He scrutinises it like a jeweller checking the quality of a diamond.

‘Not bad for a first go. You let the shade pool a bit and you can’t edge highlight for shit, but all in all the little cunt looks quite good.’ He punctuates his appraisal with a huge gulp of beer. Then a belch.

‘Thank you.’

‘No problem.’

A few awkward seconds of silence. I look over the devastation of the kitchen, the broken miniatures and fallen furniture. I look at Bill. He chugs his beer like its going out of fashion. The ruined suit.

‘Bill, what’s happened, mate?’

Bill drains his beer and rolls the stubby bottle between his palms. He drops it. It lands on the lino with a clunk. He bows his head.

He looks up at me with red rimmed eyes. Tears dribble over his chunky cheeks.

‘Hey man, it’s okay.’

The damn bursts and the tears well over and he's bawling like a child. I go over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. He's crying in fits and starts, trying to catch his breath in between each bout.

Bill's not really a hugging person but I hug him anyway. I wrap my arms around his bulk, and he hugs me back, clutching at me. He smells like a pub ashtray that's been left out in the rain.

The tears slow to a few leftover dribbles. I release him from the hug, and he sits back in the chair. He sniffs a long pendulum of snot back up into his nose. Wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

'Look at me crying like some silly fat cunt,' he says. 'Sorry mate.'

'It's okay.'

'I'm a fucking mess.'

'No, you're not. Just tell me what happened mate.'

'Sue's in the hospital,' Bill says. He looks like he's going to start crying again but he thumps himself hard on the chest and swallows back the tears. He coughs.

'Is she okay?'

'They think she's going to be fine but they're keeping her in. Psychiatric in-patient. Bunch of cunts.'

'As a psychiatric patient?'

Bill told me the whole story.

The Megasoldiers were fighting their final battle on Kufari Prime. If they could break through the swarming legions of the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw, if even just one of them could make it to the top of Bookcase Fortress to send the signal to the fleet, then they would be saved. The combined fury of the Megasoldier Corp would drop through the heavens on wings of fire and put down the alien menace.

Bill dressed up for the occasion. He'd combed his hair and even bought a suit. Didn't even care that it cost a hundred quid. He was having a romantic evening with his girlfriend: something he never thought he could say.

So, Bill went out and bought himself a suit, some flowers, and a bottle of wine. He didn't know the first thing about any of them. The bundle of white roses had looked nice against the grey tarmac of the garage forecourt as he stopped to fill up his car. He'd gone to a proper wine shop in town and the 'four-eyed prick' (as Bill described him) behind the counter recommended a very reasonable bottle of Chateau Musar. Very reasonable being thirty pounds, which Bill describes as 'fucking daylight robbery.'

He set up the battlefield like he was setting the table for a romantic dinner. The tanks go the left of the place setting, while the dessert shock troops always go above.

He'd even bought a pack of a hundred tea lights on discount in the pound shop. The misshapen candles dotted the kitchen. The flames wavered and danced and smelled faintly of lighter fluid. The petrol scented atmosphere oozed romance.

She'd knocked on the door. He'd opened it and she'd laughed at the suit. He flushed with embarrassment and for a moment worried that he'd made a tit of himself.

You look very handsome, she said. He felt like he was going to be sick. In a good way though.

You look beautiful, he'd said and meant it. Never mind that she was wearing the same old baggy jogging clothes and her hair was a mess. She really was beautiful.

He was momentarily confused when he discovered the wine had an actual cork rather than a screw top and spent several fruitless minutes hunting around the kitchen for a corkscrew. Corinne was eventually summoned, and she produced it from a forgotten drawer. She smiled at them as she left. Bill poured a glass of wine for Sue and even had one himself.

The battle commenced and the Megasoldiers began to fight their way across the expanse of desert. The combat was fierce. The Swarm slashed at the Megasoldiers. The Battle Sisters provided good aerial support. Sue bent down to reach into her army case, searching for the Swarm Queen of the Glittering Maw.

When she stood back up, she tottered to the side for a moment, looking confused, before collapsing onto the battlefield. She crashed face first into the table, sending models flying in all directions. The table slid off the sawhorse and careened into the bookshelf. It rocked back and forth for a moment before falling, dumping books on top of her. The hardbacks battered her skinny frame. The bookcase finally slammed down, thankfully missing her head.

Bill scrambled over the fallen table, heaving piles of books out the way and shouting her name over and over again. Corinne came running downstairs, wondering what happened. She gasped when she saw Sue lying in the debris.

‘Call a fucking ambulance,’ Bill yelled. He held Sue and shook her and started crying. Corinne was trying to do everything the emergency services were telling her, check for breathing, bleeding, pulse but Bill was holding her too tight.

‘Bill, you need to let me see her,’ Corinne said.

Bill released her and let Corinne crouch beside her.

‘Yes, she’s breathing,’ she said into the phone.

‘Just tell them to fucking hurry up and help her,’ Bill said. His face was red and his jowls bulged against his shirt collar.

‘None of these questions are delaying the ambulance,’ the operator said through the phone.

When the ambulance arrived, Bill’s was in pieces. He’d shouted and screamed, losing his shit. Called the ambulance crew a bunch of cunts and demanded to know what took them so long.

‘Sir, I understand you’re upset but you need to step back and let us work. ‘

So, Bill took a step back and let the paramedics do their job. They reported that Sue’s pulse was thready and her blood pressure was all over the shop.

‘We need to take her to hospital. Do you know if she’s been receiving any treatment for her anorexia?’

Bill didn’t know the answer to that. He’d never thought to ask; he thought it would be rude to bring it up. That it might ruin everything that had happened.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. They slid Sue onto a stretcher and tucked her in with a mint green blanket. Bill followed them out into the chilly night. The amber streetlights spotlighted her as they loaded her into the ambulance. She looked so thin. Like crumpled paper.

Bill rode in the back of the ambulance. He had to sit on the little seat across from her. Couldn’t even reach across to hold her hand. The paramedic, a preppy polite posh boy, kept talking to him to keep him calm.

‘Just fucking hurry up.’

At first Bill went into the cubicle with Sue. She just started to wake up. Then she started convulsing. Her back arched and her legs kicked. They pushed Bill out of the cubicle and he had to go and sit in the waiting room, listening to the sounds through the door.

He pulled off his tie. The suit was ruined. A red blotch on the knee where he’d knelt in spilt wine. The collar streaked with tears. Damp patches on the shoulders from the evening rain.

He waited for an hour and then they finally let him see her. She was covered in tubes. One up her arm, one up her nose, wires trailing to an ECG by the bed. Swollen bags of fluids hung above her. The doctor came to see him.

‘I’m Doctor Kay.’

‘Bill.’

‘Are you her boyfriend?’

‘Yes.’

‘She’s in quite a bad way. We’re going to get her out of the woods, but after that I’m afraid I’m going to have to admit her as a psychiatric inpatient.’

‘Can’t she just go home?’

Doctor Kay was gentle. ‘With Anorexia this serious, no. It should’ve been caught sooner but she’s slipped through the net. Have any of her family ever brought it up?’

‘I’ve only known her a couple of weeks.’

‘It’s okay.’ The doctor put his hand on Bill’s shoulder. Bill shrugged him off.

‘How long will she be in for?’

‘Until she’s put some weight on. When she’s mentally well enough.’

The next morning, Sue was awake. She wouldn’t look Bill in the eye, but she took his arm as he helped her into a wheelchair. Doctor Kay accompanied them as Bill pushed the wheelchair out into the morning sunshine. The psychiatric ward was around the corner.

He pushed her into the head of psychiatry’s office and the little man asked him to wait. Bill patted Sue’s hand and told her he’ll be outside.

He collapsed into a plastic chair with metal legs. Tears threatened to reappear. A ding from across the hall made him look up. A lift arriving. The doors slid open.

A group of teenagers shuffled out the lift. Each one was so thin that they wobbled when they walked. One couldn’t walk at all and was instead pushed in a wheelchair by a nurse. The group was all girls, except for a single boy wearing a blue

beany to cover his shaved head. Bill couldn't help but stare. It was the kind of starvation that would normally put you in mind of famine.

They went out a glass door and into a little garden at the back of the psychiatric wing. They all sat down at a picnic table. The nurse with them produced little packets of biscuits and passed them out. Two biscuits each. They took their time eating them. Some chewed slowly, others took little bird-like nibbles. One girl cried. A nurse crouched beside her, saying something supportive. She didn't stop crying, even when she finally ate.

Bill looks up at me. Silent tears spill down his cheeks.

'It was so fucking awful, Mack,' he says. 'I just sat there, this fat cunt, watching them all eat. Sue was in the office talking to that doctor who was going to make her stay there. I couldn't do anything. I was just fucking useless.' He punctuates this by bringing his fist down hard on his leg. He raises his hand for another punch, but I catch his wrist. Jesus, he's strong.

'Bill, stop. Stop mate.'

'They wouldn't even let me stay with her. She's there all by her herself.'

'She's not well, Bill. If they say she need to stay in, then it's really serious. They can get her the help she needs.'

'I was fucking looking after her.' Bill wipes his eyes.

'Yeah, you were Bill, but you couldn't fix this.'

'So, what do I do? Just sit here? Like a useless fat cunt?'

'No. You've got to... I don't know, Bill.'

'Oh great. Fat fucking lot of good you are.'

'I know you're upset.'

'No shit, Sherlock.'

‘Bill, listen. You can sit here like ‘a useless fat cunt’ if you want. Crying your eyes out. But that won’t help Sue. You think you being in bits is going to make things better? Sue needs you to be a big tough cunt.’

It’s weird, talking to him a bit like he’s a child. Chin up, son.

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘And you need to be looked after too. So, we’re going to go to the Plastic Adventurer and buy a load of models and drink beer. You can’t help Sue right now, but she is being looked after. You can either sit here moping or we can paint miniatures: which one is it going to be?’

Bill looks at the floor in shame.

‘Sorry I was a cunt.’

‘You weren’t a cunt.’

‘I was. You’re just trying to help and that.’

Bill looks up at me. He’s got light grey eyes. I’d never noticed before. He hugs me.

‘Let’s get some miniatures,’ he says.

‘I’ll buy the beer. My treat,’ I say and pick up my keys and wallet.

We head back out into the rain.

A Memory

I'm staring at my phone. Finger hovering over Frankie's name. I haven't spoken to her in months—

—changing the water in the octopus's tank, cleaning out the filter. Salt water and Frankie chatting away. I laugh at something she says, I can't remember what, why can't I remember, why—

—never went for that drink, in the end. Stupid. She was busy with work, so we postponed it. Then I cancelled. Had to go for chemo. Didn't tell her. Then as it got worse, I tried to arrange to service the tank whenever she wasn't there. I didn't want to bring her into my mess.

The house phone is ringing. I try to push myself up from bed. The last bout of chemo has knocked me for a loop. I'm tired all the time. Sick too. I'm wearing wraparound sunglasses. Everything's too bright.

'Phone!' I call.

'Hang on a tic,' Dad says.

'No 'hang on a tic.' It might be Doctor More.'

'I'm carrying a bloody bookcase,' Dad bellows back.

'Mum?'

No answer.

'Mum?' I call again.

'She's taking a nap,' Dad's voice is strained. There's a heavy thunk followed by a wowl of pain. 'Bloody bastard thing.'

I manage to lift my skinny arse up and scoot onto my wheelchair. I wheel out into the hall. Dad's beaten me to the phone. He's standing on one leg like a flamingo, his injured foot waving about.

‘Hello?’ he says into the phone.

I stretch my neck to look around. The bookcase has put a hole in the wall.

‘Oh hi, Doctor More,’ Dad says. I spin back round. ‘Yes, we’re all very well, thank you. Nick’s doing okay. So-so.’

I wave at him to give me the phone. He holds his hand out. *Hang on.*

‘Yes, he’s here, would you like to speak to him? I’ll pass you over.’ Dad hands me the phone.

‘Hello? I say.

‘Hi Nick. How’re you doing?’

‘I’m good, thanks.’ I lie without thinking. I’m basically bed bound now. I’m not giving up: I’m too close.

‘And the family? They all well?’

I look over at Dad. He tests his weight on his squashed foot. He yelps like a dog who’s tails been trodden on.

‘They’re all fine.’

‘Good to hear. Listen Nick, I won’t beat around the bush: you’ve been chosen for the program’—

—you’ve passed your exam, yes I’ll go on a date with you, you’ve won the money, every time I’ve ever felt like this, you feel—

—the bottom falls out of my stomach and my hands go all loose and shaky. I think I might drop the phone. I look up at Dad. He’s forgotten about his foot and is starting to cry. He hugs me, squashing the phone up against my cheek.

‘Nick, are you still there?’ Doctor More’s tinny voice calls out from the speaker.

‘I’m here yeah... that’s.... that’s amazing news.’

‘The procedure won’t be for another month, two at most, but we need to get you here for the first dust infusion as quickly as possible. We’ve arranged a car to pick you up and take you to the airport?’

‘Airport?’

‘No time to faff around on trains. Not when a half hour flight will get you here.’

‘Can my Mum and Dad come?’

‘Of course, it’s all already been sorted.’

‘Wait, what happened to the other candidates? I thought there were still three of us being considered.’

‘It went down to two when one of them sadly passed on.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ I say. I mean it. To come so close and then have it snatched away. Fucking awful—

—‘You a patient of Doctor More?’ Maisie says, sitting twisted in her chair—

—‘When we compared you and the remaining candidate, we were unanimous in deciding it should be you.’

That other poor sod. Passed up in favour of me.

‘Thank you.’

‘Listen Nick, I’ve got to run. It’s mental here but I’ll email you all the flight details and stuff.’

‘Okay then.’

‘Oh, and Nick?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m really proud of you.’

‘Er, thanks?’ This is weird. Doctor More is getting all misty eyed.

‘I just mean that it must be scary. Thanks for being up to the task.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Right, I’ll email you the stuff when I’ve got everything confirmed. Bye for now.’

‘Bye,’ I say but the phone has already gone dead. I hand the phone back to Dad. We both start shouting.

‘Yes! Fucking yes!’

‘You beauty,’ Dad says and then pulls me into a huge hug.

‘What’s going on? Why’s there a bookshelf here?’

We both stop and look around. Mum is standing at the bottom of the stairs, the massive wedge of the bookshelf blocking her path.

‘Nick got picked. Val love, he got bloody picked. He’s the one.’

‘Really?’ Mum’s voice is tiny. It punches a hole in our celebration.

‘Dad, move the bloody bookshelf.’

‘Right, sorry.’ He moves it with a sheepish shuffle. Mum comes down the stairs and takes my hand.

‘You really got picked?’

‘I really got picked.’

‘When will it happen?’—

—a room full of scrubbed up doctors and nurses. Mum holding my hand—

—‘In about a month but we’re going to the institute for the first dust infusion tomorrow.’

‘Please don’t,’ Mum says. ‘Please don’t, Nick.’

‘Val...’ Dad starts as he puts his hand on her shoulder.

‘Mum, I’m sorry. I have to.’

‘I can’t lose you.’ She strokes my hand. You can see the shape of the bones in my fingertips. The tendons on the back of my hand are visible like the strings on a violin.

‘Mum, it’s lose this or lose all of me.’ I feel evil saying it, like I’m making her choose. It’s worse than that: I’m choosing and there’s nothing she can do. Nothing she can say to change my mind.

She’ll see though. When it’s done—

—‘Yes. I’m here.’—

—She’ll see that it’s better than nothing.

I’m lying on something a bit like a dentist’s chair—

— ‘Say aaaah!’ —

—Doctor More is sitting beside me on a little wheeled stool. He slides a needle into my arm. He tapes it in place and then connects it up to a drip.

Doctor More isn’t wearing his usual happy TV doctor clothes. He’s decked out in surgical scrubs, complete with a face mask, as well as one of those shower cap things for operations. His hands are wrapped in blue gloves.

The room I’m in isn’t like anything else in the institute. It smells of bleach mixed with hand sanitizer. The floor is squeaky plastic that’s easy to clean.

I shiver. I’m wearing a hospital gown. I can feel the shiny material of the chair under my bare bum and back.

‘Is there any heating in here?’ I say.

‘You cold?’ Doctor More says. He doesn’t look up. Instead he’s staring at an open laptop, hooked up to a tall server bank in the corner of the room.

‘Yeah, a bit.’

‘No heating I’m afraid. Hold still for a second.’ He takes two little metal disks with glowing status LED’s. He peels the sticky backed plastic off them and fixes them to my temples. He taps at the laptop.

‘Doctor More?’

‘Hang on a second, Nick.’ Tip tap of the keyboard. He gets up and goes over to the door. He pressed the intercom button. ‘All good in here. Bring in the dust.’

The door opens with a hiss. It’s a heavy airlock, separating this inert chamber from the outside world. Two of Doctor More’s scrubbed-up colleagues shuffle in pushing a metal cart.

The machine on top of the cart looks more like some arcane alchemical device than the cutting edge of neuroscience. It’s made of polished stainless steel, a next gen cauldron. On one of the long arms attached to it there’s a needle as thick as my little finger, capped with a plastic protector. The body of the machine bristles with pipes and tubes all flowing to what looks like a workshop air compressor.

Atop the whole construction is a cylindrical steel tank. The top is held in place with some serious looking metal clamps. There’s a thick glass panel set into the side showing the liquid inside. It sloshes back and forth as they manoeuvre it into place. Wisps of cold frost trail off the metal.

The liquid is moving. It’s like a soup of molten metal. It twitches and spasms as it moves in slow, languid loops. Occasionally, geometric patterns coalesce in the metallic ooze, interlocking hexagons forming and then melting back into the metal slag.

‘Is that the dust?’ I say.

‘It is indeed. The finest neural dust that money can buy.’ Doctor More sounds like a door-to-door vacuum salesman.

‘Why does it move like that?’

‘We tell it to. The patterns are random, generated by an algorithm. If we let it go inert, it would start to bond together which is a big no. If that happens inside your head well... then it would be like an aneurysm but a thousand times worse.’ Doctor More turns to the other two figures. ‘Are we ready to inject?’

‘Just linking up now.’ The two figures have been busying themselves attaching long cables from the machine over to the bank of servers. One taps away at the laptop while the other wrangles cables.

‘Wait a second.’ Anxiety has started to rattle around my stomach. ‘You’re not using that huge needle, are you?’

Doctor More laughs. ‘No Nick, that’s for the actual procedure. You won’t even be able to feel that one when we use it. We’re just getting the inert dust into all your tubes now—

— ‘Good for the tubes!’ —

—It’ll take a few infusions to get up to saturation levels. When we do the actual procedure, the live dust will meet the inert and complete the circuit.’

From the side of the machine he pulls out a small tube and shows it to me.

‘See? We connect the dust to the drip and that’s how it’s done.’ He screws the tube into the drip in my arm.

‘What about the aneurysm thing?’

‘We’ve programmed the dust into a holding pattern. It’ll keep moving so that won’t happen.’ He rests a hand on my shoulder. ‘Nick, don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.’

‘Okay. Sorry. I don’t know why I’m apologising. I’m just nervous.’

‘Relax. Deep breath. I know this is scary.’

‘Thanks.’

‘We all ready to go guys?’ Doctor More looks at the other two doctors. Nods and thumbs up.

‘You ready, Nick?’

‘Yes,’ I say, completely failing to keep the tremor out of my voice.

‘This might feel a little strange,’ Doctor More says. ‘Here we go.’

There’s a loud click as he presses a button on the machine and then a gurgle like a drain being unclogged. The silvery liquid in the tank begins to creep through the tube and into my arm.

I shiver when I feel it enter my blood. Not just out of revulsion, it actually is cold. Like someone is pumping ice water into my veins. The cold feeling spreads down from the needle in the crook of my elbow to my fingertips and then loops back up. It stops for a moment at the top of my left shoulder. Like it’s nervous to go on, before finding another burst of energy and starts to creep over my chest.

When it hits my heart, I swear I can actually feel the shape of the chambers as the cold is pumped straight out to the rest of me. In less than a minute it feels like my entire body has brain freeze. I can feel it at my temples and behind my eyes like a cluster headache. I writhe in the chair.

‘Nick? Nick, are you okay?’ Panic in Doctor More’s voice. He sounds far away. ‘Nick, can you hear me?’

The tremors subside and I relax.

‘Ow,’ I say. I open my eyes. I didn’t even realise I’d closed them. Doctor More’s worried face comes into focus.

‘Nick, are you alright?’—

—A sunny day. Ice cream eaten too quickly, like my teeth are going to shatter. My head pounds—

—‘It’s like the worst brain freeze ever.’

There are nervous laughs of relief from around the room.

‘You sure you’re okay?’ Doctor More checks the machine and then takes my pulse. His fingers feel impossibly hot on the inside of my wrist.

‘Yeah, I’m fine. You need blankets in here though.’

‘We’ll try and get some in a minute. Your pulse is fine. Nothing to worry about.’

‘How long will this take?’ The brain freeze has become tolerable but it’s still there, nagging at me.

‘At least an hour for the first infusion. We’re going to take our time and make sure everything is within acceptable levels.’

‘So, I’m going to be cold for another-’

‘-hour? I can’t feel my toes.’

‘Nick, can you hear me?’

‘How many more times do we have to do this?’

‘Nick, please snap out of it.’

‘Four? You’ve got to be joking.’

‘Frankie, I don’t think shouting at him will work.’

‘Well, then what the fuck are we supposed to do, Rosie? We can’t just leave him like this.’

