

WORM: CHAPTERS 1, 2

BY

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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 homepage 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 seconds. 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 seconds. 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.TEX 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”.

2 — ANGEL EYES

I stare blankly at the simulation. I notice, sure enough, his eyes are a deep cobalt blue. There's a hint of metallic sheen in there, like an ocean pool glazed with oil. You could swim in those eyes.

"You looking at something, kid?" he spits. I was thirty-three last I checked. Angel Eyes doesn't care. He stubs his cigarette and swigs from the glass. It looks like whiskey. He winces. "Goddam tasteless shit." The barman eyes him warily.

"You drank the others, Angel Eyes. That's all we've got" he shoots over his shoulder as he stirs down a tall, well-dressed lady's old fashioned. I'm starting to notice other guests now – everyone's drinking some kind of concoction, decorated with twists of lime, olives or orange peel, but Angel Eyes is ruthlessly working through a bottle of straight whiskey. The second anomaly. Some kind of incompatibility is clear, but this is the last mod I'd have expected to cause problems – it's old, out of fashion. .TEX mods like these were all the rage when the first consumer holos came out, but customising your eye colour pattern soon caused security breaches across the board. Nowadays you only come across these mods embedded in other .mpks, presumably the holo-girl front end is running the mod. I didn't notice. Angel Eyes gets up from the bar.

"You heading out, Angel Eyes?" the barman asks, with a tired half-interest.

“Yeah, I’m heading out. Some of us got real work to do.” He grips his hat and gives it a firm tug. It could have been a hat tip, had he suggested a better disposition. Instead, it comes across as an attempt to obscure more of his face in shadow as he heads to the lobby. I’ve never seen a mod try to leave before. Where would they go? There’s no coding for the mods to leave the hotel, the sim isn’t built beyond that. Intrigued, I follow him a few paces. He takes a heavy leather overcoat from a hook by the doorway and shrugs it on. He nods to Janus, “I’m back late so hold the room service. I’ll sleep through.” Janus is my program, running alongside the .mpk – the mods within the package shouldn’t be able to communicate with him, that would mean they’re sending data out to my sim. Probably trying to connect to the metanet, that must be what ‘outside’ is representing, but why’s Angel Eyes so keen for an update? Looks like virus activity to me. There were a lot of anomalies in this already, I reckon I’d save myself some grief just disabling for now. I head out to the lobby and turn to Janus,

“Janus, I’d like to speak to the hotel manager”.

“Of course, sir.” Janus’ eyes become entranced with code. Angel Eyes spins to me,

“What do you want now, kid?” he gripes, frustrated. I humour him,

“Nothing for you Angel Eyes, I’m after the hotel manager, Janus?”

“Suit yourself.” Angel Eyes exhales. He pulls on the latch and steps out into a dark street.

The door shuts behind him. Janus regards me blankly, eyes jittering with code.

“Come on, it’s a simple command Janus, it shouldn’t take that-”

“The hotel manager is out at the moment. Shall I notify you when he’s back?”

“What do you mean he’s out? Define.”

“Hotel manager out. Definition. Back-end access disabled while connected to metanet.”

“What are you talking about? We’re not connected to the metanet.” Even still, I feel my stomach sink. Janus switches on an old square monitor screen on the hotel desk and it paints up a browser.

“Confirmation. Metanet connection, active. Would you like to browse, sir?” He turns the monitor to me and I see my FC start to load. Fuck, fuck

“Fuck! End sim. End simulation!”

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Too many things happen simultaneously for my dull, sludging consciousness to process them in order: first I notice hot tears under my swollen eyes, then another hot patch in the side of my ribs – wet, too I note as I bring my hand up to touch-

“Aagh!” Not good. That really fucking hurts. My ears are ringing but this is more than just post-dive nausea, why is everything so bright? The injection port slips away from my neck, dribbling spinal fluid. As I roll off the chair I see the torn hole in my shutter – thick corrugated metal plates being peeled open by black and green droid arms. Shit. FedNet colours.

