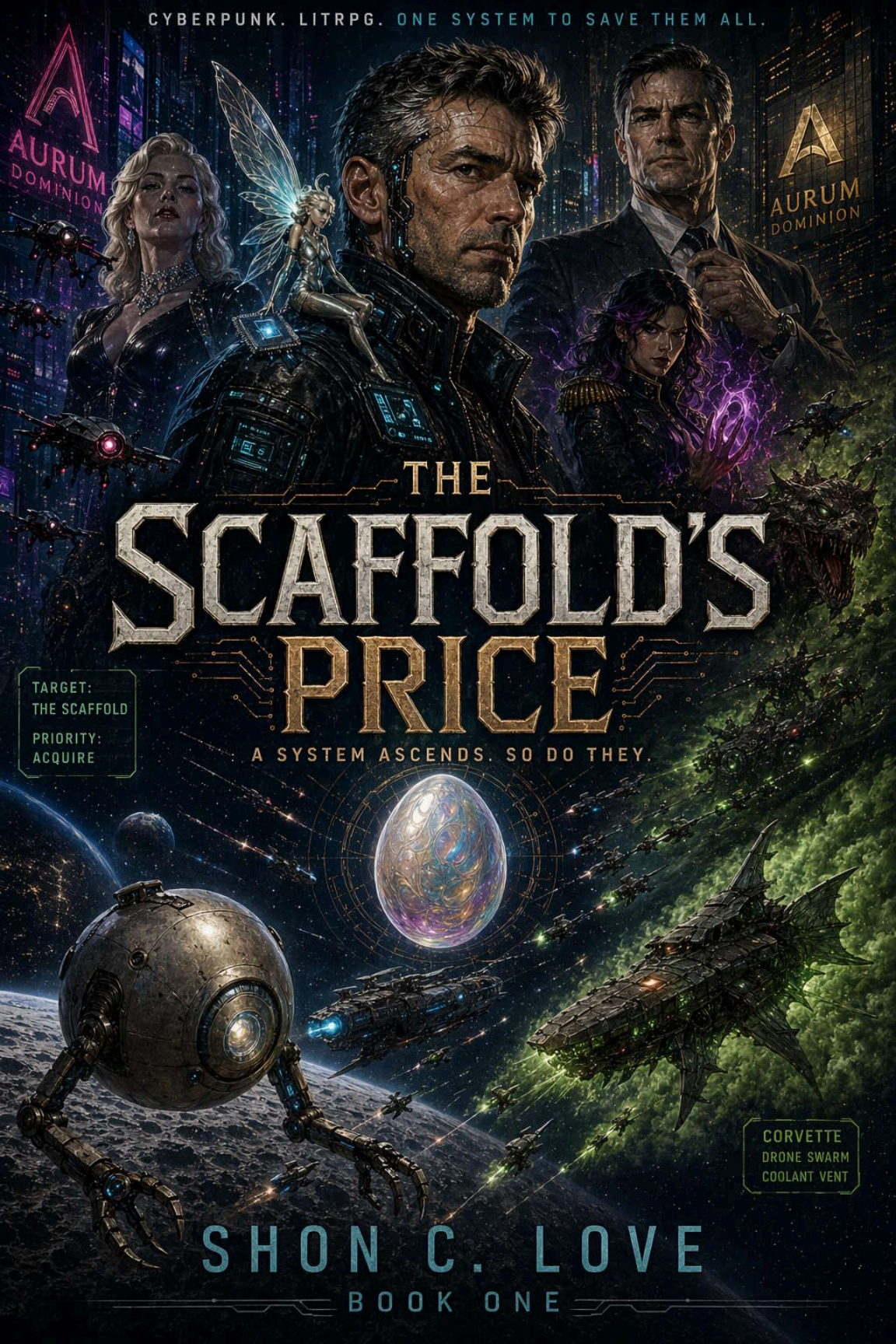

CYBERPUNK. LITRPG. ONE SYSTEM TO SAVE THEM ALL.
AURUM DOMINION
AURUM DOMINION
THE SCAFFOLD'S PRICE
A SYSTEM ASCENDS. SO DO THEY.
TARGET: THE SCAFFOLD
PRIORITY: ACQUIRE
CORVETTE
DRONE SWARM
COOLANT VENT
SHON C. LOVE
BOOK ONE

