

PSYCHO TRASH

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"I told you not to start messing around on the job." Gina was screaming at him again.
"Karl's really gonna kick your butt hard this time."

"How was I to know they had an extra smart AI booby-trapped to the hilt. Shit, it's just meant to be some small-time Datahaven, nothing as elaborate as this." Tweak shrugged — a wide grin on his face. "Chiro said he'd heard there's some nice information hidden here. He'd done a quick scan and found the usual security in place — nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly didn't warn me about any hardcore AI protecting it."

"Well, you're still going to get your ass kicked if you can't shake that bloody thing. The last thing we want is some Data Pirate's heavies trashing this place just to ensure word of it never reaches their clients. Don't you think it'd make the owners of this place a little bit suspicious?"

"It's cool Gina. I lost it in Albania. There's a nice little loop system there that will send the AI back on it's own tail. The records will end up showing that the attack came from within their own network." He cackled and began shutting down his laptop. "Grab the cable splitter and let's rock this joint."

"Don't be so bossy!" Gina scowled. "You're not the only techno wiz around here Tweak."

"No, but I'm the best."

"Yeah and the most arrogant." She put the splitter in her backpack and carefully plugged the original cable back into the wall socket.

Tweak's head twitched involuntarily as he walked towards the office door.

"Got to love these building security systems — so easy to break into — makes my job much easier. But you know, I sort of pity the guy that normally uses this computer. He's going to have a hard time explaining to the boss why he's logging onto Norwegian Websites after hours."

"Since when have you felt pity Tweak? All you ever care about is numbers and ensuring you've got enough drugs to get through the day."

"Because it all comes down to numbers. That's why I like them so much — they're either on or off — and you baby, are definitely on."

"You're such a creep Tweak." Gina visibly shuddered in disgust. "Consider yourself in my off category. For some reason, psychotic junkies just don't do it for me."

"Don't give me that crap. How many years did you spend pumping stuff into your veins?"

"Screw you." She was screaming again and it was beginning to irritate him. "I've been clean for over a year and I'm never going back there." Her voice took on a scathing tone. "Besides, every time I look at you, I see exactly what I'm missing out on and I'm glad I gave up."

They quickly made their way down the fire escape and into the back alley. Tweak punched a few keys on his laptop and re-armed the building's security system.

"I know we're meant to meet Karl so he can go through the data, but that other system's bothering me. I'm going to stop off at The Meat Market and find out what Chiro knows about it. The bastard had better not have set me up."

"Stop being so paranoid. If anyone's out to get you, it's your own subconscious."

"Nah, switched that off years ago. Sent it in a feedback loop just like the AI. By the time it finds a way out of it, I won't need it."

"You are one fucked up little puppy dog Tweak."

He shrugged. "Anyway, I'll meet you back at the warehouse in an hour or so. And don't you dare say anything to Karl about the other system."

"Maybe, maybe not," she said with an evil grin. "You owe me though. It could have jeopardised the whole operation."

"Got to seize the window of opportunity when it arises my dear."

"That seems to be your motto in life."

“You should know – once a junkie always a junkie – how many times have you been tempted to steal something, just because it’s there.”

“Fuck you, you little creep!”

“I wish.”

Gina gave him a glare of hatred mixed with disgust, turned around, walked quickly to the end of the alley and disappeared into the crowd.

Tweak put the laptop into his backpack and headed towards The Meat Market, a body piercing and implant studio run by his friend Chiro. It was about fifteen minutes walk away and would give him time to think about the AI he’d just been chased by.

The whole of the USA, New York in particular had changed so much since the global trade crash of 2053. America’s outstanding Third World Loans coupled with it’s own downward spiralling economy left it with no option but to declare bankruptcy as a country.

The Japanese market had been the only one to survive moderately in tact and so their investors swooped on the chance and bought large portions of American industry at rock-bottom prices.

Not long afterwards, America’s first Asian-born President was elected.

It took a while for people to get used to the idea, but the consumer mentality quickly took over and Americans snapped up the now cheaply available Japanese gizmos and gadgets — New York became the new Tokyo of the Western World.

The street was teeming with the usual Friday night crowd of city dwellers trying to forget the working week. Tweak had to jump out of the way as a group of drunken white collar workers stumbled from the doorway of a Karoke Bar and nearly knocked him over.

"There has to be a better place than that to pick up chicks," one of them complained to the group in a slurred voice. "What's happened to all the easy, sexy women these days."

"They don't need us any more," his friend replied sarcastically. "God-damned International Lesbian Feminist Coalition funding the Cloning Vat Project. The bitches just keep churning out more females."

"They say that males will be obsolete with fifteen years."

"Scary thought hey. At least we got access to pornography still."

"The real thing still beats VR anyday. Those women all just need a good fucking — remind them what they're missing out on!"

"Yeah, but I'm not getting my balls cut off just for a bit of real flesh occasionally."

An image of Gina ran through Tweak's semi-fried brain.

A few blocks later the city began changing from flashy and expensive shops to seedier, dirtier ones. The street was no less crowded, but the people were visibly different. Business suits made way for leather jackets or trench-coats and expensive dresses were replaced with mini-skirts, fishnet stockings and knee high boots.

"Much more like home," he mumbled to himself. "Can't handle all those corporate drones."

Tweak turned the corner into a side street and headed towards a flashing neon sign that proudly advertised "The Meat Market" in large, red letters.

His head involuntarily twitched a few times again as he walked through the doorway and into a room full of shiny metal piercing equipment.

"Ah, definitely more like home now."

It was a place he'd spent far too many hours in, trying out all forms of new black market drugs, having the occasional implant inserted or just kicking back with Chiro. They'd met on a discussion board and were soon swapping emails about hacking techniques. In the last year they'd become close friends and business partners of sorts. Chiro was well connected through his piercing studio and Tweak could break into almost any system, so between them they had a regular flow of stolen information to trade. It was a system that worked well for both of them and gave them a little extra cash at the same time.