That’s...How-? The fumes from the city choke the room and dust swirls thick and high. There must have been a blast. A bomb? The side of my rib sears again as I move – it’s grating on something sharp. Shrapnel, I hope, and not a tracer round. Fight or flight kicks in and I choose the latter, time to-

“Aagh! Fuck!” It really hurts to move. I walk-stumble-crawl like a multiple-amputee crab and fling myself into the bathroom. “Lock!” The door sweeps closed but judging by the shredded industrial shutters, it won’t stand for long. Under the sink I smash out a back panel and feel for a screwdriver. God I hope it’s kept its charge. I smash the butt of the tool on the corners of a fake tile in the shower and blow away porcelain dust to find the screws. THUM. A wide hand-print

bends the bathroom door inward. The metal creaks and cracks. I look back to the false panel. Vwurr-Vwurr- that's one corner out. Vwurr- and the next- THUM-kkk. That door is about to go any second. I whirr out another, then the last - but it sticks half-out in the tile dust. I twist it by hand, the thread scoring my fingers. I wish my heart wouldn't pound so fast – I can feel my t-shirt hanging heavy with blood. I bash the last bit out with the back of the screwdriver, fling the panel aside and roll out on to Mrs. Voorheim's balcony. She's great as neighbours go – keeps to herself and occasionally has wine that “needs using up” so invites me round to her apartment. Just another lonely soul in a big, lonely city. One of those evenings, I went to her balcony to smoke (Mrs. Voorheim won't have it in the home) and noticed the patio wrap round the side of my apartment outer wall. I also noticed her car parked there – a maraschino cherry-red Luxar sport. The same car I now roll under and pull wires from with blind precision. Hotwiring an Electromagnetic Vehicle (EMV) is surprisingly simple – all that's needed to get it going is a surge to the trip circuits to enable autostabilisation, tech in high-end EMVs that keep it on the road when you're too drunk to drive. This doesn't, however, bypass the more complex security of the encrypted maglock doors, biometric control mapping or destination input – I'll have to work that out on the way, and hang on for dear- Chiwr-chiwr-chiwr – the circuits have engaged, thank Go- WUUUM- the EMV shoots up about twenty feet, I swing by my weak arm and grapple frantically with the under chassis. I grab hold of a wing mirror and swing myself on top of the Luxar. Mrs. Voorheim rushes out and sees me cling to her car roof, bleeding over the windows, attempting to steal it. I look down and spot half a sad smile slip over her cracked lips. I feel bad. I wish I could've stolen from some cold, deserving bastard. Not a friend. Then she reaches in her pocket and points her key at the EMV. I almost slip my hold as the automatic doors raise open like wings. I roll in thankfully, avoiding questions. But I wonder-BLAM! The

side wall of my apartment blasts open and two chittering FedNet droids scuttle on all-fours across the balcony. Mrs. Voorheim spins to them as a red dot appears on her forehead. Wait,

“Wait!” The doors of the EMV sweep shut as the droid stands to bipedal height and heated plasma surges out from its wrist-mount. Liquid bone melts into her shoulders where her sad smile was a moment ago, and the corpse slips gracefully off the balcony edge. The EMV rotates finding its router and builds to a cruise away – electric pulses humming as it slips through the sky and joins the holoway. In a moment of respite, my adrenaline faults and I pass out.

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Moments or hours later I wake in the car. I’m on the holoway and the inside of the car’s now almost as red as the flashy exterior paintjob. I decide it’s been moments, bleeding at this rate I’d be gone in an hour. Medical kit – under the dash? No. Under-seat drawer? Nothing. I drag myself into the passenger seat and lean behind me to the storage: its overhead like a truck, but only because the engine’s so bloody big. I slide open the cupboard behind the headrest and rifle through. A cream cocktail dress, make-up bag with...yes! Scissors. Sorry Mrs. Voorheim, this looked expensive. I pull my soaked tee off and ball it up. Holding it over the wound with my knee, I cut long strips of the satin material and wrap it around the makeshift dressing. Another rummage finds a half-bottle of gin which goes half on the wound and half down my throat. I pop a couple hefty-looking painkillers from the make-up bag and lie back in the seat, catching my breath. I glimpse myself in the rear-view and it’s a sorry state: blood-caked and bruised – the puffy eyes hadn’t woken wet with tears but blood. The same for my nose and possibly ears – though with the amount I’ve smudged around its hard to tell. What was that – sonic shock from the .mpk? Fuck, the .mpk... What was that program doing leaving the sim? Had it overwritten my own code while I was inside? That’s some serious virus if it got past my firewalls that