The Scaffold's Price

Reality's Scaffold 1

Shon Love

V0.1.0-ALPHA.1

Build v0.1.0-alpha.1 · 2026-05-17 UTC

©2026, PB4UPlay Games, Shon C. Love. All rights reserved.

Chapter 01

Ambition

Playing the role of dutiful XO, I open a private channel to the `Captain` in our tac-net.

tac-net: direct voice

Lieutenant *(xo)*

"`Captain`, you've outdone yourself."

"You planned for every contingency with perfection."

"The information retrieved by the mercenaries will greatly expand the company's value."

activates ***suggestion***

"They've even completed the raid far ahead of schedule."

"Let's hope that they didn't leave any evidence behind."

Suspicious.

Activating the Scaffold, I can feel my carefully cultivated vitality slip away — feeding the Sprite its due. I once again consider this gift from my father — the **suggestion** Sprite. Its Scaffold is an heirloom; a carefully guarded secret — a dangerous secret.

The `Captain` is far too susceptible to **suggestion**. This alone justifies his removal.

His paranoia is on display. He's jittery, sweaty, and his eyes track the shadows. The mission's success will be a secondary consideration — the `Captain`'s unnecessary destruction of an effective asset will define his failure.

I will claim the success as my own.

Around us, the dusty warehouse stands on the edge of the slum district. Prying eyes are rare in the no-man's land between the corporate world and their victims.

This remote location ensures that my plans will proceed without interference.

Captain *(actual)*

"That hope is vain, `Lieutenant`. They've either been sloppy, or we've been betrayed."

"Their good work in the past doesn't make them any more than they are — mercenaries; no loyalty beyond their next payday."

shakes his head

"I can't allow this to come back on us. Activate the burn-down as soon as we make the exchange."

I've been feeding the `Captain`'s paranoia for weeks, poisoning his thoughts.

In the distance, a fast moving aircar thrums on approach.

`tac-net: team voice`

Sgt. Boz *(the eye)*

"Merc bird arrives in two."

Lieutenant *(xo)*

presses hard with ***suggestion***

"In that case, shall we proceed as you've directed?"

"Not just the mercenaries, but their known associates, too?"

Applying this Sprite so frequently is tiring, but well worth the cost.

Captain ***(actual)***

struggles briefly

"Yes, `Lieutenant`, all of them."

Predictable.

I activate the burn-down.

Our security detail receives an alert and they arrange themselves in the warehouse, waiting in ambush. There are plenty of places to take cover while still having open fields of fire.

Back at headquarters, corporate security dispatches several tac-teams. They're heading for the mercenaries' associates.

Adding more blood to the `Captain`'s hands.

Just as the security team takes up their firing positions, the mercs' ride lands in the empty lot outside, its electrokinetic thrusters winding down.

Our men tighten straps, check magazines, and settle in for the fight.

A moment later, the five-man mercenary team enters the warehouse. Sweaty, scuffed, and scraped, but smiling — satisfied with a job well done.

As they enter, I note the crew's Netrunner. Even as he jokes with his team, he cases the warehouse — looking for cover, marking the men standing in shadow, glancing at the `Captain`'s slightly sweat-stained clothing.

A professional.

"Dude! Rockie, your slagging zipper is still down, man!" jokes the 'runner.

"Huh?" looking down, Rockie, gets a friendly slap for his efforts.

"Static-ridden 'runners," mutters the giant, smiling, shaking his head and shoving the 'runner. "You're a child."