"Heya Tweak-dude," Chiro greeted him with a smile. He was a slightly set Asian man with a long black ponytail. There was barely an inch of skin that he hadn't tattooed, pierced or augmented in some way — he was a man who loved his work and it showed. "You after something to make the night more fun? I have a nice new Nano-drug that just came in today. None of my other clients have tried it and I need a Guinea Pig of sorts. I know you're a hopeless experience junkie so I'll insert it on the cheap if you'll give me some feedback on what it's like."

"I'll think about it," he replied knowing full well that within half hour the drug bots would be making their way towards his brain. "We need to talk though. Can we go somewhere private?"

"Sure," and motioned for Tweak to follow him through to the office.

Chiro closed the door behind them and walked over to a liquor cabinet, took out a bottle of whisky and poured himself a shot. "Fancy a drink?"

"You know I never touch that stuff. Gives you brain damage I've heard."

"Like you're one to worry about that!"

"There's a big difference between indiscriminately killing off random brain cells and reprogramming them."

"Whatever you reckon." Chiro took a long, slow sip of the whisky. "What's up anyway hacker boy?"

"That site you sent me to was protected by an AI. Mean motherfucker too. I left it chasing its own tail but it gave me a good run for my money. I thought they were just meant to be small-time Data Pirates. You need real money for that sort of technology."

Chiro shrugged. "Howie gave me the address. I ran my own scans I ran over the site and they didn't show anything out of the ordinary. You sure it was an AI and not one of your visions."

"Hah, hah. I may see some pretty weird things sometimes, but I know which ones are real and which ones aren't. Besides, Gina was there with me and she's pretty pissed off about the whole thing."

"Ah, mucking around on the job again."

Tweak went to say something, but Chiro interrupted him saying "Yeah, I know — if an opportunity... You're going to get yourself into some serious shit one day with that ."

"Only if I get caught. Besides, I can feel myself starting to get closer to that machine level. It won't be long before I can talk in their language and beat them at their own game. Then you'll all stop laughing at me."

"Dream on Tweak. No matter how much you play with your brain, it's still meat. You can't get away from that."

Chiro took another sip of his whisky. "Why don't you head down to Psycho Trash and see if Howie knows anything. Now how about testing that Nano drug for me."

"What's it meant to do?"

"Apparently this one rewires the brain so that you can sense animal pheromones. The range is pretty limited at the moment — only covers about ten or so major species but they're working on expanding it if this one proves to be safe."

"Doesn't sound greatly interesting." An image of Gina naked and crouched on all fours appeared in his brain. "Hmm, I guess it could have it's uses though. Go for it."

"I knew you I could rely on you my little Guinea Pig."

A few minutes later Tweak was on his way towards Psycho Trash, drug bots already crawling his brain stem to make the necessary alterations. For good luck he'd also had a nice shot of Ice before leaving and could feel the first tingling sensations spreading out through his whole body.

"I hope Howie knows something about that AI," he mumbled to himself. "Fuck this feels good." Tweak arched his head back towards the sky and let out a small yelp of pleasure as the drug quickly took full effect.

A fist slammed into his face, knocking him to the ground.

"Pleased to see you Tweak," growled Brian, a large Street Punk with tattooed arms and several visible piercings. "If I remember rightly, you owe me some money. Yesterday!"

Tweak was roughly pulled to his feet.

"Where's my money you little computer geek?"

"I'm working on it. Look, I had a great source that turned out to be dud. I'm trying to sort it out now. If you give me another twenty four hours I should have something that will well and truly cover what I owe you."

"You better have or next time it won't just be your nose that's bleeding you little fucker. Now get out of my face — go rip someone off so you can pay me."

Wiping the blood from his face with a sleeve, Tweak cursed Brian under his breath of stumbled away.

"God damned drug dealers. They just have no patience these days."

The entrance to Psycho Trash was crowded with an assortment of Glamour Girls, Gothiks and Cyberpunks. Loud music spilled through the doorway. The strong smell of cigarette smoke and beer wafted out onto the footpath.

A heavy-set bouncer greeted him as he walked up. "'Evening Tweak, what happened to you?"

"Don't ask, it's been a long night. Is Howie about?"

"Sure is. He's working in the Back Bar tonight."

"Cheers."

Tweak nodded a thankyou to the bouncer and walked into the dimly lit nightclub. Dozens of people were dancing about to the music and as many more sat around an assortment of tables and booths.

A tall girl with long, silver-threaded pigtails jumped about wildly in the middle of the dance floor while several men eyed her off eagerly. Nearby, an even taller Gothik with half-closed eyes danced vaguely to a beat that existed only in his own head.

As he weaved through the crowd, Tweak felt a strange sensation run down the length of his spinal chord. His vision seared out to white.

"Man this is good Ice," he giggled and stood still for a few minutes until his vision returned. "Must remember to thank Chiro for it."

The Back Bar was where people came to chill out and so it was a lot quieter than the main dance floor. Most of its inhabitants were lazing about on plush lounges watching hypnotic Holopics swirl on the dark blue walls..

Tweak spotted Howie near the bar. He was chatting to a blonde woman wearing red stiletto's, a red vinyl dress and spider-webbed stockings

Howie motioned for the woman to leave.

"How'd you go with that site?" He flashed Tweak the million dollar grin that had gotten him laid so often. "Enough saleable data there to cover your habit for a little while longer?"

"Judging by the strength of their AI and the fact it chased me half way across the globe, I'd say that whatever's behind it is certainly a little more valuable than you made out. What the fuck were you trying to do to me? Get my sorry ass busted or something?"

"What do you mean?"

Tweak's eyes started burning and his vision blurred again for a second. He sensed a slight smell of fear coming from Howie.

"It was protected by some sort of high-level AI. And I tell you, it wasn't your run of the mill code. Haven't seen anything that quick or smart outside military defence systems. What the hell did you send me after Howie!"

"Nothing Tweak. Your drug habit's making you paranoid again. Why on earth would I try and set you up? You're my best client after all."

There was that sense of fear again, only stronger this time.

"Well, see if you can find out anything more about it. It makes me curious to know what a bunch of struggling Norwegian crooks have that's worth protecting with that sort of technology."

"Ok, I'll see what I can find out. Makes me a little curious too and a little nervous. I'll get back to you in a few days about it."