quickly, and silently. It gave me its name as well – Angel Eyes. Most programs would be encrypted but this was an open book. Had it already been cracked open and altered? Or was there something hacking it inside the .mpk while I was there? The FedNet droids must have been alerted of an unlicensed dive once I went online, but I've never heard of anything force a metanet connection without user consent – the program must have been able to pass as me while I was in the sim. Who knows what could have been on that mpk. FedNet's problem now, I hope it fries their whole droid unit. I was only online for a moment, but the program seemed to be transferring a lot of data. Maybe it was FedNet bait, trying to catch unlicensed divers out. Doesn't seem their style though, they're blast first, read their rights later – usually alongside the funeral rites. This is way more cloak-and-dagger. Could be data-terrorism, or weaponised .mpk devs. I heard about that from a client once – .mpk's that masquerade as an update to current systems, then turn nasty once they're inside your head, messing with hormone balance to flood the brain or something. Feel like I'd already be dead if that had happened. I raise my gaze out the windshield and scan for a landmark. We're still cruising – there's about ten lanes either side of us, all locked with EMVs. At the city's most congested, around thirty of these holoways run on top of each other, sweeping cars through the electromagnetic currents of the road. To maximise efficiency they constantly morph and re-route between levels by changing the direction of the current. The roads themselves have no physical surface beyond the currents, instead projecting a holographic road that shows traffic updates and reroutes, in amongst adverts and download codes for free-trial .mpks.

The manual controls are still locked away, waiting for a thumbprint of Mrs. Voorheim to activate. They'd be waiting a long time, but if I don't start driving soon the Luxar will loop right round to where we started. The tech itself will be hard coded, so I'd have to find a way inside the

program to upload my own biometric data. Without a monitor or proper set up there's no way I'd be able to get in though... I stretch and my hand wanders absentmindedly behind me in the overhead compartment. It glances against a heavy weight of hard plastic. Curious, I feel for a handhold and take it out to examine. Shit, I didn't expect that. The familiar sensation of power and danger fills my mind as I flip the gun over in my hands. It's small enough to be concealed, it must have been covered by something when I looked before. I don't recognise the model, but it looks like it uses electrically charged rounds. If I could cause a big enough surge in the bio-recognition module, it might corrupt the ownership data and let me make a factory reset – but that means resetting the whole car, and right now we're about fifteen holloways up. The Luxar would reset its electromagnetic charge and fall right through the road, maybe a few roads. I lean against the side window, it looks like a long way. The lower holloways have more split offs though, if I could time it right, we'd fall through the space between the intersections and be loaded up again with a new user before we hit the next level... No, it's way too much of a risk, I could hit another EMV, or miss the timing and fall hundreds of feet into the city below. I'm not about to waste the few litres of life I've got left on some mad-op for a joyride in a Luxar. Almost in response to my doubts, the holloway flashes red as green lights blaze up in the rearview: a sleek, black armoured EMV sweeps between lanes, lashing forward through the traffic. FedNet smelt the trail. Now would be a great time for mad-op ideas. I dash the clip out the gun and start lining bullets up around the bio-recognition module.

Twenty-two make up a full clip in these small-arm concealables. The rounds are small but have a fierce electrical burst that splashes on impact. On skin it would course a three-inch wide burn over the point of entry, making it hard to dig out. The electrical charge, however, deals its real damage to the mods and circuits wired through the body. While most physical mods