The `Captain` steps up to greet them, pale and tremulous, "Great work, team! Done in record time. Were you successful?"

"Paydata's on the secure platform. We've placed the decryption keys and download links in escrow, as agreed. Simply awaiting payment," says the team samurai.

The crew's joviality at such a time is off-putting.

Idiots.

The `Captain` turns and nods to me. I trigger the `Re:Coin` escrow contract, finalizing the transaction. Upon receiving confirmation, I signal back to the `Captain`.

Sweat is dripping from his brow. Just as I acknowledge the transaction, the team's 'runner cries out a warning, "*Ambush!*"

Pandemonium breaks out in the warehouse.

The crew are fast to react, diving for the scant cover near the warehouse entrance. Getting behind anything, they scramble to mount a defense.

Our security detail is professional and methodical. They function as a single unit, with some moving to flank while others provide covering fire; everyone reporting their movements into the tac-net as they flow.

Along with the warning, obscuring smoke fills the space — at least two canisters were thrown out to provide the crew with some concealment, hoping to delay the inevitable.

The 'runner's doing, I'm sure of it. His cry gave the mercenaries two full seconds to react.

Someone has wasted a professional on contract work.

Irritating.

The crew goes down quickly — one after the other. They have their protective gear, cybernetics, and weapons — but they're surprised, surrounded, and exposed.

During the battle, I make sure to receive a minor injury — a cut to my leg. Nothing serious; just enough to require medical attention; just enough to mark myself a victim of the `Captain`'s incompe—

-BOOM!-

-choking; gut punched-

-ears ringing; vision swimming-

-muted voices; groaning-

Coughing, I come to, lying on the ground, covered in dust, debris, and flecks of gore. A cloud of dust still hangs in the air. The sounds of injured men fill the space.

Picking myself up, limping, I check the scene. There's a crater in the neocrete floor; part of the roof has collapsed; the mercenaries are blown to bits. Many of our men are injured — several are dead.

I count the crew's bodies.

Four.

"Rockie", identifiable only by the large implants visible through the wreckage. Two others laid out where their cover failed them. The samurai — caught in the open.

The 'runner is not here.

Dusting off my jacket, I search for clues to the 'runner's whereabouts. Near a collapsed section of wall, I find a set of footprints vacating the chaos.

The smoke. He used the smoke.

Of course.

* * *

A loose end requires a plan.

Hunting him directly would cost resources, time, and risk exposure. More immediately, I don't know where he's gone — and a frightened 'runner who knows his way around the net is a difficult thing to find.

I do, however, know everything about him and the team he just watched die.

Back at headquarters, corporate security is already dispatching teams toward the mercenaries' known associates.

I update the parameters.

Broader. His family — a trap.

Surely, we'll find him with his family. And, if not there, if he has any other attachments — a reason to surface, a reason to make contact — we'll find him.

And if he doesn't surface?

Then he's hiding. And a man in hiding isn't making trouble for me.

* * *

The `Captain` has survived, unscathed.

Perfect.

There is no evidence of a betrayal by the contractors. Not only have they been eliminated, but we've suffered significant and unnecessary loss of life, limb, and equipment. This will cost the company dearly; all blame carefully laid at the `Captain`'s feet.

He will certainly be removed after this fiasco.

My plans proceed — opening the way to ever greater power.

Legwork

Ollie heads out of his office in the campus building. His last student just left, and his office hours are over. It's late in the afternoon, stormy, and the rest of the day belongs to him.

The "Crawlerz" are getting out of control once again. Several of Ollie's students, among many others, have suffered at their hands recently.

Local scavenger gangs are problematic if they're not broken down once in a while. His skills give him the ability to deal with them — discretely. There are ways to make them struggle, even without a shootout.

Leaving his office, he uses his commlink to summon an autocab. Making his way onto the street, he avoids the garbage that edges the sidewalk. Outside, the afternoon rain soaks into his clothing. At least it helps wash some of the stench out of the air.