Frankie and Rosie stand in front of the server banks. Marky lounges on the sofa fiddling with the code for the implant in his hand.

‘I don’t know, do I? That’s what we brought you here for.’ Rosie’s voice glitches for a moment. She strokes the device attached to her neck. It would need servicing soon. ‘What can we do? Give us options.’

‘We could force a restart, but I have no idea how that’ll affect him. You said he hasn’t been offline since the upload?’

‘Yeah, he’s never been switched off. Not fully at least. We’ve always kept basic cognition running at least. Even when we moved him, we had a generator.’

‘Bugger. Too many fucking unknowns. It might help or it might not, I really don’t know.’

‘What about a partial shutdown? He mentioned that once a while back.’

‘He’s basically already in partial shutdown. Memory storage is being accessed all the time, eating up processing power. That means cognition can barely get a word in edgeways.’

‘So unplug memory then.’

‘If we shut down memory then we just end up with cognition which is no good either. You couldn’t even talk to him; he wouldn’t know he was Nick. Or you can force stop the little bit of cognition that’s starting the recall of memory in order to stop the playback, but it’s the same problem: solving one problem just creates another. You need both functions to work together, cognition and memory, in order to get him working again.’

‘You’re saying there’s nothing we can do?’

Silence.

‘What about short-term memory?’

Rosie and Frank turn around to look at Marky. His dirty brown hair is pulled upwards into a small man bun. He doesn’t look up as he types into his laptop, updating code.

‘What?’ Frankie says.

‘Shut down long-term memory. Leave short-term functioning.’

‘What good would that do?’ Rosie says.

‘Well, it would stop the playback for starters. Short term memory lasts roughly sixty seconds, so you’d be able to have basic conversations. It isn’t much but it would at least let you talk to him, maybe trace the problem that way.’

‘Would that work?’ Rosie turns to Frankie.

‘Errr,’ Frankie says. She opens and closes her mouth a few times, while her brain works through the idea. ‘Its.... possible? I think. Maybe. It would at least isolate long term from the rest of the system. That might stop any problem there from spreading to cognition, fucking that up too. I’d have to go into his basic OS and fuck around with some pretty fundamental systems.’

‘Woah hang on: isn’t fucking around with the OS a really bad idea?’

‘When they put this whole thing together they transferred the memory module wholesale. The system our brains have works by putting stuff into short term memory first and then if we pay attention to it long enough it gets transferred over to long term. Nick’s mind isn’t like that: he’s basically just got read/write. Everything just gets stored and then he decides what to delete later. That’s why this system needs so much storage space. In order to get the OS to work like our own, I’d have to dig around in the code and find a way to separate the two.’

‘Can you do that?’

‘I can try. But if we fuck anything up then that’s that.’

‘So, either we shut down memory or cognition. Both of those choices leave him a vegetable. Or we fuck about with the code to try and isolate short term. Then he’d be a goldfish, but we could at least talk to him.’ Marky folds his arms.

‘That’s the long and the short of it, yes.’

‘A vegetable or a goldfish.’

‘It isn’t a great set of choices. But the goldfish we might be able to fix.’

‘Fuck it,’ Rosie says. ‘Do it.’

‘Agreed,’ Marky says.

‘Give me a few hours. I need to go through loads of code before I can do anything.’

Time passes. Frankie taps away at her keyboard, parsing through Nick’s memories. Watching the moments slip by—

— ‘You fancy a drink?’

Him pale and thin, finger hovering over his phone, over her name—

‘It would’ve been nice to see you,’ she says. ‘Before this happened.’

She’s crying and she doesn’t know if it’s for Nick or Mack or simply how unfair it is.

PART THREE

Fifteen

‘So, why have you brought this filthy alien into my base, Commander?’

Metalfist looks at the floor. He doesn’t speak face to face with the Strategists often.

‘Sir, he asked to be brought here,’ Metalfist says.

‘And if it had asked for an ice cream, I assume you would’ve given it one?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I don’t know what an ice cream is, sir.’

The Strategist sighs. He and Metalfist stand in the adjoining room of the interrogation chamber, peering through the one-way glass. Spongy Underfoot looks peculiar on the other side in the sterile white room. When they marched him in, he’d left a trail of dusty pollen all through the base. Some clone meat was summoned with a dustpan and brush and told to take care of it.

‘He said he’d come to surrender, sir,’ Metalfist says. The Strategist looks up sharply at Metalfist.

‘He said what?’

‘He said he wanted to surrender, sir.’ Metalfist looks back to Spongy Underfoot.

‘Look at me Commander.’

Metalfist turns and looks down at the Strategist. The familiar icy blue uniform flares in the darkness of the room. He’s older than most, cracks all over his skin. His eyes are brown, almost black. The lower half of his face sports an impressive greying beard with a few braids woven into it.

‘The Vavrians want to surrender?’

‘He said he didn’t represent all of them, sir. Just the tribes near the road.’

‘What’s its name again?’

‘He said it was ‘Walking Upon the Ground After High Season Rain’, sir.’

‘No, the other one.’

‘Spongy Underfoot.’

‘Ridiculous fucking name.’

‘What are you going to do, sir?’

The Strategist sighs and dusts some imaginary dirt off his shoulder. ‘I suppose we’d better go and talk to the fucking thing. You’re coming with me Metalfist. Break its neck if it makes any funny moves.’

The Strategist marches out into the corridor. The door to the interrogation chamber is guarded by two lumps of clone meat. They open the door. Metalfist clanks into the chamber behind the Strategist. He has to duck to get through the door. He feels heavy and unwieldy in corridors made for smaller frames. It’s not often Megasoldiers are brought inside the main HQ.

Spongy Underfoot looks up as they enter. Under the harsh fluorescent lights his skin looks like drab forest camo-gear. His eyes still sparkle, the harsh white beams catching the mottled gold and making it shimmer.

‘Commander Metalfist,’ Spongy Underfoot says. ‘It is good to see you again.’

Metalfist doesn’t say anything. To seem over-familiar with the alien is probably a court martial offence. He simply nods. The Strategist pulls the chair out from the table and sits opposite the alien. The Strategist studies Spongy Underfoot for a moment.

‘You smell like tea. Green tea,’ he says. ‘Do you know what tea is?’

‘We do not know what tea is, Strategist.’

‘It’s a drink from back home. Leaves steeped in boiling water.’

‘We would like to try it one day.’

‘I’m sure you would.’ The Strategist shuffles in his chair, leaning back to make himself comfortable. ‘You can probably imagine that I have a lot of questions.’

‘We are sure you do.’

‘Like how do you know that I’m a Strategist? Or what even a Strategist is? How do you know that a white flag is an old human signal for surrender? Most importantly, I want to know how you’re speaking fucking English.’

‘Ah yes. We expected that you’d find this strange.’

‘It is strange. I know precisely how many of you can speak English. Do you know? We took four of you and taught them English so they could teach us your language. All are under lock and key.’

‘You call them... ‘ambassadors’, don’t you?’ Spongy Underfoot opens his mouth and makes a rough hacking sound. The four tongues inside his mouth flick back and forth. Metalfist realises he is laughing. The Strategist recoils in disgust. ‘We understand you call that a ‘euphemism.’

‘Listen, Spongy whatever-the-fuck. Either you answer my questions or that Megasoldier in the corner will start breaking bits off you.’

‘Sir, he surrendered—’ Metalfist starts but is cut off by the Strategist.

‘You shut the fuck up as well. Speak when spoken to,’ he snaps.

‘Don’t speak to him like that,’ Spongy Underfoot says. ‘He’s been kind to us.’

‘What is this, the fucking Megasoldier-Vavrian coalition? Talk, you ugly alien fuck.’

There’s a moment of frigid silence.

‘You had four of our people. Your ‘ambassadors’ yes? But one of them died.’

‘Found the fucker slumped over in the corner of the exercise yard with a fucking tree growing out of his head.’

‘He had flowered. When we die, we become part of the forest. Go back to what made us.’

‘Get to the point.’

‘You burnt the forest. You did not burn the roots though. The system burrows underneath the whole planet.’

‘And when the Ambassador died, he became part of the system.’ Metalfist says. The Strategist glares at him.

‘So that’s what happens? When you die you turn into a fucking tree and all the knowledge gets passed through the roots back out into the forest.’ The Strategist taps his chin. ‘That’s why you surrendered. We burnt the trees. Not good, but you can survive through the roots. But you must also know that we’ve begun mining. You don’t want our machines chewing up your precious roots, eh?’

‘Every one of us who has ever lived flows through the roots.’

‘So, here’s the problem.’ The Strategist sits forward and puts his hands on the table. ‘I’ve got the whole of Human High Command as well as the Sentience of the Core Computer watching this discussion. See?’ The Strategist points up to the corner of the room. In the shadows, a little camera bobs up and down in an anti-gravity field.

‘Now all of them will be discussing what to do. Your planet has a good oxygen content, reasonable gravity, and a hell of a lot of resources. Perfect little place for us to lay down some ‘roots’ of our own.’ The Strategist chuckles to himself. ‘You don’t seem to understand. You’ve told us how to finally be rid of you. I could have dirt chewers shipped in within four days, ripping all that shit up from beneath the ground. So, what me and High Command are all fascinated to know is: what’s your compelling reason that we shouldn’t?’

Spongy Underfoot locks eyes with the Strategist. Mottled green and gold stares into deep brown. Metalfist stands in the corner feeling sick to a stomach he doesn't have.

Metalfist reaches to touch the edge of his cloak. He always rubs the fine green and gold cloak between finger and thumb at times like this. He'd been given it for honourable service. This wasn't honourable. His fingers close around the edge—

He's not wearing a cloak. He's never been given a cloak like that. He shakes the thought off. That wasn't him. Someone else.

Spongy Underfoot lays his hand, palm up, on the table. From the cracks and whorls of his handprint, small saplings start to rise. They flourish and harden into dark brown bark with lush green leaves. Metalfist gasps. He can't help himself. Sitting in the palm of Spongy Underfoot's hand is a perfect miniature forest.

'We can help you build your colony. We can excavate the resources with our root system. No bulky machines polluting the air. The root tendrils twitch and writhe to push precious metals to the surface. This whole world would be open to you, a new place for humanity to lay down roots alongside ours.'

The Strategist stares in wonder at the forest in the alien's hand. Tiny mites and grubs snuffle through the handheld underbrush like great herbivores rooting in the dirt.

'Know this though human,' Spongy Underfoot says and then reaches over with his other hand and grasps the tiny forest. He twists and pulls and then tears the trees up by their roots. The skin of his palm comes away alongside them with a wet ripping sound. Yellowish sap drips onto the table. The Strategist jumps up with a disgusted cry. Pale green flesh is open to the air. Tendrils and lightning jags of veins pulse with deep amber resin. He lets the handful of timber go and it lands in the pooling yellow blood.

‘We can take it all away. You think we were hiding? We were allowing you to stay here. You grabbed and burnt. We let you. Not anymore. This isn’t a surrender. This is an offering of peace. Accept or we’ll take it all back. The forest will grow so thick and so fast that you will be swallowed up. All that will be left will be the memory of you in our roots. You will be trapped there forever and the last thing that you will remember is that you had this chance.’

The Strategist is pale. He backs away from the table until he bumps into Metalfist standing behind him. He jumps like a frightened child. Metalfist looks down at him, bathing his white face in the emerald glow of his eyes. The Strategist turns back to Spongy Underfoot.

‘I’ll have to talk to High Command.’ A tremor has crept into his voice.

‘We expect an answer soon,’ Spongy Underfoot says.

‘We’ll be back shortly.’ The Strategist flees to the door, pushing past Metalfist to get away from the alien.

Spongy Underfoot and Metalfist regard each other for a moment. Metalfist nods. The alien nods back.

‘Metalfist!’ The Strategist barks.

‘Coming, sir.’ Metalfist clanks out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. They look at Spongy Underfoot through the one-way glass. The Strategist takes off his cap and runs his fingers through his hair.

‘What the fuck do we do?’

‘Sir?’

‘I said what the fuck do we do? I need to speak to High Command... I need to... what the fuck should I do?’

‘You’re the Strategist, sir.’

‘Then what fucking good are you? Standing there like a dumb metal sack of shit. Fuck this. Fuck Megasoldiers and fuck whatever the fuck that is.’ He points at Spongy Underfoot. ‘And fuck this whole awful fucking planet.’ The Strategist storms off down the corridor. Metalfist looks back through the one-way glass.

Spongy Underfoot is looking right at him. The alien raises his ruined hand and gives him a slow wave. As he does, the skin on his palm begins to knit itself back together.

Sixteen

Bill's sound asleep on the sofa when I leave. We'd gone to the Plastic Adventurer and come back with two huge boxes of miniatures, fifty quid each. They've both got the words 'START COLLECTING' plastered across the front like a fake ink stamp. I'd gone for Megasoldiers, my own battalion. Bill had picked out a set of Vavrians, the box art showing them creeping through the lush forests of their home world. He was going to paint them as a present for Sue. For when she got out.

We listened to the rain drum on the kitchen windows as we clipped the little bits of grey plastic out of their frames. Bill didn't say much. Every now and then he'd sniff back tears. I'd jump in and ask him something about Planet Crusaders.

Who was Commander Metalfist before he was a Megasoldier?

What is it about Vavrian biology that lets them grow forests?

Has there ever been peace in Planet Crusaders?

Bill eventually shoved the rulebook into my hands and told me to shut up. He said it with a smile though. I went to the fridge for two more beers. We assembled all our miniatures and then were forced to stop. The driving rain meant there was no way we could go outside to spray paint and Corinne had promised us both a swift death if we did it indoors.

We spent the rest of the evening in front of the TV playing *PLANET CRUSADERS: HIVE PLANET OMEGA* on Bill's PlayStation. We each took command of a Megasoldier, the screen bisected lengthways.

'It's such a shame so few games do split screen these days,' Bill said.

'Which button is it to fire rockets again?'

We played until three in the morning. I stretched and said goodnight to Bill and left him in the living room. The blue light of the TV lit his face, his eyes not seeming

to blink as he played. The Vavrian's watched him from the table, stood next to the brand-new Commander Metalfist. Waiting for him to paint them.

Now he's lying face down on the couch, letting out a gentle snore. His t-shirt has ridden up overnight, exposing the hairy mountain of his belly. I sneak past him and go to the front door. I stop just before opening it. Bill's using the Planet Crusaders rulebook as a pillow. He must have fallen asleep while reading. I slide it out, careful not to wake him and replace it with a cushion.

He wriggles for a moment like he's going to wake up and then settles back down. His breathing slows. He's headed for deeper sleep. The cushion must be more comfortable than three hundred hardback pages of war.

I tuck the rulebook into my backpack and head outside. I've got two hours on the coach to get to London. Another half-hour tube and then a walk to the address Charvi gave me. I needed to start being more careful with my money. Sixty quid on a train to Manchester is a bit cavalier for someone about to lose his job.

I take the little bit of paper out of my pocket.

23A METEOR STREET.

TUFNELL PARK.

LONDON

N7 OEQ.

This tiny scrap of paper is driving me insane. I can't put it in my pocket without checking I haven't lost it every five minutes. Eventually I take a photo of it with my phone, hoping that it'll stop me from being so weird. It doesn't work. Now I'm just worried about losing my phone too.

I wait for the coach in a dingy car park round the back of a supermarket. There's a line of us, shivering in the cold. A hungover student with his hood up, pale-faced, is dragging a wheelie suitcase behind him. A mum with a beet faced baby who's

screaming. A young man in a sharp suit and a briefcase, checking his watch every five seconds and tutting. Obviously thinks the coach is beneath him.

The coach arrives and we shuffle forward to board. The weather makes it seem like we're climbing the scaffold to be hanged. The clouds are a headache-inducing grey.

My seat is mercifully far away from the claustrophobic little toilet. I feel even better when the student bolts for the toilet door, hand clasped over his mouth. I push my suitcase up onto the luggage rack.

I sit down with the Planet Crusaders Rulebook as the bus chugs to life and begins to pull away.

Humanity has pushed out into the darkest corners of the galaxy. Advanced cyberfusion enhancement has birthed a new race of warriors, the MEGASOLDIERS. Their enhanced cyborg bodies are loaded with the combat memories of the legions who came before them, commanded by the finest strategic minds in the universe.

Despite all of humanity's triumphs, alien threats lurk in the inky blackness of space. The ever-hungering DREAD HIVE OF THE GLITTERING MAW devours planets whole to sate their voracious appetite. The jungle dwelling VAVRIANS swear a solemn vow to protect their ancient forest world. The terrible FROST ZOMBIES march implacably onward, their purpose unknown, fuelled by foul necromancy. Each of these races battle to claim new worlds for themselves.

They are the PLANET CRUSADERS and the war for the universe has only just begun.

I try not to roll my eyes. Pretty edgy introduction. I flip over the page.

Welcome to Planet Crusaders, the miniatures battle game set in the far-off future! This book contains the awesome history of the Planet Crusaders universe, tips for painting and collecting your armies and the complete rules for playing the game. For anything else, the staff at your local Planet Crusaders store will be more than happy to help you. It's also a great place to meet other people who are into the game and get essential advice on starting out!

Bit of a shift in tone. Edgy darkness to model train enthusiast. I look up as the toilet door opens. Even from this far away I still catch a whiff of vomit. The student stumbles out, looking like death. I try not to laugh and go back to the contents, running my finger down the list.

Getting Started

Which Army to Choose?

Painting and Modelling

Basic Rules

Advanced Rules

Scenarios

Tournament Play

The Advent of the Megasoldiers

That last one. The stuff Bill wouldn't tell me about. I flip through the book. Glossy full-page photographs of impossibly detailed miniature armies. Rough, ugly black and white drawings of Frost Zombies. The rules break down the different phases of play: moving, shooting, melee, sorcery. Tables of stats for different types of troops. I get to the lore section.

The Advent of the Megasoldiers

Humanity's greatest warriors. Earth's stalwart defenders. The vengeance of man. All these monikers and more have been applied to the green-eyed fury of the Megasoldier Corps. Their strength is something all the galaxy has come to fear. They are humanity's first and last line of defence. Supported by the graceful Battle Sisters and the rumbling behemoths of the armoured tank division, the Megasoldiers forge a path to claim new planets for humanity's glorious future.

It wasn't always so. Humanity began its push out into the galaxy first with rockets, then with faster-than-light cruisers and finally wormhole inducer transports. We found a universe teeming with life.

First contact with an alien species became known as 'The Kilpatrick Disaster' after the ship sent to investigate a signal sent from a seemingly intelligent lifeform.

All contact was lost with the Kilpatrick soon after its arrival at the source of the signal. The strange transmission was coming from a derelict space station at the edge of the Grafetti Expanse; a vast asteroid field that was the result of the collision of two planets.

There was radio silence for months. Eventually, it was decided that a team of soldiers would be sent to discover what had happened.

The transport located the station with the Kilpatrick still docked alongside it. The two were spinning end over end in a silent ballet. The Kilpatrick had a ragged hole in its side, exposing its innards to the hard vacuum of space.

The transport pulled alongside, strafing the ruined ship with sensors. All seemed quiet. The soldiers spilled out of the airlock and drifted into the belly of the Kilpatrick. They were the best troops of their day, outfitted in Kevlar hard vacuum suits and clutching precision railguns.

The explosion had ripped through several layers of the ship and lead them straight to the bridge. Accessing the main computer, holographic ghosts recounted what had happened, the long dead finally getting to tell their tale.

The Kilpatrick had rendezvoused with the wreck of the station. It was ancient, from man's earliest days of space travel. They found the signal, an old distress beacon no longer recognised by current human codes. The scientists of the Kilpatrick were disappointed. No aliens, just a relic from long ago for archaeologists to puzzle over.

Then one of the junior scientists, taking swab samples for chem-analysis, discovered a new type of single celled organism. Never before seen on Earth or any other planet.

The sample was brought aboard the Kilpatrick and quarantined to the lab while exhaustive tests were done. The bacteria were invisible to the naked eye until the next day it had multiplied into a brown smear of the sample slide. It had survived the vacuum of space. The warm lab was nourishing. Orders from the captain demanded it be monitored twenty-four seven.

In the middle of the night the crew were woken by screams from the locked laboratory. The crew tried to override the door lock, but it was jammed shut from the inside. The security cameras had all gone dark.

The sensors inside detected one thing: the identity bracelets worn by the crew, showing the two scientists inside were still alive. Their heart rates thrummed at two hundred beats per minute. Their blood pressure was so high, they should have been bleeding out of their eyeballs.

The Kilpatrick's security team was assembled to breach the lab door. An ion torch was used to cut through the jammed bolts. The red glow of molten metal lit

their nervous faces. With the last bolt cut the door collapsed inwards with a resounding crash.

The walls inside the lab were covered in bone-like coral. In honeycomb cells, fat grubs wriggled like overgrown wasp larvae. Dark amber honey dripped from the ceiling, pooling on the floor. The grubs heaved themselves from the coral to lick at the liquid nourishment with red barbed tongues.

They found the first scientist in the centre of the room. He was still alive in the crudest sense. The bone structure had grown into him, lifting him into the air like the maidenhead of a ship. Visible through the coral were his internal organs, encased in a sac of the dark amber liquid. His eyes were open, following the movements of the security team around the room. A reflex, nothing more. From between his legs, new grubs were birthed in a slosh of watery brown honey.

The second scientist dropped down from the ceiling onto the security team. Long bone scythes grew from the ruins of her hands. Her jaw split in the middle to reveal a long, blood red tongue hanging down. As she devoured the crew there were shouts of panic and loosed shots. The blasts tore her clothes, ricocheting off the chitinous plates growing across her back.