– clothing holos, optical overlays etc. will have surge protection built in, high electrical spikes can cause them to freeze or deactivate while they reset. For anyone connected to the metanet, the temporary halt in data causes an adjustment shock resulting in dizziness and nausea – like trying to read after looking out the window of a moving train, the words on the page dance while your eyes catch up. I save two rounds in a pocket. Never know. All the electro-rounds need to trigger is a complete circuit from the hammer to a conductive plate on the casing. The plate's kept clear by a rubber membrane that's pierced when the hammer hits. I manage to get a grimy thumbnail under one side and the rubber peels right off, now all I need is something to connect the casings so the circuit triggers them all together. I remember the cocktail dress – clothes this fancy are usually holoweave – a built-in circuit thread to make them compatible with colour holos and stain remover. I tear a strip off and hold the frayed edges up to the light – my eye catches the rearview and I see the FedNet EMV pull immediately behind me... Yes! A silver sliver glints between the fabric edge, this should be enough to carry the current. I wedge the rounds into the lip of the bio-recognition module between the two front seats and cover them lightly with the shard of fabric. I stuff the other end of the fabric into the chamber and cock the gun, FedNet almost on me. I lean out the window quickly to check the drop. Fuck. Shouldn't have done that. Jerking my head back in – Ffwip – a bullet cuts the air where my head had just been. Guess that was their warning shot. I give them mine: Click- TZZP! Blue-white sparks flash out the car modules, every dashboard light flares like a dying star then- Vwuum. The Luxar powers down and lights dim, around me the holoway slips above and the EMV drops silently toward a busy freight holoway, eighty feet below.

I see the FedNet EMV fly past on the holoway above but, from the driving seat of a deactivated car falling into moving traffic, I have no time to appreciate the near escape. Fast

heading to the holoway below, this thing had better reboot quick- HOOONK! A huge truck slams its horn as it forges past me – clipping the Luxar and sending it spinning. I shout and slam the wheel, kicking hopelessly on the dead acceleration. Suddenly, Whirr...

“Good evening, driver. Welcome to the Luxar Sport ZedX-1. It looks like you don’t have a bio-recognition profile yet. Would you like to set one up now?”

“Yes! Set up profile!” I spit hurriedly as I crane out the window – we’re falling fast and about to hit another holoway. Thousands of six, nine-seater EMVs clog noisily. Fuck. Public traffic. Families, first-car teens, cheapo-drivers. Drivers without another choice. Drivers that could literally kill for a car like this, it would change their lives, their family’s lives. That’s how these things are though – the super luxuries are there as aspirations to make working thirty years in an asteroid mine seem worth it. At least they’d have a family waiting for them.

“Please, pick an avatar”, a host of garish holos pop up from the dash. For fuck’s-

“Ignition! Self drive! Manual drive!” I beg,

“Please set up an account before continuing”, the Luxar repeats.

“Confirm, confirm, confirm-” I blast through the defaults, the car’s about to hit...

“Is this your name, CONFIRM, please reply ‘yes’ to continue, or ‘no’ to re-enter...”

“Yes! Yes! Manual controls!” ten feet above a fleet of traffic and we’re still spinning, heading through the electromagnetic field of the holoway at this speed would have no chance of finding traction, surely-

“Good evening, CONFIRM. Please place your hand on the bio-recognition monitor to complete set-up.” I glance the trashed module of cracked glass and splintered plastic. What the hell. I slam my hand down and hope for the best. The module fizzles and glitches, then a sharp

shock bounces up my bone. I jerk my hand back in reflex and see my bloody handprint staining the module. The blood seeps through the cracked glass.

“Manual controls activated. Holoway detected. Initiating joining-” I floor it and fly through the gear box, 2nd straight to 4th: CRUNK, then to 5th: CLUNK, VROOO- I’m flung back to the seat like I’m driving a fighter jet. The acceleration blurs my peripheral vision for a moment before I recognise where I am. My windshield view is an upside-down city world, dripping down from the sky like monolithic stalactites in glass and obsidian. The Luxar must have compensated for the electromagnetic field when joining from the outside – because we’re now stuck to the exterior of the ring, driving as an upside-down reflection to the traffic under my feet. Well, not dead yet. It’s progress. These sport EMVs have a drift mode that lowers the magnet voltage enough for the car’s weight to swing out, some kind of combination of that and an engine restart and I reckon I can drop in to the lane. First I check the upside-down city, getting bearings. Looks like Darwin – one of the outer boroughs and pretty pricy. I remember having a coffee there waiting for a client – a seclusive suit called Nkunda. Including the driving tax, it cost me near enough the whole job. Nkunda lent me his car for the journey back, I was surprised at the time but I know now how loyal these machines are – self-driving, drop you off and head straight back. Most businessmen nowadays never even learnt to drive manual, straight to universities and management training schemes. Rich people jobs. No time to hold the wheel. No time to steer. Just hop in and follow the road. They learn to be savvy though, and distrustful. Important traits in Darwin. There’s plenty of smooth talkers who’ll tie you into a slick deal, only to jump ship right before the crash and write off their own debts to your empty business. They’re gamblers here, just with other people’s money. I played a few rounds of rummy with Mrs. Voorheim on her birthday last year. She didn’t say what age. I still can’t believe she’s dead.