Across his shoulders, Ollie places an unremarkable synth leather duster. On his head, an oversized fedora. He picked both up at a local thrift shop. The getup is a little cliché, but there's a reason it's a classic. The duster hides his outline and the fedora hides his eyes — making him harder to track; harder to identify.

With is outer wear settled, Ollie expands his unremarkable, worn umbrella — an old, low-tech assembly with neither blinking lights nor digital display surfaces. The rain makes a steady drumming sound on the tight waterproof material while he waits for his ride.

During the wait, Ollie leans against the building. He switches his wetware Sprite load-out from his 'Teaching' set to this 'Legwork' set. He's keeps their Scaffold chips slotted all the time, switching the active ones as

needed. These Sprites don't require a cyberdeck — they work fine from his wetware stack.

As his ride lands, Ollie activates **obscure**. While active and charged, the effect will protect him from Sprite-based tracking. Fortunately, his evolved Scaffold can even bank a little vitality — in case he gets knocked out.

He hops inside the autocab. The synth leather seat is clean for once. It squeaks against his duster as he slides inside. Setting his destination, he sits back for the short ride. The EKTs burble mutely as they throttle up.

Ollie switches autocabs a few times, taking short walks in between — concealing his path through the borough. The ubiquitous cameras make it difficult to go unnoticed. He pays for the rides with bits from a `Re:Coin` credstick. This, too, makes it harder for his movements to be tracked.

During the trek, Ollie streams the latest episode of his favorite Sensiecast drama, "Netrunner Sylph". The writing is passable and the lead's love interest is stunning. Sensie streams of real 'dives are recorded by the show's production team, resulting in authentic action sequences. He is glad that his ancient wetware is still able to manage some of the sensory tracks from the 'cast.

* * *

After some time covering his trail, Ollie makes his way deeper into gang land. He is comfortable moving around without drawing too much attention; meandering paths, slow movements, eyes down, no tech on display.

Eventually, he finds a Crawlerz crew. They're making their rounds of the local shops, collecting "Insurance" money. Protection rackets are always good money for the low-life scum in the slums.

Ollie knows this crew — he's scanned them before. Nobody new today. They're all stupid meat-heads. He tails the thugs for a while; watching for their bosses, collecting their faces, locations, and tags.

The work is slow and boring, but, it's necessary. The more information he has about his target, the easier things go in the 'dive. Ollie's best work is done in the shadows, battling in cyberspace.

While he has seen lots of combat in the real, he's no samurai. His previous life as a Netrunner was very dangerous. Deepdiving in a firefight — not a pretty sight.

Surface work, as opposed to the 'dive — that must be done in the real. Signal scans, videos, locations, voice recordings, stills, bio samples, handshakes; these all help lay out a pattern — a web of connections. The more connections he finds, the more Ollie is able to corrupt, sever, take, fake, or frame.

The "*authorities*" know this as well. They invest great treasure in maintaining their own view into these webs.

So, Ollie follows the thugs — recording, and sampling as they go. Eventually he's able to get a few more connections; some face shots, voice samples, and finger prints. He takes great care to remain unnoticed by his quarry — he'd rather avoid a beat-down.

* * *

Later in the evening, just as the rain stops, the crew breaks up, and Ollie puts his umbrella away. Their leader heads in an unusual direction. *A new direction!* Ollie's heart ticks up a bit. He may make some progress this evening.

Frank, the leader, makes an effort to be sneaky. *-head shake- It's pathetic.* Frank loves breaking things. His path of destruction is obvious.

They travel a short distance before approaching an abandoned office building. Each of it's five floors are missing windows and there is little exterior paint remaining. The few flickering streetlights emphasize the cracks in the walls.

The building is clearly Frank's destination. With his attention now drawn, Ollie sees that there are trails through the garbage, all leading to the building — marking it as a destination rather than a ruin.

