

‘WORM’ – EXCERPT: CHAPTER ONE

BY

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Approximately 3100 words

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1 — DEEP DREAMING

Blue-green filament vibrates a connection, sending a haptic pulse into the raw spine as magnets suck in and seal the wire. A drunkenness clouds your vision, followed by nausea and what starts as a lump in your throat soon becomes painful asphyxiation, overtaking, swallowing you under. Then you're in.

It's hard to trace when you become a professional in this line of work. It seems like an age passes between dives. It could only have taken moments to any waking party, but to you, months of consciousness can pass in an hour. Streamlined, active thought: controlled and invasive, that's how you work. I've been diving for about four years. Most divers could tell you how many times they've been under from a Reflex Directory Search, but I'm offline. It's old-fashioned and inconvenient, increasingly - but not all dives I'm on are licensed.

Most licensed dives are contracted to the big bio-tech testing companies, but droids are expensive to hire and are programmed with strict access restrictions. So, where does an independent mod builder get his .mpk download tested? They come to me, with a secure transfer of Electronic Financial Tokens which I'll upload to my Financial Credit through an automated tip service algorithm – no big deposits, just small, constant drips of FC10 or 15 and the finance authority's data writes off the transactions as negligible transfers.

To keep it sweet I code a holo-livestream answering tech requests. The questions are generated by a keyword-tracer I leave in the .mpk of any client that under-pays me, or I don't like the look of. It's mostly non-malicious, the user's data just feeds a zeitgeist suggesting quick-fix solutions to rookie queries: "why doesn't my beautyFix holo work on radiation scarring?", "How to stop concealed_arms.mpk being blocked by Federal Cybernetics?". The advice I've programmed replies from a list of basic troubleshooting methods then auto-resolves and closes the query, depositing a tip into my FC. Clean, traceable and funded by the ignorance of the metanet.

It's almost ironic, that their .mpks are almost certainly working to peak efficiency, having been rigorously tested to meet the spotless requisites of the Cybernetic Standards Association, and, troubleshooted by a professional, like me. The core of this is, simply, that when downloading a modular package (MPK) into a synthesised neurocore in your mind, a corrupted file kills - or worse.

For this job, the greasy peddler's scratched together FC400 for a descaling. That's when the mod builder has junked together a bunch of programming from existing downloads, often copyrighted, and needs someone to scrub the tags off. These builds are a nightmare for compatibility issues since the content could come from anywhere... I load it up on a hardmonitor – an old LCD visualisation. I bet they don't even have the components to make these anymore, it's a bloody antique, but it does the job. Black and green crackle over the screen like an 8-bit ink blot. Yep, definitely some problems in start-up then.

After a minute it loads, and a holo-girl walks out onto screen. "Hey baby", it simulates. Great, a sex sim. Notoriously jammed full of viruses, hacker tags and pass-breakers. No surprises he didn't want to test it himself. Load this up when you're connected to the metanet and you'd

almost smell the circuits burn as your FC account is hijacked, your databank is downloaded and your identity is forged to commit crimes across the whole of cyberspace. If I'd known there'd be this much clean-up, I'd have charged triple this. He knew that, obviously, but he's already gone, and I've already been paid. Better get to work.

I unmount the .mpk from the monitor and spit on it for good luck, then lock the cartridge into a thick glass syringe and hook them up to an injection port. I flick my homespace into lockdown and swig the end of a warm beer as the shutters grind down the windows. Outside isn't worth looking at, but I still look. There's just city blocks, cars, neon ads blaring through a hazy atmosphere. The traffic's bad at this time, even on my level and I'm on the fifteenth floor. An exhaust grunts past my window as the shutter creeps down, blackening the glass.

I flick a switch by the door and set them to holo. Lush green pastures fade in, a yellow sun twinkling in the baby blue sky. A deer stumbles into the horizon sweetly and gazes up. I almost gag on my beer. This is worse than the bloody default view. I turn it off as the shutter closes. Sitting down in the synthetic leather-backed chair I pull the injection wire through, and it snaps to the back of my neck. The wires mesh, sending a magnetic thud through my spine and setting my head spinning. I want to throw up, but it would be pointless. I haven't eaten in days. Instead, my eyes start to twitch and vibrate and a blue-green fractal blurs into my vision, turning and pulsing unsettlingly. My eyes are sore, I feel them start to water. Then, in a moment, their outward gaze reverses, and I'm in.

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They say the trick to lucid dreaming is to stay almost awake. The trick to diving is to forget you ever were awake. It's a kind of pre-consciousness. Maybe it's experienced in the womb when the brain is building itself, and with the way Memory Cloud implants are advancing, the next

generation would probably be able to tell you. Or it could be a conceptualised non-existence that we're so familiar with after spending our lives in tech. The idea of being disconnected from the outside world could be as simple as not paying your metanet contract and getting logged out.