There was no way to seal the door they'd cut through. The crew died one by one. The captain began the procedure to scuttle the Kilpatrick. The blast tore through the side of the ship. The alien lifeforms were vented into space and off they drifted, to seek new planets.

The troopers watched all of this in silence. When the tale was told they withdrew from the ship and returned to their own. They obliterated both the station and the Kilpatrick with a nuclear cannon. Then they turned around and headed back to Earth.

Humanity didn't have a name for what they had encountered but, in the years to come, it would be known as the Dread Hive of the Glittering Maw. That scientist, her name lost to history, would become the first Swarm Queen, drifting through space until she found a new planet to devour.

Humanity knew now, there was life in the universe, and it was hungry.

In the wake of the Kilpatrick disaster, fear spread across Earth. The things out in the dark were not our friends. How would we protect ourselves? All dreams of a bright future in the stars had been snuffed out.

Ten years after the disaster the leaders of the great nations of the world signed the Kilpatrick Accords. The agreement united the warring factions of Earth under one banner, the Great Race of Man. The squabbles that had plagued our society for generations seemed trifling compared to the enemies that lurked out there in space.

To support this great new enterprise, development began on the next generation of soldiers. The leaders of the world knew that mere men could not combat this threat. Our troops would change, in order to fight the ruin that the Glittering Maw threatened.

Thus, the first Megasoldiers were born. Brave men volunteered to undergo the experimental procedures. Their skin was flayed, and new muscles were sheathed in polysteel armour. Their eyes were gouged out and replaced with high resolution green-laser scanners. Their organs reconfigured so they could go for months without nourishment and almost indefinitely without air. A combat stim dispenser was mounted in their brains, the tiny doses of chemicals able to sharpen their senses or grant them superhuman strength.

The final enhancement was the most radical. Officially known as Full State Mind Capture those working on the Megasoldier project quickly rechristened it ‘The Black Box.’

The Black Box recorded everything. Like a hard drive, it backed up all thoughts and memories. The skills and stratagems they developed over a lifetime were captured and stored. Fighting styles were analysed, probed for strengths and weaknesses.

Wherever the Megasoldiers died, the Censors followed. Clone meat of the rudest kind, the Censors poked inside the shattered skulls of Megasoldiers to extract the black box.

It was a small black oblong, with a wide bandwidth data socket at one end. The surface was dark but shimmered with incandescent colours like oil.

The Sentience of the Core Computer received each and every one as a holy gift. The aggregate knowledge of every Megasoldier who had ever lived dwelled there together as one mind.

Whoever the Megasoldier had been before was subsumed. Lost to the collective. A few memories clung on though, like cobwebs.

The Sentience is THE Megasoldier. The perfect warrior. The shield of the race of man. It is one and it is legion.

Humanity would no longer be frightened by the cold dark of the universe. Instead, the dark would be frightened of us.

I close the book and stare at the Megasoldiers on the cover. Poor bastards. The hungover student dives for the toilet door. He doesn’t make it in time. I close my eyes and breathe through my mouth.

Another hour to go.

Seventeen

Wetware City begins to crumble. With Wired Connection seemingly gone, the whole city had gone mad. The gladiator matches at the Mycelium Theatre stopped. No one was interested, not when the gangs are at each other's throats. The placating influence of Wired Connection no longer held them in check. Who needs deathmatches when you can see real bloodshed? And what vicious bloodshed it was. The bodies pile up, three deep in places.

The Chop Shop burns one day. Laser fire from rival gangs clips a tank of hydrogen. The ruptured tank belches like a dragon and flames engulf a nearby stall selling cloned limbs. The place smells of burnt steak and then the fire spreads to a nearby polymer refinery. The stench of melting plastic joins the riot and then the whole patch is ablaze. Burnt down inside of an hour. The most valuable digital real estate, gone.

Conflict makes coin, or so they say in Wetware. Weapon merchants are raking it in. Cheap and reliable is the order of the day. Arm as many soldiers as you can. Swarm tactics. Zerg rush, whatever you want to call it.

Out of nowhere, a legion of Moories appears to meet the sudden demand for body recycling. Their personal forcefields hiss as bored soldiers take potshots at them.

There's no shortage of bits. Wicker baskets stacked high and canvas gloves stained red. Most people simply ignore them. The war is too exciting.

Wetware's war is reported in the news, the real actual news. It's talked about in that baffled way reporters do when talking about gaming. Four hundred thousand pounds of in game assets destroyed, they kept saying. It was Dresden, Rome, all of it burning.

In the real world, a civil war usually drives people away from the cities where the fighting is worst. People flee their homes and travel thousands of miles in the back of a lorry or a tiny boat just to make sure their families are safe.

With digital wars the opposite is true. Immigration to Wetware is at an all-time high. People see the news and think, well I've got some time off so I might have a crack at this Wetware thing. Bored teenagers, retired teachers, all sorts.

One of these immigrants is Johnson Middlepart. He picked that name because he thought it sounded mild mannered and non-threatening. At the character creation screen he swings the blank figure around and considers his options for a moment. Then he starts to put his avatar together.

First, he makes him tall and then short and then decides to split the difference and go for average. He gives the character frilled red cheeks, horns and burning demonic eyes. A bit too much, he thinks and clicks undo. He replaces both eyes with rough bionic ones. Nope. Not what he was looking for. Undo. Johnson Middlepart eventually settles for looking like a bog-standard human. Close cropped hair smoothed down with gel. Bland features. Middle aged. Average.

The next stage of character creation: clothing options. Johnson scrolls past the cyberpunk overalls and traditional samurai armour. He scrolls past spacesuits, mechsuits and diving suits, instead heading straight for business suits. This is his wheelhouse.

Something grey or maybe navy, definitely in wool though. He settles on grey. Navy is too loud. He picks out a pair of black shoes: Oxford's of course, none of that brogue nonsense. The shirt is white and the tie is black, kept in place with a brass tie pin. Cuff links in the same colour. Gold is much too flash.

Johnson spins his avatar around. He looks like a civil servant or perhaps a middle-ranking bank executive. Not noticeably handsome or vomit inducingly ugly.

There's something missing though. He looks the avatar up and down like a fashion designer wondering what would complete an outfit.

Ah, there we go. A pair of glasses with simple black frames. A bit of Clark Kent to round off just how ordinary he looked.

Johnson Middlepart materialises in Wetware City, where all players start their journey: the little neighbourhood known as Tutorial Street. Here is where you learn the ropes. He runs past grizzled cyborg veterans offering to teach him the basics of combat. He ignores punks with sockets in their heads who would pull him into cyberspace and school him on the basics of hacking. He even passes the food cart at the end of the street where a greasy fat alien offers out free stat-buffing food.

Johnson Middlepart knows exactly where he's going. He's heading straight for Wetware's financial district.

In the real world, Johnson is a stockbroker. He spends his days sat behind his desk watching numbers jump back and forth. Graphs dip and soar. He'd bought into a company in China that manufactured microchips for children's toys. A good investment, trending upwards.

His boss had stopped at his desk. You work too hard. Treat yourself, have the day off.

This really irritated him because more than anything else Johnson loves his job. When he gets home to his nice apartment in the city centre, he opens a bottle of wine and sit in front of the TV with the latest season of whatever. He drinks the whole bottle then goes to bed. Still bored.

Then one day the news tells him about this place where there's a war going on. A real war with actual damages. Investment opportunities.

In the real world, Johnson knew a lot of traders who messed around with stock in weapons manufacturers and private military contractors. The demand for that sort of stuff was always high. They did quite well for themselves.

Just last week, there was a good chunk of a Chinese handgun manufacturer going. Johnson saw how he could flip it, parcelling it off into smaller chunks and then moving it on to hobby investors. It would be a good investment for the company and a tidy commission for him. He let it go. The nagging little moral compass at the centre of him swung around, pleased. He makes up the difference by being the best.

In the game though he could mess around with any stock he liked. It would keep him busy of an evening. Maybe even help him cut down on the wine. His shiny work laptop was good but couldn't run the game. He used it to go online and buy a shiny new gaming PC. He rarely bought himself anything expensive. Not classy to flash wealth, but this clocked in at two thousand quid. It arrived three days later in a massive cardboard box, along with a huge, curved monitor and an expensive mechanical keyboard.

When he turned it on, he felt like he was authorising a nuclear missile strike. The power button made a satisfying click, followed by the whirl of the fans in the case. Lights in the case began to glow a gentle blue. The curved monitor blinked into life, bathing his face in digital warmth. An hour or so to download Wetware City. Then he was in, falling through the screen and down onto the waiting streets below.

Wetware's financial district remains untouched by the civil war. They stand independent of Wired Connection, big enough to protect themselves. The banking families made public examples of those who tried to storm the trading floors. The mirrored skyscrapers stand pristine. Every entrance to the district is patrolled by automated guard bots. They look like tall metal cylinders that float around on a fog of purple antigrav. Two thirds of the way up their bulk is a band of smoked black glass

containing sensors and weapons. No personal firearms are permitted in the financial district. They give Johnson a cursory scan before letting him though.

Johnson marvels at all the traders wandering around. Unlike his real-world office there is no dress code. You wouldn't get fired for not wearing a suit. A feathery Crinoid from the Europa Sea discusses agriculture futures with a spiked demon of the Sixth Circle. An amorphous ooze tracks the price of RAM on a tablet, reading with a single eye floating in its protoplasm. A tall sasquatch takes an hour off the trading floor to eat lunch and goof around with a yeti.

Johnson walks through the arched entrance of the most popular trading house, Wetware Financial, or WeFi for short. He goes straight to a free trading booth and sits down. He spends a minute familiarising himself with the interface. It's not that different from the one he uses at work. Except at work they're insured, covered if things went really tits up. Here, your balance dips negative and they take it from your flesh and chuck you out.

Every Wetware character starts with a hundred credits in their account. Johnson places a buy order for five combat stims at twenty credits each. Everyone uses combat stims. A minute later an alert pops up: TRANSACTION COMPLETED. The money is whisked out of his account and the little red ampoules appear in his inventory. He immediately puts them up for sale for forty credits each.

TRANSACTION COMPLETED.

Doubled his money. No problem. He sees a basic neural processor going at below market value. He snaps it up to sell.

TRANSACTION COMPLETED.

Got enough to move into wetware components now. Eyes are always a safe bet.

TRANSACTION COMPLETED.

Type-40 Neural Boosters are a bit of a risky investment. See if it pays off.

TRANSACTION COMPLETED.

The buyer messages him, a group of hackers who are looking for an edge on their next job. Can he put together some bits for them? Of course, he says, what do you need? A list comes through a few minutes later.

Ten Tusanka Cranial Sockets.

Seven more Neural Boosters.

One hundred and fifty feet of vat grown nerve fibre.

No problem, Johnson says. Let me price that up for you and I'll get back to you. My service charge is ten percent by the way.

They agree, no problem.

The Cranial Sockets are top shelf goodies but a guy out of Little Madrid is selling them cheap. Don't mind that they've got shards of bone around the edges, no brand new these are, sir.

The Neural Boosters he buys off the guy he bought the last one off. Johnson thanks him and gives him his card. Maybe they could work something out, supply and demand and all that.

The nerve fibre he gets from the now defunct Chop Shop. A biochemist growing a variety of polyorganic nerves is selling it for cheap, trying to make a bit back on everything she didn't lose in the fire.

Johnson puts all the parts into a little delivery bot and programs it to go to the pre-arranged drop point. The bot chirps in an annoying voice. 'THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING DELIVERBOT, WETWARE'S NUMBER ONE DELIVERY SERVICE!'

Johnson rubs his eyes. The clock by his desk warns him that its two in the morning in the real world. The glass of wine he poured himself at eight o'clock sits untouched by the keyboard. He checks his Wetware bank balance.

He'd started the day with one hundred credits. With the money from the hacker sale he's now at over six thousand. Not bad for his first day's work. He's got so many buy and sell orders he's had to deactivate the 'TRANSACTION COMPLETED' notification. It pops up so fast that it makes his computer sound demented.

He clicks the light off by the desk and sits in the dark, watching the credits in his account tick upwards. He falls asleep in his chair and is almost late for work the next morning.

He can't focus at the office. His trades are going through but it seems so much slower than Wetware. Worse than that, he keeps imagining all the virtual money he could be making. Never mind real cash. He needs those credits to keep rolling in.

He eats his lunch at his desk, staring at the trades. He buys a share of a big recycling company in America that provides most of the trash collection in New York. People always need their rubbish taken away. There were guilds for it back in the Middle Ages.

He pauses. Wetware must need recycling too. He'd seen bodies lying around in the streets. They must get cleared away somehow. Where did all that free meat go? Hell, you could pulp it and sell it to make burgers.

Ten seconds googling answers his question. The Moories do it. He taps his chin. What do they do with all the bits? On this, google is sketchy. There's pages and pages of speculation on various forums. People piling on to put forward their private theories.

They eat it, some people say. That's what powers them.

No, they make sculptures out of it. They're actually artists.

That's ridiculous, someone chimes in. They're clearly a doomsday cult, building a neutrino bomb.

The workday ends and he sprints out the office to get the early bus. It drops him a few streets away from his apartment building. He's too dignified to run home, so he does a semi-hurry walk. Not in a rush, no, just got somewhere to be. The lift to his flat seems to take an age, stopping at nearly every floor to let people on. He wrestles with his front door and then drops his bag and keys and coat on the floor and parks his arse at the desk. The computer's got an SSD hard drive, so it boots in ten seconds. It's the fastest thing he's dealt with all day.

In Wetware, Johnson Middlepart materialises in the middle of the trading floor. Instead of the trading booths he makes a beeline for the doors leading out of the financial district.

From a battered vending machine, he buys a compact railgun and a pack of tungsten flechettes. He hasn't trained any of his basic combat skills so going for something with maximum punch ought to compensate. A basic software vendor sells him some tracking software and a few bugs.

Then Johnson commits his first murder in Wetware City. The civil war is so thick and bloody that no one will really notice another dead body.

He finds a Quixote-Yung street pusher skulking around an alley and asks to buy some narcoware. When the skinny little runt bends down to get the memory stick out of his sock Johnson puts two rounds straight through the back of his skull. He drags the body to the end of alley and dumps it behind some bins.

Normally with a murder like this, the killer would start cutting up the body for any good implants. Johnson wants the Moories to get here quickly though: they can smell all that good tech going bad. He disassembles the railgun and then drops it in a bin at the entrance to the alley. Then he waits.

He leans against the dirty graffitied walls and brushes the bits of bone and brain off his lapels. It doesn't take long before a Moorie totters around the corner. Its

neon orange robes have been shredded to tatters by non-stop work over the last few weeks. The basket on its back is nearly full. It's perfect: probably only got one more collection until it goes wherever the Moories disappear to.

It hauls the Quixote-Yung pusher up by his armpits and looks the body up and down. Using one hand to hold the body by the shirt it reaches down with the other. There's a wet snap as it tears off one of the feet. Long manipulator arms emerge from beneath its robes and pulls the bundle of memory sticks from inside the sock. High grade narcoware. It stashes the chips inside its robe.

It pulls out both eyes and inspects them. Nothing good. At the base of the skull it tears off a flap of skin and then pulls out the neural interface like it's gutting a fish. The rubbery thing looks like a wet bundle of transparent noodles. Into the basket.

It scans the body one final time. Satisfied it reduces the body to dust with its lasers. Powdery ash runs through its fingers. It clanks back down the alley towards Johnson.

As it turns the corner Johnson steps out and walks straight into it. The Moorie chirps in surprise. Johnson is flustered and apologetic.

'Sorry, my mistake,' Johnson says. The Moorie stares at him for a second. Johnson looks back into the ruined biomechanical face. He can feel the shudder worming its way up his back.

The Moorie gives a chirpy little beep and wanders off. He waits until it's out of sight to pull up his interface. The tracking software takes a minute to load up. He mutters prayers under his breath.

TARGET ACQUIRED.

He'd bumped into the Moorie on purpose of course. Used the moment of contact to stick one of the tracking bugs onto its chest. The flesh beneath his fingers had been wet and clammy and left behind a stain of yellow pus-like slime.

He follows the Moorie for an hour. It wanders into dangerous bits of the city, forcing Johnson to duck behind bins to avoid roaming gangs. It staggers as it takes a blast from a plasma caster, the force field around it shimmering. It clambers over rubble to dig up a human torso and claim some valuable component.

It wanders into the middle of a busy street with Johnson following behind. It stops. Its legs hiss, raising it to its full height. It looks over the heads of the crowd then turns and dives into a narrow alley.

Johnson pushes through the crowd, elbowing people out of the way. The tracker on his interface glows green. He gets to the alley and stumbles, running to catch up. He turns another corner... into a dead end.

It's gone. Did it climb up the walls? He checks his interface. The glowing green tracking dot has vanished. Like it had just teleported away.

Teleported... Johnson taps his chin. He googles whether teleporting is a thing in Wetware City. Apparently, it was introduced into the game but then removed again, for balance reasons. When you can teleport enemies into the depths of the ocean it tends to break the game a little bit.

Johnson rolls up his sleeves and starts rummaging through the detritus in the alley. He scrabbles through torn bin bags, spilling their rotten contents like guts. He scrapes grime from the concrete with his fingernails, trying to find something beneath. The cuffs of his shirt are fetid with waste. He knocks trash cans aside, tapping at the walls trying to find a hollow spot. There. One of the bricks is loose.

He tugs at it. Instead of coming out of the wall it swings to the side, revealing a shiny silver button beneath. He presses it without hesitating. There's a pause. Then the grime coated alley floor begins to glow. Electricity arcs around him, discharging with loud cracks. The streams engulf him, ripping him to shreds until he can't bear it anymore before finally...

There's a bang that makes his ears pop. His eyes are scrunched up tight, still recovering from the blinding light. He crouches with his head between his knees, hands clamped over his ears. He manages to open an eye a crack. He's standing in a metal cage, with a door at the front. He steps out and sees a long antenna attached to the back, powered by a serious looking generator. The teleporter.

The light is dim. He's standing in a brick tunnel, as big as the Tube. Lights have been set up on the floor, trailing long yellow electrical cables. He follows the trail of wires down further into the tunnel, trying to keep quiet. It curves around to the right.

He sees light up ahead. A huge round rusty iron doorframe set into the brick. Plastic sheeting, like you'd see in a building site, hangs across it. Shadows move behind it, across a huge mountain. He can hear the skittering of metal legs and the chittering of electronic voices. This must be the dragons hoard, where they stashed the materials. All the supply he could ever need, more than he could sell in a hundred lifetimes.

He wishes he hadn't discarded the railgun. It would have been a little security at least. He crouches and pushes his way through the sheeting.

The cistern on the other side is huge. In the centre is a vast structure, girded with bands of scaffolding. On the wood boards, Moories scuttle back and forth, pulling components from their baskets and adding to the colossal thing.

It takes a moment for Johnson to understand what he's seeing. A sweeping curve here, a soft patch of flesh there.

They're building a body. A hundred feet tall. The flesh is mismatched and lumpen. Sometimes there is no flesh at all, just sheets of riveted metal creating a foot or a rib. It looks almost complete, but the head is still being worked on. It dwarfs the Moories who slap on dripping chunks of red meat and stitch them into place. It looks

like an anatomical diagram: complete on one side with the other still open, showing bone and muscle and nerve.

A team of Moories lift a massive glass dome on their backs. They heave and push until it's positioned over the eye. With one final effort they get it into place, and it clicks and then locks into place to protect the jelly beneath. The other eye has yet to be installed, the socket a dark cave lit by flashes from a welder and a shower of sparks.

The teeth are still being installed. The Moories scuttle in and out between the gaps like spiders, pushing slabs of metal into place to complete the mismatched smile. Some are rusty steel while others shine like gold.

The top of the head is open like someone has unscrewed the lid. The pan of the skull is visible, and Johnson can see it's made from real bone. Skeletons fused together with some unknown science, creating the scaffold.

There's something hanging in the dark above the open skull, given away by the tell-tale purple fog of antigrav. It bobs up and down as the Moories clamber over it. Johnson steps out to see, no longer worried about being spotted. Massive cables trail up to the strange device, connected to generators and pumps. The wires and hoses push crackles of electricity and thick white bio-fluid up to feed it.

It's a brain. A giant brain. The whorls and contours of the surface are patched together out of scrap. A face peers out of the frontal lobe, the lumpy matter made of bodies melted together. The walnut like occipital lobe is composed of ancient circuit boards fused together. The brain stem has been carved from the unmistakable fungus of the Mycelium theatre; a colossal mushroom felled for that single purpose.

Johnson can't help himself.

'What the fuck?'

Three-Two-Five looks up at the sound of human speech.

‘What the fuck?’

<WHOA WHOA WHOA! WHAT’S HE DOING IN HERE?> Three-Two-Five points at Johnson Middlepart and nudges the Moorie next to him. The Moorie shrugs.

<WHAT’S GOING ON?> Eight-Four elbows his way through the crowd of workers. He stops short when he sees Johnson. <WHO THE BLOODY HELL IS THAT?>

<I DON’T KNOW.> Three-Two Five waves his hands in exasperation.