Frank disappears through a back door. Though barely hanging onto its rusted hinges, it still makes little noise as he enters. Ollie doesn't try to follow him. There are certainly watchers inside.

Nearby, and within sight of the building, Ollie settles in behind a dumpster. His wetware is old, but Scaffolds improve with age. He still has to use an external scanner for this kind of work. Fortunately, his is small

and easy to conceal.

From hiding, he sets his **search** Sprite to work through the hand-held scanner — sniffing the building for commlinks. Several signals are quickly found — in the basement. At least ten different devices. Eight have been scanned before, leaving two new ones.

I really want to get a mark on those new commlinks.

Sadly, the range of Ollie's **magic-marker** is too short. He'll have to get into that basement.

Maybe, "The Shill"? That could work.

This is probably going to hurt.

* * *

A few queries in cyberspace and he finds a twenty-four hour kiosk just down the block. He carefully extracts himself from his blind and makes his way down the alley, away from the target building.

Safely out of view, Ollie heads to the kiosk. On his walk, he accesses the kiosk's cyberspace menu. He buys a crummy Sensie camera, a "disposable" **streamie** Scaffold, a memstick, and a couple new credsticks — all for immediate pickup.

Opening the kiosk's door he steps in to the, well, basically a large closet space. There is an auto teller behind an armored glass wall. Cameras abound. Sending his pickup key, the auto teller dispenses his purchases. Collecting his loot, he also arranges to have his scanner delivered to his office on campus. He then leaves the space.

He shuffles a few bits between the credsticks, layering in the digital grit that makes them look well-traveled. With bits: he's a mark; without: he's a trap. Ollie will let them take the bits, playing the role of the mark. He's not here for money, he's here for their boss.

As he leaves the kiosk, he inserts the decoy **streamie** into his stack.

Ollie makes his way back to the ruined building. He tasks his **search** with finding random Sensie streams that look like surveillance footage from this area. Using his real — evolved — **streamie**, he pumps the video through the camera onto the memstick. The **streamie** tweaks the Sensie streams' metadata, lighting, signage, etc. — even adding his image in for a few selfies. Setting the stage for Ollie's role as a streamer.

* * *

The building looms back out of the darkness before him. He slows his pace and takes care to be extra conspicuous as he approaches the building — pausing here and there for more, 'scenic' shots. Ollie makes sure to take lots of selfies, certain to get the building in the background.

Goofing around gets the attention of the toughs in the building. Three ne'er-do-wells detach from the shadows and stomp through the trash, approaching Ollie's latest picturesque vista.

"Hey, you!" calls out the lead smasher. "Whaddya think you're doin'?"

"Me?" replies Ollie, with his best innocent voice. "Oh, I, uh, am scouting a location for a Sensie shoot."

"Liar! You're tresspessin' an' I'm in the mood to beat a punk," the roidster slobber-says.

Tweedle-two and Tweedle-three have flanked Ollie. He cowers, with his hands up, "Oh, no, there's no need for that, fellas. I'll head out, no problem! Here, take my camera!" Making them aware of the imaging device, hoping to establish his identity as a streamer.

The thugs take his feigned weakness as an invitation. They grab Ollie and proceed to slap him around a bit. During the fracas, he takes care to protect his important parts — no need to get seriously injured at this point.

Once they've worked up a little sweat, Ollie is lying in a heap on a heap of trash. "Oh, hey, he's got that fancy camera. Why's he got that?" Two-of-three asks the other two.

"Dunno, but I bet da' boss wanna see dat," opines roidster.

Nodding in self satisfaction at their cleverness, they grab Ollie and proceed to haul him into the building. Ollie hangs as limp as possible, adding in a few moans for good measure. The interior leaves everything to be desired. It's actually a little shocking the structure is still standing.

