2003

Lottery Man

Malik Toms

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rd

Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation
Toms, Malik, "Lottery Man" (2003). Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 165.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rd/165

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Malik Toms

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy

Major Professor
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Program
Mirror-World

Biometric scanners never work right; not on the first try at least. It’s something about the way he cradles the device. Gentle. His fingers slide into the imprint grooves around the case and nothing happens. He presses down harder until he can feel the plastic surrendering to the metal beneath it. LED’s thrum to life along the console’s two buttons. Interface. Disconnect.

Slowly now, Jonas attaches a coil of yellow fiber-optic cord to the base of the keyboard-sized computer. He takes up the other end of the cord and presses it directly into a raised ring of metal on the side of his head just below the hairline. The datajack cord slides in with a satisfactory “click” linking the metal aperture beside his temple and the keyboard itself.

Things were different once. Before the scars and the replacement surgery he believed cyberspace was a place where people could make something of themselves. Connect. Learn. Before, Jonas drove a cab. He lived with his girlfriend. He was poor.

Jonas exhales slowly and then speaks into the microphone dangling from his headset. "This is control. We are a go." He presses Interface.

The computer comes to life, circuits gobbling up commands the instant his mind made them. All of his doubts and fears melt away in the first few seconds of transition between the gray world and this kaleidoscopic world. In cyberspace Jonas is blue. He is tall and muscular with eyes that are cut from coal and a pointed white
goatee that clings to the image of his chin like an icicle. He is Frost here. It is a powerful name.

Jonas/Frost stands at the center of a ring of snow-lined trees. His shoeless feet are all but hidden by the long blades of snow-covered grass. The forest ringing his clearing is so thick and tangled with growth that he can not see what lies beyond it. There is in fact nothing to see. His mirror-world begins and ends with this clearing. The code is sharp. He has spent years working out the imperfections in order to make this cusp of cyberspace space seem real. It isn't real. It isn't the way the space, the real space, looked when he was a kid. Details are missing. There are no morning birds chirping. That fresh smell of pine needles is ominously absent. It is neither hot nor cold. Frost has never been taught how to will cyberspace to provide these things. These things are not relevant to his purpose here.

Along edge of the tree line, a series of rectangular mirrors hovers inches above the ground. Green neon letters spell out a name above each window. From left to right they read: Arson, Trotter, Sticks and Lucky. There is a fifth window behind him from which he came. Frost. It is larger than the rest.

"Frost in the Box." Everything he says in cyberspace is translated to his flesh body. His mouth spits out the words mechanically. It is the same with his other physical senses still linked to the real world. Everything his ears hear through the headset back in the van, his digital self hears as well.

He turns to the fourth mirror. Lucky. Frost leaps through.
The net-world lurches and Frost is on a motorcycle. A concrete labyrinth of glass-coated skyscrapers and old, ivy-covered brownstones replaces the image of a forest clearing. All that had been absent in cyberspace is present in this new vision. The air stinks of industrial pollutants and his ears are filled with the white noise of New York City traffic.

"I'm with the point now." The words are aphrodisiac. Frost feels the pleasant tug of his groin coming awake between his legs. Yet as real as the sensations are, Frost knows that they are not his own. What he hears, what he smells, sees, even what he feels is an echo of Lucky’s experience. Lust fills his heart, an emotion which like the rest is not his own.

"Technology is grand, nes pa?" Frost can feel Lucky’s throat grind out the words. They sound deeper and hollow between his ears. “Sometimes I think you like riding with me like this too much."

It’s always like this with Lucky before the job. Lucky is their sparkplug. Doing this kind of corporate work stimulates him in a way that Frost cannot comprehend. He always feels dirty after using the sense link with Lucky, but this is the way they do things. Their process. Seeing through the eyes of the others and feeling what they feel is the only way Frost can know exactly what is going on from their point of view.

"It is good to have you aboard, Frosty. How do you like my view?" Frost’s shared vision shifts to reveal a leggy blonde standing at the corner waiting for a cab.
"Business, Lucky. Focus on business now. Show me the building."

Lucky speaks in a slow Cajun drawl. Frost isn't certain that it's genuine. "You ride with ol' Lucky off the books one day and I'll show you business."

He doesn't bother to respond. Lucky grins at the silence but shifts his vision nonetheless. He pans to the left and then back to the right very slowly, a human camera giving Frost a view of the entire setting. Lucky is on a side street seated atop his motorcycle. By the look of the ivy laden buildings, it's a particularly affluent neighborhood. The low brownstones of mid-Manhattan are all that survived the earthquake of 2005. Beyond this specter of old New York, a tangle of silver and black corporate buildings juts into the evening sky. The streetlight nearby flashes green and a clump of cars works its way through the narrow side street onto Park Avenue. Lucky glimpses the street sign again. 71st street. He pans back slowly and brings his eyes to rest on the tan brick building near the corner.

"Green awning, like you say. Reinforced plexi-glass windows. One door guard." The awning has the numbers 114 printed on it in dusty gold lettering.

"Hold position." There is a lurch, like a roller coaster beginning its trip downhill. Frost tumbles back through the mirror and into the clearing. His digital body rolls up to a sitting position in the grass, turned towards the mirror from which he came. The dusty green image of 114 E 71st street hangs there, a window into another world.
“Location confirmed.” He’s only been to 71st street one other time in his life. It was when he met Santiago, when Santiago brought him in. Santiago brought them all in.

“Sticks, are you still with me?” He’s working through the mirrors backwards. Hesitant.

“Clear line to our shooter.” Sticks is stationed at 116 E 71st street, the building next door to 114. He is the group’s mage, but like the others, the corporation involuntarily put him under the knife in order to receive a sense link. Sticks’ argument against the sense link was that it would dull his magic. From what Frost has seen, Sticks still has more than enough juju juice to go around. The sense link is important. People don’t always pay attention to everything that’s in front of their face. A person’s eye may see everything but the mind is only trained to notice so much.

From the mage’s position, Frost cannot see 114. Instead, his eyes gloss across the team leader. She is standing near a parking meter across the street from Sticks and the target location. She is a tall red-haired woman dressed in a business suit and black gloves. Through Sticks’ eyes he watches her dutifully attend to her make-up. Frost says nothing, backs out of Sticks’ mirror, and sets off to activate the others.

He moves to Trotter’s mirror next. He is stationed around the corner on Park Avenue. He is their safety man, in case everything else turns to shit. He is waiting
just inside the entrance to a Russian art gallery, peering at the art pieces with seemingly expert eyes.

Viewing the world from Trotter’s point of view is a truly different experience. Knee-high to the world, Trotter often jokes. He is unusually confident considering his Dwarven height. Frost will never have that kind confidence outside of cyberspace. He lingers in Trotter’s mirror, longing for some way to siphon some of that confidence.

Arson is always last. Frost feels a twinge of guilt stepping inside of her emotions. Of all the members of their team he is closest to their leader. It is a friendship that has drifted into something else on more than one occasion. He could be in love with her. Only, she doesn’t call it love. She calls it “bunkmates” his “bunkmate” is the only person he’s felt his heart shudder for since he’s joined the corporation. Arson is a lot like his first love. She is ambitious and determined. She did what it took to get the job done. Even if it meant sacrificing her pride, her gains, her arms. She’s been under the knife four times since they met. Invasive surgery each time. Her last cut job netted her the two cybernetic arms that she cradles him with the nights they are together. The feel of them is cold and lifeless against his skin. Somehow he feels closer to her after the last surgery, like he understands what she is trying to become.

A lump of fear sticks in his—her—throat. Through her eyes he watches their target saunter into the lobby of 114 E 71st street. Frost is quiet as she observes the
man. Diego Santiago—Frost has spent weeks learning everything about the man, his habits, his past, trying to find something that will make it easier to kill this man. The others were easier. They were thieves, and murderers. Santiago is nothing like them. Even now, Frost doesn't know what Mr. Santiago did to deserve their visit, who handed down the order from high above, but that doesn't matter anymore. Mr. Santiago doesn't have very long to live.

Arson's eyes are focusing in on Santiago's face, optical magnification circuitry reaching out across the crowded side street until it is as if the two of them are face to face. Five years have aged Santiago more than Frost would have guessed. Arson peers into the deep worry grooves around Santiago's eyes; studies his sagging chin. She can read every inch and pore of his olive face and is probing for some inconsistency that would suggest that this isn't their target but instead a carefully crafted double sent to throw them off.

"Potential target in range. Frost, do we have a match?" she asks over her headset.

"You know it's him, Arson. We all do."

"By the book, Frost. Make the check."

Inside her mirror Frost summons an image of their target, and tests it against the face he sees through Arson's eyes.

"Yeah, we have a match." Arson's cyber eyes zoom out again. Santiago is standing in the lobby talking with the doorman. Frost feels the warm twinge of
regret pulling at Arson's heart. She doesn't want to kill Santiago anymore than he does. That's what he loves about her. It's also what he hates about the rest of his team.

"Frost, are we green?" Her impatience grips him as if it were his own. He quickly backs out of her mirror into the clearing. Frost calls up an outline display of the side street. The image appears on the ground at his feet. Each member of Frost's team is represented by a flashing dot. Each dot is a different color. His own dot is colored blue but isn't on the map. His meat body is blocks away from the affair, slumbering peacefully, jacked into the van. The easy ones are like this, staring through his looking glasses as he lounges comfortably in the digital garden with a digital overlay between his hands. The work is never really difficult unless he has to step through his own mirror and into that other space that is neither real world nor matrix. It isn't until Jonas is rigged into the vehicle that things are really hard.

"Overwatch established. All points online command. Proceed." He draws out the last word so that it sounds like Lucky's southern drawl. Pro-seed. It is a comforting habit, like basketball players who wear their college shorts under their pro ones or soldiers who carry letters from their ladies in their helmets. His dash of voodoo has become so commonplace that the team would suspect that something was wrong if he doesn't say it that way. At the sound of his voice the images in the mirrors go into motion. The next few moments have been rehearsed for weeks. Each action honed until it is as if they were connected by invisible threads that spindle out to each
member, drawing their movements into a single pulse. It starts in Lucky's mirror. The Cajun Samurai goads his motorcycle to life. Through his eyes Frost watches a dulled silver Toyota elite limousine glide around the corner. Fixed upon its side door is the polished "K" of the Kerrigan Corporation.

Lucky juices the throttle once more and the Harley shoots out into the street. Everything is clockwork then. The limousine stops just short of hitting Lucky. The Cajun kills the engine and looks down at the bike as if it has betrayed him. With Lucky stalled in the middle of the road, there is no way the limo can reach its destination. He shrugs his shoulders comically, his eyes riveted on the limo driver, instantly feeding the man's description to Frost.

In his digital realm Frost is already on his feet, grabbing at the mirror and peeling the image away from it like a plastic coating. He turns towards the mirror labeled "Sticks" and fixes Lucky's image of the limo driver over it.

"Download received control. Engaging mask." Sticks works as he speaks. In the mage's mirror Frost can see Arson. Her face contorts and stretches until it becomes the fat red face of the limo driver. She draws her pistol, its silenced barrel hanging at her side as she approaches the building. Behind her another illusion is already underway. A jet black limousine rolls to a stop in front of Santiago's building.

"Santiago's too smart for this. He'll know the limo is an illusion."
"He'll take the bait." Frost turns to watch from Arson's eyes. He isn't inside the mirror with her, but he can feel the cadence of her heart quickened by the wait.

He switches back to Lucky's mirror. The real limo driver honks a second time, and starts to get out of the car. "Time's up, Lucky, move on."

Lucky keys the ignition, mouthing the word "sorry" to the driver. Any longer and the driver would have gotten out of the limousine and been able to see its ghostly double parked in front of 114.

"Target in range." Arson's voice.

It's developing faster than he expected. In Arson's mirror the doorman opens the building door. The target greets her with a smile and hurries down the short flight of steps toward his ride.

"Got him." He imagines she is smiling back. Her silenced colt pistol hisses in the night air.

"Target Down!" Sticks' words are hurried. The mage conjures a third illusion, and a small crowd jams the walkway beneath the awning of 114. There are a dozen children, and a frantic trio of mothers carrying bags. All of them screaming and staring at the man who has fallen to the ground only steps away. The doorman draws a gun and bounds into the crowd after Arson but the face he saw is gone. Sticks drops the illusion spell he had put on her and the red-haired woman is screaming alongside everyone else.
In Lucky's mirror the illusory limousine vanishes as Lucky speeds out of the way of the real one. When it reaches the building, the illusionary crowd has all but completely scattered, running to the four winds to avoid the gun-toting doorman. The limo driver doesn't even make it out of the car before the doorman fires.

Disconnect.

The real world slid into fuzzy grey focus. Jonas felt for the datajack cable embedded in his temple. He spoke into the headset, "Our Oswald is down. All units are clear. Rendezvous for pickup at beta point. Stay arctic people, trans-scan says NYPD is on their way. Frost has left the shell."

"Arctic," Arson responded, "Make sure you copy that people. That means no stopping for Twix-bars on the way back to the rendezvous this time, Lucky. Well done, people. Let's go home."
Far away an alarm rang and Christina Maldonado pried her eyes open. She was fully dressed. Morning heat had made the thin silk dress cling to her moist skin. Her mouth was dry and she could still taste last night's drinks. Yawning, she rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Christina couldn't remember what had happened last night. She knew that she'd done herself up to look like Nadja Daviar. Her mother had taught her that men love to feel like they're in control of someone that powerful. Experiences over the past few years confirmed the lesson. Maria Mercurial, Euphoria, Jenna Ni'Fiarra, and now she'd even made herself look like the Vice President. Sometimes she dressed like the old faces, the people from the movie days. Amanda Bynes, Natalie Portman, Angelina Jolie. Every role she played, every look she replicated made her men wild with excitement.

"Give a man what he wants and you'll get what you need." Her mother had said that. And it was so true. Christina's apartment was littered with flowers and gifts from the men she gave her nights to. Jewelry, negligees, and dresses to flaunt for them. Everything she needed to keep them happy.