<HOW DID HE EVEN GET DOWN HERE?>

<MAYBE HE FOUND THE TELEPORTER. DID HE FOLLOW YOU?>

<NO. CLEAN BOY USED IT LAST. HEY, CLEAN BOY!>

<WHAT?>

<COME HERE.>

Clean Boy clatters over. He chirps in surprise at Johnson. <WHO’S THIS?>

<DUNNO. DID YOU GET FOLLOWED THROUGH THE TELEPORTER?>

<I THOUGHT I HEARD IT GO OFF AGAIN WHEN I WAS ON MY WAY BACK.>

<FUCK’S SAKE, CLEAN BOY YOU DICK. WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO WITH HIM?> Eight-Four gives Clean Boy an irritated shove.

<WE CAN’T LET HIM GO. NOT NOW THE HOUSING IS SO CLOSE TO BEING DONE.> Clean Boy says.

<HE’S RIGHT. I GUESS WE KILL HIM?> Three-Two-Five looks between his two mates.

<YEAH. WE’RE GOING TO HAVE TO.> Eight-Four says. There’s a pause as they all look at each other. <WELL, GO ON THEN.>

<I’M NOT DOING IT.> Three-Two-Five looks offended at the suggestion.

<WELL, YOU SAID IT.>

<SO? I'M IN CHARGE. YOU SHOULD DO IT, OR CLEAN BOY. HE NEEDS TO GET HIS GLOVES DIRTY.>

<HEY, I DON'T WANT TO KILL HIM EITHER. ALTHOUGH...> Clean Boy walks forward and grabs Johnson by the shoulder. Johnson tries to flee, and Clean Boy redoubles his grip, pulling the man over by the scruff of his jacket. <THIS GUYS HEAD WILL FIT THE GAP WE'VE GOT IN SECTION 43 OF THE TEMPORAL LOBE.>

<REALLY? MY TEAM HAS BEEN TRYING TO FIND A PART FOR THAT FOR WEEKS.> Eight-Four moves forward with excitement. <OOH YEAH, YOU'RE RIGHT.>

The three Moories advance on Johnson Middlepart. He's done for. The long manipulator arms slide out from beneath their robes. He tries to run again. They lift him into the air and his legs pump like a cartoon character.

<BAD LUCK MATE.>

He's still alive as they begin to take him apart. They flense the meat from his legs to complete the face and pass the long bones up to be incorporated into the dome of the cranium. With scorching pain, nerve fibres are plucked out like someone removing a stray strand from an unravelling shirt. The delicate spaghetti pieces are used to wire the nerves of the titanic face. They remove the top of his head and scoop out his brain. The fleshy grey and pink lump is macerated into paste and then used to grow new neurons for the sleeping giant. When they are finished all that remains of Johnson is his smart, bloodstained suit.

<DIBS ON THE SUIT.> Clean Boy says. <THAT'S WOOL, THAT IS.>

He tears a strip from the trousers and uses it to patch a hole in his robe. The last remnant of Johnson Middlepart is his empty face, used to fill the hole in section forty-three of the temporal lobe.

In the real world, Johnson Middlepart sits back in his chair. The words 'YOU DIED' are splashed across the screen. He shuts Wetware City down and takes a long slug from the glass of wine next to him. He opens one of the Wetware forums and starts typing out what he'd seen. He loses steam by the second sentence. Closes the web page and stares into space. A shiver crawls over his back.

The way they'd swarmed together... the way they chattered to each other. They were alive. Not like a person was alive. Different.

He deletes Wetware City from the hard drive and then goes online to place an ad for a gaming PC, barely used.

Eighteen

Metalfist ordered all the handheld flamethrowers to be returned to the armoury. When they were all accounted for, he locked the door.

Some of the troops had been reluctant to hand them back. Working with those *things*. Disgusting. The tension was slow to leave. A war had just ended after all.

The first encounter between the Megasoldiers and their new Vavrian allies was a strange one. The gate guards called out in panic as twenty melted out of the trees by the road. They watched the trucks going in and out of the compound. One even waved. The Megasoldiers itched to have their flamethrowers back. After an hour, the aliens wandered back into the trees. The guards relaxed.

Twenty minutes later they came back. Over a hundred of them. Metalfist was called to calm the situation.

‘What the fuck are they doing, sir?’ Copperfoot whispered.

‘They’re just curious, that’s all.’ Metalfist looked around at the Megasoldiers who had stopped to watch. ‘What are you lot gawking at? Get back to your posts.’

The chastised Megasoldiers scurried off back to work.

‘What do we do though, sir?’ Copperfoot said. ‘They’re making people nervous.’

‘We do nothing,’ Metalfist said. ‘We are their guests. I’d be curious if I were them. Back to your post.’

Metalfist wanders through the camp as the sun goes down. The insects in the trees beyond the fence begin to chirp. Most of the Megasoldiers have gone back to their tents to power down for hibernation. A few Strategists lounge around on the makeshift deck in front of the command tent, smoking fat cigars. Metalfist gives them a smart salute.

‘Sirs.’

‘Commander,’ one of them says. He coughs out a cloud of blue smoke.

‘I’m looking for Spongy Underfoot, sir. Has anyone seen him?’

The Strategist from Underfoot’s interview pulls himself up out of a slouch. His shirt is rumpled and he’s worse the wear for drink. He flicks the butt of his cigar at Metalfist. The glowing ember bounces off the metal plating on his chest. It lands on the ground, smouldering among the leaf litter.

‘Why the fuck do you want to see him?’ His voice is slurred.

‘A few of his people are curious about the gate. I just wanted him to ask them to move back. It’s making some of the men nervous.’

‘Look lads, the Megasoldier is giving orders,’ the Strategist says and then roars with drunk laughter. None of the others join in. The sound dies and he eyes the other Strategists. ‘Fuck the lot of you. He’s in that bloody garden.’

The Strategist heaves himself up, wobbling side to side. He takes out a small hip flask and drains it, tottering off towards the officer’s mess. The rest of the Strategists eye him with hatred. Metalfist gives them a smart salute. All ignore him except for one who gives him a half-hearted salute back.

The prison cell where the four Vavrian ‘ambassadors’ had been kept is a squat concrete building. The small exercise yard off to one side is enclosed by a chain link fence.

The dusty yard is now a garden. Lush plants tower overhead, their leaves poking through the gaps in the metal. Bright blue and violet flowers bloom, lighting up the military base like fireworks. Vines form an arch where they have crept forward and tore away one of the fence panels to create an entrance. The concrete cells are swallowed by climbing creepers, some alien variant of honeysuckle. Even through his mechanical senses Metalfist can smell the sickly-sweet syrup of the flowers.

He ducks underneath the arch, running his fingers over the braided branches. In the centre of the garden twisting roots have pulled the earth apart, allowing water to bubble up from below and create a small pond. The bare dirt of the exercise yard has been replaced with soft meadow grass dotted with wildflowers. The tall trees form a canopy overhead, allowing dappled sunlight to filter through.

Metalfist finds Spongy Underfoot sat on the ground staring into the corner of the exercise yard. There, slumped against the chain fence, is the Vavrian who had died to bring what he knew to his people. The ambassador.

Metalfist can just about make out the shape of his body, the contours of his limbs visible. He curled up to die. The crag of his jaw has become a tough slab of bark. The sockets of his eyes are dark whorls in the wood. One of his arms has been drawn upwards by the growth of the tree, fused to the side of his head, and thickened to become the trunk. His long toes have burrowed downwards to become roots.

‘Ambassador,’ Metalfist says. Underfoot had picked the title himself. He liked irony it seemed.

‘Commander.’ Spongy Underfoot doesn’t look around. ‘Would you come and sit with us?’

Metalfist hesitates before stepping over the flowers, careful not to trample them with his heavy boots. He feels ugly and bulky. He can’t cross his legs as Underfoot does, so he kneels instead.

‘Frightened to damage the garden?’

‘I’m trying my best not to.’

‘Don’t be so cautious, Megasoldier. Parts of the forest must die so the rest can grow. Look.’ Spongy Underfoot reaches down and tears up a fistful of grass and wildflowers. He scatters the stalks over the ground where they become lost in the leaf litter. ‘Now you.’

Metalfist takes one long blade of grass between his blunted fingers and plucks it from the ground. He fiddles with it for a moment, trying to tie it into a knot. His hands are too clumsy. He lets it drop to the ground.

‘See? Feels good, no?’

Metalfist can no longer see the blade of grass he destroyed. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘You’ll learn.’

A moment of silence. Metalfist breaks it. ‘A few of your people came to the gate today.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Of course you do. I apologise, I didn’t think.’

‘More apologies, Megasoldier. Stop it. We too are coming to terms with the reality of this... alliance. Our people are merely curious. We’ll ask them to exercise more restraint.’

‘Thank you.’

‘It troubles us though.’

‘What does?’

‘The... not talking. The mistrust. We are the only two on either side who talk to one another. The talks with your Strategists, they’re just so...’

‘Formal?’ Metalfist says.

‘Yes! That’s it. They are still frightened of us.’

‘We’ve explored the universe and only ever found threats. Things out to harm us. They see you as a threat, but you don’t act like a threat. You welcome us. Everything they have learned tells them it’s a trap. All the data I have suggests it’s probably a trap.’

‘We mean you no harm.’

‘I know that. But we have been a species at war for long as we can remember. The universe is a hostile place. The Kilpatrick Disaster taught us that. The Strategists simply aren’t the trusting type.’

‘So, how do we fix this?’

‘We can’t. We just have to wait. This garden though... I feared walking in your forests for so long.’ Metalfist pauses and looks around in wonder. ‘I told my troops they are welcome here. I hope that is alright.’

‘Of course, Megasoldier.’

‘Time. That’s what we need. Just time.’

Spongy Underfoot makes a low chirruping sound, long and drawn out. A sigh perhaps.

‘Did you know him?’ Metalfist says, gesturing to the ambassador entombed in the tree.’

‘Yes, we did.’

‘A friend?’

‘No. They were an... acquaintance. Is that right?’

‘Yes. It still must be difficult.’

‘It is.’ The garden is disturbed by a sudden gust of wind that shakes the leaves. The sound takes a moment to die down. Metalfist shifts his legs, uncomfortable.

‘I want to ask you something, but it’s... I don’t know if it’s appropriate. I don’t want to offend you.’

‘Please ask us, Megasoldier. We want to help you understand.’

‘You’ll tell me if it’s none of my business?’

‘We will.’

‘Is he dead?’

A smile creeps across Spongy Underfoot's face. Every day he spends with the Strategists his smile grows a bit more human. Less like a bloody slash and more like he's genuinely happy.

'That's a good question, Megasoldier. He was already old when he offered to be one of the ambassadors.'

'He offered?'

'Yes.'

'The ambassadors were spies.'

'Yes, they were. Apologies for the deception.'

'I would keep that to yourself if I were you.'

'It is of no consequence. We think your Strategists must have realised by now. They can't say though. It would threaten the peace we've brokered.'

'He was very old?'

'Very old indeed.'

'Did he kill himself? To become part of the forest and get what he'd learnt back to you?'

'Yes and no. He chose to flower. It is the natural end of our lives. He probably could have lived a little longer if he wanted to. We think though that he wanted rest.'

'When your people die, they flower?'

'Look at the tree, Megasoldier. Does it look dead to you?'

'The tree is growing out of him. He is dead, surely?'

'Maybe he's alive. Simply in a different way.'

Metalfist shakes his head. 'Megasoldiers never have to think about this kind of thing.'

'What happens to you when you die, Megasoldier?'

'We die. Our black boxes are taken to the Core Computer.'

‘Black boxes?’

‘A device inside our brain. An impression of our mind.’

‘Ah. So, when these are taken to this Core Computer, are you dead then?’

‘Well-’ Metalfist starts and then frowns. ‘I don’t know to be honest.’

‘Neither do we, Megasoldier.’ Spongy Underfoot smiles again. ‘It will just have to remain a mystery.’

They sit in silence and listen to the gurgle of the pond and the crinkle of the leaves beneath them.

Metalfist leaves Spongy Underfoot in the garden. As he steps through the arch the low evening sun starts to cool the air, the clammy humidity abating. Private Wirenerve is standing by the entrance to the garden, craning his neck to look inside.

‘Private,’ Metalfist says. Wirenerve is startled to attention. He gives a shaky salute. ‘Is everything alright?’

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.’ Wirenerve starts to hurry off.

‘Come back, Private. I did not dismiss you.’ Metalfist uses his Commander voice. Wirenerve does a smart about turn and marches back. He looks at the floor to avoid looking Metalfist in the eye.

‘What are you doing, Private?’

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘It’s a court martial offence to lie to your commanding officer. Tell me the truth.’

‘I was just looking at the garden, sir.’

‘Why?’

‘You said we could, sir.’

Metalfist sighs, his shoulders sagging. ‘Yes, I did. Why in the hell did you look so guilty then, lad? Relax, you’re not in trouble. Come on, look at me.’

Wirenerve still doesn't look up.

'Come here. Stand next to me. Look into the garden.'

Wirenerve shuffles over, careful to keep one step back from the alien domain.

'Can I go in, sir?'

'I've already said you can. Spongy Underfoot is in there. Go and talk to him.'

Wirenerve balks. 'I wouldn't want to disturb him, sir.'

Metalfist gives the private a firm shove in the back. Wirenerve stumbles into the garden, his outstretched hand catching a tangle of vines and tearing them down. He stares at the twisted plants in his hand in horror.

'Oops. You'd better go and apologise to him. Don't worry, he won't bite.'

'Yes, sir.' Wirenerve shuffles deeper into the bush and disappears.

Metalfist takes a deep breath. He is relaxed. Relaxed for hell's sake. The first hours of the treaty threatened to tear the peace apart, but then hours had turned into days and days into a week. A whole week without his hands shaking with the thump of combat stims. His weapon lay at the bottom of his footlocker, the battery dead.

Metalfist tramps over to the repair tent. A Megasoldier sits inert in one of the repair rigs, long cables trailing from the back of its head as the Mechanic runs diagnostics.

'Mechanic,' Metalfist says and bows his head in greeting.

'One moment, Metalfist.' Her fingers fly over a tablet as she checks that all systems are operational. Satisfied, she presses a button and the Megasoldier's eyes flare to life. She unplugs the cables from the back of its head and the Megasoldier stretches and nods its thanks. It clanks off to the hibernation tent.

'Apologies for the delay, Commander. How can I help you?'

'I need a few things,' Metalfist says.

‘Sure, take a seat.’ She picks up the tangle of cables to plug him in.

‘No, I needed some tools.’

‘Oh?’

‘Is that’s alright?’

‘Of course it is. Take what you need.’

Metalfist picks up a heavy-duty cutting torch, a fat red bottle connected to a serious looking nozzle. He selects a stout square headed hammer from one of the tool racks.

‘Thank you,’ he says to the Mechanic. She nods at him. Next, he goes to the officer’s mess. The few Strategists eating look up in surprise as he enters. He takes a stainless-steel bowl off the counter. Nobody says anything or tries to stop him.

Back in his hibernation tent Metalfist sits down at his charging station. There are no mirrors in the Megasoldier troop quarters. Metalfist props up the stainless- steel bowl on the small table across from him.

His own distorted face stares back. The bright metal of his features has become dull and tarnished. There’s a fleck of mud on the plate of his upper lip that he hadn’t noticed. He wipes it away and inspects the brown stain on his fingers. Below the lens of his right eye there’s a long scratch in the metal, shiny and brilliant.

Metalfist takes the cutting torch and fiddles with it until he’s focused the flame to a sharp blue point. He adjusts the bowl, so it is pointing at his chest. Reflected in the makeshift mirror is the rank markings on his chest plate. Stamped into the metal like dog tags.

CDR. METALFIST

23RD GENERATION MEGASOLDIER

SERVICE NO. #371275

He runs his fingers over the markings, feeling the shape of the letters. He withdraws his hand and puts the torch to them. Pain sensors scream at him but he silences them using his internal controls. The searing heat becomes a cosy campfire. It takes a few minutes for the marking to flare from a dull heated red to blinding orange incandescence. He shuts the torch off and places it on the floor. The hammer is heavy in his hand. He leans forward to get a better look at what he's doing.

There's a shower of sparks as he brings the hammer down on his chest plate. The letters warp and buckle. He squints into the mirror and then brings the hammer down onto his chest a second time. The sparks jump and flare like fireworks during a parade.

He lets the hammer go and it falls, the heavy head landing with a dull thud. The markings are gone, replaced by a rough patch of warped metal that's been hammered flat. He sits there for a moment, watching as the bright orange dulls to a faint red glow.

He returns the hammer and torch to the repair tent. The Mechanic doesn't notice the damage, or pretends not to, busying herself with work. Walking through camp he sees Spongy Underfoot emerging from the garden and Wirenerve hurrying to catch up. Wirenerve is talking, haltingly asking Underfoot questions. Metalfist smiles at him. Spongy Underfoot smiles back.

He stops outside the Strategist's tent. A few of them are still smoking in silence.

'What now, Metalfist?' One looks up. 'Bloody hell, man is that a laser burn? What happened?' The Strategist jumps to his feet and pulls a laser pistol from the waistband of his dress trousers.

'No sir, I'm fine. No need for alarm.'

The Strategist powers down the laser pistol. 'What the devil happened man?'

‘Everything is fine, sir. I just need to speak to you a moment.’

The Strategist eyes him. ‘What about?’

‘I just wanted to let you know I’m resigning my commission. I’m leaving the Megasoldier Corps. I quit.’

Nineteen

The student is ejected from the coach at the next service station. When we finally pull into London the smell is just about over. The coach depot is quiet, only a few journeys scheduled for today. I pull my coat tighter around me.

23A METEOR STREET.

TUFNELL PARK.

LONDON.

N7 OQE.

It doesn't take long to get to. Three changes on the tube and six quid in a taxi. The street is quiet, leaves rustling over the tarmac.

Twenty-Three Meteor Street is a tall red brick building, probably some dandy's town house back in the day. Long since divided into flats. Three stories, the tall roof like a church steeple.

I push open the little gate and wander into the garden. Someone has kept the grass neat and tidy. The hedge that hems in the walkway has been trimmed into a perfect arch to make a tunnel. The front door is post box red, a large brass knocker set into the centre and frosted glass windows either side.

I give the knocker a few raps. Wait a moment. Nothing. I look around. There's an intercom buzzer hidden under the tangle of the hedge. The list of names is scrawled in the traditional faded permanent marker.

A. O'BRIEN

B. TOPP

C. BISLEY/STEINER

D. KLEIN

I buzz flat A. There's a pause before a woman's voice fizzles through the intercom. 'Hello?'

Shit. I didn't think this through.

'Er, hi. Sorry, I've got a package for Twenty-Three A?'

'No worries love, come straight up. First floor.' The door buzzes as the lock draws back and lets me inside. The corridor is unlit. The black and white tiles beneath my shoes radiate cold. A road bike leans against the staircase, the steps up covered in tattered maroon carpet.

I feel sick. I'm so close. Frankie could be here. Deep breath. Everything is going to be alright. I go up. There's the click of a lock and a door opening. A voice calls down to me.

'Thanks for coming up, love. I would've come to you but this bloody leg of mine is a bastard and... oh shite.'

Standing in the doorway is the little old lady with one leg. Debbie. She's wearing a long cream nightshirt and a pink dressing gown. She's not wearing any shoes, exposing the unnerving fake plastic foot alongside her real one, twisted and red by a bunion.

'Debbie?' I say. She sighs.

'Hello, love. I'm impressed. I had twenty quid that you wouldn't find us. Marky's never going to shut up about it.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Well, I live here, don't I? Have done for the past...' She scratches her chin. 'Fuck knows how many years. Fancy a brew?'

I honestly don't know what to say.

'Er, yes please.'

‘Well, come in in then, you’re letting all the bloody warm out.’ She turns around and shuffles into her flat. I stand there, trying to figure out if this is a good idea or not. ‘You coming?’

The inside of Debbie’s flat is typical old lady fair. The front door opens straight onto a combined kitchen and living room, carpeted all over in faded avocado green. A flatscreen sits on an ancient tea-stained folding table. There’s a beige sofa, one of the cushions worn to white by the same person sitting in the same place for years. In front of it is an oak coffee table dusted with biscuit crumbs. A little solitaire set sits atop it, the glass marbles cradled in a board made of Bakelite. An electric fire sits in a faux fireplace made of chipped plaster.

What isn’t typical is the huge chrome desk with a glass top in one corner of the room. In front of is an expensive gaming chair, the kind Twitch streamers use with a lime green racing trim. The monitor on the desk is a curved ultrawide one, the screensaver showing a panorama of Wetware City. Muttering underneath the desk is a serious gaming PC.

‘Shut the door behind you, there’s a good lad.’ Debbie busies herself over the tea. The kettle burbles to itself as she takes two mugs from a cupboard stuffed with ancient ceramic. The teabags are excavated from the depths of an old Quality Street tin, the lid exclaiming that it’s Christmas 1985.

‘Sit down, love.’ Debbie’s prosthetic makes her walk with an awkward waddle. She hands me a pale mug of tea. I sip it, singe my tongue, and discover that she hasn’t forgotten the traditional eight sugars. Sitting down on her couch I nearly throw the hot tea all over myself. The springs in the sofa have completely collapsed. It’s like it’s trying to swallow me. Debbie opts for the gaming chair, groaning and complaining as the weight comes off her leg.

‘Tea alright?’ She blows her own mug and then takes a huge gulp. The scalding heat doesn’t seem to bother her.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

‘I still make it just how my Albert used to like it.’

‘Albert?’

She points over to a shelf stuffed with knick-knacks. In the middle, between a faded ceramic horse and tobacco tin, is a little oval photo frame. It’s an old picture, the colours bleached white by the sunlight of the years. Debbie standing next to a small man with his arm around her.