They proceed down a staircase near the back entrance. The stairs open up into a large room with concrete floors, joists for a ceiling, and trash all around. The center of the room has been cleared of most of the junk. There are a few couches arranged around the cleared space.

It looks like Ollie is crashing a meeting. Frank and several other low level squad leaders are here, along with two new people. The man is lean with short hair and an open leather vest. The woman is standing behind him, to the side. Everyone else is comfortably sprawled on the couches.

As the parade of fools enters the room, the music cuts out, conversation dies, and everyone looks in their direction.

"Claw, what did I tell you about interrupting us?" asks the man with a sigh.

"I know boss, but dis fool was scannin' the place," slurs roidster, er Claw. Two- and three-of-three drop Ollie on the floor in front of everyone.

"I see. Well, what do we have here," the man — boss? — says, reaching for the kit the thugs took from Ollie.

"A camera? What, are you some sort of Sensie streamer?" asks the boss.

"No." *-slap-* "Yes! I was hoping to get some shots of the Crawlerz in action for my channel. You guys are the burn these days, and worth a mint to my audience," mumbles Ollie.

Now that he's close enough, he invokes **magic-marker**. The marks take without issue. Ollie just needs to get out of here without loosing any biology.

The boss has crab-claw tattoos on his neck, and wears the same sort of biker leathers as the rest of the gang. Ollie notices that he has a supremely expensive sidearm strapped to his hip. Taking a surreptitious glance around the room, he sees a lot of expensive hardware lying about. These guys are loaded for war.

"Crab, give him something to post about, hahaha!" cackles the woman behind the boss, Crab, apparently.

Shrugging, Crab approaches Ollie, hand out, palm up, signaling Ollie to give him, uh, something?

Not sure what he wants, Ollie pulls out all the sticks, placing them in the outstretched hand.

Crab hands the loot to the woman. She quickly pops the memstick into a nearby terminal. "It's footage from around the borough, the rest is some bits," she barks after a quick scan.

Looking back at Ollie, Crab gestures to his head and signals with his fingers for more loot. Sighing, Ollie reaches back and pops out the decoy **streamie**. He places the Scaffold in Crab's hand.

"This your **streamie**?" asks Crab.

"Yes," Ollie says dejectedly.

Crab drops it on the ground, stomping the Scaffold into dust. Well, it takes a couple of stomps, loosing some of the dramatic effect by taking one too many stomps.

"Don't come back here, you danger-junkie." Looking to the three stooges, "Get him out of here. You can rough him up a little more, but don't break him," Crab magnanimously proclaims.

The cackler cackles them out as the original three bottom-feeders grin, grab Ollie, and make off with their prize.

* * *

Waking later, in an alley on the outskirts of the Crawlerz' territory, Ollie takes stock. He's been unconscious for only thirty minutes. His street-fu came through again and he avoids a trip to the hospital. **Obscure** survived the beating, too — it's still active. They didn't even take his umbrella.

It's a little later than he'd like, but he's still got time to finish the night's work.

Ollie remotes into his 'deck. The **magic-marker** did it's job! *-fist-pump-* The **watcher** is pulling in lots of juicy data from the marks as they dutifully report on their quarry.

The marks won't last long — only a few hours more. Hopefully, the targets will do something interesting while they last.

Oliver stands to head back to the lab. He's got a lot of work to do before those marks fade.

But first, a stop at a kiosk to grab a medispray. His jaw is a little sore and he'd like to avoid the worst of the bruising.

Relentless

The robotic frame sits utterly still. The mind 'diving the frame is fully immersed in the massive flows of data coming from the lab's sensor array. Danica's **AI** Sprites are nearly overwhelmed, dumping so much data into their models. Models needed for understanding all the changes that are taking place.

The scanners record how the glyphs in the Scaffold are subtly shifting, changing, and evolving in real-time as the vitality flows into the structure.

Correcting our many mistakes, improving where we've been deficient in our designs.