Christina sat up slowly, becoming increasingly aware of the sickly "wreep! wreep!" chant of her alarm. It was old and run down, like the table it sat on. No modern features. No friendly Chiba-born electronic voice to cajole her into
consciousness. Just the awful wreep! that seemed to never end. She wanted a new one; she planned to get a new one even. A Wakemaster VII with programmable news feed like she’d seen at the Sharper Image. She wasn’t ready to focus her money on trivial things like clocks yet, but as soon as she found the right man she would be. For now, her trickle of credits went towards what mattered: new fashions, women's magazines and hair stylings.

Christina smashed her palm into the off button. The noise began to fade but it didn't go away. She dropped her head into her palm and then raked her fingers back through her thick hair.

"Mirror." She thought aloud as she crawled out of bed. Her face was always at its worst in the morning. Her lips were pink and chapped. She had blue eyes that pretended to be awake. The makeup beneath them had run to dark smears. She wondered what her men would think of her if she ever let them spend the night.

That awful sound was coming back, like some drug induced nightmare that she just couldn’t shake. Christina fixed her eyes on the clock across the room. Damn clock. It's time/date stamp flickered 7:35 in bright green letters.

Late. The alarm was supposed to go off at 7:00.

By the time she had washed the makeup off of her face and applied a fresh coat, it was 7:49. In eleven minutes she would have to be at work. In twelve, it would be too late. Christina had been late once this week already and twice the
week before. That kind of disregard wouldn't be tolerated at the corner bodega let alone where she worked.

She worked at Firstbank of Queens. At least, she had. The moment Christina pushed past the thick glass doors it was clear that her job was already past tense. Seeing her supervisor standing there in the red carpeted foyer, struggling to keep a smile on his face confirmed her suspicions.

"My office, now."

Christina followed him without protest back past the wood finish teller boxes down gray carpeted hallways to the executive offices. She plopped down in a brown cushioned seat in front of his desk while he sat himself in the leather chair behind it.

"Mr. Myerson I can explain to you what happened. I made a mistake, but I can assure you that it won't happen again."

Myerson's blue eyes narrowed. He rubbed his balding head from front to back with a wrinkled hand and said, "Christina, we've given you more than enough leeway over the past few months. Your continued behavior is not only disrespectful to me but it's detrimental to the rest of our staff. If I allow you to behave in this manner without punishment then other workers will try to do the same." He slid up closer in his chair. "We cannot allow that to happen."

"Then punish me, cut my pay, just please don't fire me. You don't know how much this job means."
Myerson was at the edge of his chair now. "Yes, I do know how much this Job means to you. I see the way you act with some of our customers. Flirting, leading them on, and quite frankly, that's an issue that I have with you too."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir. I'm not doing anything differently than any of the other girls out there. I just talk to the customers when they come to me."

"Is that so?" Myerson peered down at his desk. It was cluttered with computer readouts and post-it notes. Amidst the mess he found a stack of blue papers. "I've had several complaints about you telling customers your personal number and performing other such indiscretions while on the clock."

Christina's jaw went slack for a moment. "Mr. Myerson those complaints are absolutely absurd! They're probably all from Sandy and Michelle. Those two girls have some kind of vendetta against me. You can't take what they say seriously, sir. They'd say anything to get me fired!" She believed most of what she said. She believed that Sandy and Michelle had a vendetta against her. In those ladies' eyes, Christina had wronged the both of them at one time or another. With Sandy it was a man, a customer whom Sandy had a crush on. The man never returned those feelings, but whenever he saw Christina, his smile seemed a little brighter, his step livelier.

Michelle was another matter entirely.
Now, maybe thanks to them it was all over. Christina had worked Firstbank's
teller booth for three years. Two years longer than Myerson in fact. Those early years
were exemplary. A Johnson named Yuri Cates got her the spot. He said it wasn't for
sex. Just a favor to a friend. Still, her friend was on her doorstep every Tuesday night
in search of favors. He still bought her gifts. She wouldn't let him touch her
otherwise. At work Cates tried to treat her the way he treated the other employees
but it didn't last. Even though she wasn't faster or any more efficient than the other
girls, she always received raises before they did. It was a good arrangement.

One Tuesday Cates didn't show. The next day, his office was empty. That was
the day Christina met Mr. Myerson.

"You got a lot of nerve expecting me to keep you on. I won't let you make a
mockery of my authority."

Christina couldn't hide her desperation any longer. She felt it spread across
her face like fungus. "I'm not trying to mock you or anything like that, Mr. Myerson.
I respect what you're saying and what you stand for here. Please, just don't fire me.
This job means everything."

"Why?" The question caught her off guard. He asked it again.

"Because I need the money." She lied.

"Then maybe you should ask those men you spend all that time with to give
you a little something more for what you do for them. They're all rich, aren't they?
Isn't that how it works? I'm sure they could cover your expenses no problem."
He could have slapped her. Her mouth closed slowly. She raised her palm to her cheek expecting to feel a glowering pink welt forming there.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Myerson stared at her form a moment, bemused. Then he went back to shuffling through the paperwork on his desk. Head slung towards the table he said, "I expect you to have your space cleared out before lunch. That doesn't give you very much time so I suggest you get a move on."

"So that's it?" She paused between each word.

"That's it."

He seemed different to her then. Larger, more in control. It made her angry. It made her want to pull his glasses off his nose and--

"You can leave my office now, Ms. Maldonado." Never looking up to watch her go.

Christina started to stand, composure and anger building to a crescendo. Then very calmly, "No."

"Excuse me?"

"No, that is not it. I was late a few times but I work damn hard for this place. People who come to my window always come back. I know that they tell you how much they like dealing with me. Whether you like it or not I'm good for business. You can't just throw me out on the street!"
"I already did Ms. Maldonado. I am not the same kind of man that Mr. Cates was. I won't allow myself to be bullied by your anger or by your sexuality. This matter is concluded."

She planted her hands on her hips. "You're right Mr. Myerson. You're not at all the type of man that Mr. Cates is. You're an asshole."

That shook him. He looked up at her. "Before you judge me, Ms. Maldonado, try asking yourself where Cates is now. Ask yourself why he was transferred out of this office. Try asking his wife."

The idea of it washed over her like a fat wave. She didn't even know he was married.

The conversation ended there, fading into angry glares and slammed doors. She hadn't been able to hide her desperation when they were fighting. She didn't hide her anger now. Cleaning out her dingy cubby in the halogen lit break room was last rites to a dying woman. "Now what?" roamed into her thoughts and demanded an answer she could not produce. She was good with people, she was certain of that, but the chances of getting another gig like Firstbank were slim. She'd probably end up six blocks over flipping soy burgers at McDonalds. Her body wasn't wired for anything else. She could type but she had never gone under the knife for a datajack implant, afraid it might affect her beauty. Most secretaries were outfitted with one. The elite invested in recording and processing headware so they wouldn't miss a
word the boss said. Not Christina. She got by on looks, vat grown breasts and attitude.

She was shivering. She couldn't stop shivering. It hit her that she had been fired and she had no way of finding another honest wage. She was spiraling into destitute anonymity, far off the slick track of everything she intended to be. Christina opened up her glossy Jovan hand purse and tried to pour all of her nick-knacks into it. It didn't work. They spilled over the leather edges of her purse and scattered across the floor.

"Shit."

Then Michelle walked in.

The pause was considerable. Michelle leaned against the doorway framed by the hallway's fluorescent glow. She stared at Christina bent over picking up lipsticks, make-up and her broken compact.

"It had to happen sooner or later."

Christina shook her head, groaning, "Can't you just leave me alone? I don't want to deal with your crap today, Michelle."

That drew a smile. "Don't blame me for what happened to you, Christina. You screwed yourself."

She remembered the first day of work. The first day she met Michelle. A friendly hello, a firm handshake. Three o'clock in the break room Michelle touched her. That night, after the drugs...
Christina climbed to her feet, hands full of make up, eyes watering. "So you came in here to stand over me and gloat for a little while? Jesus, Michelle, I thought you were a better person than that."

"I am. I came to let you know that there's a man out front waiting for you."

He had an angular face with gray marble eyes. Synthetic muscle rippled beneath his clothes. The man was black, his skin accented by a blue pinstripe Mortimer of London suit. A real leather briefcase was handcuffed to his wrist.

"He came in a little while ago looking for you. I thought I'd let you pack up before I told you he was here." Michelle curled her lips into a smirk then drifted off towards her teller box.

Christina walked towards the man, stopping a few feet away from him. She asked, "Can I help you?"

The suit crossed the distance between them in a single smooth stride. "Ms. Maldonado? I represent the estate of Mr. Diego Santiago."

The name meant nothing.

"Mr. Santiago named you in his will." He lowered his voice to say, "I was specifically instructed to bring the bequest to you here."

She flinched when he slid his right hand into the briefcase, expecting a gun, a tazer...

A ring case.
A small velvet ring case, the kind meant to hold a wedding ring. Christina had seen them before, through the thick paned windows of Tiffany's mostly. The jewelry boxes that her gifts came in were nothing like this. This said money.

"What is it?"

The courier shook his head. He retrieved a digital notepad from his briefcase and then collected her signature. "So open it already," Michelle called from her booth.

Christina glanced over briefly before returning her attention to the box. Standing there in the lobby of Firstbank of Queens she brushed back the velvet and tugged it open.

Inside was a key.
2. Locksmith

"Just a key?" The heavy Greek voice belonged to Lauren Pantelakos. She was perched on the edge of the Christina's short brown couch. "You would think the man would leave you more than a key."

"Why should the man leave me anything?" Christina's face felt dirty where the morning's tears had pushed makeup away from the rims of her eyes. She was holding the key in one hand, and pacing across the thick rug.

Lauren had a sharp accent that made it sound like she was whining. "You slept with him, right? He was a customer?"

"For a month or so. That was a year ago. He came to me a few times, for dates and then he just stopped."

Lauren shrugged. "Obviously you meant enough to him that he left you something."

She didn't like the way Lauren was looking at her; a visual tsk tsk. There was anger in her voice then. "Don't do that. Not today."

Lauren nodded and pretended to look away, but she kept on turning her eyes on Christina. Tsk tsk.

"Your boss fired you, didn't he?"
"What?" Christina rolled her eyes and shook her head as if to say it didn’t happen.

"It’s one o’clock on a weekday, and you’re home. You obviously weren’t crying about the dead guy so…"

"I don’t want to talk about this, Laurie." Lauren knew her well. They could have been sisters. People even said they looked alike. It was part of the reason why Christina liked her, but that familiarity wasn’t bringing her any comfort right now.

"Whatever. I don’t see what the big deal is in the first place. You don’t need a day job. The house covers our rent, and gives us a good wage. The men we’re with give us anything else we could possibly need."

Christina didn’t respond. Didn’t look at her friend. She could feel her skin growing hot with anger. She walked over to the window and opened the blinds. Sunlight bathed the room.

"How long have we known each other, Teenie?"

"Four years."

"And for four years you’ve been telling me that you want to get out of this business, but you’re still here. Have you ever thought that maybe you really don’t want to get out? It’s a lot to give up, Teenie. I’m not just talking about the things. I’m talking about the way it feels when they look at you."

"Like a piece of meat?"
“Only if you let it. Those men want you. They want you more than their wives, more then their careers, more than their money.”

“Do you really believe that?”

Lauren said, “I have to. We don’t have the type of job that people look up to. But it is a job, not—”

“—who we are as women? My mother used to say that all the time.”

Lauren smiled, they had the same smile. “It was the first thing they taught me when I got here. It stuck.”

“I can’t think like you, Lauren. It would be a lot easier if I did.”

“No, but maybe it’s not the best thing in the world to think like me, I don’t think I would like you if you did. One me is enough.”

Christina smiled. She could feel it fade into a frown when she spoke. “Ok, yeah. I got fired. I showed up late to work again and the guy canned me.”

“So what?”

“So I’m not cut out for college, I barely made it through high school. I can’t do anything but lay on my back and bring a smile to some fat old guy’s face, that’s what. I needed this job, Laurie. I needed to know that I could do something besides the family business.” Christina’s face was flush with anger. She wanted to cry and the idea of crying only made her angrier.

“And working at a bank is going to make you feel like you can do something with your life? Christina, you’re not stupid. There are a lot of things you could do.”
"And live the way we live? I don't want to do this work Laurie, but I don't want to have to fight for money everyday either. I see how other people live and I don't want to be the woman who isn't sure she can afford to feed her kids. My mom was able to take care of us through this work. I got used to living the way we did and I don't want to leave that."

Laurie was looking at her eye to eye. She never did that. "You're serious about this?"

"I can't be this person anymore, Laurie."

"Well, if you really want to get out that bad maybe you should try to find out where the lock is that goes with that key."

Anger had clenched her hands so tight that a red impression had formed in her hand where the key was. She moved it to the other hand, clenching and unclenching her fist to make the fresh pain subside. Christina studied the key. It was a long cylinder with irregular notches and a thin strip of circuitry down the center.

"Nobody gives you a key unless it opens something right?" Lauren said.

"It's not the kind of thing you open houses with. It almost looks like a safe deposit box key, but I've never seen one like this before."

Lauren had a toothy smile, like a woman in a chewing gum commercial. She said, "I think you just found your lottery man."

"My what?"
"You know what I'm talking about." She waved off the question. "You find an old guy with a whole lot of money, make him feel like the world would end if you weren’t in it, and then when he dies it’s like, bam! You just hit the lotto."

She didn’t know whether to smile or be appalled. As friends go, Lauren was her best one. However, the woman could still surprise her. "How in the world did you come up with that?"

Lauren shrugged, "Believe me honey, in this line of work you need to have something to wish for."

The phone rang.

Christina flipped on the receiver screen to see who it was, but the Callers ID was blocked. Telemarketers did that. She moved to pick it up anyway.

"Let it ring" Lauren’s face was fixed into a stare. "And tell me what you going to do about that key?"