He’s short and bald with fuzz on his cheeks. Perched on his upper lip is a moustache that wouldn’t have been out of place on a World War One colonel. He’s got a cheeky grin and Debbie is laughing. They’re both in their forties. Albert’s eyes are magnified by a pair of enormous square glasses. He looks like that snooker player. One of his arms is encased in a plaster cast, from elbow to fingers. His other arm is around Debbie, his hand holding a half full mug of beer.

‘Bless him,’ Debbie says with a smile. ‘Not a single bit of him worked. He was short sighted in one eye, long in the other. Asthmatic. He’d get out of puff taking a shit. Clumsy bugger broke his arm the day before that photo was taken while he was putting up some shelves. Stupid git put the ladder on the stairs. Whole thing went out from underneath him. Fucking howled with laughter I did. Until I saw his hand pointing the wrong way. I’ll tell you though, the bit of him that did work, really did work if you know what I mean.’

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? ‘Er... he sounds nice.’

‘Yeah, he was.’ She sighs. ‘Prostate cancer got him in the end. All the things wrong with him and it was his bloody arsehole that bumped him off.’ She stares at the photo for a moment before turning to me. ‘Right then. Questions love?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well don’t be shy.’

‘Who are you?’

‘Debbie O’Brien.’

‘But really though?’

‘It was me following you. I put that note under your door.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, we didn’t want you kicking up a fuss, did we? Fucking blew up in our faces. When the note didn’t do it, we sent the Moorie and then Frankie herself to try and tell you to mind your own bloody business, but you just wouldn’t listen would you? You’re a determined little bugger, I’ll give you that.’

‘Frankie’s here?’

‘She’s downstairs, love.’ My heart drops down through my chest. ‘Reckon she’ll be happy to see you.’

‘She’s really here?’

‘That’s what I said, love.’

‘What about Rosie?’

Debbie nods. ‘She’s here too. How are they all at M.O.P?’

‘They were... lovely to be honest.’

‘Bless ‘em. They did a lot for that poor girl. Don’t be too hard on her about all that unpleasantness in the lab. She felt bloody rotten about it for days afterwards.’

‘So did I.’

‘Well, she’ll be back in a couple of hours if you want to have a word with her. We’ll go downstairs and see Frankie.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes now.’

‘That’s it?’ It feels like an anti-climax.

‘Well, you’ve found us now, haven’t you? No point trying to hide from yer. The less people who know the safer Nick is, but you seem determined to be someone who knows.’

‘Nick?’ The name twigs something in my memory but I don’t know why.

‘Come downstairs and meet him. He’s why we needed Frankie. Come on.’ She goes to the hallway and pulls on a pair of woolly gloves and a long scarf. We go downstairs. She fumbles with a set of keys to open the bottom floor flat.

The inside of the flat is a tip. Stacked against one wall is a landslide of busted up CRT monitors and cracked flatscreens. The tiny kitchenette is piled with crusty dishes and empty takeaway boxes. Something furry grows in an abandoned forest of mugs. A long table dominates most of the living room. Four huge computer monitors are seated on top of it, surrounded by numerous laptops, all plugged into different extension leads. The place is an electrical fire waiting to happen.

All the computers are switched on. Some display screensavers as they snooze: pipes scurry to create patterns on one while others rush through a field of stars. A few are still aglow with half-finished code. One is a window into Wetware City, showing a skinny robot covered in yellowing ceramic armour as it lounges on a street corner.

‘This way.’ Debbie leads me down a narrow corridor, past an open door. In the room a mattress on the floor serves as a bed, covered by the tangle of an orange duvet. Books are stacked up in the corner, most of them on coding or electrical engineering. A few pop science paperbacks mixed in for variety. The sofa in the corner is pulling double duty as a closet, clothes strewn all over it.

At the end of the corridor Debbie opens a door, revealing stairs descending down into darkness. She finds the light switch and manages to summon the flickering

light of a single naked bulb. She's shaky on the stairs, gripping the banister tightly. I have to bow my head to avoid braining myself on the low ceiling. The cellar has an old wooden workbench in one corner and a sad looking bike leaning against one brick wall. An old-fashioned steamer trunk is tucked underneath the stairs, garlanded in cobwebs. Debbie ignores all of them and goes over to the tall oak bookcase standing against the wall.

‘Give us a hand, love.’ Debbie grabs hold of one side of the bookshelf. Together we heave it to one side.

Behind it, someone has knocked a hole in the brick wall of the cellar. A string of fairy lights illuminates the darkness beyond. Debbie leads me further underground. Cool air blows towards us, making the lights dance. The tunnel ends at another brick wall, again with a hole knocked through. The room beyond is a long basement, all wide arches and brick pillars.

‘Where are we?’

‘Department store a couple of streets down used to be a wine shop, a proper old fashioned one. They sealed up the cellar years ago. Said it was unsafe. We haven't had any trouble yet.’ Debbie walks through one of the arches.

In the centre of this long room is a wooden desk. Atop it is a baffling piece of machinery sat next to a keyboard and monitor. The thing looks like a polished metal sphere with four stubby plastic legs. There's a small glass window set into the front, and through it I can see a complicated tower of golden metal. Copper coils twist around arcane components with gossamer thin fibre optic cables linking circuit to circuit. All the wires and workings flow upwards to emerge from the top in a thick bundle of cables. The bundle is encased with a metal mesh for a foot or so and then all the cables snake off in different directions, each connected to one of the server towers that rings

the desk. The thickest cable is plugged into a serious looking set of fuses mounted against the wall. The hum of power is audible.

Tending to one of the servers is Frankie. She's just standing there, laptop in one hand and the other connecting it to one of the servers. An image fuzzes onto the screen, resolving into a first-person view of a children's birthday party. There's a cake with blue icing, spelling out 'Happy Birthday Nick!' Lines of code spill out next to it.

'Everything alright, Debbie?' she says without looking round.

'You've got a visitor.'

'What?' She turns around. Stops dead. The laptop she's holding falls to the floor with a clatter. Tears gather in her eyes. 'Mack?'

I rush over and pull her into a hug. She's here. She's solid, real, and safe. She's crying still. I stroke her hair.

'It's okay, it's okay,' I whisper.

'I'm sorry,' she says. I hold her face in my hands.

'Where have you been?' What's going on?' I say.

'I've been here, honestly, I wanted to call you and tell you and I wanted to come and see you so bad but I couldn't because it was all going wrong here—' The words spill out of her, the damn of panic roiling over after everything.

'It's okay, it's okay.' I shush her. Bury my face in her hair as I hug her. 'God I've been so worried.'

'I know.' She's ugly crying now. 'I was going to get in contact the moment I was done here and then everything would have been okay. But then I thought... I thought you'd be really angry at me so I should stay away—'

I want to be mad at her. So badly, after all that's happened. But I can't. 'No. I'm not.'

'You should be, I ran off and all the stuff that happened...'

‘Don’t— just don’t think about that for now. All I care about is that you’re safe.’

She kisses me. It’s the best kiss of my life. Surrounded by the hum of the computer towers and the cool air of the underground, just me and her, back together. The stress of the past few days is streaming off my shoulders, and this is the best thing in the world. No competition.

There’s an awkward cough. We both look round at Debbie.

‘Oh, sorry,’ I say. Frankie wipes at her eyes, composing herself. I cough. Debbie grins at us. ‘Pair of bloody drama queens, it’s only been a week.’

‘Sorry, sorry.’ I look around.

‘Frankie?’

‘Yes?’

‘What is this place? I still don’t know what’s going on.’

The hum of the power changes subtly. It goes from a gentle pulse, like someone breathing while asleep, to an aware hum.

‘Hello? What’s going on?’ A voice echoes around the room. It’s a man’s voice, soft and a little confused.

‘What the hell?’ I say.

‘Mack, this is Nick.’ Frankie says.

‘Hello Mack, I... have we met before? Sorry, I’m having trouble remembering stuff at the moment.’

‘Frankie, where’s that coming from?’ I say and she points to a set of large speakers mounted to the walls in the corners of the room and then goes over to the large metal sphere on the table. She gives it an affectionate pat.

‘This is Nick. He’s why I’m here. He needed my help.’

The machinery inside the sphere is illuminated by pulses of light as the voice speaks.

‘I’m not feeling great,’ Nick says. ‘I think I might be dying.’

Twenty

The interior of the officer's mess tent is hot and sticky. The Strategists shift uncomfortably in their dress uniforms. Shirts thick with sweat cling to their backs. They blink away the salty drops that crawl into their eyes and makes them sting.

The tent has been converted into an impromptu courtroom. The tables have all been pushed to one side and the long benches set up into a gallery. A raggedy armchair has been fetched from one of the officer's quarters to be used as a seat for the judge.

The Strategist from Spongy Underfoot's interview should be overseeing the proceedings as the most senior officer present, but he is currently nursing a terrible hangover. He told the attendant sent to fetch him to 'fuck off and take that fucking Megasoldier with you.'

The other Strategists are secretly pleased with this result. They all think the man is a terrible cunt. Instead, Strategist Amanda Stirling has taken his place. Again, the Strategists are pleased. Second in command at the age of twenty-eight. Chatter around camp is that she's in line to take over the outfit. Too bloody right, they say to each other. The old man spends every night pissing drunk. She's kept things steady.

Strategist Stirling doesn't relax in the big velvet armchair. With its worn, puffy cushions it would be all too easy to sink back into it. Stirling instead sits perched on the very edge of the seat. She has a little table set up in front of her and she shuffles her papers back and forth. Scratchy printouts of court martial processes and Corp laws. She has never had to court martial a Megasoldier before. No one ever has. The Sentience of the Core Computer even find out that no Megasoldier has ever resigned its commission. She waves to the guards at the tent door.

‘Could you fetch Commander Metalfist, please?’ she says. They nod. ‘Thank you.’

They scurry out and return a moment later return with Metalfist, flanking him on both sides. They look small next to him, garden variety humans.

‘Where would you like me?’

‘There,’ one of the guards says and shoves Metalfist forward. At least it was an attempt at a shove. The guard cannot budge him. Metalfist gives him a look. The guard takes a nervous step back. Metalfist clanks over to stand in front of the judge.

‘Do we not have a chair for the defendant?’ Stirling says. The Strategist’s watching from the gallery look at one another. One of them shrugs. ‘Can we get a chair for the Commander, please?’

The frightened guards slink off for a minute and comes back with a metal folding chair. Stirling gives him a withering look.

‘Seriously?’ Stirling rubs her temple. ‘Are there no other chairs? Alright, bollocks to it. Commander, are you alright to stand?’

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘Thank you. My apologies.’ She picks up the tablet on the desk in front of her and presses the red button to start recording audio. “This is Strategist Amanda Stirling presiding over the resignation of Commander Metalfist from his commission in the Megasoldier Corp-’

‘Wait,’ one of the Strategists in the gallery interrupts. ‘Isn’t this a court martial?’

‘If you would let me finish – we will get to that in a moment. Present is myself, Commander Metalfist, service number three-seven-one two-seven-five and the Strategists of the twenty-fifth legion as listed in the court documents. Commander

Metalfist, as per the laws of this court you are allowed to make an opening statement. Would you like to do so?’

‘Err,’ he said. He honestly hadn’t thought this far ahead. The destruction of his service number had been a spur-of-the-moment type thing. He’d expected to be punished, to be decommissioned and broken down for parts but instead he’d been led to the hibernation tent and told to rest. He locked into his dock and cycled down to low power mode. The next morning they told him his case would be heard at noon. Would he like them to provide him with legal representation?

Commander Metalfist had to ask what legal representation was.

Someone who argues your case for you, they said.

I can argue my case. Besides, they wouldn’t know my case. They’d just interfere.

Now after all that, they wanted him to say something? A statement?

‘Er, yes. I am resigning my commission. I’d like to thank the Corp for everything it has done for me, as well as to say that I will not look back on my years of service with any regret. I’d very much like to remain on Vavre, though I understand if that is not possible. That’s the end of my statement. Thank you.’

Baffled looks were exchanged between the seated Strategists along with a great deal of muttering.

‘Order please,’ Stirling says. She doesn’t bang a gavel. Doesn’t shout. She just says what’s going to happen and people listen. The Strategists are right: she’ll be an excellent leader for the legion.

‘Commander Metalfist, you must appreciate how unusual a situation this is. The Sentience tells me that it has never happened before.’

‘I understand that, ma’am.’

‘What led you to make this decision?’

Metalfist thought for a moment. Because I'm tired? Because my hands shake from combat stims when someone drops a spanner. When I hibernate, I dream of other places, places that I know I haven't been, but I can still see Commander Metalfist fighting there. Not me though: a version of me.

'I feel like it's time to move on with my life,' he says.

'What?' Stirling's look of surprise makes Metalfist shuffle his feet.

'I just feel like I want to do something different.'

The crowd of Strategists chatter. Do something different? What the hell is it talking about? Someone get the mechanic and run some diagnostics. The unit is clearly faulty. 'Move on' my arse, it's the property of the Corp.

All these objections and more are shouted at Strategist Stirling. She raises a hand to silence them and then turns to Metalfist.

'Commander, you are aware that the Corp went to great expense to create you for the purpose of the fighting the wars that Humanity must win. Many here see this as an act of insubordination: refusing to fight. That would necessitate a court martial.'

'I am aware of that, yes.'

'If this court were to find you guilty, you would be decommissioned. Your mind state would be deleted and your body recycled.'

Metalfist looks at the floor. Would that be so bad? Not hibernation, the half dream state he spends his nights in but proper sleep. Oblivion.

'I would not object to that either, Strategist.'

For the first time, Stirling sits back in the armchair. Taps her chin with her finger.

'Commander Metalfist, while you hibernated last night, I stayed up to review this case. I spoke with the Sentience of the Core Computer at some length about your

request. We spent several hours examining archive files, some over a thousand years old. The process for a Strategist requesting a discharge is straight forward. Their commanding officer may give them leave to do so, usually resulting in an honourable discharge. An honourable discharge may also be given due to injury or extenuating circumstances that mean, while they are loyal and faithful servants of the Corp, they are no longer fit for duty.

‘A dishonourable discharge, on the other hand, usually includes the death penalty. Desertion is the primary reason such a discharge is usually given.’

Stirling pauses for a moment and gives Metalfist a measured look before carrying on.

‘Now, the process for a Megasoldier being discharged is much more complicated. In fact, the Sentience wasn’t even sure the documents for the process existed anymore. It had to go back through the archives, all the way to the very beginning of the Megasoldier program to see if and how it could be done.

What we found was quite interesting. Something that, as far as I know, no one in the Corp is aware of. The regulations for a Megasoldier requesting discharge do exist.’

Muttering from the gallery. Metalfist keeps his face inert. Don’t give anything away. Stirling continues to speak, her voice overriding the others.

‘Firstly, we must establish whether the discharge being requested by the Megasoldier could constitute an act of desertion. It’s a very simple question: if the Corp were to deny your request, would you refuse to fight?’

‘I wouldn’t dishonour the Corp in that way.’

‘So, this is not a case of desertion then. The other criteria for a Megasoldier’s discharge request relate to whether they have fulfilled the terms of their service. Do you know what these terms are?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘You signed a document agreeing to these terms when you joined up. First, you must undergo the cyberfusion process. So that has been completed. Then you must complete your tour of duty. The documents show that the standard tour a Megasoldier enlists for is a thousand years. How long have you been in service, Commander Metalfist?’

‘One hundred and seventy-four years.’ Metalfist’s voice is flat. He won’t give the Strategists sitting off to the side the satisfaction of seeing him break.

‘Exactly. You, therefore, would not apply.’

Murmurs of approval from the gallery.

‘Except, the Sentience and I turned up something very interesting indeed. You are not the first Commander Metalfist. The Sentience keeps a record of all the Black Boxes that are returned to it and all the associated mind states. It even dug out the original Commander Metalfist’s enlistment records. Would you like to see them?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ Metalfist will not let hope take over.

‘Here they are.’ From the pile of papers on her small desk, Stirling holds up a yellowed sheet of paper. The edges have begun to crumble. She hands it to Metalfist and murmurs, ‘Careful.’

Commander Metalfist takes the flimsy paper in his huge hands. Through the sensors in his fingertips he can feel the paper, thin and not quite there, like it might vanish at any moment. The ink has faded and blurred with age, but the words are still legible.

MEGASOLDIER ENLISTMENT FORM

THE FOLLOWING APPLICANT, Riley Sallow, DOES HEREBY AGREE TO THE FOLLOWING TERMS OF SERVICE:

(1) THE APPLICANT WILL UNDERGO THE CYBERFUSION PROCESS,
THERBY MAKING THEIR BODY READY FOR THE RIGOURS OF
OFFWORLD COMABT.

(2) A SERVICE TOUR OF ONE THOUSAND (1000) YEARS. AFTER THIS
PERIOD THE APPLICANT MAY ENLIST FOR ANOTHER TOUR OR
REQUEST A DISCHARGE.

THESE TERMS ARE BINDING.

THE APPLICANT ACKNOWLEDGES AND AGREES TO THESE TERMS.

Beneath the form is the scrawl of a signature and the stamp of a date.

SIGNED: *Riley Sallow*.

DATE: 16TH NOVEMBER 2243

Commander Metalfist stares at the signature. Whoever wrote it had terrible handwriting, all cramped together and rushed. Commander Metalfist brushes his fingers over the faded ink.

He remembers. His hands feel light and slim. He read the form over and over again before finally signing it, his hands shaking at the thought of what he was doing. So frightened but everyone was so proud of him. The recruitment officer smiled at him as he handed it back. The ding of the computer as the form came back APPROVED.

His hands are big and heavy now. He gives the form back to Stirling.

‘The most interesting thing about this form, Commander Metalfist, is the date that it was signed. Riley Sallow enlisted nine hundred and eighty-four years ago. Therefore, the mind state that is Commander Metalfist has been in service for that

length of time. Which would mean you are sixteen years from the completion of your tour of duty.'

Sixteen years. He could be shipped anywhere in the galaxy in that time.

'Commander Metalfist, on the completion of these sixteen years we would be more than happy to give you an honourable discharge,' she says. Metalfist nods, looking at the floor.

'Thank you, ma'am.'

'It has also been pointed out to me that you have built a good rapport with the Vavrian's leader. You've been integral to the peace agreement and as such, while I can't give you your discharge papers yet, I would like to offer you the opportunity to remain on Vavre and continue facilitating between the natives and our settlement efforts. Would this be a satisfactory compromise?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Metalfist says.

'What the hell do you think you are doing?' One of the Strategists stands up and points a finger at Stirling. 'This was supposed to be a court martial and you're asking it what it wants? The bloody thing should be scrapped for insubordination.'

Stirling rises to her feet and shouts back.

'Strategist Chaucer, sit your arse down! Commander Metalfist was not aware of the proper process for requesting a discharge and communicated his wishes in the only way he knew how. The fact that we didn't even know about the process is a disgrace.'

'But—'

'Another word out of you and I'll show you what a court martial looks like. Sit down.' Stirling glowers. Under her furious gaze the Strategist buckles and takes their seat. Another Strategist stands up and gives a smart salute.

'Permission to speak?'

‘Granted.’

‘I agree with your ruling, Strategist Stirling. I must ask however what the punishment will be for Commander Metalfist destroying his serial number? That is destruction of Corp property.’

Stirling sits back to consider this.

‘You are correct, Strategist Lavocat. Would a demotion to lieutenant be satisfactory to this court?’

‘I would deem that to be appropriate,’ the Strategist says.

‘Very well then.’ Stirling stands to address Metalfist. ‘Commander Metalfist you shall be demoted to the rank of lieutenant. After your completion of the final sixteen years of your service this court will convene again to discuss the matter of your discharge. Please report to the Mechanic to have your new rank stamped onto your plating. Court dismissed.’

The Strategist’s shuffle out into the midday sun, unbuttoning their tight collars and shedding their stiff dress jackets. Stirling sits back down and starts to gather up all her documents. Metalfist stands there, not sure what to do with himself. He clanks over to stand in front of Stirling and thumps his chest twice in salute.

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

‘No need to thank me, Lieutenant. Report to the Mechanic, please.’

Metalfist walks out into the sun savouring the smile on her face.

‘So, he’s a computer?’

‘Kind of... he’s all software and hardware now but he’s a living human mind. The whole system is an amazing bit of engineering.’

‘Why you though? There must be loads of neuroscientists knocking about.’

‘You met Nick once. Before this. He delivered the octopus.’

My brain makes the connection. The dude who looked like a model, the one Frankie was so excited to see. Shut up, brain. Stop being jealous, he's in a computer now. 'Oh... yeah.'

'Loretta, she gave us the idea. How to fix him.'

'How?'

'Remember what I told you about distributed intelligence? All those bits of brains working in tandem. Nick's kind of like that. The sphere, that's executive functions, cognition and stuff.' Frankie goes over to one of the server towers and gives it a pat. 'This is language processing, hearing and speech. Over there, that's vision and colours. That tower is like his spinal cord, for sensory input, in case he ever gets a body again.'

Frankie goes over to three towers pushed next to each other. 'These are mass storage. Memory. This is the problem; they won't play nice with the others. Memory keeps interrupting cognition, which stops Nick from functioning properly.'

'And they want you to try and fix him?'

'We're all working together. Rosie, Marky and me.'

'This is so fucked up.' I shake my head.

'Hello?' Nick's voice echoes through the room. 'Have we met before?'