In the data, Danica sees several new glyphs appear. Even in all the time she's been developing Sprite Scaffolds, she still hasn't seen everything the universe has to say.

There! I didn't know that glyph could be combined with those other two. Oh, the implications!

The Gaia seed has been absorbing vitality for a full month.

A month to charge a Scaffold! Utterly unheard of — with over a year still to go in charging the artifact!

Danica has been working on this project relentlessly for over three hundred years. When this most recent version of the Scaffold began absorbing vitality, it was one of the single most rewarding moments of Danica's many lives.

Also, one of the hardest. It forced her to reflect on all the sacrifices she's made in pursuit of Gaia. The decades of missed events while she was buried in scanner data and Sprite development suites. The lives of her hosts that she neglected in order to, "try just one more iteration."

The melancholy is swallowed remembering the moment when her friend felt the draw of vitality, the subtle static electricity in the air, the gentle, subtle pastel colors swirling within the enormous ostrich-egg shaped device.

Danica was happy to share the moment with her friend. They had been together for decades and shared a deep passion for the Gaia seed project.

Her friend died last week. Her coffee mug still rests on the lab bench — right were she left it. The coffee's cold.

Martha would always sit here in her silly white lab coat, humming some pop-song-or-other — badly out of tune. Remembering, Danni hums one to herself.

It's almost like she was just holding on until she got to see Gaia's beginning. I'm happy she got to see the first stirrings.

"We're so close, Danni!", she would say, every day. Then, "It's happening!", every day.

Her friend's funeral is tomorrow. Danica will take a little time to honor her passing.

Later, I'll mourn her properly.

She resists the urge to sorrow, but she is forced to when the emotions beset her.

Mostly, she studies what is happening with the massive device sitting on the scanners next to her.

With her host's passing, Danica has had to rely on her staff to keep the Gaia Scaffold charging — not to mention her own Scaffold's needs.

I need to find time to seek out a new host, too.

Eighteen months and Gaia will awaken. Just a moment in time, and, hopefully, I'll finally meet the mind I've been searching for.

Chapter 02

Crossing

The party has been raging for five days already. Janice has been having the time of her life. She's currently hiding in a private observation space above the main ballroom, taking a breather before plunging back in.

Her personal twinkle-drone swarm has settled around the space nearby, also taking the opportunity to recharge. Even settled, the tiny drones scuttle and twist with rapt attention to her every move. She giggles at their antics, her emotion causing a gentle ripple of light to flow across the swarm. They make her feel like a fairy princess sometimes.

The bass from the music below rumbles the deck plating even up here.

Looking up through the clear observation dome of their pleasure yacht, she can see Earth approaching, blue, white swirls — beautiful, mesmerizing. A much better view than what she can get back home among the clouds of Venus.

They did most of their braking further away from the planet — allowing them to orient the ship so that everyone could absorb the view during the final approach.

The planet is half-lit from the sun as they draw near. The dark side glows from all the lights of the cities. Even the clouds over them are backlit and luminous. The bright side with the white swirling clouds over the bright blue oceans is stunning. She can see the subtle movement of the clouds as she watches.

Gazing out the dome, her twinkles continue echoing her emotions in gentle swirling light patterns.

To the edge of the dome, she can see the sun, a tiny bright point against an expansive black backdrop. On the other edge of the dome, looms Luna up close. The barren landscape is covered in dome cities. On the sunny side, they just look like spots and lines. On the dark side, however, lacking atmospheric diffusion, they glimmer like bright clusters of stars.

Drawing her attention from the planet to the reason for the visit, she considers the groom. The man is older. Wealthy. Powerful. Powerful in a way that her father respects. But, what has drawn their attention is the Prophetess' pronouncement, "The man has a ghost. The ghost has a treasure. The treasure will exalt us. Retrieve the treasure, my loves. Elevate us above our rivals."