"I can’t do anything with this. I don’t even know what it’s for. That attorney person didn’t give me a name of a bank or anything. He just gave me a key."

"Didn’t you ask?"

"Of course I asked! He said he didn’t know what it was for. He said that his firm has received instructions to give the case to me upon Mr. Santiago’s death."

"Maybe Santiago thought that you knew what it was for."

"I don’t obviously, and I don’t see anyway that I can find out." She studied the key again.
Lauren's voice was softer when she responded. The determined creases at the corners of her eyes faded back into the smooth palate of her face. She worked her lips into another smile. "The Teenie I know doesn't give up that easy".

"What are you getting at, Lauren?"

"I think I know of a way, but it involves some people that you may not be interested in dealing with."

"If it's my Lottery Man, as you say then I have absolutely nothing to lose. I'm willing to try anything."

"I used to spend some time with a guy who knows computers." Lauren lowered her voice. "He told me once that people pay him to break into big corporate systems and steal information."

"He's a decker?" Christina used the street term.

"Yeah, and good enough to pay my fee. Maybe he can find out something about this key of yours."

"I'll try anything. What's his name?"
3. Thomas Red Owl

He was too comfortable in familiar places. He no longer noticed the way the smell of liquor clung ghostlike to the air. He didn’t notice the woman moving across the bar, the way her eyes latched on to him and her face tightened. For just a moment, he’d shut himself off to all of it. Thomas was living in the past again. Something about what he did for a living made it easy to forget about the physical things. He would just close his eyes and let his mind separate from the now.

“What are you thinking about?” She had a face that matched her voice. Very cute, but young. The nametag on her button down white chemise read Marla. He thought of her more as a Tammy or Betsy.

Thomas said, “Tarot cards.”

Marla pressed herself into the torn red vinyl at the other end of the booth. She set her tray on the table between them, leaned in a little, and smiled, “So what about them?”

For Thomas, the hard part of dwelling in the past was shifting back to the now. He thought of it like a crank-head or a mood chipper crashing back down from a high. He could remember where he was and what he had been doing but it took a few moments to untangle the why. “It all depends on the type of reading you want. You want to know about the past, you do it one way. The future, another.”

“No, I had a lady read me once. I checked up about it on the net afterwards.”
“So why are you telling me about it?” If he looked past Marla he could see the entrance to the pub. She followed his eyes towards the door. “Expecting someone tonight?”

“Maybe later,” Thomas pulled a short stack of drink napkins off the metal clip on her tray. He laid the napkins out one by one atop the pealing Formica laminate until his design looked like a cross.

"Imagine the napkins are Tarot cards. This setup right here is called the Kachina Knife spread. First you set the left and right of the hilt. This is the heart of the reading. Then the handle is the past. The blade is the Present. Finally the point. That’s the Future."

Marla had a half-bored look in her eyes. He flipped the first card.

“The Lovers.” Interest flickered in Marla’s eyes.

“That was my past card. She told me I was at a crossroads, and the need to make a choice was at hand.” Marla had her hands on her hips. She had started to thrum her fingers.

"Then she flipped the second card, the Nine of Pipes and she said close friendships are with others who play the same game as you, but good enemies also play your game. Use caution in all personal matters."

“Why bother asking a Tarot lady for advice if you’re just going to ignore it?” There was some bite in Marla’s voice. Less cute. A pair of men walked in through
the front. Jeans and jackets. They stood by the front door looking around. Marla studied them and said, “Back to work then.”

Thomas removed a beautifully carved Meerschaum pipe from its protective case inside of his jacket. His eyes never left the pair of men by the door. He was studying them; the way they carried themselves. Marla sat the two men at a table close to the door where Thomas could see them and could see her flirting with them. He unrolled his beaded tobacco pouch and loaded the bowl with tobacco. Then Thomas struck a wooden match, lit his pipe, closed his eyes and turned the next napkin.

"The Eight of Blades, Captive," Star Spider Woman said as she turned the next card. "Um....hmmmm.... Strength is needed to establish unity. You are your brother's keeper, but you must decide if you wish to be the captive or the captor in this relationship." The pronouncement was followed with a rheumy chuckle which quickly devolved into a weak cough. When the witch had pulled herself together she wagged a bony finger at him and said "Such a face! Listen to me, child; the cards are true even if they are not clear. Did you think because this card is in the position of your past it would speak of your deeds as a warrior? That it would talk to me about the machine you clutch like a talisman or the metal you have polluted yourself with? She laughed in a way that made the loose flesh on her chin jiggle. This is not the way of my magic, Lightning Walker. You will find the meaning eventually, child."
It still didn’t make any sense. But he remembered it the way that people remember a specific prayer or a mantra. A few minutes of footage locked inside of his biological hard drive destined to replay itself every time he found a paying gig. Thomas exhaled slowly, watching the white smoke float apart and drift the way his thoughts did all too often. Marla was watching the bar and walking back towards him. He didn’t know what he was going to say to her.

“Your friends are getting antsy, Tommy.” She kept walking.

Thomas checked his watch again, an oversized Russian thing; very cheap. The big hand overlapped the little hand somewhere between the seven and the eight. If that big hand made it to the nine before the client got here, he wouldn’t be. That would be unfortunate. It would also be expensive.

Thomas hadn’t walked into this alone. Even if the lady didn’t make an appearance, Thomas would have to pay both of his partners for showing up. Gypsy was seated at a table somewhere behind him, pretending to be passed out. If this was some kind of set-up, Gypsy would have been the first to react. The awakening had given Gypsy the ability to manipulate magical energies. Mana, he called it. Good old-fashioned magic.

Tommyknocker had also been affected by the awakening. For him it was more like a disease than an awakening. Doctor’s even had a name for it, Unexplained Genetic Expression. For a few, it started at birth. Children would come
out with stunted legs and squat bodies. Dwarves were fat, waddling things but they were the lucky ones.

Thomas studied his friend standing alone at the edge of the long bar. He was a hulking man, the kind of person you expect to play football. But that was where his normalcy ended. Tommyknocker had been one of the many that didn’t change until puberty.

UGE came on like a violent storm. The changed ones like Tommyknocker sprouted tusks. Their skin paled to a dull grey or a milky brown. The media called them Trolls. A shrill thread of terror ran through the world when the first Troll appeared. Man had reached a place where a parent could know what diseases a child would have before they were born. UGE presented no warning signs, not like cerebral palsy or other birth defects. Parents had to wait and see if their child would mutate into a monster.

“You know, there are a lot of other ways you can look out for yourself without having to bring that thing around.”

“If you’re talking about Tommyknocker, he’s good people.”

“Scary people, Tommy. He’s scary people. There are places for things like him and a bar isn’t one of them.”

“Not your problem for much longer,”

“It’s not me I’m talking about here Tommy, it’s our customers.” It was hard to ignore the way people looked at Tommyknocker.
"You’re right. It’s not worth the wait." Thomas glanced at his watch and started to rise. A subtle sign from Tommyknocker convinced him to sit back down. Twenty seconds later a woman burst into the bar.

Taking a deep breath she scanned the bar, which, thanks to her breathless entrance, was now completely focused on her. She began moving towards Tommyknocker, but with a flick of his eyes, the Troll directed her attention to the Native American calmly smoking his pipe. She headed towards Thomas’s table.

"You must be the Johnson."

"Christina and I’m sorry I’m late." She looked the way he imagined a trid star would. Not just make-up pretty but down to the bone attractive. She had her hair tied back into a bun. She was wearing jeans and a long wool coat tied up at the waist. Thomas motioned for her to sit down.

"I need you to help me find a lock."

"A lock?"

"Yesterday morning a lawyer showed up at my office and gave me a key. It came from the will of a man I didn’t really know that well. The lawyer who brought it to me looked pretty upscale, but I don’t have any idea what the key opens or why." After several seconds of internal debate the young woman admitted, "Look, I probably should keep my mouth shut about this, but I know it could come back to haunt me later. I just got canned from the 9 to 5 I had. That means all I’ve got is debts. I think that the key may be to something good."
"Why come to me?"

"Well, I don't really know anybody who uh...." dropping her voice to a whisper, Christina continued "is a shadowrunner. I didn't know how to even find anybody who might help me with my problem."

Thomas put out his pipe. "How do you know Lauren?"

"We're friends."

"You work with her?" She reminded him of Lauren, not just the face but the way she carried herself; like a girl who knew how to get what she wanted.

"Does it matter?"

"I need to know that you're legit."

"I'm not a cop if that's what you're asking. As for my job, I work at a bank. At least I did."

"Ok," Thomas said, "What you are asking for is just that I trace down the lock that is worked by this key. Assuming such a lock exists, and that it is located somewhere on the planet, and that it's keeping something good locked up, you're offering me what to find it?"

"Twenty percent of what we find?" She had the kind of smile that sold toothpaste.

"Get real"

"Twenty five percent?"

He just smiled back.
“Look Mr. Red-Owl, I don’t want to try to screw you on this but I don’t even know what kind of money this person had. If you help me find out then I’ll give you enough of it to make it worth your while.”

“Ms. Johnson—”

She cut in, “Christina. My name isn’t Johnson.”

“Then you clearly don’t understand how this works. I don’t want to use your real last name, just like I have no intention of giving you mine. We don’t know each other, nor do we know what this key has to offer.”

“Fine, then you tell me how much this sort of thing costs.”

“My fee is one thousand dollars for each day of work. Plus an additional five hundred dollars a day for each of my two associates. Whatever you locate at the end of this search is yours to do with as you wish.”

She crinkled her brow in a way that made it look like she was in pain. “Two thousand a day? Do you really think I have that kind of money?”

“What I think is irrelevant Ms. Johnson. That’s my fee.”

“And if the key doesn’t lead to anything?”

“I don’t believe you would hire me if you believed that that was a possibility, Ms. Johnson.”

“Two thousand...” She sounded like she was talking to herself more than to Thomas. She was silent for a moment and then she said, “Ok.”
Thomas looked around the bar, nodding discretely to his companions. He turned to study this young woman sitting next to him and said, "You've got yourself a decker."
They were sitting in a cafe called Swoog's, not twenty minutes away from the place that they had met. It wasn't a dive like Huey's tavern. Oversized armchairs, fluffy couches, and coffee. They played rap music, a sound that was popular a century ago. There were dimmer lamps and quiet corners, but more importantly, there was cyberspace access. Gypsy had selected the place. Tommyknocker agreed. The two of them knew this part of Queens better than Thomas did so he left those decisions up to them. Christina said she knew the place too. Thomas thought about asking her how, but decided against it when he read the look on her face.

Tommyknocker was by the window, working through a bowl-sized cup of chicken noodle soup. Once in a while he walked over to the register for a tissue to blow his nose. Gypsy was inside as well, but tonight Swoog's was jammed with people and the dwarf blended in well. Thomas Red Owl had settled into an oversized pleather chair near one of the data ports. He had rigged a keyboard and monitor screen to his deck so Christina could see whatever data he dragged up. When he'd jacked in, she had perched herself on the chair's wide arm. Just as quickly as Thomas had jacked in, he jacked out again.
“That’s it?” Christina said with apprehension. Thomas pulled the datajack out of his head socket and the red cord retracted back into his deck case. “That’s it.”

Christina complained, “You were only working for a minute.”

The decker shrugged. “Bank registries were made public domain in the thirties. It’s not illegal anymore to know who has accounts in what banks. Or safety deposit boxes either. You just can’t ask what’s in the safety deposit boxes.” He took a sip of his coffee “Used to be that you had to give a company permission to check out your bank statement. Now you can log into a bank’s public information database and get a listing of everyone who presently has an account there. It’s just another way for big business to keep tabs on us.” He paused to take another sip, and leaned back in the chair.

She shook her head, “I worked at a bank and I didn’t even know that our customer account list was on a public database.”

“Not everybody knows, and even fewer people take advantage of it. Besides, the info is useless to most people. Even us deckers can’t make use of it without direction. Everybody needs direction. See, all I really had to do was rig Two-Moons to do a grid search on all the banks in this sprawl, cross referencing each and every system-related mention of the name Diego Santiago.

“Who is Two Moons?”

“Two Moons is my search frame, sort of like a net-detective. He’s a program I built to help me locate data in cyberspace. I re-keyed his programming to your Mr.
Santiago. If Santiago did any sort of banking in New York, Two-Moons will locate the records. Accounts, Safe-boxes, anything.”

“Yes, but what if this key isn’t for a bank? What if it opens something in an airport, or a UPS store, or someplace like that?”

The tone her voice carried made it sound like she was challenging him. Thomas didn’t know how to take that. “Private Mailbox places carry the same policy as banks do. The same goes for post offices and even airports. I can rebuild the search protocol to indicate those places as well as banks. I just figured the key would belong to a bank box. If it isn’t there we can try those other places next.”

“So that’s it?” She oozed disappointment.

“You expected something more? Tougher? I’m sorry but cyber-duels and black ice, that’s all for the videos. If it ever comes to that then you’re probably in way over your head.”

“No... I mean, what’s the use of hiring a... *shadowrunner*... to do something I could have done perfectly well myself.”

He nodded, taking the same despondent tone she had earlier. “You know, people usually don’t regret hiring me until after I screw up.”

“I’m not saying that I regret hiring you. I... I guess I should have thought this out more before I—we made a deal.”

Beep! Beep! Beep!
Instinctively, Christina reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone, but it wasn’t ringing. Thomas smiled, letting his eyes roam her body before meeting with her face.

"It’s me. My deck actually. I rigged Two-Moons to send a comm flash to my deck when it was done running the procedure. I just didn’t expect it to respond so soon. It must have found something."

"That’s good, right?"

He shrugged. "We’re about to find out."

Christina pulled her hair behind her ears she was leaning so close to him that he could feel her breath on his neck. Thomas hunched over the systems tiny vid-screen and keyed in a series of commands. Then Thomas’s smile started to fade. He typed faster, words flying across the screen. Soon, the rapid click-click of his hands striking the keyboard carried over the conversations going on in the background and the hum of rap music.