'It's Mack,' Frankie says. 'We were just talking.'

'Were we? I'm sorry, I'll try to concentrate.'

'It's okay, Nick. Just rest.' She lays an affectionate hand on the tower. I look away. Clear my throat.

'So how close are you to fixing him then?'

'We've managed to switch off long-term memory. That means we can talk to him at least. Cognition functions partially but so much of who you are is built on memory. It's difficult to know whether what we're doing is helping or not.'

‘It’s a fucking nightmare.’ The sound of a robotic voice makes us both turn. The wooden door to the basement stands open. Rosie Hamilton pulls back the hood of her jacket. Behind her Marky closes the door with his glowing hand.

Rosie looks older than she did in her Facebook photos. Her red hair is scraped back into a tight ponytail. She looks tired. Her clothes are worn and stained. Marky on the other hand is all trendy metrosexual. A tiny man bun with a carefully trimmed moustache and beard. N64 t-shirt with ripped jeans. The whole look screams ‘Silicon Valley craft beer enthusiast.’

‘Don’t mind Rosie, she’s just grumpy.’ His voice is a soft Yorkshire burr. ‘I’m Marky.’ He sticks his glowing hand out. I hesitate for a moment before shaking it. ‘Hey, no hard feelings about the lab, eh? Did you have a hangover or anything?’

‘No, it was fine.’

‘How fine we talking? Any headache, nausea, anything like that?’

‘No, nothing.’

‘Your balance and everything, all good?’

‘Marky, drop it,’ Frankie says. ‘You can fiddle with the formula another time.’

Marky pats my shoulder and whisper into my ear. ‘Talk later.’

Rosie shuffles over. ‘Erm. Sorry, I guess. I didn’t want to.’ Her voice crackles. The quality of the Newvoice is beginning to deteriorate.

‘Is your voice alright?’

‘It’s fine.’ She turns away.

‘I met Charvi. She’s worried about you. You should go and see her about it.’

She tries to hide her smile. ‘How they all doing?’

‘They’re all good. Charvi is amazing.’

‘She’s a fucking fighter.’ Rosie turns to hide away her tears. She sniffs them back up with the sound of a dial tone. She wipes her eyes with her sleeves and breezes past me. ‘Frankie, where we at?’

‘Still nothing. The problem started when they combined the two. Have to fix the broken bit but we’d have to separate them fully.’

‘So why can’t you do that?’ I say. Everyone turns to look at me. ‘Or is that a stupid question?’

‘No, it’s not but... okay look, let me show you.’ Frankie goes behind one of the server towers and pulls out a tall whiteboard on wheels. She takes a board pen from her pocket and draws two boxes. In one she writes ‘SHORT’ and in the other ‘LONG.’

‘Okay, so your brain has a couple of different memory stores. There are more but focus on these two for now. Imagine that the stores are boxes. Any new memory gets put into short term memory.’

She draws an arrow going into the ‘SHORT’ box.

‘That’s the stuff going in. Now every minute or so, your brain rummages around in the short-term box. Anything you’re still paying attention to, it leaves in the short-term box. Anything you’re not, it takes out of the box and chucks it away. Every minute, rummage rummage rummage.’

She draws a little rubbish bin in the corner of the whiteboard and connects an arrow to it from ‘SHORT.’

‘Anything else, anything that you keep paying attention gradually gets moved over to the long-term box. There are loads of different types of long-term memory too, episodic, and procedural etcetera but all of them are stored in the same way. You take them out the box and have a look at them every now again and that reinforces them. You stop taking them out to look at them then they get chucked away

too. Like in short term but it takes a lot longer. It's more like they fade than get thrown away.

When they transferred him over, using this neural dust stuff, it didn't copy individual bits. Instead, it took a snapshot of the whole structure. It's like only being able to see a whole painting. You can't go in and look at the individual brushstrokes. Either through some bugger up of hardware or software or possibly that the human mind was never meant to run like this, memory is acting up. Nick's mind can't tell the difference between short term and long term, so anything that gets stored triggers recall. He's remembering all the time.'

'But you've shut down long term, haven't you?'

'We've shut it down, yes, but that's only a temporary solution. We need to separate the two, turn them into their own separate boxes.'

'And?' Marky pipes up.

'And what?'

'How are we doing?'

'Well, I think I have a solution.' Frankie looks tired. 'I've been looking at all my old models of Loretta's brain and there is a way.'

'So why don't you sound happy about that?' Rosie says.

'Okay. You know how an octopus can regrow a tentacle? If they lose one it just grows back with fresh neurons and everything. Here's the thing though, when it grows back it works exactly the same as the old one. With the same processing power and everything. I'm willing to bet we can do the same with Nick. We cut out a bit of his mind.'

'Long term memory?' Marky says.

'Yeah. We transfer all of long term out to separate storage and then once we've got the framework right, we can reconnect it and he'll be back.'

‘Yeah. But the fucking storage.’ Marky rubs his eyes miserably.

‘What? What about the storage?’ I say.

‘It’s a matter of size,’ Frankie says.

‘Isn’t it always?’ Rosie mutters.

‘I still don’t get it.’

Marky takes his hands away from his face. ‘Most estimates put the storage of the human mind around two point five petabytes. A petabyte is a thousand terabytes or a million gigabytes. It’s a colossal amount of information. On top of that you’ve got the software framework and all the other gubbins, so let’s say that’s another petabyte. Also, you’d need solid state storage with enough bandwidth to transfer him out or it would take years.’ Marky counts the problems off on his fingers.

‘We’d never be able to put that kind of storage together,’ Frankie says. ‘We’d need a couple of million quid to buy that kind of disk space, which we obviously don’t have.’

‘There’s nothing we can do, is there?’ Rosie’s electronic voice echoes in the silence. Frankie goes over to stand by one of the server towers.

‘I’m sorry, Nick. We tried,’ she whispers to the monoliths.

‘What are you sorry for?’ Nick’s voice is quiet.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Frankie wipes her eyes. ‘I’ll see you in the morning, Nick. Goodnight.’

‘Don’t worry about it... I can’t remember your name.’

‘Just rest, mate.’ Frankie turns and goes back up the stairs. The room is silent. Marky and Rosie look at each other. Debbie comes down the stairs, her footsteps with the odd half pause in the middle when she has to hike up her leg.

‘We all tried to tell you, love. It’s a bloody unpleasant business this.’ She sighs. ‘Come on, I’ll make us another brew.’

Twenty-One

I can't sleep. I'm lying on Debbie's sofa, covered with a scratchy wool blanket. Debbie called it a night and asked for a hand taking her leg off. The rubber sock on the inside came off with a pop and she sighed like she'd taken her shoes off after a long day. The end of her stump was flabby and pudgy.

'Quit looking at me thighs, you pervert,' she said. I grinned and said goodnight.

Debbie's net curtains don't block much of the light from outside. A streetlamp, pretty much level with the window, fills the room with a bright LED glow. I've propped the cushions at the end of the sofa. I rest my head on a cross stitched kitten. The only other light in the room is the occasional flash from the power button on Debbie's PC.

'Just leaving it on to download some games, love,' she'd said.

I keep thinking about my nan, the one that had to go into a nursing home. She was so confused. Bit like Nick, really. Dad and Frankie had the same face, like they'd failed somehow.

I take my phone out, the harsh white screen glow blinding me. A bit of browsing usually sends me off to sleep. I've got a lot of messages. I haven't really been keeping up with the rest of the world.

Message from Joe asking if I want to maybe try another MMO or something. We could try some Final Fantasy or something. I laugh. He's already missing hanging out.

Bill's working up the courage to go see Sue. He's asking if he should take chocolates or if that's a really shit thing to take to an anorexia ward. I tell him it is.

An email from work. If I'm not there for a review on Thursday then they're going to fire me.

Okay, the phone isn't really helping me to get to sleep. There's a gentle knock on the door. It opens a crack and Frankie glances through.

'Drink?' She elbows the door open and I can see she's holding a bottle of wine and two glasses.

'Sure, why not?' I click on the lamp. She sits next to me on the sofa and pours us some wine.

'Cheers,' she says and necks the whole glass in one go. I sip mine. It's been open a while, on the doorstep of turning to vinegar.

'Come on, don't do that,' I say. Frankie refills her glass and sighs.

'Sorry. I'm just... sorry.'

'Don't be sorry. Just sip it instead.'

She does. I watch her.

'Stop looking at me like that,' she says. I laugh. 'What?'

'It's just good to have you back.' I sound sheepish. She touches my cheek gently.

'It's good to see you again. And I am sorry. Really.'

'You could have just told me. I wouldn't have blabbed.'

'It's not up to me. Rosie, Marky and Debbie made me swear.'

'I know but...'

'We couldn't risk it.'

'How come I hadn't heard about Nick before now? I mean surely this was meant to be some big next step or something?'

'The funding dried up.' Frankie looks miserable as she tops off her glass. I think of Charvi and those people at MOP left high and dry without the corporate

sponsors. ‘They couldn’t reproduce the results. Second patient died before they could transfer him. The next two died on the operating table, ‘neural dust transcription failure’ according to Nick. What were they left with then? Some very expensive supercomputer hardware with one bloke inside it that sort of half-works. The amount of power it takes to run is insane. Only way we can do it is the same way squatters do, bypass the electric meter and wire straight into the grid. Debbie’s been fending off British Gas for months.’

‘And Debbie brought him here?’

‘She knew him, y’know, before. They’d kept talking online after, before his mind went sideways. When things started going wrong, Nick was already hacking into the phones and emails of the company and shit. He found out they were going to decommission the whole project and repurpose the towers for a new American military supercomputer. Started planning his escape right after that, got Rosie and Marky on board.’

‘How’d he get out?’

‘A false fire alarm at one in the morning to clear the building and a fuck off big transit van. Marky said it was surprisingly easy.’

‘Wow.’

‘I know, right? Ballsy as hell.’

‘This is all so fucking weird.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You going to come back to the house?’

‘I mean, I will, when we’ve fixed Nick.’

‘You said yourself that it might not be possible.’

Frankie stares into her wineglass.

‘Yeah.’

‘What are you going to do... if you can’t?’

‘Nick left instructions in an email. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out that he wants digital Dignitas.’ Tears are forming in the corners of her eyes. ‘It’s just... not fair, y’know? He’s dying and then he gets this second chance. Then that all goes to hell. Fuck.’

‘Wired Connection’s gone.’ I hadn’t been planning to say anything. It just slips out. I’m surprised at how upset I sound. ‘It all fell apart. Joe sold the shares. I’m sorry.’

Frankie stares into her wine glass, swilling it round for a second. ‘All of it?’

‘Territories carved up. There was a big fight over the Chop Shop, whole thing burned down.’

‘Last time I checked my playtime, on my main, I’d played for about three hundred days total.’

‘I think I was something similar.’

She slumps sideways leaning against me. I put my arm round her.

We sit there for ten minutes, not saying a thing. Like a silence for some long-ago tragedy. All that time and all the friendships we’d made and us, our relationship — the place where we’d built it was gone.

‘Maybe... we could try some other games?’

Frankie laughs, the best and longest laugh I’ve heard in such a long time.

‘Something casual this time,’ she says. ‘Maybe Animal Crossing or something...’

‘Yeah that sounds good.’ My brain clicks. ‘Hey I have a question.’

‘Shoot.’

‘How the hell did you get the octopus out?’

She laughs again.

‘Hey, quit it. It’s been bugging me for days.’

‘It was good, right? Spooky.’ She’s got a mischievous grin. ‘How’d you reckon they did it?’

‘Teleporter?’

‘Don’t be daft, Mack.’

‘I just met a guy who lives inside a computer. Daft is a bit relative.’

‘It wasn’t hard. We got a big hiking backpack and put a huge plastic barrel in there. Got a little drainage pump to suck the water out and into the backpack. They transferred Loretta into the tank after a bit of octopus wrestling.’

‘Then how’d they get the tank out? Even without the water in it, it’s huge.’

‘Electric screwdriver. The whole frame breaks down into sixteen pieces and the glass isn’t glass, it’s toughened plastic. Takes about ten minutes to disassemble the whole thing. You can put it in one of those bags tents come in. Stuff it in the boot of a car.’

‘Ah okay.’

‘You sound disappointed.’

‘Yeah, it’s a bit of an anti-climax.’

‘All magic is disappointing when you know how it’s done. Though... come here, I’ve got something that’ll cheer you up.’

Frankie sits in Debbie’s gaming chair. She wiggles the mouse and the screen flares into life. She clicks through a few folders and then opens a program.

The window fills the screen. A black void at first. Then the tiniest flash of blue light, flaring and dying like a bioluminescent jellyfish in the ocean abyss. Another tiny flash, like it’s far off. More of them, signalling to each other. From the black of the screen an amorphous purple blob coalesces and throbs for a moment before disappearing.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s Nick. This is a visualisation of the simulated brain. These are unconscious processes. Hang on... see that there?’ A slash of electric blue cuts across the screen like a bolt of lightning. ‘He’s dreaming. That line is connecting memory to subconscious and then simulating sensory inputs.’

‘Can we see? His dreams?’

‘We could, but I promised him I wouldn’t. They’re for him to know.’ She clicks the windows closed. She yawns. ‘I’m so fucking tired.’

‘What do you think he’s dreaming about?’

‘He’s dreaming about memories. That’s all any dreams are really. With the problems we’re having, he can’t stop dreaming really. Can’t stop reliving the past.’

I put my arm round her shoulders. She tilts her head, resting it on my chest.

‘You want to go to bed?’ I say. She looks up at me.

‘I can’t think of anything I want more,’ she says.

‘You big sap.’ I nudge her. She does a serious face.

‘I love you,’ she says.

‘I love you too,’ I say and lean down for a kiss.

I click off the lamp and we fall back onto the sofa, together, the only light coming from the jags and colours of Nick’s memories being transformed into dreams.

A Memory

‘Okay, so the way Doctor More explained it to me is that it’s like eating a soft-boiled egg.’

‘An egg?’ my Dad says. We’re getting ready to go to the hospital. Dad is packing clothes for me. I told him not to. I won’t need them. He said he was going to anyway, just in case. Mum is hiding in the kitchen. The occasional bit of crying manages to escape. Dad leaves me sat in my wheelchair to go and check on her. He comes back, red faced and awkward.

‘So, it’s like when you open an egg right,’ I say. ‘First you get your spoon and crack the top off, get rid of the shell and that bit of white and all that. You’ve got to be super careful though because you don’t want to damage the yolk. It’s all gooey and sticky and that’s the only bit you can’t break.’

‘Yuck.’ Dad makes a face.

‘When you’ve got the yolk exposed you need to get at it properly. They have this special bit of kit that gets all the stuff out that they need.’

‘Toast soldiers,’ Dad says.

‘What?’

‘The specialised equipment, it’s a bit like toast soldiers. To dip in your egg.’

‘I mean, I guess?’

‘Sorry for interrupting, carry on.’

‘Well, that’s it really. Then it’s done.’

‘And what do they do with the leftovers of... the egg... afterwards?’

‘Nothing gets wasted. Everything is donated.’

Dad looks a little sad for a moment. ‘That’s good, I suppose.’

I smile. ‘Yeah, it’s good.’

‘All ready?’ Mum’s voice makes us both look up. She’s standing on the landing, looking over the banister at us. She’s worrying a disintegrating bit of tissue in her hands. Small bits of white fluff drops like snowflakes as she picks at it. She’s put on her makeup with shaking hands. The badly applied mascara has already started to run as it mingles with tears. Her blouse has tell-tale stains from crying.

‘Yeah, we’re nearly ready.’ Dad helps me put my shoes on.

Mum comes downstairs. I catch her hand as she walks past me to the coat rack. She turns.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ I say. She won’t look me in the eye. The floor is getting a lot of facetime though.

‘I know,’ she says. Her voice is almost a whisper. I let her hand go and she goes to get her beige old-lady coat. Dad finishes tying my laces and then slaps me on the knee.

‘All done. Let me get my coat and then we’ll go.’

Dad wheels me out to the car with Mum trailing behind—

— a family day out. I’m in my pram and everything. Dad cheerfully bellowing about the adventures we’re going to have, Mum rolling her eyes—

—Dad makes weird small talk while Mum doesn’t say anything.

Strapped into the car, I twist in my seat to look back at our house. It’s not a big house, just a two-bedroom slice of suburbia. A little garden out front for the cliché rose bushes. An alley down the side blocked by a wooden gate. The whole thing at the end of a cul-de-sac. Normal. The car rolls off the drive and turns the corner down the road and the house vanishes. I turn back in my seat and wipe away the tears.

‘Want a CD?’ I say. I hold up the plastic binder Dad keeps tucked in the door.

‘You can pick,’ he says.

‘What?’

‘You pick the CD.’

‘What happened to ‘my car, my rules’?’

‘If you keep complaining about it then I’ll pick for you.’

‘No, don’t worry, I can do it.’

The argument is redundant anyway. I pick the same CD we always listen to;
Dark Side of the Moon—

—Wizard of Oz, light refracting through a prism making rainbows on the
floor—

—and we pay extra attention to Brain Damage where there’s a scratch on
the disk. It always makes the music go funny.

Compared to the institute, it isn’t a long drive to the hospital. The actual
procedure warrants a proper operating theatre and funnily enough it’s the same place
that I had my chemo. Dad gets the wheelchair out of the boot, and I gingerly transfer
over.

‘Bloody millions on this procedure and they can’t even pay for my parking.’
Dad grumbles as he argues with the ticket machine.

We wheel into the reception of the hospital. Doctor More is waiting at the
front desk like he’s excited for a parcel.

‘Nick, it’s great to see you.’ He reaches out and shakes my hand. ‘Mr. March,
it’s lovely to see you again. Mrs. March.’ He gives my Mum a respectful nod. He’s good
at the whole bedside manner thing. Clocked straight away that Mum didn’t want to
talk.

‘Nick, we’re going to take you through to surgery prep now. It’ll take a few
hours to get everything ready, but we hope to get the actual procedure started around

midday.’ Doctor More taps the chart he’s holding. ‘We’d better get a shift on, but your parents are welcome to come through to the prep room. Or there’s a waiting room? We’ve got tea and coffee, anything you need.’

‘Gin?’ My Mum pipes up for the first time. Dad laughs too loud. Doctor More smiles.

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Do you want us to come, Nick?’ Dad says.

‘Go and relax. I’ll see you in a bit.’

‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

Dad holds his arm out to Mum. ‘Bacon sandwich love?’

I catch Mum’s sleeve. ‘Go and get something to eat. I’ll be fine.’

She smiles and Dad leads her off. Doctor More takes up position behind me and pushes me through a set of double doors.

‘Everything okay, Nick?’

‘Just fine and dandy.’

Doctor More pauses. Even this smiling robot doctor isn’t immune to sarcasm. ‘Difficult morning, huh?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I get it.’

We trundle through the wards. Past rows of beds. Sleeping forms lie still or shuffle about in the depths of sleep. It’s still early morning. Nurses squeak up and down the rows in their rubbery slip-on shoes. The quiet murmur of a building waking up.

Surgery prep is through a set of swinging doors. A team of scrubbed up doctors and nurses wait to receive me. They help me out of my chair and onto a padded

bed, the vinyl covering protected by a sheet of white tissue paper. A nurse slips off my shoes and socks. She leaves me to take off my trousers and pants myself. I get them down to my knees before I have to call for help. Even the t-shirt is a problem. I get stuck inside it and have to wiggle to get it off.

There's a mirror in here. A tall narrow one screwed into the wall across from me. I'm thin. Too thin. Skin hangs off my arms. My hands, feet and bald head look comically large compared to the rest of me. A homunculus, hairless like a new-born. I can see the outline of my skull. You shouldn't be able to see someone's skull. My feet are red and sore. I feel old. Not-long-left type old.

'I need you to lie back, Nick,' Doctor More says. The bed feels cold beneath my bare arse. 'Just a few things to do for our prep. Just relax.'

A cannula goes into my left arm to administer drugs. A nurse draws a vial of blood from my right. I shiver as the needle is withdrawn. They give me a sheet to cover my cock and balls. Not really sure why. The state I'm in, we're a little past decency.

A nurse appears holding a plastic tube with a bulb at one end and a bottle of KY jelly.

'Woah, hang on. What's that for?' I say. Doctor More laughs.

'It's a catheter, Nick. You won't be able to go the loo while we're working.'

'Oh, right.' I lie back and try not to think about it while the nurse fiddles around under the sheet. I wince.

A bag of antibiotics is hung from a pole and connected to my cannula. Surgical prophylaxis, Doctor More explains. Fuck knows what that means. In case we need to cancel during the surgery apparently.

At that my stomach wobbles for the first time. The uncomfortable feeling of sick rising in my throat. I burp up vomity gas. I swallow it back down. Deep breath.

‘You alright, Nick?’ Doctor More stands next to me, peeling sticky plastic off a set of electrodes. He starts applying them to my chest.

‘Just a bit nervous.’

‘That’s perfectly fine. It’d be strange if you weren’t.’

Tests are ordered. I’m poked and prodded for a few more hours. Doctor More goes away for a bit. Anxiety coils up inside me. Tensing. Doctor More returns with a huge stack of papers for me to sign. I scrawl shaky signatures at the bottom of each one. I pause as he hands me the last one.

It’s got ‘CONSENT FOR ORGAN RECOVERY’ in big letters at the top. Deep breath. Sign my name.

‘We’re all done. You ready, Nick?’

I nod. Don’t think I could say anything right now. Doctor More leaves to scrub up. The bed is wheeled through into the operating theatre.