A look of anxiety crossed Tweak's face. "Can't wait that long. Got to have the data tomorrow or Brian's going to kneecap me."

"I can't promise you anything, but I'll make enquires. There's another target if you're really that desperate. It's run by some fanatical religious group. They call themselves The Clan of Global Truth. Weird bunch of motherfuckers if you ask me."

"Aren't they the ones responsible for all those raids on the GeneTech labs last year?"

"That's them. Don't believe in altering the human body by artificial means. They'd rather let their own children die than use a Health Bot to save them."

"Sounds right up my alley."

Howie scribbled down a website address on the back of a beer coaster.

"Apparently they're purchasing patents to any gene technology they can get their hands on. That way no-one else has access to the stuff and they can keep it off the markets. I can't promise what you'll find there, but you never know."

"Thanks dude. Let's just hope I don't get my ass chased again."

"Yeah, let's hope."

Tweak shook hands with Howie and headed towards the exit.

On the way he was tapped on the arm by a puchi-iede or "petite runaway" as it translated from French/Japanese. They were teenage girls who hung around nightclubs on the weekends trying to make a bit of extra money. The puchi-iede girls would take lots of Speed and spend forty eight hours sleeping with whoever wanted to pay for their services.

On Sunday night they'd go back home, parents assuming their daughter had spent the weekend at a friend's house.

"You look like you're into kinky stuff," the girl said with a naughty grin. She pulled a plastic bottle out of her purse — it was filled with a yellow liquid — probably urine — dirty old men paid big bucks for teen bodily secretions.

"Sorry, not my scene," Tweak said without interest and continued to the door.

Hopping in a cab he gave the driver an address in the industrial suburbs.

"You got a net-node in here?"

"Sure. Just swipe a Credit Chip and you're in business."

"Excellent."

He booted his web browser, typed in the Clan's address and scanned through a few pages that outlined the Clan's manifesto.

"These people are crazier than I thought."

Clicking the Search Option, he typed in "opposition to GeneTech".

The results bought back several documents from the Clan's manifesto. He read through them and learnt that The Clan opposed the GeneTech Bots because their encoding used an eighteen-digit numbering system, consisting of three separate sets of six digits each: 6-6-6.

"I can't believe that in this day and age people still believe in that superstitious nonsense."

Then that searing white flash in his brain again. This time it lasted about twenty seconds and was accompanied by intense pain.

"That Ice must be very pure."

He let out a little giggle.

Ten minutes later the cab driver dropped him off and sped away. Tweak slipped through a hole in the side of a building, walked up a flight of stairs, crossed a makeshift gangway and weaved his way through several corridors that ended up at a doorway. He carefully swiped an ID Chip through an almost imperceptible slot above eye level, took a deep breath and entered hoping that Gina had kept her mouth shut.

"About time Tweak!" Karl had a big smile on his face. "Get the data?"

"Yeah, no problems." He breathed a sigh of relief. "Where's Gina?"

"Another job came up while you were on the way home so I sent her out with Max."

"You know I'm a better code breaker than he'll ever be!"

Karl shrugged. "If you'd come straight home then maybe you'd have got it. As it was, you were out on the town with your friends."

"Private business to attend to — something I had to sort out sooner rather than later."

"Well, next time get your priorities straight. Now show me what you've got."

Tweak took the laptop out of his backpack, plugged it in and transferred the stolen information to Karl's machine.

"You did well. Surprised you had time to get all this data while you were fooling around in that other system though."

"Fucking bitch," Tweak growled.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

When they'd finished transferring it all, Tweak excused himself and headed towards the space that served as his bedroom. Rummaging through the pile of junk that littered one corner, he pulled out an encryption module and plugged it into the Laptop. He wanted to explore the Clan's website further.

"Right, time to see what these weirdo's are really up to."

Booting up some of his own home-made software, he watched as a listing of the site's publicly accessible directories came onto the screen. Scanning through them he found a few dead ends that required authentication to get further. He punched a few keys and changed his details to show that he was coming from Brian, the Street Punk's Web house.

"That'll teach the bastard."

He wandered over to his pile of personal belongings and left the software analysing the website and looking for a backdoor entrance. Taking a phial of blue liquid and an applicator from a small container, Tweak sent himself into hack-mode.

The liquid entered his body and began its journey through his cells. It made him giggle a little bit.

"Soon I'll manage to separate meat and brain. That'll show them. They're so caught up in this physical thing — can't see that it comes down to on/off states. When I can talk on that level, no-one's going to be able to get further into the system than me."

He laughed maniacally for a few seconds, sat down and then began to focus on the job.

The software worked away looking for holes in the site's security system.

"Man this site's got decent protection for a bunch of religious nuts. I wonder what they're so paranoid about."

The laptop emitted a few small beeps of success.

"Rock it! Now, let's see what they've got hidden here."

He scanned through the files looking for something interesting, but it all seemed to be about the Clan's doctrine and procedures.

"Why do they need to lock this stuff away so securely?"

A further sense of detachment as the blue liquid took full grip and added to the effect of the Ice already in his bloodstream.

Continuing to scan the files, he found one simply named "AGP" in a hidden. In the recesses of his brain, something about those initials rang a bell. A slow thought wound its way into his consciousness.

He opened the file and nearly fell backwards off the chair.

"Holy shit — literally."

With shaking hands, Tweak saved the file to his hard drive and disconnected. There was a look of wildness in his eyes. Reading through the rest of the document, his brain went into overdrive.

"No wonder these bastards are buying up all this technology. They're not trying to keep it from the public, they're going into business for themselves."

The document outlined a series of experiments known as the Animal Genome Project. For many years, several companies had worked on splicing together animal and human DNA to enhance people's range of senses. This hadn't gone very well and the success rate was minimal due to cellular rejection leading to toxic shock and death.

Then someone hit upon the idea that instead of trying to implant animal DNA in a human body, it would work much better if they used Nanobots to switch on the right chemical commands in the brain. Because the host body produced the genes itself, there would be no chance of rejection.