"What’s happening?" Christina rested a hand on his shoulder.

"Two-Moons discovered a freeze on all accounts bearing the name Diego Santiago. And from what I see here, there’s a shit load of them. But... No safety deposit boxes anywhere. I don’t know what this chummer of yours was into but it’s got the corp people digging in all of his pockets. I’ll have to go online and reconfigure the search parameters for mail—"
He froze.

"What... What now?"

With a look of disbelief he moaned, "We're being traced."

Then Thomas jacked in.

The icon he calls Two-Moons stands outside the doorway to his jack point on a digital sea of gray. Two-Moons is shaped like a wolf, with burnt orange fur. The immense white eyes staring back at him have no pupils. What it sees is not the Thomas Red Owl of the physical world. Here he is not a man, but a creature with a man's legs and an owl's face. His hands are human, attached to red-feathered wings that met at the line of his naked back.

Thomas's digital self manifests atop a massive blacktop highway. There are more lanes than his eyes can see. Parcels of information shaped like cars, motorcycles and buses scream by, rocketing through cyberspace towards their destination. The Information Super-Highway. That had been some early programmer's idea of a joke. When cyberspace stepped out of the realm of computer screens and became a real world unto itself there had been a conference. The world's leading programmers came together and devised what they called Universal Cyberspace Specifications. It was to be a standard iconography for all things digital. Information would pass between computers on a vast highway of circuits. In the mainframes and the grid-systems, people linger long enough to enjoy the digital
landscape that programmers create. But here between the circuits, life is sped to the point where everything is a blur of light moving back and forth past him. Most deckers never stop long enough on the highway to even notice what it looks like. They are part of the stream, moving between systems, working, monitoring or just exploring their world.

"Go home, boy." The wolf responds immediately by jumping through the jack point. With a flash it vanishes from cyberspace entirely.

Thomas is very still. In the digital plane he feels his form relax; feels his eyes peer further. In the digital, his spirit eyes show him a world surging all around him. Data transfers, command strings, they are life in fragments and colors. Golds, blues, reds, all coursing to and from their distant ports. Thomas Red Owl is motionless amidst them, staring into the streams of color until he finds the proper one. The Trace and Burn; a tendril of violet energy spiking outward from the virtual east toward his jack point. The program is weak, it would be easy for him to destroy it and move on.

But then I wouldn't know who sent it, or why.

Thomas spreads his wings and steps into the energy stream. He courses through the violet like electricity through a wire.

The room he arrives in is oblong, and his digital eyes focus upon a scaly green basilisk gazing hungrily from left to right. He is in a vault of some kind, coated in lock boxes that trail off into the distance. They are all closed, save for the one his
frame has been trying to access. His frame has chewed the door off of that one. The basilisk rests its gaze there, sizing up the damage as though it were a repair man or detective. It doesn’t notice RedOwl at all. Layers of tightly woven code make the decker appear as though he is part of the wall of lock boxes; invisible to anyone he doesn’t want to realize that he is there. This creature in front of him is not the Trace and Burn program. Pockets of grey scale interrupt its green form. An Intrusion Countermeasure. This is ICE.

Red Owl inhales reflexively. The Basilisk is a creature of fable, One look into its eyes can freeze a warrior where he stands, skin made stone. Constructing a program to look like this is a sign of its power. The idea of such power intrigues Red Owl. He’s wrestled ICE; in the military and even more afterwards. The thought of it makes his digital flesh ripple with anticipation; every moment of his training has been directed towards honing his skills to fight. Not to evade or escape but to destroy. That hunger fills his shuddering net-flesh. He wants to battle this thing. He wants to know that he is better than it.

The creature raises its head finally. Red Owl steps out from the wall. He motions calmly and a wickedly carved bow appears in his hands; deep mahogany, the bowstring the color of old blood. He fights the way the old ones did. Bow and arrow. Blade and fist. Where he had been naked code grows armor. Arrows fill a deerskin quiver at his back.
The creature’s mouth opens, exposing rows of teeth dripping saliva. The code is good, better than he usually deals with. The challenge will be better then. He draws an arrow from the quiver and fires.

The creature shifts more than it moves, jaws clasping at the virtual space between them. There is no air in the cyberspace, no aerodynamics to spin Red Owl’s arrow from its course. The jagged tip of it burrows into the Basilisk’s rough form. The sound that the creature makes is meant to be a growl; a staccato piercing noise that gets inside of Red Owl and makes him want to kill the thing even more. Then it is on him, pressing, snapping angry at the man-form and Red Owl knows it won’t be long before the beast has him.

He draws and fires a second arrow but the beast is faster now, moving with the attack, smacking it aside with wet teeth. Then those same teeth find purchase. The creature clamps down upon Red Owl’s leg. Pain is instantaneous, as if this is the real world and those hot teeth have gouged his real flesh. Red Owl is screaming in the Cyberspace. He doesn’t know what his meat body is doing. No time to consider. React. The bow morphs into blade, his code thoughtwired to sense the closing of range and match the visible physics of such an action. The blade is the color of gunmetal. It sparks and crackles each time he thrusts it between the creature’s grey-green scales. Then at once the Basilisk shudders and is still.
Another growl. Another Basilisk. Red Owl spins towards it, bow-blade dripping with the remains of its companion. He raises his blade to strike, but something else grabs Red Owl's attention.

What had been a thread-like tendril of purple energy has coalesced into a thick cord. The Trace and Burn program has run its course.
The others were already seated when Jonas reached the briefing room. They were spread around a lacquer-topped table facing the gaunt man that stood at its head. Genetics had not been kind to the Director. At either side of his forehead small protrusions marked the beginnings of tusks. It was obvious that the change had not taken full hold of him. His teeth were still a pearl color. His skin was chocolate. Jonas himself had been under the knife three times for invasive cybernetic replacement surgery. Still he couldn’t imagine the pain the director must have gone through. Genetic cleansing was the only way to halt the goblinization process. The only thing worse than how much it hurt was how much it cost. The rich poured their money into UGE research, hoping if their child did change they could halt the process.

Money couldn’t have the same meaning to the Director as it did to Jonas. The man’s suit could have cost more than Jonas’s salary that year. The Director straightened an impossibly simple blue tie and crooned, “You are late, Mr. Scott.”

Jonas decided to lie. “Sorry sir, they had me down in mechanical. There’s some new—”The Director froze him with a casual wave. Another sweeping gesture directed Jonas to fall into an empty chair in front of him. The Director had long black braids that cascaded down the side of his face. There were few features that set a man apart from a Troll. He didn’t have the telltale tusks or sickly grey skin. The
cleansing made him acceptable. He could pass for any other man, no different than Jonas himself.

Except for the eyes.

The Director’s eyes were large yellow circles full of passion and contempt. Jonas hoped to never be on this man’s bad side.

The Director cleared his throat to ensure that he had the attention of everyone else in the room. “A situation has developed that requires the expertise that your security detail can provide.” He paused dramatically and said, “Last night a decker tripped a security tap on one of the Diego Santiago accounts. While we were unsuccessful in our attempts to trace his location in time to capture him, we were able to record this.”

The Director leaned over a square black console jutting out from the table in front of his seat. There were identical consoles in front of each of them. He keyed a sequence in on his console and an image filled the theater screen behind him.

It was a cyberspace scene, a representation of computer activity that had been recorded inside of someone’s computer system. A Basilisk-7 intrusion countermeasure was doing battle with another figure, a man, mostly. It had a dark chest and bright red wings so intricately constructed that you could see the wiry stalks of every feather. It had the round face of a man, but the ears were flat against that face and pointed like an owl’s. The mouth was a hard red beak. Jonas could even see the
sweat gathering at the creature’s brow as his attack program drove the Basilisk into oblivion. This decker was fast, even faster than he was letting on with this display.

No one else looked impressed by the decker and that frightened Jonas a little more. They should have known what they were seeing. Each of them had taken cyberspace combat evaluation training. But they were not concerned or even aware. They didn’t see the patterns unfolding and looping in the decker’s rhythmic movements. They didn’t see the fugue being played out in front of them. This battle with the Basilisk-7 wasn’t about self-defense. It was a burglar waking up a watchdog, just to see what could happen. The man was engaging the security countermeasure not because he had to but because he wanted to.

“Any insights?” The Director’s eyes searched the room. Jonas wasn’t the first to speak.

“He’s military, Director.” The voice belonged to Arson. Jonas looked towards her and their eyes met. She smiled and continued. “You can tell by the way he moves. Notice how he forces the countermeasure into an offensive stance. The Basilisk series of ICE is built to respond to attacks. He makes the creature attack him, limiting the resources it can apply to defending itself and thus insuring its eventual defeat”.

The Director looked impressed. He turned away from them to ponder what was on the projector. “Are we certain? What is it about this profile that rules out a corporate decker for you, Ms. Rueben?”
“Dere’s your shadow team.” Lucky grinned.

“Indeed, Mr. St. Jean. Now if freelancers are investigating Mr. Santiago’s unfortunate expiration then that is a matter of concern to us.”

To you, the Director meant. You and the rest of your team. If it were publicly discovered that Jonas’s team killed Santiago, the Director would deny sanctioning the hit and the corporation would deny any affiliation with them and send them to the dogs. A glance at the others assured him that they were sharing the same thought.

“Ms. Rueben, I’d like you and your team to handle this matter personally. Find me the person who broke into our system. Start at the coffee house in Brooklyn. Once located, find out who they were working for and terminate all parties involved.”

Jonas started to object but he held his tongue. He didn’t want this. He didn’t want to stay in New York any longer than he had to. Too many memories. Too much unfinished business. Arson accepted the task with a nod. There others nodded their acceptance as well.

The Director continued, “Due to the nature of the task I’m assigning an additional computer specialist, Mr. Dencklau to your team to make sure things go smoothly.

This time Jonas spoke up, "Sir, I don’t mean to question your orders, but Mr. Dencklau is a bit of a loose cannon."
"Don't be alarmed Mr. Scott, your ability is not being called into question. You still have the lead on net-operations. Mr. Dencklau will listen to your orders."

Jonas disagreed. Dencklau would listen to the voices in his head. He would listen to his lunchbox or the wind. He would not listen to Jonas. The Director smiled, all teeth and pink lips. He announced something about another meeting, and contacting him with details of the assignment. Then he left.

"So what now?" Lucky broke the silence. His fists were clenched and his jaw tight, the way it always was when someone asked him to think.

"We have a lot of data here." Sticks groaned and moved the image he was viewing to the big screen. It was a menu list. Background files on the Santiago case, data on the location that this red-feathered decker had hacked, feedback reports from what was left of the Basilisk ICE command shell, layouts and diagrams of the coffee shop,

"Pictures? De coffee shop had cameras, nes pa?. Small ones fixed on the front door and de bar."

"No, he's one step ahead of us there." Arson sighed. "The decker hacked the coffee shop's mainframe and looped the camera feeds recording from an hour before he even entered the building. That meant that a recording was playing the entire time he was there."

"No pictures. What about purchases? Did he buy anything with credit?"
They filed out one by one. Arson walked out behind him and cupped his hand in her own chrome one. She said, "Well, Jonas, looks like your going home."
6. Ghosts

He had written the search program before they even came to the city. The frame was programmed to evidence any strand of information in New York’s public net space that held the name Christina or Maldonado. The frame would cross-reference that data with the image and background data it had been built upon. He had worked on it for hours, the painstaking way that his grandmother used to cultivate her gardens making sure that every leaf can see the sun and every flower is in its proper place. She would kneel in the hot dirt every day feeling the leaves and smelling the flowers. He watched her everyday from the shade of their building. Everyday he would ask her why she kept looking at the same flowers. “Just in case,” she would say. Just in case something had changed and needed fixing. Just in case she could find a way to make something better.

Just in case Jonas found the confidence to call Christina.

There was no way of knowing how she would react to hearing his voice again. Did she even want to hear from him? He’d found more reasons not to use the frame than he had to use it. Sarah Rueben was a reason not to use it.

It was only out of that necessity that Sarah and Jonas had come to be together. Jonas knew that he wouldn’t have been her first choice. She was a wild spirit, like Christina had been in their youth. But Sarah was different. She was reckless. She liked the danger her lifestyle brought with it. She was carefree. She came to Jonas when she needed him and only then. She was everything that Jonas wasn’t. There
were things about Jonas that Sarah accepted where Christina never would. Sarah understood him. She understood that he could carry a three hour conversation about electrical induction and bit rates, but he had no idea about human things. Late at night when the skyline glared like a new day, he would sit in the darkness surrounded by the red eyes of forgotten machines, picking and sifting through their circuits, their zeros and ones, until he could read each one like body language.

The night the Director told the crew they were staying, the others went to visit the clubs in the bowery district. It was a rare chance for the six of them. Since Santiago had recruited them, they had spent so much time operating in the name of the Kerrigan Corporation that they hardly had any time to meet people. While the others worked the rows of bars along Manhattan’s cracked streets, he stayed among the computers and cameras of the Kerrigan Tower wondering if he should have ever made that frame.

Kerrigan Corp. had given them an office on the eighty-second floor. It was a crowded space, no more than a few cubicles pressed into an unused waiting room. The office was an illusion, like the magic Sticks had done, like their job titles, Corporate Security Information Specialists. A very elegant way of saying assassin. The corporation didn’t even call it killing anymore. They called it cancellation. As if the person was a bad TV show or an experiment that didn’t work out. Once their crew was done they moved on to the next office, at the behest of whichever executive officer needed their services. It was always the same set up. They would
be provided with an office, told who to cancel and given the resources to carry out the task. Jonas had lost count of how many nights he’d sat in a darkened office waiting for a search frame to run its course and bring him information of the person they were sanctioned to cancel. He’s been in this same office three nights ago, sifting through the data on the man who’d brought him into the corporation, looking for the perfect moment to take him out.

The blinking yellow light at the base of his workstation told him that his frame had run its course. Jonas plugged the data cord into his temple side jack and transferred the frame’s data directly to his visual cortex. There was a lot of information there, too much to sort through right now. All he wanted was her phone number. He found what he was looking for and closed down the frame.