My eyes hurt. It’s too bright. Fluorescent strip lighting is supplemented by round surgical lights, each one looking like a high-tech parasol. The glare is made fiercer by the shiny white tiled walls.

There’s an observation room looking down into the theatre from behind a huge glass window—

—every medical drama I’ve ever seen, those nervous faces watching as a loved one is cut to pieces—

—and its got comfy chairs in off putting mint green and the walls are painted that shade of sick that hospitals think is soothing.

Mum and Dad watch from behind the glass. Dad’s got his arms around Mum. She’s holding a fresh bit of tissue that she’s started to pull apart. They’ve both been crying. Dad’s got his brave face on. Mum isn’t bothering. Red cheeks and fresh tears.

The bed is wheeled into place in the centre of the room. Someone's set up a load of cameras on tripods all over the place. They stare at me with their lenses and blink with red status LEDs. A captive audience.

Ringed around the operating table is a set of servers. They look like standing stones arranged according to ancient ley lines. The sound they make, whirring and muttering to themselves, gives the impression of monks chanting prayers.

The theatre starts to fill up with identical people. All in blue gowns. Facemasks over the nose and mouth. Alien hands in powder blue gloves. Maybe ten in total. The doors swing open and another one walks in.

'We all good?' he says. It's Doctor More, distinguishable only by his voice. The rest of the figures give a general murmur of consent. 'Recording?'

The one tending the cameras gives a thumbs up.

'Alright, I think we're ready to start. Can we get the handheld over here?'

The thumbs-up person picks up a small camera and starts to record Doctor More.

'Hello. My name is Doctor Simon More, representing the Cambridge Institute for Wetware to Hardware Solutions. Today is the culmination of over four years of work and thousands of hours and research and development. Before we begin the procedure, we need to get the final consent of our patient. Can you please state your full name for the record?'

Thumbs-up pokes the camera into my face.

'Er, my name is Nicholas John March.'

'Nick, you understand that this procedure is non-reversible?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Are you absolutely sure that you wish to undergo this procedure?'—

—'Nick, I need to know that you understand what I'm saying.'—

—I look up at the balcony. Mum wipes her eyes. Dad gives a tiny nod.

‘Yes, I’m sure.’

‘Well, all that remains is to thank you, Nick. Procedure begins at twelve forty-three pm.’

Not a lot happens for the first hour. The operating table is wheeled in. It’s not a traditional lie flat one. It’s more like an articulated chair, like something you’d find at a dentist. The doctors spend an age fiddling with it, adjusting my posture until I’m on my side, with my head angled downwards. The blue sheet covering my crotch drops for a moment. I grab at it and flush red with embarrassment. It’s freezing in here and my balls have gone full walnut.

‘Time for general,’ Doctor More says.

Another trolley is wheeled over to me, drip bags lined up. One of the anonymous figures takes one and fixes it into the cannula.

‘You’re going to start losing feeling Nick,’ Doctor More says. Deep breath. Numbness is piped into my arm. They wait a few minutes.

Next comes the halo. It looks like a cross between a medieval torture device and a piece of gardening equipment: a heavy metal ring with shiny chrome screws. Doctor More places it on my head like a crown.

‘Drill.’ Doctor More circles me. He’s holding a fucking builders drill. Christ, it even has ‘BLACK AND DECKER’ on the side. He stops in front of me. He gives it a test squeeze. The sound of the motor revving up makes me shiver.

He pushes the drill against the first screw and pulls the trigger. The buzz of the drill hardens as the screw encounters bone. I can’t feel a thing. A trickle of blood skips over my nose. A nurse wipes it away with some tissue. He goes all the way around my crown, eight screws in total. He hands the drill off to someone.

A nurse comes in with an armful of blue sheets, like the small one covering my junk. With care, the team start to pin the sheets to the halo, making a canopy surrounding my head—

—putting up the dust sheets to do a bit of painting. The old walls could really do with a fresh coat—

—I can feel the cool air on top of my head. My bald dome pokes out from the sheets—

—egg in an eggcup—

—I can barely see now. The blue drapes obscure my vision like—

—hiding under the bedsheets, reading when I should be asleep—

—I can just about make out Mum and Dad.

‘We’re ready to make the incision,’ Doctor More says. ‘All okay, Nick?’

‘I’m okay,’ I say. With my head screwed into place, speaking feels super weird. Only my jaw moves. I’m immobilised.

‘All good then. Mark it, please.’ There’s the sensation of someone drawing on my head. ‘No, we can afford to be bold. Further down please.’

A wet cloth wipes the marks off my head and then starts drawing again.

‘Scalpel, please. Thank you. Okay. Making the incision.’

I can’t see what’s going on. There’s no pain. A nurse wipes away stray droplets of blood. There’s a sound like—

—peeling off a wet sock—

—then a heavy slap as something is dropped into a bucket. On the balcony my Mum turns and runs for the door. Dad goes after her, looking back at me before he follows her out.

‘Doctor More?’

‘Yes, Nick?’

‘Can you get someone to check if my Mum is okay, please?’

‘Of course. Can you get the theatre staff to go and check, please?’ His voice floats somewhere behind me. ‘Okay, everything is looking good here. Drill please.’

There’s a high-pitched whine as the drill gets up to speed. It doesn’t sound like the guttural roar of the Black and Decker. This is a sharp buzz, more akin to a dentist’s drill. Precise and dainty. The pitch steps down as the circular drill bit meets bone. Again, there’s no pain. Just the vibration from the little machine making my eyes jiggle. Beneath the drapes I can see indistinct figures shuffling about as they work.

‘Chisel, please.’ Doctor More again. The door to the surgery room swings open and someone comes over to whisper into his ear.

‘What’s happening? Is my Mum okay?’

‘Your parents are getting changed and cleaned up so they can come in and be with you.’ Doctor More’s voice is soft and gentle. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

‘Thank you.’ The thumping panic in my head recedes a little.

‘Okay Nick, I need you to be quiet for a moment. Let’s get this open.’

The top of my head feels strange. Like someone is scratching an itch on my scalp with something sharp and metal. There’s a crack like someone opening an oyster. Wet and organic. The sound of bone against metal as something is put down into a tray—

—that scene, that awful scene in the film, I can’t remember, what film was it—

—‘That’s what we’re here for ladies and gentlemen.’ Doctor More sounds less like a pioneering brain surgeon and more like a treasure hunter. ‘Okay, can we bring the dust infuser in please.’

The double doors opening. Footsteps. Then a hand wrapped in a rubber glove holding mine.

‘I’m here,’ Mum says. Tears spill and soak into the mask covering her nose and mouth. ‘I’m here, love.’

She’s easy to distinguish from all the other blue figures: she’s a foot shorter than most of them and the only one bawling her eyes out. Dad stands behind, his hand on her shoulder. He’s doing his best to hold himself together. Don’t want to look like a big girl’s blouse in front of all these doctors.

‘How you doing, mate?’ Dad’s fake cheeriness doesn’t stop his voice from cracking.

‘Feels like someone’s drilled a hole in my head.’ I get a chuckle from the crowd. ‘You looked behind the curtain yet?’

‘We saw it from up there,’ Dad says.

‘How’s it looking from down here, though?’

‘God love, don’t look,’ Mum says but I can hear Dad moving behind me.

‘Jesus,’ Dad says in alarm. I can hear Doctor More smirk. There’s a pause. ‘Yeah, it’s pretty gruesome.’

‘Is it bad?’ Mum says.

‘You definitely shouldn’t look, love.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you nearly fainted when we watched *Robocop 2*,’ Dad says.

I start laughing. ‘Did she really?’

‘Yeah, it wasn’t a great date. Not my finest hour.’

My laughter is infectious. I start off and then the giggling spreads to Dad. Mum makes a serious face but that only makes us laugh more. Then she catches it and we’re all okay. Everything is fine. Like we’re watching a lazy Sunday afternoon film.

‘Nick, I need you to be still,’ Doctor More says. I try to keep a straight face but I can’t. It’s like I’ve got the giggles in church.

The dust infuser is wheeled through the door, the same machine that they used on me the first time. The only difference is that they're using that fuck off great big needle this time. The nurse takes the plastic cap off the evil bloody thing. It's not even a needle, more like a massive metal drinking straw. For a moment I imagine my brain being sucked up through it. I shake the thought off.

Behind the dust infuser comes across another trolley bearing a device I'd never seen before, only heard of. It's a shiny metal sphere with four plastic legs and through the glass window at the front I can see brass circuitry and fibre optic cabling. It's maybe half a meter to a side, as tall again.

This must be the Central Processing Unit.

'Connect everything up,' Doctor More says. Technicians start to pull cables from the ducts at the back of the dust infuser. They plug them into various ports in the CPU and in turn wire the whole apparatus into the tall server banks around the room. Doctor More turns to address the camera as they busy themselves.

'We'd like to thank our fellow researchers at MIT for collaborating with us to develop this neural dust technology. Doctor Banks and his team are not only responsible for this, but they also custom manufactured the emulation platform to our exact specifications.' He gestures to the sphere and the accompanying servers. 'I cannot overstate their contribution and we are immensely proud to share this achievement with them.'

'The patient has been given several dust infusions already so that his central nervous system is saturated with the particles. The final dust infusion must be given at the point of transfer to minimise transcription errors when the live dust meets the inert dust already in the brain. Our best estimate as to the duration of the download is somewhere between four and eight hours. Once that is completed then central cognition can be transferred over and the procedure will be complete.'

‘Okay, let’s get this into place.’ The infuser is wheeled behind me. There’s a click as motors whirl and the articulated arm wielding the needle positions itself above my head. Across the room a big TV shows the view from the arm’s camera. The end of the needle hovers over the pink meat of my brain. A wiggling vein pulses just below the surface, dancing with the thrum of my blood.

‘Inserting the needle now,’ Doctor More says. The arm plunges the needle into the soft mass of my brain. I can’t feel it: there are no pain receptors in the brain itself, but the wet squishing sound makes my stomach flip.

‘Beginning final dust infusion.’

A switch clicks and there’s the sound of a bathtub plughole being pulled. Glug glug glug.

‘Activating inert particles.’

The active dust meets the inert and that evil cold feeling crawls all over my body. I can feel it in the tips of my fingers and behind my eyes. My skin tingles as imaginary frost dances over it. My hand spasms involuntarily. Mum redoubles her grip on it. My legs start to shake.

‘It’s alright love, it’s okay.’ Her voice is soaked in panic.

‘Nick, are you okay?’ Doctor More sounds frightened too. ‘Come on Nick, talk to me.’

After a minute, the shaking subsides. I’ve got a migraine tier headache and my fingers feel like they’ve got frostbite. Mum’s hand is burning hot in mine.

‘It’s the cold again,’ I manage to say without my teeth chattering.

‘Nothing we didn’t expect.’ Doctor More pats my shoulder and then turns to address the camera. ‘We’re still investigating the causes of the transformed sensation the patient has experienced whenever a dust infusion is given. The reaction to the active dust seems particularly intense, so more research will definitely be necessary.’

Magic dust is watching my brain. Each tiny particle is latched onto a different neuron, examining its structure and monitoring the firing of synapses. Digging about in my memory banks. Doctor More said it's like opening Task Manager on your computer. All those processes behind the scenes that you never knew were going on. The dust notes each one of them down and then passes them on to the server bank to be stored.

'We're going to start our transcription now, Nick. The bulk download will take at least four hours. I'm going to go with my team so we can run some diagnostics and check that everything is working properly. Can I do anything for you before I go?'

'A blanket, please.' The machine next to me registers that my temperature is completely normal even though I'm shivering like Scott of the Antarctic.

'I'll see if we can find a sterile one to bring you,' Doctor More says. 'Try and sleep if you can.'

The door swings to and fro as Doctor More leaves.

Mum is stroking my arm. She whispers into my ear how brave I am—

—I'm at the doctors, getting my jabs. I get a sweet for being brave—

I sleep for a while, full of strange dreams—

—Skinned knees while I learnt to ride a bike.

My first kiss. Carrie who liked those strong mints.

Diagnosis day. 'Nick, I'm sorry to say but this is very serious.'

Laughing at mint Vienetta.

Remembering a few words. Cat, soap, and cranberry.

My first night out to a pub. Head in a toilet later the same evening.

Debbie having her leg off.

Sick that tastes like Werther's.

Dad sneaking me a glass of wine. Not good on the chemo stomach.

The smell of sulphur, like a bad fart. Egg sandwiches. Egg mayo sandwiches that Mum used to make when I was little. I hated the way they smelled, the way they tasted and the way the stench would work its way up your nose and obliterate everything else. She'd make them for picnics and put them in the blue plastic cooler with the rest of the food. After ten minutes, absolutely everything in there would taste of egg. Even the cans of diet coke—

—My brain drags me out of sleep. I open my eyes a crack. The lights in the operating theatre have been turned down low. A few nurses and doctors mill about, tending to the machines and watching for any sign of trouble. Mum and Dad sit off to one side, both asleep. Mum's head is resting on Dad's shoulder. Dad's head is bowed, giving him a comedy double chin. The facemask he's wearing twitches as he snores.

'Hello?' I whisper. I don't want to wake them up.

'Hey Nick,' Doctor More says, stepping into view and crouching down beside me. 'How are you feeling?'

'Cold still. What time is it?'

'It's a little after ten. Transcription is taking much longer than we'd expected due to the sheer volume of data. It's all going fine though.'

'How much longer do you think it will be?'

'Going by the rate we're currently operating at probably another two hours or so. Do you want me to wake your parents up?'

'No, let them sleep. They'll just sit there worrying otherwise.'

'Okay. I'll be nearby if you need me. Just call out.'

'Doctor More?'

'Yes?'

‘Do you think this is going to work?’

‘I think it will. We should be able to transfer you soon.’

‘That’s good.’

‘You feeling okay about that?’

‘I’m nervous.’

‘I’m not surprised.’

‘What will happen after the transfer?’

‘Lots of diagnostics and tests. You’re going to have a few days of them, I’m afraid. We can read all the data but only by testing your cognitive function will we know if everything is there.’

‘And then you’ll make the announcement?’

‘Not straight away. We’ll give you a few weeks to get acclimated. A lot of people are going to want to talk to you. Then we’ll have to prove it can be done again, for validation.’

‘Another patient?’

‘Yep. Then we’ll refine the process hopefully make it cheaper, quicker and maybe a little less messy.’ We both laugh. ‘There’s no laws for this kind of thing yet. We’ll just have to see what people think.’

‘What about...?’ I start to say but Doctor More interrupts me.

‘I’m really sorry Nick, but I’ve still got a load of work to do. We’ll have all the time in the world to talk afterwards. Just try and relax. Get some more sleep.’

‘Okay,’ I say but I don’t want to go back to sleep. I don’t want to go back to the dreams I was having earlier. Memories spilling out everywhere. I couldn’t stop it. I watch Mum and Dad sleep instead.

A hand touches my arm.

‘It’s time,’ Doctor More whispers into my ear. The operating theatre is packed with people again. A team is clustered around the servers, peering into tablet screens. Another technician makes final adjustments to the interior of the chrome sphere.

‘Can you wake them up, please?’

Doctor More gives my Dad a gentle shake. Dad’s head bobs up in surprise and then he looks confused for a moment.

‘What’s going on?’ he mumbles.

‘Mr. March, it’s time.’ Doctor More is doing full on, considerate bedside manner. My Mum wakes up too, her confusion snapping away in an instant. She comes over and holds my hand.

‘Please don’t go,’ she says. Her voice is a whisper in my ear.

‘Hey, it’s okay. It’s all going to be okay. I pat her hand.

‘We love you,’ Dad says. He doesn’t bother wiping away his tears now. They spill over his cheeks and soak into his mask. ‘You’re so brave.’

‘Emulation platform stable?’ Doctor More says. Someone calls out confirmation. ‘Dust saturation good? Links all reporting? Okay, I think we’re go for transfer. Ready Nick?’

‘Wait, wait,’ I say. I grip Mum’s hand tighter. I smile at them. ‘I love you both and I’ll see you soon.’

‘No, don’t-’ Mum says but nurses pull her back with gentle but insistent hands. Doctor More leans down to whisper in my ear.

‘Thank you, Nick. Thank you for making this possible.’

‘It’s okay.’ Deep breath. My own eyes are blurring from tears. Staring across the room at Mum and Dad. Arms around each other. ‘Let’s do this.’

‘We’re go,’ Doctor More says. A flurry of activity around the room. The final checklist is read out in call and response, like a spaceship being launched.

‘Emulation?’

‘Good.’

‘Dust?’

‘Good.’

‘Links?’

‘Good.’

‘Initiate transfer in five... four... three... two... one... hold on Nick... go.’

The cold is replaced by static electricity coursing through my nerves and then I’m falling. Through the table, down, down, down as I get compressed and pulped, sorted, and teased through all the wires. Gravity reverses and I’m flying upwards, rushing up towards something I can’t see and then...

Snap.

I’m confused for a moment, not sure what I’m looking at. It’s the operating theatre but I’m watching it through a camera, wired up to the server towers. How am I... something else is wrong.

It takes me a moment to realise. I don’t have a shape. I can’t feel my body. Blind panic for a moment. Deep breath. Wait. I can’t do that either. I force myself to relax through sheer force of will.

People are clustered around the operating table. One of them turns around. It’s Doctor More. Through the gap in the crowd he’s left I can see my own face. My jaw is slack and my eyes are closed. I can see the edge of my skull and the meat of my brain and the dried blood crusting around the halo. I didn’t realise how much blood there was.

‘Nick? Are you there?’ Doctor More says.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I’m here.’

At the sound of my voice Dad turns around, his face pale with shock, while Mum weeps over the body of her son.

The front door of Debbie’s apartment smashes open. I jump out of my skin, falling off the sofa. Marky stands there, red faced and eyes wide trying to catch his breath and desperately tell us something.

‘What the hell?’ Frankie shouts. ‘Woah, calm down, breathe!’

‘Hacked!’ he finally wheezes.

‘What?’

‘We’ve been hacked. Something is connected to Nick’s systems.’

‘Oh fuck no.’ Frankie bolts for the door, her footsteps echoing in the night.

I’m about to follow when I hear a creak behind me.

Debbie’s hopping up and down on her single leg, holding onto the doorframe to keep upright.

‘What’s going on, love?’

‘Marky says Nick’s been hacked, I think, and Frankie ran downstairs and—’

‘Shut up and help me with my fucking leg.’

Twenty-Two

‘Room four,’ the nurse says.

‘Thanks.’ Bill tightens his grip on the cardboard box under his arm. He hates the sticky feeling of sweat dripping down his back and making his palms all nasty. He wipes his brow to clean the sheen away. A few drops escape and trickle into his eyes. He blinks away the salt. It stings.

The anorexia unit is quiet after the morning meal. All the patients retreat to their rooms. On every wall there’s a laminated schedule. When mealtimes are and how much patients need to eat. Snacks between main meals are paired with fun activities to follow. It’s a bit like a weird, food-based summer camp.

Hanging on the wall outside each room is a little whiteboard with a felt pen on a string. The patients have each written their names on them and all decorated the space around with doodles.

MARK. The name is surrounded by detailed drawings of twisting vines.

SOPHIE. A frowny face. ‘FUCK OFF,’ written beneath it. A nurse stops to rub the offending phrase away.

SUE.

Sue’s written her name in quick block capitals and decorated her sign with the PLANET CRUSADERS logo and ‘BATTLE SISTERS FTW!’

Bill pauses outside the door. Through the glass window he can see her sitting cross-legged on the bed. She’s still wearing her oversized jumper and the baggy trackie bottoms. A big fuzzy dressing gown over both. She looks like she’s bundled up for winter. Around her thin wrist is a hospital bracelet.

‘Come on you fucker,’ Bill mutters to himself, working up the courage to knock on the door.

‘Come in,’ Sue says. She looks up. ‘Bill!’

Bill envelopes her in a hug. They hold each other. Bill pushes his face into her shoulder to hide the fact he’s crying. She smells soapy and sterile, the industrial hospital laundry making her tracksuit cleaner than it’s been in years. Her hair usually feels like straw, but the food and routine have helped.

‘Self-care is one of the things people need help with,’ the doctor had told him.

‘It’s good to see you.’ She’s buried her face in his chest and her voice is muffled.

‘You too.’

They break apart and Sue sinks back down onto the mint green bedclothes. Bill drags a chair from the corner of the room to sit next to her.

‘You alright?’

‘I’m okay.’ Sue sniffs. ‘I’ve put on a bit. The doctors seem happy.’

‘You’re looking a bit better.’

‘Please don’t. I mean... just not about weight.’

‘No, no, I was talking about your hair. Honestly. It’s nice.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, it’s lovely.’

‘Thanks. How’s Mack? Has Frankie come back yet?’

‘I dunno. Mack went off to find her. He... he’s been really nice to me. Like looking after me and stuff.’

Sue puts her hand out. Bill takes it. His fat sausages clutch at her long piano hands.

‘It’s okay if you’re not alright, Bill,’ Sue says.

Bill breaks down. Great streamers of snot burst from his nose as he bawls. Tears run down his puffy red cheeks and drip off his chin. Sue hugs him and he cries like a child in jumping raggedy breaths.

She holds him tight. Strokes his back, letting him get it all out. The tears die down to a gentle wheeze. She wipes his red rimmed eyes and kisses him.

‘Come here,’ she says.

They lie on the bed, just holding each other. Bill’s massive arms around her, holding her like a miniature, delicate but loving. She can feel his breathing, quiet and steady. They doze for half an hour and then are woken by a knock on the door.