Data was pretty limited at this stage as the first prototypes were only just being tested and the results were mixed. Although there hadn't been any fatalities, depending on the source DNA patterns, side effects varied wildly from schizophrenic reactions and animalistic behaviour to the growth of a layer of hair or claws. Tests into mixing several species at once had proved to be highly dangerous and in every case had caused severe personality disorders within seventy two hours.

Tweak remembered the implant Chiro had given him earlier.

"I'm going to kill that little bastard!"

He quickly packed his laptop, a few blue phials and the applicator into backpack.

"Better get my head together," Tweak giggled and took one of the phials back out.

"Much better." A contented sigh as the drug quickly entered his bloodstream and increased the effects of the Ice already in his system.

"Where you going?" Karl quizzed as he walked out into the communal area.

"Unfinished business to attend to."

"Don't forget you've got a job on later tonight. If you're not here I'll have to send Gina out with Max again. They seem to get on so well. I think they'd make a great team and he's getting much better at sensing his way around the systems. Might even rival you soon Tweak. The way you're killing those brain cells off I don't think it'll take too long."

"Reprogramming, not killing off. There's a big difference."

Karl shrugged.

"I'll be here," Tweak replied with a guttural half-growl.

He left the warehouse and headed back towards the city trying to figure out exactly what he was going to do to Chiro.

A few minutes later the searing white light ran through his brain again and he collapsed onto the pavement.

After regaining consciousness Tweak felt quite strange and everything around him seemed somewhat different — almost brighter in contrast, but with a reduced colour spectrum. A sense of someone approaching — scurry into the shadows — crouch — wait — pounce.

In a few moments the stranger lay dead, windpipe crushed by a well-aimed bite to the throat. Without even searching the body, Tweak ran off into the night, desperate to find Chiro now.

"What the heck is going on here," he mumbled as he ran. "Those bots must have had a field day in my brain. God only knows what they've done to it."

And then a feeling of calm. He stopped running — began to understand — to realise that everything around him seemed to be moving much slower than normal. No, that wasn't it — his perception of things had sped up.

"Kick ass!"

He let out a wild whoop.

A little further up the street, a gaudy neon sign advertising 2/7 XXX Movies and Cybersex Booths caught his eye.

"Chiro can wait."

Walking inside, he went into one of the booths, closed the door, took the cable splitter and laptop from his bag, connected them to a wall socket, focused his mind and began booting his encryption software.

"Time to see what this AI's really made of," he giggled maniacally and punched in the address of the Norwegian Datahaven. Before long he'd broken the first few layers of security and was down to the directory where the AI had first begun chasing him.

"Come on out little firewall. I want to play."

And there it was. His software showed it was trying to figure out where he was logging in from, but kept getting an invalid address in response. It tried kicking him off the system, but Tweak sent it after a phoney login that kept reconnecting as soon as the AI disconnected it. While it chased after the other login, Tweak began scanning the machine for the AI's core code.

Shortly, a series a beeps alerted Tweak to the fact that the phoney login had been disconnected properly now. The AI had figured out what was happening and was now working analysing his main login.

"Smarter than I thought, but not so smart," Tweak grinned and booted up Nuke, a nice little piece of his own home made hacking code. It bombarded the site with what appeared to be virus attacks from a number of locations worldwide. "That'll keep it busy for a while. Once you figure out how these things think, it's easy to keep them occupied."

Before long he had a copy of the AI's core code downloaded to his laptop.

"Bye, bye."

He disconnected from the site.

He was about to pack his gear away when a thought crossed his mind. Logging back onto the Cybersex terminal, Tweak punched in a backdoor code he'd traded with a friend recently and scanned through their Wangari models until he found one that looked like Gina.

"You are one sexy chick," he muttered and downloaded a copy of her picture. He plugged Brian the Street Punk's cellphone number into the console and pressed send.

"That'll teach the fucker to be impatient with me!"

In a few seconds Brian would receive a call from a sexy female who would leave a ten second video byte basically saying that she really liked him and could he please call her back. When Brian returned the call he'd be redirected to a voicemail number that charged around \$80 per minute. Of course she'd never return the call and Brian would be left with a huge phone bill and a hard-on wondering who the woman was.

This sort of fraud was illegal in the USA, but the Wangari software was easily available on Japanese websites, so a lot of the seedier Strip Clubs and Love Hotels used their own girls as bait to make some extra money on the side.

Tweak neatly put everything into his backpack, left the shop and continued on his way to The Meat Market.

Twenty minutes later he was sitting in Chiro's office grinning from ear to ear and explaining what had happened in the last few hours.

"The side effects are a bonus in disguise Chiro."

"You're one hell of a freak Tweak. Not too many people would look at it that way."

"It's a unique opportunity as far as I'm concerned."

"Still, who knows what else it's done to your already fried brain. I can try deactivating the bots if you want. It won't fix the changes they've already made but it'll stop them making any more."

"Give me a day or so to think about it." He knew he wouldn't change his mind — this was too good a chance to waste.

"Hey Chiro, what do you know about The Clan of Global Truth?"

"Not much. Only that they're one weird bunch of fuckers. And that they hate people like me for doing a little re-wiring of people's brains. They say it's against God's wishes or some crap."

Tweak sensed an uneasiness in Chiro. Subtle body signs and a faint smell of fear made him certain Chiro knew far more than he was letting on.

"What do you know about the Animal Genome Project?"

This time there was definitely a look of fear on Chiro's face.

"Who the fuck gave you that Nano Drug? Wasn't someone from The Clan by any chance was it?"

"One of my usual dealers, but I don't ask where they get them. People who deal in stolen Drug Bots usually tend to keep fairly quiet about that sort thing. I knew it was one of the prototypes from the Genome Project, but I had no idea the side effects were as bad as this. Honestly."

He was telling the truth.

"Let me tell you what I think is going on," Tweak began. "We all know that The Clan has been buying up GeneTech patents. Maybe they're not doing it to keep them off the market — what if it's quite the opposite? It makes sense — these cult leaders are generally complete control freaks and what would be better than having a controlling interest in the first real generation of crossbred humans. Shit, they could make a whole congregation of worshippers ready to defend the faith. Before you know it, they're taking over the world and forcing doctrine down our throats. Believe what we want you to believe or we'll splice a lap-dog DNA strand into your system so you become nice and subservient."