Christina’s home number glowed in red letters at the corner of his digital eye. He dialed each digit very slowly, pausing in-between them as if some revelation would hit him if he waited that much longer to do this. He had to do this, it had gone too long unresolved in his mind.

Would she remember what he looked like? He could see himself darkly in the reflection of the blank video screen. His hair was as short as it had ever been, almost bald. She would remember the first datajack jutting out from his left temple. The second datajack she couldn’t see. It lived at the base of his skull where his neck and head met. That came after, along with the wisdom lines across his forehead and the deep pockets of brown flesh his eyes had sunk into.
Why call her? Why even bother?

Because he loved her. He remembered when they were young she loved watching him playing with remote-controlled cars. He told her that he wanted to be a race car driver. He wanted to plug himself into the machine and feel the adrenaline course through him as he raced around the course. What would she think when she found out that he didn’t end up just controlling cars. How would she react if he told her that he could control people? He could see through their eyes and feel their emotions, watching the terrible things that they did, being a part of it in body and soul.

Jonas turned the video capture on. The screen soaked up his image and prepared to send. Then he reconsidered. He killed the video capture. He would make the call, he had to. But when she picked up the phone she wouldn’t see his face. She would see a blank screen. Fear lanced through his chest and came to rest in his belly. An unsure hand pressed the send-call button. Each ring was a heartbeat.

Christina answered the phone with her own video on. She looked every bit the woman he remembered. Her long black hair was straight now. It dipped over her shoulders. Her face was made up as if she was going out. She was beautiful, and it took his words away.

“Hello?” She was talking to a blank screen. There wasn’t even a readable number for her to look at. He didn’t want her to know where he was. She said “hello” again, this time more demanding. Still, he didn’t respond.
“Listen, I don’t know who you are or even how you have this number but I’m not buying whatever it is you’re selling.” Her voice was still the way he remembered, sweet with a monofilament edge.

“Christina, it’s me.” He clicked on the view screen.

Her face betrayed her shock. He watched her watching him, her eyes tracing the contours of his face on her screen. She was putting the pieces together the way his frame had, deciding if this was real, if he was the person she thought he was. It took her several moments to respond. When she did, all she could manage was a name, “Jonas?”

“Yes, it’s been a long time. I know.”

“Long enough for me to think that you were dead. Where have you been?!” There was that edge, lashing out at him, hoping to cut into him.

“It’s a long story.”

“Don’t bother telling it. You should have stayed gone, Jonas.” The view screen flashed and then went black.

She was gone. Jonas jabbed the send-call button. Her phone number appeared on the screen again, only this time she didn’t pick up. It rang seven times without her answering. Each reverberating pulse dug a little more at his confidence. If he were in cyberspace, if he were Frost, he could make her answer the phone. He could reach inside of it and turn it on so that she could see him and hear what he
had to say. But he didn’t want it to be like that. He needed her to answer it on her own.

It rang five more times before she answered.

"Don’t hang up."

"Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you."

"How could you still have anything to say to me after five years of nothing?"

"I’m sorry."

"Five years." Her face was blank.

"I wish you could understand that I had to leave?"

"What, were you wanted by the cops? Did you kill someone? Was a gang looking for you?"

"No nothing like that."

"Then what reason could you have for running away?"

"I just had to go."

"No goodbyes, no offer to take me with you. Nothing. You’re an asshole, Jonas."

"I deserve that."

"You don’t deserve that much you son of a bitch!"

"Ok, you’re right! You’re always right!” He could feel his throat tighten as he raised his voice. His face was pressed closer to the screen. There was a silence then.
In that silence, Jonas felt his jaw unclench. When his hands loosened their grip from the arms of his chair they left lines like ten little ghosts in the plush fabric.

"Ok, what do you have to say?" Her arms were crossed and she gritted her teeth in that familiar way.

"I’m sorry I left you. I know that I made a mistake. I’ve known for a long time now that it was wrong. I knew then I think. It was just too hard to stay in the same place and trying to pretend that we were making a life together. Queens was a dead end. I couldn’t find a single job that would have lifted us out of it."

"You obviously found something."

"I did. But the deal was only for one. I couldn’t take you with me."

"What kind of job says that you have to go alone? What kind of job makes you give up your life?"

"Chris, it’s more complicated than that. I knew I couldn’t pass up the only chance I had. I was going to come back to you first chance I had."

"You never even said goodbye."

"I couldn’t say goodbye to you. I knew you would try to talk me out of it."

"How can you even say that? Why would I try to talk you out of your dream?"

"Because you’re still here."

"What?"
“You never wanted to leave Queens. You wanted to have money, you wanted to travel, but you never wanted to leave Queens. I never wanted to stay.”

“You don’t even know me, Jonas. I always wanted to leave. I’ve worked my entire life to get out of this place. You don’t know what I’ve done to try to get out.”

“You’re right I—“She wasn’t going to let him talk.

“I waited for you. I spent a year of my life filing missing person reports and praying that you were safe. After a while I realized that you weren’t missing. You were just gone. All those things you said to me about us being together were lies. All that time, you were just using me.”

“Christina it wasn’t like that at all.”

“Wasn’t it? When your parents died, my mother took you in because I wanted you close. We were barely into high school but I knew I loved you already. Every year you would tell me how we were going to be together, how you were going to take me away from this life and we’d have a house somewhere out west where we could raise kids without all the crap we had to go through growing up. I remember you would even tell my mom how you would pay her back for looking out for me. You took advantage of me and you took advantage of her.”

“ Took advantage of her? You’ve got it all twisted.”

“Like hell I do. You left us Jonas. You told her all about how much you cared about us and then you left. She hated you for that.”

“She hated me long before that Christina.”
"She took you in, Jonas! She loved you like you were her own son!"

"Wake up, Christina, who do you think helped me get the job? Who do you think told me that I couldn't take you with me?!"

The new silence between them was accentuated by the hum of the computers around him. Her eyes were red-rimmed on the screen. Jonas didn't know if it was because of anger or because she was fighting back tears. There was a lot he didn't know right then. He didn't know what he had expected to happen. He didn't know what he wanted to happen.

"You shouldn't have called me, Jonas."

"I had to call you. You're the only thing that I left behind. I shouldn't have done that. I would be a different person right now if I hadn't."

"But you did leave me behind. I don't care if you say my mother made you or whatever. I didn't know where you went. I didn't know why you left. I didn't even know if you were still alive. For five years I've had to deal with that. You don't want to know how it feels to have the only man you've ever loved walk out on you. It feels even worse when that man tries to walk back into it."

"I still love you, Christina." The words came out before he could stop himself from saying them.

"It's too late Jonas. I don't even know who you are anymore." He watched her hand reach for the end-call button and then the screen was black. He sat there
long into the night, staring at the black screen and trying to answer the question for himself.
7. Key and Lock

Her heart was still pounding after she hung up the phone. After all these years she had learned how to forget about Jonas and suddenly, here he was calling. Her face was flushed. Anger still pushed its way through her veins.

"That son of a bitch has a lot of nerve!" she said to no one in particular. His nerve had been one of the things she loved about him. Jonas was always the first in line for a challenge. She was in line right behind him, showing her support. But he'd had enough of that support, hadn't he? The man she wanted to marry had walked out on her without a word. She often thought that if Jonas had stayed then she wouldn't have followed her mother into the business. Now Jonas was telling her that her mother had made sure he didn't stay. She didn't know what was true anymore. Jonas was right about them never having enough money to leave the city. The world was a scary place if you didn't have any money. At least here she had friends, which was part of why she never tried to leave until now. The other part of it she wouldn't admit, not even to herself. She would never accept that she was waiting for Jonas to come back. Now she'd told him that it was too late to make things right.

Perhaps it was. It felt different to see Jonas again. There was relief, yes, she was happy in knowing that he was alive. Only, she wasn't sure about what else she felt. Her stomach was tied in knots. Her palms were wet with perspiration. Did she still even love him at all? His face had changed so much. She could recognize the
boy she knew but he looked older now, not just in years. He'd had such beautiful
eyes, but on the screen they looked cold and mechanical. Had he changed so much?
What about her?

The videophone rang. Christina was surprised by how fast she clicked on the
view screen. "Jonas?"

"No, it's Red-Owl, Ms. Maldonado" The Amerindian man was smiling. She
liked the way the tiny age lines spread across his face when he smiled. It made him
look distinguished.

"Sorry, I was expecting someone else." She paused to regain her composure
and then asked, "What have you got?"

He shook his head. "Not over the lines, we should meet."

"Where?"

"Willow Lake Park. I'll find you."

Willow Lake Park sat on the edge of Forest Hills, Queens. Christina used to
come to the park as a kid. Her mother had told her all about the place. Before the
city tumbled in the earthquake of 2005, the community had been largely Jewish and
rich. Afterwards the community began to hemorrhage money. In a matter of years
Forest Hills became a ghetto. The Corporations that ran the borough of Manhattan
bought up most of the real estate and turned it into low-income housing for the
thousands families who had lost their homes when the earthquake wiped out most
of Manhattan. For a long time people would say Forest Hills in the same breath as
Bed-stuy and the South Bronx. These places were the barrens of New York City. Hell brought to Earth.

The past decade had seen Forest Hills transform into a corporate community. Drawn by the beauty of Flushing Meadows, the corporations that controlled Manhattan began re-zoning much of the surrounding areas, including Forest Hills. Some said it was because the forest was a source of power for Magic, some though it was because the new rich remembered what Forest Hills used to represent and felt that they deserved a community like that. In time, the makeshift tenements were torn down and replaced by sprawling estates and high-class condominiums. Forest Hills had returned to its previous splendor. It had become a place for tourists to visit and capture the beauty of old New York. That aloofness engrained itself into a generation of people, and every generation that followed them. Christina could smell it on them as she maneuvered through the streets of Forest Hills towards Willow Lake. It was more of a pond in reality. Large enough to race a fleet of miniature boats around it but not large enough to sail a real one.

She was sitting on a park bench when he found her. It was near the slender lake shore where the sun peeked out from a haze of clouds. She was watching a group of kids feeding breadcrumbs to the ducks. Their crisp black uniforms earmarked them as private school students. Corporate kids.

It made Christina nervous to see children. She had been born long after the time of the awakening, but she had been raised by a mother who'd lived through it.
Goblinization could happen any time, well into the teenage years. Christina remembered the way her mother would look at her while she was growing up. It was as though she was afraid to love her own daughter.

"Why did you choose this place?" she said to Red-Owl as he sat down beside her.

"All kinds of people come to this park, sometimes just to sit, sometimes to watch the ducks. We won't be noticed."

"So you have more questions?"

"A lot more questions unfortunately. I've been through every corporate database that I can access and it's clear to me that this key and whatever it opens is not part of Mr. Santiago's corporate life."

She raised an eyebrow.

"What I mean to say is, he purchased this box without anyone knowing about it. He probably did it with cash."

"Nobody uses cash anymore, unless their too poor to own a credit stick."

"Or unless they want to remain anonymous. Cash is harder to trace than credit. It takes a lot more digging to find out where the paper came from."

Christina nodded. What she didn't tell him was that some of her customers used cash. It was the ones with wives mostly, the men who were afraid of what would happen if someone found out that they came to her for services. She made
them pay more when they used cash, but they paid the money because the knew it wouldn’t be traced.

"Wait, are you telling me that you can’t find out what this key opens?"

"Hardly, it’s just going to take longer. I need to put together an information profile on this Santiago person."

"There isn’t much that I can tell you about him. I only saw him for a few weeks, not even long enough to really mean anything."

"I won’t need you to feed me the info. Everything I need to know about the man is on the net. I just need some time to figure out the pattern."

"The pattern?" She squinted against the reflection of his sunglasses.

"Everybody has a pattern to how they live. People think in patterns. They do things in a certain way their entire lives. Maybe you only drink a certain kind of milk, or shop at a certain type of store. Sometimes people only hang out in certain neighborhoods. If you can unravel that pattern you can predict how a person will act or even where they will go when they want to hide something."

Christina held up the key for Red-Owl, It was dangling from a silver chain around her neck, close to her heart. "So if you find the pattern, you can find whatever lock this key opens."

"You’re starting to understand."

She smiled. "It helps to have a good teacher."
Thomas goes straight home after they say goodbye. He barely pulls his jacket off before he jacks himself into the net. This job is starting to become very exciting. He isn’t sure if it is the thrill of the hunt, or if it is his client. Thomas has been with joygirls before, when he was in the service. Yet those women seem unfamiliar compared to Christina. There is something about her, about this whole situation that is out of place. He knows that if he finds the key to that strangeness, he will find Santiago’s lock. He reprogrammed Two-Moons before talking to Christina. The wolf is slouched by Thomas’ leg now, watching disinterestedly as information races all around them.

“Go fetch boy,” he says, and pats the wolf on its side. Two-Moons leaps to its feet and disappears into the data stream. Searching the corporate and banking webs for information on Santiago has brought nothing but trouble already. Attacking another host intrusion countermeasure the way he attacked the Basilisk-7 was sure to bring a stronger response and make it even harder to dig up the data he needs. Thomas has to try something new.
He’s played a hunch and now his plan is working.

In the physical world, anything you touch leaves behind your unique fingerprint. Magic users call it an astral signature. It is no different in cyberspace. If a decker moves anywhere through cyberspace there will be a record of where he has been. That’s Thomas’s fingerprint. He has programmed Two-Moons to search for a search, tagging anything related to Santiago that had been previously accessed. If the corporation was watching the dead man’s files, they must have assigned someone to do a background check to find out what he’d gotten himself into to get killed. Fortunately for Thomas, the corp decker who researched Santiago before him didn’t hide his tracks very well. The decker accessed bits of data all across the New York City grid about the man. Thomas doesn’t have the information itself, the bricks of data at his feet are more like receipts, transcriptions showing that this data had been accessed and where and when it was done. It is data that exists on everyone in the cyberspace. A bit of property owned here, a contact there, phone records, when he last used his credstick, where he shopped for groceries. Something catches Red-Owl’s eye.