Bill sits up for a moment, confused where he is. The door opens a crack, and a nurse sticks her head through the door.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘Is she sleeping?’

‘We were just dozing.’ Bill turns red.

‘You’re not in trouble. It’s just snack time.’ The nurse holds up a Twix, the golden foil shining underneath the fluorescents. ‘She needs to come and eat with the others.’

‘Can’t she stay here with me?’

‘We have to make sure she actually eats it.’

‘I can do that,’ Bill says. ‘I brought a game for her. We’ll play while she eats.’

The nurse gives him a look, before shrugging in a ‘I shouldn’t but I’m feeling nice’ sort of way. She hands him the Twix.

‘Make sure she eats it and if she offers you any, don’t take it.’ The nurse lowers her voice. ‘Don’t cock up mate or I’m the one in trouble.’

‘I won’t,’ Bill says. She smiles at him and shuts the door. Bill goes and sits on the bed. Sue rolls over and looks at him through half closed eyes.

‘Hey,’ she says.

‘Hey.’ Bill holds up the Twix. ‘Snack time.’

‘I can have it in here?’

‘Yeah.’

Sue pushes her way to full consciousness.

‘I brought a game for you.’

‘You did?’

‘Yeah.’ Bill reaches down to the side of the bed and picks up the cardboard box. He hands it to her.

The painting on the front of the box shows rolling multi-coloured fields, packed to the brim with strange alien crops. Purple trees hang heavy with electric blue fruit. An alien cross between strawberries and sweetcorn grows in long rows. A Megasoldier stands holding a wooden handled hoe, looking out over the fields. He’s shed his armour plating, reducing him down to a strong lithe robot.

The words on the front of the box read ‘PLANET CRUSADERS: FIELDS OF VAVRE EXPANSION SET.’

‘What the hell?’ Sue says. ‘They released a farming expansion?’

‘Yeah, I was confused too, but it got a bunch of new models in it. I haven’t painted them yet, but we can still play the game.’

They pass the rest of the day quietly. The Twix is extracted from its wrapper and eaten in slow, occasional bites. Sue inspects the new models while Bill sets up the board. The hexes on the cardboard surface represent different resources and hazards. The farming Megasoldiers hop over them, tending to the fields on Vavre.

Bill and Sue work together to build a little farm and Sue soon forgets about the empty Twix wrapper, lying on the floor like a crumpled sheet of gold.

I finally manage to jam Debbie's leg on and then I'm crashing down the stairs. Down into the basement, behind the bookcase and through the tunnel. Frankie and Marky are frowning into screens and clicking through programs. Rosie is dragging cables from the computer and connecting them up to the server towers.

'Where the fuck is this coming from?' Frankie shouts.

'Working on it,' Marky calls back.

'Nick's drawing a lot of power,' Rosie shouts, inspecting the temperature readouts on the towers. She wipes sweat off her brow. The air is muggy and thick with the hum of cooling fans working furiously.

'Nick, talk to me,' Frankie says. 'Nick please, talk to me mate.'

'I I I I I think think think think I'm I'm I'm getting get- getting better.'

Nick's voice echoes like it's coming through a dodgy phone line.

'Marky, tell me what's going on,' Frankie says.

'Somethings downloading files from the towers. An outside connection is pulling Nick's data out.'

'Get me an IP number.'

'People this clever wouldn't leave their IP unmasked-'

'Fucking try will you!' Frankie practically hauls Marky out of the chair and starts working. I move behind her.

'Who do you think it is?' I say.

'I haven't got a fucking clue. Marky's probably right; anyone who could manage this is smart enough to cover their tracks.'

'What do we do?'

'I don't know,' Frankie says. 'I don't... wait. It's registering, I've got the number.'

A small pop up appears and displays the IP number. Frankie and I both stare at it in dumb silence.

‘Is that?’ I say.

‘Holy shit it is. What the fuck?’

‘What? What is it?’ Marky says.

‘That’s... that’s the IP address for Wetware City. We see it every time we log in.’

‘We’re being hacked by game developers?’ Marky’s panic is replaced by confusion.

‘We’re connected to the servers and files are being downloaded out. Jesus Christ, I need to get into Wetware. Mack, where’s your laptop?’

‘Back upstairs.’

‘We need to go now.’

Behind us the door opens, Debbie finally having made the arduous journey down three flights of stairs on a leg I think I’ve put on wrong.

‘Use me computer, love,’ she calls to Frankie.

‘Yes,’ Frankie says and rushes past her thundering up the stairs. ‘Rosie, make sure the stacks don’t overheat.’

Marky follows Frankie and I’m just about to rush off as well when Debbie catches my arm.

‘Don’t you fucking make me do those stairs by meself again,’ she growls. I take her arm and help her make the crawl back to the top.

<HOW WE DOING BOYS?> Three-Two-Five says. He folds his arms and looks up at the giant. They’ve really done some good work here. Managed to cover nearly ninety percent of the body with skin. There are only a few gaps where you can see the inner

workings. Sure, the eyes are different colours, but they managed to find lenses big enough for both. And so what if they couldn't get enough meat together to make a proper right foot? Moories get by on metal ones fine.

<LAST FEW POWER HOOKUPS ARE BEING DONE NOW, BOSS.> Clean Boy directs two teams of Moories hauling gigantic power cables on their shoulders. They lock the massive brass plugs into sockets on the walls, cheering each other on.

<EVERYONE SEEMS HAPPY.> Eight-Four comes up behind Three-Two-Five and claps a hand on his shoulder. <I'VE GOT A GOOD FEELING ABOUT THIS, Y'KNOW? I THINK IT'S GOING TO WORK.>

<IT BETTER BLOODY WORK. I'LL BE PISSED IF WE DID ALL THIS GRAFT FOR NOTHING.>

<IT WOULDN'T BE FOR NOTHING! ALL OF US WOKRING TOGETHER LIKE THIS, IT'S AWESOME.> Clean Boy double checks the power couplings. Satisfied, he gives them an affectionate pat and goes to join the others. <THAT'S EVERYTHING. EVERYBODY BACK!>

At the command, the remaining Moories on the scaffolding climb down and join the trio, huddling behind them and chattering to each other with excitement. Clean Boy opens his interface and turns it around to Three-Two-Five. <WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO THE HONOURS?>

<I WOULDN'T SAY NO.> He takes the interface and puts it in front of him. On the screen three virtual dials await him. He reaches out to the first one then hesitates.

<WHAT'S WRONG?> Eight-Four looks at him.

<NOTHING'S WRONG. I JUST FEEL LIKE... I FEEL LIKE SOMEONE SHOULD SAY SOMETHING Y'KNOW? THIS IS A BIG MOMENT AND ALL.>

<WHAT DO YOU WANT US TO SAY?> Clean Boy looks at Three-Two-Five in confusion.

<SOMETHING PROFOUND. OR HEARTFELT MAYBE?>

<WELL, WHICH ONE DO YOU WANT: HEARTFELT OR PROFOUND?>

Eight-Four clicks with irritations.

<PROFOUND SEEMS THE MOST APPROPRIATE. NO WAIT, HEARTFELT. WE'VE ALL WORKED SO HARD AND THAT AND I'M REALLY PROUD OF ALL OF YOU.>

<OH, SHUT YOUR TRAP.> Eight-Four grabs the interface off him and turns the three dials. The lights in the cavern dim. The power couplings start to spark and whine. The cables plugged into the back of the giant's head begin to shudder and blinding arcs of lightning jump to the earth, files being pulled into its mind.

In the dark of the room the clustered Moories all jump as they feel the boom of a gigantic heart.

<WELL, I STILL THINK SOMEONE SHOULD HAVE SAID SOMETHING.>

Twenty-Three

Frankie and I materialise in Wetware City standing in a pile of guts. The half rotten remains of an ogre muscle-boy splattered across the tarmac.

‘Jesus,’ Frankie says looking down at the smeared body.

I look around. The streets of Wetware are quiet, save for the occasional distant explosion or gunshots. On a street corner there’s a man in black robes proclaiming that the apocalypse has come. He’s not far off. Wetware’s iconic skyline has been reduced to rubble. The Mycelium Theatre has been hacked to pieces and then left to grow wild, no one to tend it.

The Cola Corp building, shaped like a soda can looks like a giant has crumpled it in with its huge fist. The sides buckled, the satellite dish like a ring pull on top, torn off.

The Chop Shop still smoulders. Players and Moories scavenge through the debris. Fighting over whatever cheap treasures they could find.

‘Holy Christ on a bicycle.’ Frankie looks over her ruined kingdom, all thoughts of Nick forgotten for a moment. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘Power vacuum. With us gone, everyone tried to grab what they could,’ I say. ‘What about Nick?’

‘I don’t know,’ Frankie says. ‘Files were being downloaded out into the game server. But there’s nothing here—’

The ground beneath us rumbles. A massive thump, like someone crashing their fists against a door.

‘What was that?’ I look around.

‘Sssh.’ Frankie drops to the ground and puts her ear against the tarmac. ‘Listen.’

I strain to hear. 'What?'

'There's something... beneath the city.'

The ground bucks this time. The sound is cataclysmic. I struggle to keep my footing.

'I think we should move...' Frankie gets up.

We're deafened as the end of the street explodes. Chunks of tarmac are thrown into the air as something pushes up from underground. The whole street starts to collapse, cracks racing along the pavement. The ground tilts beneath us. The rusting hulk of an abandoned car slides past and tumbles into the expanding sinkhole.

'Hang on,' I yell over the deafening roar. I grab hold of a lamppost as I slide towards it and then catch hold of Frankie's jacket with my other hand.

'Holy shit,' Frankie screams. Something is pushing up from the maw.

A gigantic hand. Taller than both of us. The skin is patchy and through it I can see the crackle of electronic components. An arm follows and in the twisted bare metal of the forearm I can make the shape of a car engine, pumping orangey blood through clear sewage pipes. Nerve fibres made of copper wire and plastic sheathing spark and twitch with spastic motion.

I look back up. A hotdog cart careens down the street towards us.

'Look out!'

I let go of the lamppost and the cart smashes into it, tearing it free from the ground with a scream of metal. I pull Frankie towards me, hugging her to my chest.

The hand tries to catch hold of the crumbling foundations around it. They slide away, in an avalanche of concrete and rebar. It redoubles its grip.

Frankie and I scrabble to catch hold of the concrete, get hold of anything. We skid down the road, towards the sinkhole. Frankie dives sideways, her hands finding the metal grating of a sewer. I've got hold of one her legs.

The hand manages to get a hold on the street. It tilts again, until it's vertical, Frankie and I dangling.

'Hold on!' I look up. Frankie's face is red from the effort of the holding both our weight.

'I can't—'

She lets go and we both fall towards the maw.

My eyes are burning. I cough, wheezing out a mouthful of dust. I try and push myself up. Rubble scatters off my back. Bits of broken brick and heaps of gravel. I roll over and groan. I just need a minute.

'Mack?' I can hear Frankie's voice, somewhere. I don't know where. I can't believe I'm alive. I manage to sit up.

'Frankie? Where are—' I break off in a coughing fit. I hear footsteps scrambling over the rubble. Frankie kneels down beside me. She's covered in dust, her face scratched and bloody.

'You okay?' She wipes the dust from my face. I look at her. Her eyes are wide.

'I'm fine, I'm fine. What the hell happened?'

She points. 'Look.'

The bowl of the sinkhole is a hundred meters across, and I can see the street high up above us. From the rubble, broken pipes gush water in a fine mist and torn cables vomit up showers of sparks.

The gigantic arm arcs over us like a huge bridge, still clutching at the foundations. Its shadow eclipses us as it moves, pulling and working.

A giant is emerging from deep beneath Wetware City. Its head is bent like a man kneeling to be knighted. The other arm catches in the tangle of power cables, and

it pulls against them, like a butterfly struggling with a cocoon. The cables snap and finally the figure stands.

Around its feet is a legion of Moories. Their robes are no longer orange, the dust coating them so completely that it leaves them little sand fleas. They're... cheering. A strange electronic sound, like joyful hard drives. Metal hands raised to the sky, dancing back and forth on their pointed feet.

'What the?' I say. I look around. Frankie is laughing. Doubled over. She wipes tears from her eyes.

'We connected Nick up to Wetware, to talk to you through the Moorie... it must have... I don't know.' She whoops and jumps up and down. The giant pushes itself up.

The titanic frame has been cobbled together out of scrap and cast-off pieces of flesh. Its skin is a massive patchwork quilt: acres of human flesh meet enormous sheets of carbon fibre which in turn are connected with rubbery synthetic polymers. Through the gaps in the stitching the guts of the creature can be seen working away. Massive sewer pipes twitch with peristalsis, moving waste through artificial intestines. Immense strands of rubbery white plastic fibres make the muscles, spasming to drag the figure upright. Through the transparent plastic casing of the chest, the heart jumps and writhes. One chamber is made from a spent clone birthing tank and another is stitched together out of the unmistakable fungus of the Mycelium Theatre.

The giant surveys the city with mismatched eyes. One glows with the electric pink of a recycled neon shop sign. The other is made of octopus skin, cycling through greens and purples as the chromatophores are squeezed and stretched.

It's missing the top of its head. From the round bowl pokes the brain. The curves and folds are made of fused masses of circuit boards and recycled nerve tissue. Arcs of lightning crackle across its surface.

It's Nick. A Frankenstein giant version, cobbled together out of the cast offs of Wetware City. A voice booms from the sky above.

'Can you please state your name for the record?'

The giant opens its mouth and speaks. 'My name is Nicholas John March.'

'I don't understand,' I say. Lost doesn't begin to cover it.

'MMO's are huge. Wetware's server is the only place with enough storage, to do the transfer and rebuild the architecture.'

The giant looks down at us. I stumble backwards. It's like being stared at by Godzilla. With titanic slowness, the giant kneels down, taking care to avoiding crushing the Moories around it. Frankie steps forward, reaching a hand up towards it.

'Nick... are you there?' Her voice is a whisper.

'Yes. I'm here.' Nick's voice is gentle, but the sheer size of him makes it boom.

'You're okay?'

'I'm okay.' The giant smiles. Frankie turns, crying, and throws her arms around me. I look on the devastation all around us.

'Wetware City... it's all gone...' I manage to get out. Frankie lets me go. She grins.

'All the player data has been erased, to make space for Nick!'

'You mean... we'll never be able to play Wetware again?' I try and keep the terror out of my voice. Losing Wired Connection was bad enough but the thought of the *entire game being gone*.

'Yep!' Frankie says. 'All of it. Every file and version of the game.'

I stumble and then sink to the ground. I sit in the dust and the rubble, drawing my knees up to my chest.

'But... what are we going to play?' I say.

Frankie laughs so hard that she chokes, tears spilling down her face. She sits down next to me, wiping her eyes. She shows me her hand, the droplets trickling over her skin.

‘It’s *nearly* all gone. These two characters, we’re the last two files. When we log out, there will be no game to log back into.’

‘So, what do we do?’

Frankie leans her digital head against my faux shoulder. In the real world, she sits next to me on Debbie’s sofa, doing the exact same.

‘I think we should sit here for a bit. Just enjoy the last of Wetware before it goes.’

‘Okay.’ I can feel the nervous jumping of my stomach. I put my arm around Frankie. We look out at Nick and the ruins of Wetware.

It was just a game, really. Somewhere to hang out. Somewhere to meet people.

But that’s what made it special.

As Metalfist drove his spade into the ground the hot sun beat down on his back. The high season rains had left the ground thick and hard to work, but it signalled that the crop would be ready soon. The combination of boiling sun and heavy rain left everything covered in a fine mist of condensation. Metalfist pauses to wipe the drops from his lenses.

He hunkers down again and drives the spade back into the earth. A sopping pile of dirt is thrown over his shoulder. Another slam of the shovel. A crack like a ripe apple being broken.

‘Bugger,’ Metalfist says. He drops the spade and kneels in the dirt.

When his tour had been completed, Strategist Stirling gave him an honourable discharge. Perhaps the finest soldier to ever serve with the Corps, she'd said. As expected, she had risen to command the unit, ousting the grumpy old bastard without much trouble. Metalfist heard he'd retired to some holiday world.

Metalfist's discharge included an overhaul of his body. He'd gone to sleep on the table and half-wondered as he slipped away whether they would just wipe him and download a fresh version of his mind state. He didn't care much. He'd never know. He felt a twinge of guilt for the Metalfist who was bound to come after him.

They didn't. With the buzz of heavy drills, they started to remove his armour plating. The frame beneath was serviced, his metal skeleton oiled and polished. Spent pistons were taken out and fresh ones machined. The huge hands made to carry heavy combat rifles were disconnected and slimmer ones attached. The hydraulic muscles that gave the Megasoldiers their massive strength were swapped for more reasonable, human baseline ones. His nuclear battery was replaced with a fresh one. It'll last a thousand years, they told him.

The final thing was to open up his skull. The cranium was unscrewed like a bottle top. Beneath it was a toughened clear plex dome filled with bio-fluid. His brain was wrinkled and old. The clear casing was punctured by several metal ports, each one connected to a thick, multi-coloured cable.

The mechanic put on thick black gloves and reached into Metalfist's head. With a twist, she disconnected each cable. When all of them were free she pulled out the component they had been attached to. It looked like a metal cigar case, filled with clear cylinders, each one trailing a cable behind it like a dreadlock.

The Combat Stim dispenser. The Strategist dropped it into the bin next to the surgical table. She screwed Metalfist's head back together and started the power up sequence. She thought she'd make herself some tea while he came around.

Now Metalfist scrabbles in the dirt with his precise new fingers. The grime cakes the silver of his hands, but he keeps digging. In the brown and reds of Vavre's earth he finds the two pieces of the fruit he'd sheared in half with the shovel.

He inspects them. They've got a tough yellow outer skin but the flesh inside is thick and rich. He sniffs it. The fruit smells like meat left out on a hot day. Or a dead body. He puts the pieces to the side of the hole and begins to dig again. In the wet earth, he pulls out a cluster of the fruits all connected together by a rubbery white root. He takes a small knife from a pouch on his belt and cuts them free from the ground. He holds the trophy aloft, inspecting them for a moment. He climbs out of the hole in the ground and picks up the spade. Carrying his things, he sets off down the track back towards the village.

His house is near the fields. He doesn't like to be far from the crop. The tree's lining the road ripple as Vavrian's detach themselves and wave to him.

'Metalfist!' one calls. Metalfist nods to the shouter.

His house isn't big or fancy. The walls are made from living trees woven together by a team of Vavrians. It had taken several days to get the structure right and then a few more to grow the trees for everything else. Metalfist worked with a few Strategists to fell the trees and then shave them down into planks. They built the doors and window frames and even a bed.

Attached to the wall of the house is a metal water pump. Metalfist drops the spade and holds the fruit beneath the clear cold water to wash away the dirt. He gives them a shake. The fruits are bigger than the ones they grew last year, and it wasn't even time to harvest yet. The dung from the older trees is perfect fertiliser.

'What have you got, Megasoldier?' someone calls. Metalfist doesn't look up but smiles to himself.

'I told you to stop calling me that.'

‘Well, we’re not going to.’ Spongy Underfoot smiles at Metalfist. ‘Is that the new Yarra?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ripe?’

‘I think so.’

‘May we?’

‘Go ahead.’

Spongy Underfoot plucks one of the fruits off the stem. He twists it in his hands, breaking it in half. Rich pungent juice soaks his hands. He breathes in the smell. His tongue darts out, the four points tearing away a little piece. He chews in an odd motion, the tongues and teeth working together to grind the food down into a paste.

‘It’s nearly there. We think it needs another week or two. At least we know when we need to harvest.’

‘I’ll start putting people together. There’s a lot of it out there.’

‘Thank you, Metalfist.’

‘It’s no problem.’

‘We must go. Saplings to tend to.’ Spongy Underfoot’s laughter is still peculiar to Metalfist, even after all these years. Grinding and rough, but Metalfist laughs with him. Spongy Underfoot’s most recent child was proving to be a handful.

Metalfist hangs the fruit above his front door. The bad smell of the Yarra kept away the crawling insects that emerged during the high season and burrowed into the trees. He hangs the spade on a peg next to it. He pushes the door open.

He really should tidy up. A job for another time though. It’s a special day today. It’s his birthday. Or rather, the day when Riley Sallow stopped and Metalfist began. Both his birth and death day. The date on the enlistment form gave him this single link back.

He goes over to the wooden chest at the foot of the bed. A present from Spongy Underfoot when the house had been completed. It's beautiful, made of the best wood Spongy Underfoot could create. He lifts the lid and sorts through the things inside.

A piece of shrapnel blasted from his armour.

His plasma rifle, the power cell long dead.

A letter from Wirenerve, serving on some far distant world.

His discharge papers signed and witnessed by Strategist Stirling.

Then, buried at the very bottom, is a small scrap of cloth. He unfolds it carefully and lays it flat on top of the chest.

The torn piece is made from rich golden Kevlar battle weave and though faded he can still see traces of the green trim, patterned like a circuit board. It had arrived a year ago with a message from the Sentience of the Core Computer.

Cloak fragment retrieved from Kufari Prime. Our thanks.

He rubs the cloth between finger and thumb. He remembers tearing the cloak from his shoulders. He remembers receiving it. Kneeling. Becoming Commander Metalfist.

He puts it back into the chest and closes the lid. He stands up and goes back outside. Spongy Underfoot is waiting for him and the high season rain has just begun to fall again.