"You've finally flipped Tweak. That's one hell of a conspiracy theory if I've ever heard one."

Tweak told him about the file he'd downloaded from the Clan's server.

"Whoah, maybe you're right. It does sort of make sense. You going to go back in there and see what else you can find?"

"Of course. I managed to get the code of that pesky little AI from the Datahaven you sent me to. I'm going to see if I can modify it a bit and send it into the Clan site ahead of me to deal with their security. Use it as a decoy while I have a better look around."

"Better be careful Tweak-dude. If they've got anything much of value hanging around their site it's likely to be well and truly protected by some mean-ass security. They don't tend to leave valuable things like Genome patents just lying about."

"I'm a big boy Chiro. I can look after myself. And speaking of looking after myself — it's going to be a long night. You got some more Ice?"

"Tweak, you're going to fry that brain of yours if you're not careful. It'll turn to putty and ooze out your ears if you put too many more drugs into it. God knows how the A.G.P bots have altered it. What if they interact weirdly with the Ice?"

"Like I said, I'm a big boy."

Chiro sighed, walked over to a storage cupboard, pulled out several phials of the drug and handed them to Tweak.

"Pay you after tonight's job," Tweak grinned. "Gotta run. Work to do," and left quickly.

"Sure you will," Chiro mumbled after him. "Your tab is climbing pretty high though." He let out a sigh. "If only you weren't my best customer."

Tweak headed towards one of the many Love Motels in the district. He could hire a room and work undisturbed for as long as he needed. Because of their client's desire for privacy, all ports in the room were served via satellite from Saudi Arabia, the only country which had so far failed to sign the International Digital Content Pact. As a result, a lot of

companies who required a high level of discretion took up the offer of a "no questions asked" satellite connection.

The Motel foyer was dimly lit, old, but clean. Easy listening music from the late 2020's spilled from hidden speakers — not that it mattered to Tweak — the room's port was all that he needed.

"Better use an anonymous Credit Chip," he mumbled to himself. "Really don't want any traces left with this one."

He checked the Hotel's Room Menu to find one which was available and punched in the PIN Code from a Credit Chip he'd purchased at a vending machine on the other side of the city. A Room Pass dropped into a dispenser below the Menu Screen.

"Please swipe your Room Pass and then take the elevator to Level Four," the Computer spoke in a sexy female voice. "Hope your visit is an enjoyable one."

"Let's hope so too."

He let out a maniacal laugh that lasted for well over a minute.

"Actually, I'm sure it will be." His voice was still edged with madness.

Tweak swiped the Pass through a reader on the wall. The elevator doors opened with a soft hissing sound. He walked inside, doors closing automatically behind him. A few seconds later they opened again.

"This is your floor," the same Female voice chimed in. "Your room is third to the left. Hope your visit is an enjoyable one."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll look you up sometime soon. You sound like a damn sexy little AI."

That madness-edged laugh again.

Tweak walked to his door, swiped the Room Pass and entered.

Despite recent trends towards tastefulness in most Love Hotels, this room still looked like something from a bad porn movie. The bright pink walls and bed were almost enough to

make your eyes bleed and the heart-shaped Spa bath appeared very uncomfortable to sit in — too many curved edges.

Getting straight down to business, Tweak attached his Scrambler to the room's net-node and plugged it all into his laptop.

“Time to nail this fucker and see what they're really hiding.”

After a quick shot of the blue liquid, Tweak began to hacking into the Clan's Webserver. He called up the Code Breaker and sent in Nuke behind it to keep the system busy while he made some quick modifications to the stolen AI program.

By the time he received a beep of success, Tweak had modified the AI core to search out any security systems he'd missed while searching last time. It wasn't so hard – the thing was designed to seek out anomalies in user patterns — he'd just had to modify the code so it sought them out, but hid when it found them rather than attempting to destroy them. If he began attacking the site's Firewall it'd trigger an alarm somewhere — stealth was the best approach for this job.

He sent the modified AI core searching for documents containing information on the Animal Genome Project, but only came back with that same document he'd found before — everything else was religious babble.

It was frustrating — maybe he was looking in the wrong place. Where would religious nuts hide their goodies?

He typed in “search GeneTech patent acquisition”.

A confidential internal memo that Tweak's software managed to undelete — this was a little more promising.

“In order to provide humanity with a safeguard against such a technology, The Clan of Global Truth has attempted to purchase the patents to any Gene Technology that enters the world market. We have also recently begun an aggressive acquisition of GeneTech related businesses in order to regulate the output of such technologies and reduce the number of Patents we need to purchase from third party sources.”

“Where are they getting all the revenue though?”

“search revenue projection expenditure spreadsheet”

Another document undeleted from the same directory. He scanned it quickly but couldn’t make sense of the figures — the numbers just didn’t add up.

“undelete all /trash/untitled/blah/junk/././_”

“Nice hiding place,” he acknowledged. “But silly to have ever put it on this site in the first place.”

Tweak quickly downloaded the entire directory — safer checking it all out later.

Beep, beep, beep. It was an alert from Nuke.

He checked out what the matter was.

“Time to rock this joint.”

His real location had been traced back to the hotel room.

“That is some nasty software protecting that site — even the Pirate’s AI couldn’t sniff it out. Now I’m really intrigued.”

“disconnect”

He grabbed a disc from the backpack and copied the AI core onto it.

"That'll keep Brian happy for a while."

Shutting down the laptop, he quickly but carefully pulled the cables from the wall socket, packed everything in the backpack and left the room.

Elevator, front door, sexy goodbye message [really must look her up when I get down to machine level], business to complete.

It wasn’t hard to track Brian down. Drug dealers are impossible to find when you need a hit, but when you owe them something, they’re always there.

Tweak pulled the disc out and handed it to Brian.

“Here’s your payment. The little sucker on here gave me a hard time earlier today. I’ve modified it to be a little friendlier. It’s a notch or two above your usual Script Kiddie stuff — quite a few notches actually. In my opinion it’s worth what I owe you and then some more.”

There was a tone of menace in Tweak’s voice.