L. Carstairs, Interior Decorating Consultant. It is the type of thing that is overlooked, unless you know exactly what you are seeing. Red Owl wouldn’t even know the name but for the fact that he’s used this man before. Carstairs is the type of person that you go to see if you want to be discrete.

Discrete fits the pattern.
Thomas Red-Owl steps into the data stream, shifting through the New York grid until he arrives at a place that is familiar to him.

The host computer is done in Universal Cyberspace Specifications, a naked site. It appears on the net as a single-story green shack, like the monopoly houses he played with as a kid. The name on the front reads L. Carstairs, Interior Decorating Consultant, but that isn't what Lionel Carstairs does for a living. Carstairs is a private investigator. Thomas Red-Owl pries open the door of the little green shack. It isn't long before he finds out what Lionel Carstairs was investigating.
9. Into Darkness

Sideshow Bob is insane.

He’s fascinated by the idea of the Birdman destroying an Electronic Lizard. He calls it evolution. He says its nature’s way of reminding the dinosaurs why they fell extinct in the first place. He claps and giggles, his fat curls of blonde hair spilling off his face with each tilt of his head. He takes Jonas’s “command” seat in the back of the Van and says it feels all “warm and cozy.” Then he smiles again and jacks the net cord into one of the nine ports in his cybernetic arm, looking like a needle head’s worst nightmare as he slips away from the physical world.

Crazy.

Jonas had already started to wonder how he was going to work with someone like that. He knew that the freak was magic in the cyberspace. Jonas looked at himself as a rigger first and a decker second. Someone who worked purely with cyberspace interface was more accustomed to these types of showdowns. If Red-feather’s a good as Jonas thought, the only shot at taking him down would be rerouting through the system to get behind him with an arsenal of destructive programming while he was focusing on Side Show Bob.

“You’re quiet today kid.” Trotter was the oldest of their group. He had seen a lot of conflicts like the one they were getting themselves into. He knew how to handle himself.

“Thinking about Red-feather.”
"You’re worried about this one aren’t you?” Trotter wore a cowboy hat most of the time. He had pulled down low so you could barely see his eyes.

"I used to live out here. It makes it harder, you know, working in the old neighborhood."

"Your parents still live here?"

"My parents died a long time ago. I grew up with my girlfriend and her mom."

"So what you’re really thinking about is the ex-girlfriend.” Trotter smiled and nodded. "Don’t worry, kid. You don’t have to say anything. It’s a natural thing. Coming back to your old neighborhood, you’re definitely going to be interested in how the old friends are doing. You probably even want to see them."

"Never crossed my mind.” Christina. He was trying to forget about her as their trio of vehicles inched along the traffic queue leading towards the Williamsburg Bridge. It was warm enough for him today to envy Lucky’s breezy perch on his Harley Scorpion motorcycle. It couldn’t be as hot for Lucky as it was for the NYPD, Inc., Security officers hulking in a shell of security armor checking passes under a midday sun.

Jonas’s vehicle was next. Arson was behind him in a Ford sedan. Lucky was last with his motorcycle. Obtaining three city permits had been difficult, even with one of them being a motorcycle. The Kerrigan corp they worked for sat on the ruling corporate council. It entitled the corp to a number of passes in and out of the city.
This number was limited and clearing their small team for such a high number of vehicles had come at great expense.

Expenses were also what got you past NYPD, Inc. Jonas slowed to a stop in front of an armored pair of men. The lead officer had a shoulder plate marked with the horizontal stripes of a Sergeant. He approached Jonas’s window and said, “I need to see your paperwork.”

Jonas nodded and presented a credit stick. The officer slid it into the reader and the proper codes were exchanged. Digital handshake.

“What’s your business in Brooklyn today, sir?”

“My business,” Jonas said flatly and keyed a dollar amount to be transferred to the sergeant’s pad. He added, “The Scorpion and the Americar are mine as well.”

The officer cleared him and Jonas drove through. The Williamsburg Bridge was an ugly bridge. Not like the George Washington or Henry Hudson or Brooklyn or even Queensboro. Out of the five remaining bridges in Manhattan, the Williamsburg was the most heavily traveled. It consisted of two levels. A train deck transported Manhattan’s J line in and out of the city. The top deck was where Jonas was moving through the early afternoon traffic.

Across a short river lay a grey chasm of small ferro-concrete buildings, marked by the occasional plastic-windowed skyscraper or weathered church spire signifying a time where faith still mattered. Seneca Ave. was where the chasm widened and life peeked through in the shape of empty lots and the stone husks of
buildings long since abandoned. Ridgewood was a poor area sprinkled with pockets of wealth and cemeteries. This coffee shop they were headed to was where middle class people went to feel rich and sip coffee. It stayed safe because the local gang made sure it did, so long as they received a piece of the profits.

It was a short drive to Ridgewood from Manhattan. Jonas had grown up in Bushwick. That was as close to Ridgewood as A was to B. Arson signaled him when they turned on to Seneca Ave. Daylight was fading and heavy clouds were moving to choke off the sun’s last light.

"We’re two miles out, Jonas. You can set-up control here. We need eyes above the location.” Jonas pulled the van over and climbed into the back where Sideshow Bob was sleeping soundly. He kicked Bob awake and then prepared his drones.

"Showtime.” Bob nodded and pushed out a few words that sounded like “I-kno-wha-time-it-is” and “Whaddo-you-take-me-for?” Bob made himself comfortable in the Decker station chair, reattaching his communications module in time to hear Arson’s instructions.

“I’m walking the point with Sticks. Lucky, I want you in position out front. Trotter, take the back exit. Frost, have those drones watching both entrances. Stun rounds only, people. We need answers, not bodies.”

“What about me?” Bob’s high whine.
“You hack the site. I want total electronic control of the environment. Kill the cameras before we walk in and make sure if anyone tries to call in or out, we have full intel on both parties.”

Sideshow Bob whistled low and then away from the commlink he said to Jonas, “She sure asks for a lot.”

Jonas didn’t reply. He had already become Frost, and Frost was in the box.
The eyes of an Inquisitor Ariel drone are deep purple orbs that glow with recessed intelligence. Through those eyes Frost can see anything. He sees the borough of Brooklyn sprawling beneath him. Old neon store signs sputter and fade along the near empty streets. Few living things travel alone past the walls of their apartments at this time of night. The sprawl is a dangerous place after dark; it ebbs with a new life, gangs and crime families battling each other over street corners. The night is a place of predators, and Jonas is no different.

"Are we secure?" Arson's voice. Frost's purple eyes blink then hold on the image of Swoog's coffee house. The silver ellipse of his metal body turns and buffets itself against the coastal winds. This is the life he had dreamt of as a child, becoming something else. Not like an actor who sheds his self and steps into the mind of a character. Actually becoming something else, moving his consciousness into a ring of steel and circuitry. He is the Inquisitor drone. His dorsal ailerons move as though they are feet kicking at a sea of air. Each sensor is a tiny finger to be bent and turned by his will.

The dwarf walks out the moment Arson and Sticks walk in. "Follow him Frost. We're going to see what information we can get from in here."

The dwarf follows Bergen Street for seventeen blocks. Then he turns left and strolls five more. Relaxed, steady strides, no purpose in his movement. The dwarf slows briefly, approaching a crowd of people flooding into a local club. Frost's new
eyes close briefly then adapt. The gray, dirty white and green neon of Brooklyn swirls into the deep blue and patchy reds of thermographic vision. He can get a thermo-lock this way and track the target better in this growing throng of people. Then Frost's internal audio sensors crackle to life on the team's com-channel.

"Status?" Arson's distant voice.

Far below in the maze of squat plasticrete buildings Frost's meat body says, "Target is thermo-locked moving by foot along a southern vector towards Crown Heights. He is alone."

Arson calls back, "Stay with him, Frost. Nobody moves into position until you're sure of a fixed location."

Frost's thin rotors tilt on an updraft, carrying his round steel body higher into the night. Here beyond the squat tenements, the cloudless sky is full of stars. Frost shifts his ailerons and rides a fast moving downdraft towards the surface of a building alongside the club. The dwarf weaves nimbly through the throng and then keeps walking south.

Frost remembers Mission Street from growing up. He'd lived almost sixteen miles from here, but his high school was right off the boulevard a few short blocks away. He wants to go there suddenly. He wants to relay the dwarf's position to the nearest communications satellite, drop everything and push his steel body skyward towards his school, towards his old neighborhood, towards home.
He hasn’t even tried to see the neighborhood since leaving it. Even after returning to the city with Arson and the others he has been afraid to go back home.

The crimson form of the dwarf pauses along a blue sidewalk near an entrance to an underground establishment that glows with recessed life. He strides down the steps and disappears inside.

"We have a location. It’s a basement establishment.” He pumps a visual image of the address into each of their mirrors, where it appears as a short line of text at the edge of their cybernetically enhanced vision. Then he slides back inside the skin of the Inquisitor, and shifts his purple eyes to the grainy contrasts of electronically magnified vision to see if this place has a name.

"The Last Good Time. Strange name for a bar."

Arson asks Sideshow Bob to pull any and all records on the location from the cyberspace. Then she tells Frost to make sure there isn’t a back door.

"Already on it." His magnification sensors sconce back into their holding place. The world is once again filled with the familiar blue and red of thermographics. Frost urges his metal frame downward, circling and probing the building from all sides.

"Secondary exit is part of the main building. First floor. Leads to an alley. The main building also has front door and roof exits." He has returned to an altitude where he can see the entire building. Manhattan glimmers on the horizon.
“Ok, Frost. Move the command vehicle into position one block off the front entrance. Lucky, I need you and Trotter in the alley. Sticks will be with me, at the front.”

Sticks calls out over the comm, “Careful people. I picked up a residual astral signature at the bar. The dwarf is a spell slinger.”

Frost tumbles backwards out of the rectangular window that looks down upon the Brooklyn building. He glances around his collection of windows. Arson is cruising through the now busy Brooklyn streets, past Club Satin where life flowers and slows evening traffic to a creep. Sticks is beside her, eyes closed. Frost imagines the mage is floating through astral space, a ghost tracking the movements of their prey. Frost’s mirrors cannot see into that world.

Home in the snow-covered clearing, Frost moves his right hand. The command van lurches forward. Then, as if giving in to his will it smoothly eases out into the thin traffic and makes its way towards the target destination.

An ice-blue captain chair has appeared behind him in the clearing. Frost sits to watch the world from his many windows. He isn’t focusing on any of them. His mind is elsewhere, remembering a childhood that sent him away from this place. He wonders what it would be like to go home. He wonders what it would be like to touch her again. Christina was the most beautiful girl he’d ever met. He loved the way she moved, the way she talked, her straightforward take-no-shit attitude. She’d been the one to convince him to follow his dream. They were going to move to
Talladega together. He would race cars. She would model. She would have made a beautiful model. Even now he wonders why he had left her behind.

"Target in sight." In Trotter’s window the dwarf exits the building first.

He is trailed closely by a Troll wearing blue jeans and an overcoat that bulges conspicuously. Arson’s voice crackles over the line, “I want this clean, people. Frost, take captures from our vid feeds. Everyone’s face needs to be marked and run before we close the noose.”

Frost turns towards Arson’s window. She is moving towards the targets, making sure she picks up clear facial images for Sideshow Bob to run through the net. They already have visuals on the dwarf from the coffee shack. Bob has dug through cyberspace hoping to find even a snippet of data on who he is. The only name he has arrived upon is Gypsy. That is obviously fake, a street name like Frost or Sticks, something people call you when you don’t want your real identity involved. He doesn’t doubt Bob, though; the freak will dig up more if it exists. A name, a social security number, and then they will know everything about the dwarf.

In Arson’s mirror, the dwarf starts to turn towards her. She looks away, pretending to search for something. He may remember her from earlier. She lifts her head up to meet eyes briefly with the Troll. He has big blue eyes and broken teeth; the sort of man that could have been handsome, if not for being a Troll. Arson’s
view turns slightly as he passes and she locks on an Amerindian. He is handsome. Dark skin, bold hazel eyes. Fearless.

“This has to be our decker,” says Sticks from back in the car. His eyes are open again. “But who is she?”

She is a tall slender woman with long brown hair framing her shoulders and obscuring her face. “Arson, I can’t get a visual on the Jane.” Then Arson looks right at her. Almost instinctively, the woman turns away at the same time. They keep walking, towards a car parked near the corner.

“Did you get it?” the mage calls. His mirror is locked on the dwarf.

“Negative, Sticks. Hold position.”

“I have their mage locked.”

“Stand down.” More forcefully, “We need full visuals before we can go. If these people are corporate, we’ll need clearance to take them out.”

“So what we do then?” Trotter calls from his position beside Lucky. Arson says, “We follow them. As soon as we have visual on the girl, bang.”
The red neon above the door had splintered in places, making the sign read like “he as ood me.” It was a rat’s nest like any other bar in this part of the plex, and the last place that Thomas Red-Owl ever wanted to be.

He met up with Tommyknocker and Gypsy inside. Together they found Lauren Deeks where he knew she would be, at the back of the bar, surrounded by a crowd of gang types and chip heads who were vying for her attention. The Last Good Time was where Lauren went to score BTL chips, or if she needed it, to feel like a queen, even if it was the queen of trash.

He wooed Lauren away from her followers with a promise of “It’s something important.” They stepped out of the bar and headed down the street where it was quieter.

“Why did you need me to come outside?” Lauren was smiling and playing with the top two buttons of her shirt. She was wore fishnet stockings and a skirt that stopped halfway up her thigh.

“Because I needed you to hear what I am saying, and for your friends in there not to.”

“Look Thomas, I enjoyed what we had but I’ve moved past that now. I don’t see why you even want to try to make things work between us.”

“No, Christ, this isn’t even about you, Lauren, It’s about your friend.”
“Tina? What about Tina?” She sounded disappointed.