I click the switches for the drift- “Entering sport mode, are you sure, CONFIRM?”

“I’m sure, confirm.” I wish this thing would just let me drive,

“Thank you, Confirm. And please, call me Lus”. I eye the dash intensely. For a moment I feel its lights dim slightly. The drift control enables and I swing the wheel left. Like driving the family camping holiday up a hill, the Luxar strains and whirrs as I hold the accelerator down to the plate. Slowly, slowly, we rise up around the diameter of the holoway ring – 120°, 90°, 45°... Looking out the driver’s window we’re above the traffic now, and it is the public commute – family cruisers, 7-seaters, working vans, bikes weaving between the steady lanes. Worker bees heading back to the hive. We level out on the outside apex of the holoway ring and I gauge the traffic below – busy. All of this traffic is locked and chugging at cruising speed, it would take a roadblock to make a space big enough for the Luxar. I slow to the traffic’s speed and crane out the window, looking for a spot, then – a small goods freighter in the distance: small cab at the front with an empty cargo tail about thirty feet long, long enough for the Luxar twice over. It’d be a challenge to line up, though. I pulse the gas gently to catch up and slow to match its speed. I’m above the freighter now about sixty feet – I cut the engine and slip through the holoway ring, falling hard. I click the engine back and it loads up in a second, but I’m already about to hit the traffic – blindly my thumb catches a switch on the wheel, I don’t know what it does but I find out: “Full manual trajectory mapping enabled, please operate thruster to...” I ignore the rest as a joystick pistons out to the right of the wheel and I lean it forward- VWOO! I lose all the air in my chest as the falling car jolts upwards. Another gentle lean back on the joystick and the Luxar settles, soaring six feet above the traffic. Nice, it must be oscillating the EM charge to hold a position above the road, rather than sticking to it – it’s the same feature used to auto-drive up to the holoways but it’s usually locked on pedestrian vehicles. Despite the rise in technology, the

amount of insurance lost in EMV crashes is enough to keep their finer features out of untrained hands. Primarily because self-driving modules attach driving law blame to the manufacturers, not the driver. The car companies then fight it out with transport networks, arguing over holoway planning and infrastructure, then both sides drop the charges after a sizeable sum is paid out to FedNet, who send droids out for cleanup. It's a cracked system but it does lean on manufacturing to be thorough in their testing. Driving an EMV manual, however, attaches any incurred blame, costs and sentencing to the driver. With the cost of a FedNet callout, it's the main reason most let the car take the wheel. They can't afford the risk of stepping outside the loop, veering from the recommended course, so they sit tight to wherever they need to go – wherever they should be going. I, however, should be going to a FedNet data terrorism interrogation, so adding breach of traffic law to my list of felonies seems nominal at this point. I pulse the acceleration again and lean out the window to line up with the freight trailer below. I drop a few inches, and tap the joystick gently, hand-eye coordination skill absorbed from virtual experiences – I once fixed a corrupted flight-sim .mpk for pilot training. Didn't know who's pilots I was training, never asked. Though, the background check put them way out of FedNet's reach, so foreign waters for certain. Another tap of the joystick and twitch of the wheel and I'm five feet above – TAP – four feet above, I grunt the acceleration a touch to maintain speed with the trailer then, TAP – three feet above, easy does it, TAP-CLUNK! The Luxar slams down the last three feet onto the trailer, I slam the break and lock it in park. We screech to a halt inches behind the freighter's cab, wholly on the trailer and mostly straight. Very sensitive, that Y-axis joystick but, all considered, could have gone much worse. Admiring my handiwork, I lean back in the seat, letting the freighter drive us on into central Darwin. I wonder why I flicked the manual trajectory control. It felt like an accident but the motion was deliberate enough to engage it. Subconscious? Maybe I

drove one of these in a sim and there's a trace of code stored in my RAM somewhere. Still, it felt natural. Motivated. Strange.

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