“Look you little fucking junkie — your payment is late — let’s call the difference interest on the loan.”

Tweak glared at Brian with cat-like eyes — cold, calculated and a threat of violence behind them. The dealer flinched a little.

“I’ll be back later tonight with code much better than what’s on the disc. Interested in another loan?”

His voice this time was almost like a purr — seductive, but still with that dangerous edge to it.

“Uh, certainly,” Brian replied nervously. “Anything in particular.”

“Ice,” he said in the same “I could eat you alive” tone of voice. “Your stuff is nowhere near as good as my other supplier, but it’ll do — can’t afford to go there just yet.”

“Owe him money as well do you?” His voice had a waver to it.

“Yes, but he’s an old friend so it’s not an issue. I owe him a special favour and I’d like to repay him for it properly rather than half-assed. I have a big job to do tonight and I’m going to need all the extra help I can get.”

Tweaks voice had become unnerving. Brian hurriedly handed him three phials of Ice, mumbled something about a client waiting for him in a different part of town and then scurried away into an alley.

Tweak threw his head back and roared with laughter.

“I think I like this new GeneTech stuff — it has some interesting uses.”

He placed the phials of Ice in his backpack, sniffed the air to see if Brian had really left the area — he had. Tweak hailed a cab.

“Better do this job of Karl’s — after all, it’s with Gina.”

Visions of pinning her to the bed, mouth around her throat — not biting hard enough to hurt — just a little bit — enough to cause a sensation of breathlessness and anticipation — a look of dominance in his eyes — she will happily submit — a simultaneous surge of fear and excitement runs through his body.

“Grrr. Time to get me some Gina.”

“Have you heard the news?” the Taxi driver asked.

“Nah, don’t generally listen to it — only ever full of politics,” Tweak replied with disinterest — Gina’s image keeps playing in his mind.

“Big fire downtown — some Fuck and Suck joint is up in flames. It was petrol bombed about ten minutes ago. Probably some jealous lover caught her husband there cheating with his secretary or something.”

“Any idea of which one?”

“Yeah, it’s called The Pink Flamingo — been there myself a few times when I’ve gotten lucky with a fare — a bit tacky and way too garish for my liking, but it’s nice and discrete.”

Jeezuz-H-Christ — what have I gotten into — even the Russian Mafia doesn’t resort to fire-bombing a place full of innocent people just because someone used the place to steal a bit of data — The Clan must really have something to hide to take a risk like that — fuck the job, this is more important.

“Driver, can you take me to 146th and Pender instead.”

“Sure.”

“Mind if I use your net-node — I’ve got some urgent business to attend to.”

“Go ahead, just swipe a credit chip and you’re in — I’ll let you know when we’re close to your destination.”

"Thanks."

Tweak raised the privacy screen, connected his laptop up to the Taxi’s port and logged in with his real account. He typed an apology out to Karl and sent it to his private drop box. Karl would never sack him — he was too good — and fuck it if Max wound up as Gina’s partner, this was way more important — he knew he was get close to what he’d been searching for.

After sending off the Email, Tweak switched Credit Chips and plugged in the anonymous one he’d bought at the vending machine and began searching through an online guide the Government had released about Animal and Human Gene Splicing.

Just as Embryonic Stem Cell research had caused a massive moral debate in the early 2000’s, when Nanobots and other similar DNA altering techniques had become viable around 2065, the American public demanded a referendum about their use on humans.

This guide he’d downloaded was part of the propaganda machine of the time and was designed to convince the populace to accepted these advances as a natural progression of human beings. Rumour had it that their pro Biotechnology stance was largely influenced by the fact that many high-ranking Government officials owned substantial shares in GeneTech Inc. Of course they were going to promote use of Nanobots — they stood to make a fortune if the public accepted them.

And they did — to a certain extent — while medicinal bots were made legal, any that mimicked the effects of illicit drugs were outlawed. Of course this didn’t stop their gradual spread on the black market and if you knew people like Chiro, you could buy anything from temporary psychosis to permanent hallucinations.

The Military took a great interest in the technology as well and begin experimenting with animals to produce new hybrids that might prove useful in battle. One of their best successes was Spidersteel. They altered a Spider’s DNA to spin a thread that was flexible and strong but able to conduct electricity. This enabled electrical components and machines to be made smaller than previously possible.

Combine a microsized self-propelled delivery device with a Nanobot payload and you have a biological weapon that is virtually unstoppable — so small it can pass undetected through security equipment and straight into the target's bloodstream ready to release its payload on command.

Such weapons were banned by the U.N, but there was nothing to stop powerful gang factions using them to eliminate competitors. Tweak actually knew of a Drug Lord who'd been bumped off by one of these things.

It affected his brain at first, sending him a little crazier every day — a good healthy dose of paranoia saw his empire begin to crumble beneath him — stopped trusting even his closest aides — and then the debilitating spasms of Cerebral Palsy suddenly set in overnight. By this time it was too late to even consider trying a reversal process — it would probably send his body into toxic shock. Even if he survived, his diminished mental state meant chances of recovery were slim.

A month later, he committed suicide.

Nasty little fuckers hey!

That's why Tweak generally preferred Ice — it was a good old-fashioned Pharmaceutical high — at least you (sort of) knew what you were getting — didn't have to worry that Bots would start crawling around your body after taking a hit.

He still couldn't see what connection The Clan had to all this though — apart from being a bunch Jesus-freaks who hated progress, what were they doing with the technology. It's very rare to find altruistic intentions — especially amongst large, outspoken groups with lots of money at their disposal.

Whichever way, he knew they had what he needed to get closer to the machine level — got to start thinking in purely on/off states — start splitting the brain into separate processes — need to separate meat and brain — but how.

Whatever they'd spliced into the bot Chiro had inserted obviously heightened his awareness, but it just wasn't quick enough — a feline may be more adept at hunting than a human, but it is still an instinct driven creature — and to speak at machine level he had to remove the thought process from the action — just streams of commands.

He sighed at the thought of giving up Gina's flesh — not that he'd ever had the chance to touch it — but it was little sacrifice to make if he could become faster than the machine himself — all the speed of an AI equipped with the cunning of a cat-human — hmmm, interesting prospect.