“I found some information, it’s serious stuff.” Thomas looked around while he spoke. His eyes settled on a red-headed woman and her male companion walking towards the bar. They looked like Manhattan people, out in the slums of Brooklyn to score some illegal chips. Thomas put his hand on Lauren’s back and guided her further down the street, out of earshot. The sidewalk was empty but for a man standing at the end of the block smoking a cigarette. The man leered at Lauren for a moment and then turned his attention towards Thomas. Thomas ignored him. Tommyknocker and Gypsy were nearby. One street thug wouldn’t be a problem.

“Listen to me, Thomas. I only came out here with you because I thought you wanted to talk about me. Whatever you and Tina have going on with this key business is your business not mine, you gotta talk to her about that.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know if I should tell her about this.”

Lauren stopped walking. “How does Christina know Domingo Santiago?” he asked quickly.

“I don’t know, I think he was a client or something, why?”

Thomas’ face soured. “That’s what she told me as well.”

“What does it matter? You know what we do for a living; clients give us gifts all the time. I don’t see the big deal about who this guy is. You should be worrying about what her key opens.” She turned back towards the club and started walking again.
Thomas grabbed Lauren and pulled her towards him. “Domingo Santiago hired a private investigator four years ago to do research on Christina. Afterwards he tapped the same P.I. to put together whatever is in that lock box and deliver the key to the people who were in charge of reading Christina his will.” Thomas could see the smoking man out of the corner of his eye, still watching him.

“Why would he do that?” Lauren asked, but Thomas hardly heard her. The man was moving now. He flicked his cigarette into the street and started walking towards them.

“Tommyknocker? Gypsy?” The Troll was already drawing a gun. Thomas spun around. The lady he’d seen outside the last good time was following them. Her companion walked beside her. His hands were in his pockets.

“Thomas, what’s going on?” Lauren was staring at a dwarf on the other side of the street. The dwarf’s hands were hidden behind his back. They were coming at them from all four sides, framing his small group like a square.

“Down!” yelled Tommyknocker and he pushed Thomas to the cement. Three of the four moved as one, weapons appearing in their hands and sparking fire. The other one was still but even in the dim evening light Thomas could see power ripple the air around him. The mage hurled a crescent of sparking yellow energy towards Gypsy but the Shaman was ready. He raised a hand and bent the spell back towards its caster. The magic surged like a too-bright light bulb then died suddenly.
"Lauren, get down!" Thomas fumbled for his weapon. Gunshots crackled overhead.

"Lauren, I said down!" But she wasn't responding, wasn't moving. Bullets crashed into her and she was ripped to the ground.

Tommyknocker was moving towards Gypsy, his gun spraying bullets towards their enemy. The Troll reached into his jacket with a free hand and pulled out a silver packet, no larger than a pack of cigarettes. He flicked the lid off of the pack and slammed it into the ground. A thick white smoke bloomed out of the broken packet, consuming everything in its path. He could hear them still shooting. He could hear the red-haired woman shouting at her people, ordering them to fire into the smoke, to kill him and his friends.

The decker fought to stand up, his eyes darting around the dense smoke, trying to get an idea of where Gypsy and Tommyknocker were. He scrambled towards where he thought the side of the road was and his body fell against a Toyota Runabout. The small blue car waited at the edge of the haze. Beyond it a long alleyway yawned into darkness. His arms were trembling. In cyberspace the idea of combat excited him but this wasn't that space between computers where time seemed non-existent and healing came at the touch of a button. This was the world of flesh his blood. Here he knew his limitations. Adrenaline pushed a single thought into his head. Run.
But he couldn't run. Even now as his hands trembled, the military training consumed his conscience. He could not leave his friends behind.

Thomas heard the gunshots drawing closer, then heavy footsteps. He clicked back the hammer and aimed his Manhunter straight into the dense fog. The footsteps were almost on top of him now. Thomas breathed deeply, forcing the nervousness down into his belly. The trembling in his hands subsided for a moment. He prepared to fire.

Tommyknocker burst through the smoke cloud, bleeding from more than a dozen wounds.

"Jesus, I almost shot you," Thomas said, breathless.

"You wouldn't have been the first." Tommyknocker slumped against the side of the Runabout. He was so large that his head still peeked over the top of the parked car. The Troll's clothing was ripped and soaked through with his own blood.

"Gypsy?" Tommyknocker shook his head.

"I'm sorry man, I know what he meant to you."

Tommyknocker said, "Fog packs won't hold them off forever, and I don't have many left. You better get moving while you still can. I'll cover you."

"Not a chance."

"Go, now!" Tommyknocker growled.

"You can't hold them off by yourself. I'm staying."
"No, you’re going to get that girl out of her house before these people find her!" The realization spiked fear through Thomas’ chest. He hadn’t added that up yet. If this crew was hitting them because of Christina’s key then she was either dead or she was next.

“What about you?"

“This is what we’re built for.” When Tommyknocker smiled, blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth. The Troll hurled another fog pack into the dense smoke.

“Ok,” said Thomas. He gritted his teeth and pushed off from the car as hard as he could. Gunshots shadowed his footsteps all the way to the black alley. He kept running until all he could hear was the sound of his own heavy breathing, and all he could think about was whether or not he would reach Christina in time.
12. Freespace

Everything is easier in the cyberspace. It’s easier to avoid things like pain and death. You can watch from analog eyes and soak in everything. It’s like watching trideo. You’re not living the event anymore. It’s happening to someone else, somewhere else and you can lend them your emotions without you yourself getting hurt.

Frost is still in the box. The last fourteen minutes loop through all of the mirrors on slow replay. A part of him is watching, that part of him hoping to make some sense out of what has happened and perhaps find a way to stop the Indian and the troll the next time they cross paths.

The one they called Gypsy is already dead, his small body smoking in the cold. At the very end of the video loop Frost watches through Arson’s eyes as she searches through his pockets, hoping to find anything that would help end this chase. She finds a handful of loose change, a credstick and some useless baubles that look like they might pertain to his magic.

Then there is Lucky’s mirror. He bears down on the troll, guns blazing death. The beast holds his ground absorbing metal that would have killed a man. Then he reaches out with a meaty paw and smashes Lucky in the face. The image shakes from the force of the impact. Lucky tumbles to the ground. That is when the Troll went to find his friend.
Frost turns his eyes toward Trotter’s camera. The dwarf is watching as the Troll slumps beside his friend. He moves in to take aim and suddenly the Indian leaps up and sprints off.

"Frost, he’s moving north!” Trotter starts to give chase but the angry report of pistol fire rivets him to his spot. “I’m pinned down!”

Trotter’s eyes are darting from side to side and the world shifts with his vision. He is looking for a way out of this spot, to shoot back, to defend himself.

Frost stops the video loop. He looks towards Sticks’ mirror then looks away. He had been watching Sticks’ mirror when the other mage, the dwarf, attacked him. Frost doesn’t want to play that one again.

“Anything, Frost?” Arson’s voice is gravel over the communications link.

“Nothing new. I scanned the Inquisitor’s recordings to Sideshow Bob. He should be coming up with the data you’re looking for.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.” Cyberspace strips emotion from his voice. She can’t know he is lying.

“It was a rough one, Frost. We’ve never taken a hit like this before. We underestimated what their crew could do. We just need to get over this and finish the job.”

“I’m running replay. If there’s anything we missed, it will show up on the feed.”
"Move the van into position. We're going to need to roll as soon as we know who our Indian friend ran to go see."

He looks at his own mirror and triggers the auto-pilot function to drive to the coordinates that she gives him. "On the way."

"I need you on this Frost. Stay focused."

"Yeah" In cyberspace Frost reaches for his ear and pulls out an earpiece. He doesn't want to hear Arson anymore. He doesn't want to talk to any of them.

He is looking at the license photo of the female target that Sideshow Bob pulled off the net and sent to him. She looks familiar. Frost calls up the search file he ran on Christina. He ran the search program less than forty-eight hours ago but it feels like much longer. Today has lasted a very long time.

This woman reminds him of Christina in some way. Not the way she was when he knew her but the way she was when he called her. Older, harder edged. The resemblance between the two is definite. They have the same style of hair and makeup almost as though the combination were a uniform worn for work, like a stewardess. The idea spirals recklessly through his brain.

"It's nice here" comes a familiar voice from behind Frost. "I should make myself something like this. It's sorta like the calm before the storm right? Somewhere to chill before you hit real cyberspace?"
Frost is dumbfounded. No one has ever entered his private space before. He didn’t even think anyone could. His digital form tenses reflexively “How are you here?”

“You’re networked through the van, Frosty. All I had to do was ride our shared satellite feed backwards into your node and presto! Welcome to Frost’s neck of the woods, or clearing as it may be.”

Frost gives him a look that asks why.

“You weren’t responding to any of my communications. I wanted to tell you that I had a makeup on the girl and the new target.” Sideshow Bob saunters closer to Frost, his high wave of red curls tilting with the movements of his head. “Shouldn’t you be in replay?”

“I ran the replay twice, we were well within operating normalcy, the Troll just thought ahead of us.” Frost stepped forward to cut off Sideshow Bob’s path.

“Wait a minute. Wow.” He whistles, a sound that had never been perfected on cyberspace and sounded now like a cross between a buzz and a beep. “They told me you were gold with net ops but I never knew you could gather data so fast.”

Frost looks back to see what Sideshow Bob is staring at. The image of Christina’s ID photo still hangs in the air where he called it up. “You mean this? It’s a project for someone else, not any of your business. You shouldn’t even be here.” He waves his hand and the image of Christina shatters and sprinkles to the ground like rain.
"She looks like the Pantelakos girl, that's what you're thinking, but there's no relation."

"No man, that is her. That's our Target." Sideshow Bob waves his hands over the place where the raindrops fell. They leap from the ground and coalesce into an image of the woman.

"Christina Maldonado, age: 24 years; currently residing at 4112 New Lots avenue. I gotta hand it to ya. You must have back traced every apartment in the building to get the digs on her. I was having trouble slashing the security ICE backed up around the tenant list." Bob plops himself down in the grass. He stares at Frost as though waiting for some response. When there is none, he continues.

"The land is subsidized by Kerrigan Corp for employee housing, but it's been leased at cost to an independent company called Freedom Entertainment. They run the apartment building. Kerrigan and Freedom have some sort of relationship but it's not going to affect our work—"

"What's it for?"

Bob works his face into a questioning look. "Freedom or the Building?"

Frost repeats himself, sterner this time.

"I'm not sure. Mostly female norms live here. I think the location belongs to a madam. You know the type I mean."

Frost's eyes move from the visuals of the file to Sideshow Bob and back again.
"Are you with me here man? The first victim also lived here and worked for the same parent company that runs the building. It is employee housing," Sideshow Bob’s hands move through the air, sifting through Frost’s data.

"Your data confirms that. It also confirms the target’s status. Non-corporate entity, recently unemployed by FirstBank of Queens. We won’t mess up anyone’s shoes by taking her out.” He pauses then says. “I wonder why she needed a day job?”

Realization is settling over Frost, pins and needles. “Why is she the target?”

“This Sticks thing must have messed you up real bad. You weren’t riding when it went down were you? Man! Junkies always talk about that moment. The moment of death is the biggest thrill rush of them all. Were you in there with him? I know he lived but he was that close. I wish I coulda been shotgunning your rig for that tailspin I—”

“Why is she the target?!” He is shaping code around himself, trees are bending inward moaning. The sky is cloud black.

"Ok, Ok, I can see you’re still fried over it. Just, stay focused.” He points at Christina. “She is the target because that’s where our Mr. Red-Owl ran first.”

“Red-Owl?” he says slowly.

“The net-jockey. He was a Sioux Wildcat until he washed out of the program. He has some weird form of combat stress disorder. The guy’s more or less useless outside of the cyberspace, but once he’s in there, he’s an animal. Seventy-eight
recorded decker dumps. Twelve reported net-kills. He'll fry your brain if you're not careful.

"The troll is named Tommyknocker. It's a street handle but I couldn't pull anymore than that. Their dead shaman was called Gypsy. Reginald Goddfrey, a Boston. He was a private school kid until he heard the call of rat. Those cries led him to the city.

"The girl, you know more than I do. Christina Maldonado. I figure she's the ringleader. The tape I have on the other girl, Pantelakos, makes me think that she was the fixer, putting one friend in touch with another in exchange for part of the score. What I don't know is what they were doing sniffing around our corporate files. We didn't find any information on the Dwarf. The Troll split, and Mr. Red-Owl is right here with the little lady."

Sideshow Bob turns to the semicircle of mirrors and brings Trotter's mirror into focus. The dwarf is watching Christina's bedroom window through a pair of binoculars. From his position, Frost can see Red-Owl and Christina. The two of them are forcing her clothes and personal belongings into a duffel bag.

Frost turns back to Sideshow Bob to ask another question, but the decker's thoughts are elsewhere, as if he is listening to the voices in his head. Sideshow Bob points at his own ear, then he points to Frost. Frost reactivates the sequence for his commlink. He is in times to catch the last bit of it. "—security sweep. We'll put
down the Johnson and hold the decker for questioning until we can get a location on Tommyknocker."

"Got that, Frosty? Go time. Payback for dear old Sticks."

"Payback." His virtual mouth tightens in a way that makes him sound like he is mumbling.

Sideshow Bob snaps his fingers twice and his digital form begins to fade. Another moment and he is out of sight, out of Frost’s node. Too late though. Frost will never feel the same way about his space again. He never thought that anyone could enter his node. It has always been his private place, where no one could reach him. He feels the way he imagines Christina must be feeling, racing to pack as many of her things as she can before she runs away from her own home; scared and vulnerable. He doesn’t feel like Frost. He feels like Jonas. And Jonas is about to kill the only woman he ever loved.

They were already crowded into the back of the command vehicle when Jonas unplugged himself from the net. Arson was seated next to him, her cybernetic arms pressed up against his own flesh.

"We’ll do this fast and easy. We’re one man down so there isn’t a lot of room for error. That means no close-quarter combat, Lucky."