There was a power cut in my whole block a couple years back, it lasted four minutes. Four people died. It makes me feel better thinking they were criminals seeking opportunity off the grid – fighting, robbing and getting put down in the process. Not because I care much for justice, I'd just rather accept that than people seeing their own lives as worthless without connection, after only four minutes. There's no data. No-one will ever know. I do know that the generator engineer got on a bus and never came back, but I would've done the same.

You wouldn't want to be responsible for something like that, it'd be investigated as data-terrorism and every memory you ever had would become possession of Federal Cybernetics until the case is resolved. Cases like that don't get resolved. FedNet are privatised public security, on payroll from big tech. All big business from clothing holos to nanofoods is putting something in their pocket, through the books or otherwise. It makes them the only real authority, by sheer access to resources. They're exactly the kind of force that would raid my homespace in a heartbeat if they'd known how much the copyright claims on these .mpks were worth, but they don't know, and I'm not a lawyer, so I get to scrubbing.

Since the .mpks are physical implants on a micro-biological scale, the data is hard storage; it takes up physical space. The only way that space can be observed, however, is internally through a Manual Thought Decoder rooted to the occipital lobe – the back part of the brain that processes sight. MTD technology has been around for decades, it's only in the last few years that MTDs have been fused with cybernetics. It was originally developed for oneirological studies as a way of visualising dreams, now that dream space is the stage for self-aware analysis

of the data being implanted. This can be conceptualised in any flavour, from walking through a field and counting the flowers to performing surgery on a giant brain – whatever you have a vivid grasp of.

The root of debugging is noticing inconsistencies in familiar patterns, so visual conceptualisations are effective here – jigsaws, sudoku – even spot-the-difference. For the descaling I'm doing on this, I need to find the different characteristics in the data, so I assign them personalities. Once the different mod builder's traits are represented, I can start to blend them together until they all seem the same. Characteristics like this are best observed instinctively, so I choose a social concept: a rusty old-world hotel.

Each room has a guest, and the bar has a singer singing old songs everyone knows. The singer represents the consumer; the song represents the program. The process is simple, I meet the guests in the bar and ask them if they like the music. If they don't, I'll play spot the anomaly in their room – a curtain that doesn't match or wallpaper peeling. I make some adjustments and ask them again until everyone's enjoying the song and having a great evening. Simple.

The grotty wooden hotel doors are black with exhaust fumes, but the wood's real. Real enough, at least. I grew up in hotels like this. Apparently I remember the smell, because it's here in the sim. I wish I didn't. I lift the latch and pull. Push? Nope. So, the mod builder didn't even disable the encryption. Great. I drive a wire spike to the back of the lock and fish for the pins. I bet he didn't even know it. That means he's not even loaded up a root module and, more worryingly, that he has no idea what he's actually built his .mpk with. Clink. Okay there's one.

I jab in a short hook and waggle the cylinder. It starts to budge, but it's rusty and grates along the sides slowly. What kind of idiot builds a .mpk with locked code? Maybe it's stolen. Churk-k-k... I nudge the lock another couple millimetres around. No point stealing a dated sex

sim like this unless it was collectable. Judging by the cheap holo-render that greeted me on the LCD, I'd be surprised. Thunk. The lock finally grunts around 45° and I shove the oak doors open. I'm in.

A distressed claret carpet swarms the floor in fake velvet, punctured by stiletto marks and dark stains from the wood rot in the flooring beneath. If the building's unstable, so is the .mpk. No surprises there, then. The lobby is a small, square room, populated by a weasel of a man in his forties. In front of him, a tidy desk with an open guestbook. Behind him, a wall of keys. Simple enough. I step towards him.

"Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to TEST UNDERSCORE BAIT DOT M-P-K. Would you like to check in OR leave a message for a guest OR speak to the hotel manager?" The hotel manager would access manual simulation settings, a direct line to solving problems with the simulation I've constructed, to switch to another visualisation or to get out.

"Afternoon Janus. I'll leave a message." Janus stares blankly for a moment, accessing an internal database. His eyes judder and re-focus.

"Of course, sir. Which guest would you like to leave a message for?" he chimes. I smile. My programming is always satisfying when it works.

"Show list." I command. Janus' pupil jitters again, consuming a line of code, then refocuses. He turns the guestbook over to me and names type themselves out onto the scuffed parchment. A pretty standard workaround – before heading to the bar it's always good to know exactly how many mods are in the package.

Usually that information is encrypted front end, so I'd have no luck asking the guests individually. The hack is to get the package to scan itself – a standard function for updating individual mods and nothing the program flags as suspicious. Wouldn't work for anything that

needs manual updating, like FedNet .mpks or modular firearms – they update offline to keep clear of hacks like this, but most sex sims are streaming constantly so they can log and sell your data. This way I'll be able to see what mods are loaded in the package and read data logged from anyone who's accessed it live – though, with the state of this junk build, I'd be surprised if anyone dared. I read through the mod list. It's long.