One last fantasy about Gina before he concentrated on how to achieve what he needed.

Her naked body — both of them on all fours — she's looking at him with a mixture of disdain and lust — she senses his power — is held motionless by his unblinking gaze — a feeling of fright and anticipation — her eyelids close slowly in a simultaneous look of submission and inevitability — he moves closer and kisses her lightly on the lips — sinks his teeth into them — a taste of coppery blood — she's squirming in pain, but he keeps his teeth clamped firmly around her bottom lip — and then it clicked — KISS — Keep It Simple Stupid — grrr, if only the idea had chosen a better time to surface.

“search single celled bacteria”

Reading through the results, he came upon a recent paper discussing how Scientists recently found pure single-celled animals frozen in Antarctic Ice. It had been estimated that they had been there for over four billion years — since not long after the earth was formed. Tests had revealed that all currently known animal species carried traces of this single-celled animal in their DNA strands — it was speculated that we all shared a common ancestor.

Somehow these simple creatures had managed to form themselves into groups until they comprised of the fifty million or so cells that made a living, breathing human. That was a shitload of organisation for such simple creatures — but somehow, these simple parts created a whole that was capable of so much more than any individual organism.

Now the trick was how to get back in contact with those individual cells — how to switch the decision making processes at the root level — how to optimise them for maximum efficiency.

“If anyone has access to what I need, then Katya will.”

The taxi driver tapped on the privacy screen.

“Just about there,” he mouthed.

A nod of comprehension in reply.

Katya's workshop contained a mass of wall to monitors and an elaborate sound system designed to run her own custom-coded Dreamscape software — a sixty-four channel mind-fuck experience which allowed her to send video and audio to any point in the room. It was left running constantly and so the room was always alive with images zooming from screen to screen, while an Audio AI generated a continuously changing soundtrack.

The Dreamscape space made your brain feel like it was being pulled from several directions at once — images and sound were constantly sent zooming around the room as the software crawled the Net looking for new data, pictures, movies, noises. It piped it's findings through the code and sent them spinning around the room in a dizzy array of ordered chaos.

A person was likely to go crazy if they watched it long enough, but it seemed to help Katya concentrate for some reason. She always said it created enough background white-noise to keep her focused and helped soak up the extra cycles in her brain.

Katya was not the sanest of people to begin with. Tweak had met her when she was a geeky sixteen year old with thick coke-bottle glasses, bad dress sense and little or no social skills. She would hang around the VR Arcades all day, immersing herself in the newest games, losing herself in other people's realities, surfacing to the outside world only when necessary.

At the time, Tweak was a repairman at VR Wonderland, fixing game machines as they broke down, honing his knowledge of circuits and computers. After hours Tweak pulled apart the code from fighting games to see how the enemies had been programmed, figuring out what made them tick, why they made the decisions they did.

Katya would often spend more than eight hours straight in a dated VR game called Sleep and Dream which allowed you to construct virtual landscapes from a variety of three dimensional shapes. These worlds could be populated with creatures that evolved according to the rules of your environment. Sleep and Dream had an extremely lush feel about it and was more art than game, so it had never been popular among the hardcore gamers.

But for Katya, it was an escape into a world of her own making. A way to forget that she was friendless. She could create her own safe kingdom inside the machine.

One day in the middle of a session, the Sleep and Dream machine crashed. Her world disappeared instantly.

“What the fuck!”

With anger and shock, she flung open the door of the VR unit and stormed over to the service counter where Tweak was busy repairing a circuit board with a soldering iron.

“Your machine just ate my world and I didn’t had a chance to save it.”

“You sure you didn’t just run out of credit?”

She let out a stream of expletives that would have left a sailor blushing.

“Look you little dweeb, I spend enough time in that machine to tell when my credit’s getting low.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I was telling the boss that we should set up a bed and toilet in there and just charge you rent on the space. You’d never have to leave then.”

“Hah, hah, fucking hah. It’s just that I prefer that world to this crummy one. Who wouldn’t!”

Tweak put down the soldering iron and walked over to the machine to check the connections and power cables. They all seemed to be plugged in properly. He hit the diagnostics button and a string of garbage appeared on the screen.

“Not a good sign. I think the hard drive might have crashed.”

“But it’s got my whole world in there. Do you know how long I’ve been working on it?”

“A little over one thousand six hundred hours if I remember.”

Katya stamped her foot on the ground and gave Tweak a glare that frightened him to the core. The look in her eyes conveyed the feeling that she'd eat his balls for breakfast if he didn't think of something quickly.

“Look, I'll take the hard drive home and see if I can rescue the data for you. I might be able to get some of it back. But this machine is so old I don't think the boss is going to want to pay for it to be repaired. He's been wanting to put a more profitable machine in that space for ages.”

“But then I'll lose my world forever.”

“For the money you've spent playing that machine, you could have bought it ages ago. If I speak to the boss and tell him I want to keep it for spare parts, he'll probably give me the thing. If I get your world up and running again you're welcome to it — give me a good shoot 'em up game over Art any day.”

“Typical teenage male! But,” she was blushing a little now, “thank you, I'd really appreciate it. There's a lot of private stuff in there though — I'd prefer you don't look at it.”

“You're welcome to come and stand guard while I do it if you want, but it's a pretty boring process for someone to watch.”

“I'd be happier that way — I know how tempted you'd be to have a look at it, but believe me, you don't want to know what's on the inside of my head — you might be a little frightened of what you found.”

Tweak shrugged. “Have it your way.”

Over the next few weeks, the two became good friends as Tweak showed her to get the data off the crashed hard drive and explained how the game's world building code worked. Katya was intrigued and bugged him until he showed her how to write code herself. She was a natural and had soaked up all Tweak's accumulated programming knowledge within a few months.

Armed with this skill, she began reprogramming Sleep and Dream, adding new shapes, creatures and special effects, building more and more immersive environments. If it hadn't been for Tweak's regular visits, she would probably have lived in the machine 24/7.

After being persuaded to show some of her worlds at a major VR Art Exhibition, Katya gained an overnight cult status among both the mainstream and underground communities. Work flowed in and for a few years she enjoyed the feeling of being in demand — of being popular.