The Cajun nodded. His face was a nest of purple bruises.
"There are three points of entry, here, here and here. Jonas you bring out the Lynx Drone and cover Alpha point here. Trotter, I want you to control Beta. Lucky will be at Beta point here. I’ll go in and force them towards one of the coverage points where we’ll do the takedown."

"Let me go in and flush em out," Trotter said. There was desire in his eyes.

"Ok. I’ll control Alpha point and assist with the takedown if necessary."

"And me?" Sideshow Bob was smiling and thrumming his fingers against the side of Jonas’s chair.

"Same as before, I want total control of the area. Lock down the elevators and kill the lights on my command. They shouldn’t have a chance to see Trotter coming."

"I’m always doing your light work." Sideshow Bob grinned.

No one else was laughing. The team members filed out of the van one by one, checking their clips and testing their sights. "We do this right this time no? Then we go find us a Troll." Lucky sounded angrier than Jonas had ever seen him before.

"See you in the cyberspace." Sideshow Bob smiled again and jacked himself into the computer system.
13. The Closed Net

It wasn't supposed to be happening like this. She had held the group together for close to five years with no major injuries. None of the other encounters had been like this. They - she was always prepared. Not this time, though. The mage had done something to Sticks to crimp his magic, and when the Troll came out of the smoke, no one was ready...

Arson zipped up her jacket and started to move towards the building. This would have to be smooth. They were treading on corporate property.

"Trotter online. I'm entering the building now."

From Alpha point she could see Trotter walk in through the front entrance, "Alpha online and in position. Call them out, people."

"Beta online and in position."

The communication line fell silent.

"Frost?" Arson said over the comm. Still there was no response. She waited several more seconds to be sure. "Sideshow, check out Frost please? There may be another problem with his communication program. Trotter, hold position. Shit, I don't need this now!"

SideShow Bob didn't respond either.

"Mon cheri, I think we have a problem."
14. Abandon

Jonas’s heart was thundering in his chest, his palms sweating from the uncomfortable weight of the automatic pistol in his hands. His ears were filled with the sound of his boots hitting the concrete steps two at a time. He wouldn’t take the elevator. If Sideshow Bob had regained consciousness he would control the elevator by now and the others would already know that he’d gone over. Sideshow Bob might not be awake yet, he’d slugged the decker as hard as he could with the butt of his gun. The others still might not know what is going on. But this was no time for taking chances. He considered the irony of his thoughts as he rounded the fifth floor. There was no bigger chance than the one he was taking right now.

Jonas slammed his full weight into her door. The wood around the lock splintered then gave. He tumbled into the room breathless. Christina was directly in front of him, her mouth open as though she was starting to scream. Jonas heard the hammer of a gun thumbed back somewhere behind him.

"Drop the gun!" A man’s voice, thick and filled with nervousness.

"We don’t have time for this, Red-Owl, we need to leave now!"

"Who are you?"

"Jonas?" Christina was staring at him, her face an incredulous mix of fear and surprise. She was holding her duffel bag against her chest.
“I wish I had time to explain it. I know who is after you, Christina. They’re here now and they’re coming to kill the both of you.”

“Who? I don’t understand.” Her head swiveled frantically back and forth between the two men. Jonas started to lower his hands.

“You move anymore and you’re dead!” Even outside of the net, without the voice stress analysis sensors, he could read the fear in Thomas Red Owl’s voice. Jonas felt it too.

“Thomas wait, I know him. He’s…” Christina couldn’t find the words to finish.

“We can’t wait any longer. We need to move now.”

A silver ball crashed through the living room window. Before any of them could move, it exploded in a brilliant flash of white light. Christina and Thomas howled in pain. Christina threw her hands over her eyes, trying to protect herself from the harsh light. Jonas was ready. His electronic eyes read the flash and gamma-corrected his pupils to compensate. Everything around him glowed with a silver aura but he could still see. The white phosphorous core roiled to a stop against Christina’s plush white couch. Flames leapt from the spots where it touched. The alarm began to whine as water pumped in through the security vents.

Jonas grabbed Christina and pushed her towards the door. Thomas was already stumbling that way, his backpack slung over both his shoulders. Trotter was
waiting for them in the hallway, his shotgun pointed at Jonas. “Out the way kid, I
don’t wanna shoot you."

Jonas just reacted. He lifted his gun and yanked the trigger. Trotter fired as
well, their shots chased by each other. The force of the gunshot caught Jonas full in
the chest, propelling him backwards, into the ground. Jonas could feel the bullet
burning his chest, eating its way through the thick layer of armor there. Then the
hall was filled with wild gunfire.

Jonas tried to move but his body wouldn’t respond. His eyes were riveted to
the spot where Trotter had shot him. Smoke crawled out from the hole in Jonas’s
chest. He could still hear the gunshots. They were like an echo pushed out from the
back of his mind. This was how Sticks must have felt when the magic wrapped itself
around his throat, forcing the life from his burning lungs. He was going to die.

Then hands were clamping at the flesh beneath his armpits, tugging him to
his feet. He heard a voice, muffled at first then clearer. “Get up!” Christina
screamed.

He wasn’t going to die.

Red-Owl was still firing, forcing Trotter into the safety of a doorway, where
the dwarf couldn’t reach them. There were three entrances to the building. The front
door, the garage door and, “The service entrance, they won’t have it covered.”

“How do you know?” Thomas was pushing on his eyes with his free hand as
if to wipe away the glare.
"I just do."

They hit the stairwell and were down three flights before they heard voices from above, Trotter. Then, another sound, barely noticeable. A door was clicking shut on the first floor. Jonas grabbed Thomas before he could turn the corner to hit the next flight.

"Not that way. She's down there." Jonas peeled off his top layer of armor. The bullet was still lodged in his vest.

"Who?"

Their voices echoed, crashing against the screams of nervous tenants and their own heavy footfalls. They burst out of the stairwell on the second floor. It was quiet. The hallway could have belonged to any apartment building. Drab white walls, round sconces silently filling the hallway with light. Jonas was looking at Thomas. Thomas was looking at the doors. He raised his gun and fired through the lock of the nearest one.

"What are you doing?!"

Thomas didn't answer with words. He lowered his shoulder and rammed his way through the apartment door.

Through the now open door they could hear the screams of the resident mixed with the conversational tones of a trideo show. In the distance there were sirens.
"The police are on the way," Christina said. Jonas thought he heard a twinge of relief in her voice. They followed Thomas inside.

Christina stopped to look at the woman whose apartment they had just invaded. She was little more than a girl really, covered by a robe, her hair locked into curlers to keep its shape. Christina recognized her. Tamara Pearson. Tamara was young, younger than Christina was when she started in the business. Christina stared at Tamara for a long time, thinking about where she must have come from to end up here.

Jonas grabbed Christina and said, "Come on!"

Thomas threw a chair through the window and climbed out. He dangled himself from the ledge the dropped down to the ground below.

"Go" said Jonas.

"I can't jump out of a window!"

"We don't have a choice anymore, you have to go now."

Thomas was calling to them from below. Jonas could hear footsteps and voices in the hallway. It was Arson's voice. "We have a breached door on two!"

Jonas watched as Christina leapt from the window ledge, and tumbled towards the open arms of Thomas Red-Owl. The force of her weight landing on him sent him to the ground.

"You ok?"
"I think I rolled it." Her stocking was torn. The flesh there was scratched and bleeding. Thomas helped her to her feet and looked back up at the open window where Jonas was watching them.

"Come on!"

Jonas turned back. He heard Arson hit the doorway. She rounded the corner, gun drawn and stared at him.

"I'm sorry," he said. Her eyes hardened to points. There was no forgiveness in those eyes.

He spun and leapt out of the window. His vat grown muscle fibers expanded and contracted alongside the natural muscle to absorb the impact of the fall. He rolled and stood up quickly.

"How?" Christina stared at him. Then Thomas was pulling her away, down the street. Jonas looked up at the second-story ledge and drew his gun. He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger. He kept firing until his gun clicked empty. Then he ran down the street after the others.
Arson would have found them anywhere they went on the surface. Jonas imagined drones criss-crossing the night sky, satellites lending images to the search. They ran for twenty blocks, a city mile until Christina’s twisted ankle had become bloated and purple. There they found an old subway entrance, the green rail peeling paint, the white globe long since shattered. The entrance was boarded up, the boards coated in graffiti, to remind any passersbyers which gang controlled this inch of turf. Behind the boards was a gate, closing off the old station from the rest of the world. Most of the old subway entrances had been cemented over but some places in the city couldn’t afford to so they used boards and gates to keep unwanteds out.

"Sometimes gangbangers use these tunnels to slip the cops. They say that there are other things down here as well." Thomas shivered.

"You mean squatters," Jonas replied quickly. It was a statement more than a question.

"No, Gypsy used to talk about the subways. He said there was magic down here."

Christina was shivering in Jonas’s arms and not all of it was from the cold. He realized then that he had been holding her for some time now. “Don’t worry about it. Maybe we’ll see some devil rats, but there isn’t anything anymore dangerous than that down here.”
The group descended into the darkness of the subway station. None of the three carried a flashlight. Thomas tore off part of his shirt and wrapped it around a broken piece of board to make a torch. He said, “You still never told me who you are, Jonas, and how you knew so much about those people.”

“I was one of them.” He could feel Christina stiffening in his arms. She coughed loudly and pulled away.

“You worked with them?” Thomas asked. He was fishing in his pockets for something. After a moment he pulled out a flat silver flask. Thomas poured the contents of his flask onto the section of ripped shirt.

“I was their driver, sometimes their computer specialist too.”

“Are you telling me that you’re responsible for all of this?!” Anger tinged her voice.

“Yes, I was. I was a part of it, but I didn’t know what it was about or even who was involved.” Jonas was careful to keep his hands in plain site. Thomas was fidgeting now, flicking his cigarette lighter on and off. In the brief bursts of light Jonas could see the Manhunter pistol lying on the broken concrete near the decker’s restless hands. “Our employer found out that you were investigating Domingo Santiago’s files and ordered us to take you out. I didn’t know that you were involved, Christina.”

She didn’t say anything except to retreat a few steps further into the darkness.

“I still don’t even know what this is all about.”
"So when you saw Christina you decided to help us out. Why?" Thomas lit the makeshift torch and stood up. He scooped the pistol up with the his other hand and let it dangle loosely in his palm.

"I couldn’t let her die."

A silence formed between them. Thomas carried the torch further into the tunnel. Jonas could hear the squeal of devil rats in the distance, backing away from the light. His low-light eyes fed off of the glow of the torch, he could see their eyes in the waiting darkness. Dozens of green points of light filled with hunger. He wondered for a moment what would happen if the torch went out.

"So you’re a hit man?" Christina said after a while.

He didn’t want to answer. "It’s not that simple."

"You kill people for a living. It’s that simple."

"That’s what they turned me into, not what I am."

"That is what you left me for isn’t it?"

"Enough!" Thomas’s shout cast echoes down the tunnel. The devil rats squealed in response.

"This isn’t helping us any. We’re all stuck down here right now and if you keep on fighting each other we’ll never get anywhere."

"I told you not to come back, Jonas. Why didn’t you listen to me?"

"I couldn’t listen to you. I was supposed to kill you because you were looking for information that put my people at risk."
"Your people were trying to kill you too."

"The Lovers" Thomas said suddenly. They both stopped arguing and looked at him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Christina's voice had anger in it.

"When I was in the service I met a woman, a witch really. She offered to read my fortune through the cards." He sat down against a wall of the tunnel. His light arced shadows across the ceiling.

"She sat me down at her table, spread out a deck of tarot cards in front of me and told me to shuffle them. She drew four from the top of the pile. The lovers, the nine of pipes, the eight of blades, and a fourth card." At this his voice grew somber. He invited Jonas and Christina to sit down beside him before he continued.

"She told me that each card represented a major event that was to transpire in my life. She drew the lovers first. After every card she sent a bit of wisdom my way. Real cryptic stuff, the kind of thing you get from fortune cookies or horoscopes. She said, the need to make a choice is at hand. You are at a crossroads. Then she drew the nine of pipes, the defiance card. She said, close friendships are with others who play the same game as you, but good enemies also play your game."

"What does that mean?" Jonas asked.

"I didn't know, not then. When she drew the third card, it was the eight of blades. Even she seemed a little puzzled by that one. She told me that I was my
brother’s keeper, but I needed to decide if I was going to be the captive or the captor in that relationship.

“It all added up for me. I thought she was telling me to leave the army. I had been struggling with some personal issues for a long time. I was with my unit because of the people in my unit, but I didn’t want to be a part of war anymore. I took what she said as fortune telling me to quit this life and find something else. That’s how it is with fortune telling. You hear exactly what you want to hear at the time. Whether it’s bullshit or whether it’s rooted in real magic, your interpretation of the fortune is what drives you. I interpreted it to mean what I wanted it to mean.”

“What’s your point?” asked Christina.

“Maybe it was real magic, and maybe she wasn’t talking to me at all. Maybe she was preparing me to talk to you. It all adds up. You’re the lovers. You’re the ones at the crossroad here. Jonas, he represents defiance. He left everything he had to save you.”

Jonas and Christina shared a look. He was hoping to find forgiveness in her eyes. She looked away first. She looked at the ground and then looked over at Thomas. “So what do we do now?”

Jonas said, “You never told me what this was all about.”

“When Mr. Santiago died, he left me a key in his will. I didn’t know what the key opened so I hired Thomas to find out.”
"Then it's settled. We go on."

"All of us," Thomas said.

"What?"

"All of us go on. Gypsy is dead and I don't know where Tommyknocker is. The way things are right now, I can't do anything in cyberspace without knowing that someone is on the surface covering my back. Plus he knows the people who are after us. That's gives us an edge. I won't do this without him."

He turned to Jonas, "Are you with us?"

He thought about Lucky and Trotter. He thought about Sticks. He thought about Arson, the way rage burned in her eyes when she saw him standing at the window ready to jump. He said, "Yes."