There's a few I recognise: ANGELEYES.TEXT is a classic texture mod, it's been ripped so many times I doubt the original builder is even alive anymore. I glance the check-in: last updated four years ago. LOVEMATE.CHR is a character mod. A lot of character simulations started as scans of real people – gathering data about their habits, preferences, desires, even measuring pleasure receptors from different types of stimulation. After a few hours of scans and tests, the data is loaded into a .CHR package and synced with a virtual body. Some of the data would have to be edited to stay compatible with the sim – consent for example. A code won't say no. Unless you program it to.

By the time the sim's released as part of a .mpk there's not much human left, just a glint of consciousness that adds the necessary layer of suspended disbelief. She really wants you. She really likes how you touch her. She really remembered your name. All I see is a ghost, floating in data. The original might have died, or aged, or had four children. I might have met her, but I could never know. She probably wouldn't know herself. After a procedure like that, most people get the memory deleted. Especially if their partner requested access to their Memory Cloud. It's memories like those that get the wedding called off.

Another mod catches my eye: PLATINUMDIAMOND.OCAS. Interesting. An online casino. That means they'd definitely be tracking who the .mpk is loaded into and reading their FC balance, provided they were connected to the metanet. Not heard of the brand though. It

sounds like the kind of place that would have black marble tables and gold painted furnishings. The chairs would be uncomfortable and the cocktails would be in strange-shaped glasses. The dealers would win. The house always wins. I love playing, even more when it's for money, but I hate casinos. They always know how to fuck you.

“Thank you, Janus. I'd like to check in.”

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The foyer opens through panelled double doors into a horseshoe bar. At each point, stairs rise dramatically; red carpet cuffed to the wood by chipped gold braces. Guests mill the bar stools, grazing negronis, martinis, old-fashioned. A pianist drearily ventures through his repertoire. Heavy-footed, drowned in his suit, Marty steps up onto the stage. He's a wide man, so he adjusts his footing side to side once he claims his spotlight. Satisfied with his centre of gravity, his voice crackles down the microphone,

“Gentlemen. Ladies. Allow me to welcome you to a most-awaited portion of this evening...” – his voice trickles and grates through the tannoy system around the bar. It's not powerful, nor inspiring. He sounds out of breath. Over-smoked. Over-rehearsed. Dated. The whole place is. My program is, but I like the sense of tradition. Besides, the constructor kit I built the sim with is older than me, and I couldn't afford the new download with a year's salary.

Vague interest has rippled through guests and attracted a small crowd to the half-moon stage on the far side of the bar.

“...I bid you hold your drinks close and allow your hearts this delicate treat, this nourishment, this sweet scent of soulfulness as I set the stage for our starlight starlet, Starling”.

Starling steps out onto the stage. She's small, eyes-down, timid. Her dress is a myriad of layers, made up of thin, iridescent pieces. When she walks it rolls like the shore.

For years I wondered what a starling sounds like. I assumed it would be that sweet, mournful cry you associate with birdsong. That alluring spell, with a touch of loss. Then, I saw someone showing off a new animal soundboard .mpk they'd downloaded at a party. He was doing requests. His data bank had thousands loaded. I asked him what starlings sound like, he pursed his lips and made a perfect copy of their shrieking, chattering call. Everyone laughed. 'Lucky there's none of that racket these days', one remarked. If I had Memory Cloud, I'd delete that memory. I'd live in ignorance about the starlings. Their name was so beautiful.

The house lights drop and table lamps dim to an orange glow. Starling looks up. A spotlight's silver shimmer glazes her bold eyes. She looks like an angel. The room hushes, and Starling starts to sing. She floats around her melody, caressing each note for a moment, before letting it go. Settling on a motif, she cues the pianist into life and he softly places the chord down. For a moment I'm entranced, but I pull away and head to the bar.

The audience seem mostly engaged, could be a quick fix in the end. Probably just the casino mod standing out and that's easy enough to strip down. Worst comes to worst, I could just disconnect it – it's probably a hidden section front end anyway. I take a seat at the bar and order a beer while I scan the crowd watching Starling. Strange, I don't recognise the song.

I sip the warm, tasteless beer. I tell myself it's an ice-cold lager, that it's got a refreshing citrus twist in the brewing. I take another sip of the chilled, refreshing lager. Better. Further round the bar, a suited man stares into his drink. His bowtie hangs undone around a wrinkled shirt. He looks like the last man at a wedding bar. He's smoking. I program everyone in my sim with a smoking habit, it makes introductions easier.

"S'cuse me, do you have a match?" I throw him out the side of my mouth, while rolling up from a pouch of tobacco.

“Sure”, he mutters into his drink and passes me a faded matchbook. He doesn’t look up. I strike one and suck the flame through my rollie.

“Never heard any voice like that,” I breathe out, “just beautiful.”

“What is?” the man starts, “that husky bar singer? I wish she’d shut up.” Well, I found the anomaly. One of them, at least.

“You got a name, old man?” I ask. He looks up. His features peek from under the shadow of his dusty fedora, a weathered forehead and stubble spiked cheeks. His eyes are deep set and dark, charcoal hair speckled with grey sweeps back from a receded hairline. He could be forty or seventy.

“Me?” he grunts, “people call me ANGEL EYES DOT TEX”