But it left no time to work on her own worlds and eventually something had to give. She had enough money in the bank and enough equipment donated by sponsors to set up her own space. These days she only took occasional one-off commissions from people willing to pay her very high asking price.

Katya was now twenty one and had changed considerably. The thick glasses were gone and had been replaced with special contact lenses that stopped her vision being ruined from staring into a computer monitor for so many hours.

Her once bedraggled hair had changed into long dreadlocks full of twisted silver thread, trinkets and talismans. Her ears were masses of silver piercings, as were her face and most other body parts. Katya insisted that they were strategically placed to form energy circuits in her body. Tweak thought she looked like a freak — but he loved her like a sister anyway.

In Katya's space, a live Webcam feed of some S&M session was being mangled by her software — yes, mangled was the only way to describe it — movie frames were being captured on a monitor positioned in the centre of the roof. As each new image appeared, the last one was sent flying in shards across the space — like a skyrocket exploding, but with razor sharp glints on every edge. When the shards collided they sliced each other into smaller fragments, little droplets of image-blood dripping down the screens — and in each drop the original image kept playing until it too dripped to the monitors at floor level.

“Wow, is that a new filter you wrote?”

“You like?”

“Ooh yeah! You are one sick puppy Katya — but gotta love your work! Can't believe you're actually getting paid to create this stuff now.”

“Well, surprisingly there are people out there who are sicker than me — and some of them have a shit-load of money — I don't mind helping indulge their fantasies every now and then if it helps pay for my toys.”

“Speaking of which, I was hoping one of your VR rigs might be able to help me figure out a little puzzle that’s been stumping me for a while. I know you wrote a software module that simulates animal-sex — must say I enjoyed road testing it for you — do you think you could reprogram it to pump out something really simple like an Amoeba?”

Katya raised her eyebrows.

“And you think I’m the twisted one? I know you’re into some pretty strange stuff Tweak, but this takes the cake.”

“Hah, hah, fucking hah, to quote a well known saying of yours! It’s like this…”

And he explained the theory about making his body operate on pure on/off pulses — no meat — just simple yes or no — so he could work at machine level — become just bits of code himself.

“It’s one heck of an idea, I must give you that. Pretty crazy if you ask me, but then again, who am I to question your logic — you’re the one who taught me how to write code in the first place — just that I followed the path of good and you chose to be a Datathief who’s always looking over their shoulder and waiting for someone to kill you.”

“You going to help me or not!”

A surge of adrenalin — an urge to hurt Katya — must keep focused — I need her.

“Of course bro.” She had noticed his tenseness. “Just chill — have some Ice or whatever it is you do these days and I’ll get the rig set up. You’ve got to stop doing so many drugs — it’s screwing with your brain.”

On the Dreamscape monitors, the contorted face melted into a hundred blood droplets again — distorted cry of pain — shards slicing through meat flesh — dripping down to floor level.

Tweak prepared to find the on/off switch in his brain.

While Katya was placing a set electrodes on either side of Tweak's temple he shuddered violently and the searing white light returned — he'd taken a triple dose of Ice to detach brain and body as much as possible.

“You ok dude?”

Focus — must concentrate — single cells — speak to Katya —

“Yeah, just took a little too many drugs tonight I think — I'll be fine in a second.”

A small dribble of saliva ran from the corner of his mouth.

“You look pretty messed up. Sure you want to do it now.”

“Damn sure. Switch the fucker on.” He gave her a twisted smile. “Oops, where are my manners — switch the fucker on — please.” A half-look of contempt and irony on his face.

“Ok, hop in the machine then. You know the drill — you've got full control over what sort of hallucinations you induce, but at the first sign of your heart rate going through the roof and I switch the machine off. Your mental state however — I have no control over. If you come out an incoherent vegetable — well, more so than you currently are — then that's your problem.”

Tweak wiped the drool from his mouth and hopped into the VR Unit as Katya closed the lid and set the software running.

In a few seconds, anything Tweak thought about would seem real and tangible — the software had been designed to release all sorts of bizarre sexual fantasy — your brain could be fooled into thinking you were actually experiencing every moment of it.

At the same time, it had the dangerous potential to severely screw up someone in a bad headspace — their darkest, dirtiest desires brought to the surface and confronted — it was more than possible to go crazy using the machine and occasionally people suicided within a few hours of using it — as far as their memory knew, they had actually committed whatever kinky sex act they'd wanted to do and sometimes the sense of shame at having lived out the fantasy became overwhelming — they killed themselves over something they'd committed.

Katya made it a point never to record their fantasy sessions — both for legal reasons and the fact that she really didn't want to know how far humans could go in their sexual depravity.

“Good luck — hope you find what you're looking for in there.”

Tweak began visualising the Nanobots currently crawling through his body making new DNA patterns — thought about them slicing through neuron-networks, separating them into single units — a fluid state — on or off — sending small portions of his consciousness into each cell — find that primal state.

Monitoring the machine's processes, Katya was getting anxious. Tweak's vital signs were slowing down — his heart-rate was strong, but it had dropped to less than five beats per minute.

Slow the pulsing even further — set the cells vibrating one at a time — sense every single one of them — fifty million individual parts vibrating in resonance — a Biochip with a human processor.

This was starting to get serious — if Tweak's heart slowed down any further there was a chance he would slip into a coma. Then she'd have some explaining to do — a lot of her software wasn't strictly legal — and if they found she'd been making animal sex simulations, she'd be looking at twenty five years minimum.

He was beginning to feel himself as only cells, each with it's own set of commands — meat and brain operating together — polar icecaps — melting feeling — cold — slowing — on/off — on — off — on.

Tweak's pulse had dropped off the scale. Every couple of minutes the heart-rate monitor beeped and showed that he was still alive — but all other read-outs were flat.

“Oh fuck, I'm going to be in so much shit!”

The glass shards disappeared from her walls and were replaced by images of quickly vibrating cells. They were mesmerising to watch — all in perfect synchronisation.

A slow, sub-audible voice edged its way into Katya's head.

“I made it.”