The pronouncement set the wedding in motion. Janice doesn't dislike the man. She's met him several times, briefly, and in the context of business — her father's business. Handsome and strong, she felt comfortable in his presence.

"Retrieve the treasure for us, Scion", said her father as she prepared to make the journey to Earth. He didn't use **compulsion**, either, showing he trusts her to fulfill this most important mission.

-eye-twitch-

I won't let them down.

She doesn't fear their union, neither does she seek it. The mission is her focus. The mission — and having fun with her friends.

`ship-net: direct voice`

Vex

"Bitch!"

"Get back to the party!"

"This is your bridal shower, after all!"

Lurk

"The Maid of Honor doesn't get to boss the bride around."

Vex

"Maid?!"

"Haaaahahahahahaha!"

Lurk

-eye-roll-

Vex

"Hahaha!"

-deep-breath-

"Hahahahaha—"

Lurk

"Fine! But, you're buying the next round!"

Vex

"Hahaha. Phew! Oh, that was a good one!"

"Right — 'cause your daddy didn't already buy all the booze."

-pout-

"Anyway — `Spine` is still drunk and probably gonna break something if you don't get your hot ass down here soon."

Lurk

-sigh-

"On my way!"

Her twinkle-drones tense in anticipation of her standing. She has recovered just enough for another run across the dance floor. So, Janice stands and makes her way back down to the festivities.

As she moves, the cloud of glowing synthetic insects rise gracefully into the air, Janice's control seemingly taking neither concentration nor effort. They form up in the air over her head, creating a pixelated display of an opening door as she moves in that direction.

She remembers her father's parting words, "You are our instrument, Scion. Our most beloved."

He's terrifying, but I still love him. The Prophetess, too, but father is still the best.

`Fang`, her Majordomo, quietly steps back from guarding the door to the space, allowing her to pass. He follows in the wake of her glowing swarm as they start forming huge glowing '!?' characters above Janice's head as she reenters the party.

Her friends are there, drinks in hand. She lets them take her away into the thundering bass and chaotic dancing out on the floor.

Echo-Shard

I arrive at the viewing ahead of schedule. Mother was greatly loved, and there are many people in attendance — even the ghost.

These mass gatherings are exhausting. Keeping so many masks up at once is tedious and trying.

My mother's passing has created a great many difficulties for me. She didn't leave me enough stock to fully control the board. She spent too much time at the labs with that ghost to be effective at running our business.

Mother's clan almost reveres that artifact Scaffold. The appeal escapes me. The ghost was deemed, "A Person" long ago, so there's little value in the device itself. The idea of having an actual person living in your head is off-putting.

After we burn her box, I head to the reading of her will. The only surprise there is that, in addition to everything else, I receive the ghost's Scaffold.

This must be mother's final attempt at 'fixing' me. She has always viewed my efficient and focused mind as a detriment. It's quite the opposite.

The ghost is surprised at this turn of events, too. Her robot frame shrugs at the announcement. Afterward, we plan a meeting to discuss the particulars.

Awkward.

* * *

I interact with the entity, but I find myself disinclined to trust a creature that cannot be killed. The ghost offers me her, 'Bond', which I accept. She asks me to share my memories, too, but I refuse. I also deny her access to my wetware. As if I would let anyone else in on my secrets — my dangerous secrets.

The ghost doesn't seem too concerned about my unwillingness to let her into my mind. She's preoccupied with her mysterious project; the same one my mother spent her old age pursuing.

The thought of what an ancient entity has spent so much time developing piques my interest. Just asking would expose my curiosity. Best to avoid scrutiny and discover it myself.

Curious.

* * *

Observing the ghost's old, worn down, overtly robotic frame, I decide on a ploy.

Long ago, my father had the Echo-Shard developed — he made great use of the little spy. Before he died, he gifted me the device. I keep the control Scaffold in my wetware at all times.

Once installed in a body, the Echo-Shard is extremely difficult to detect — especially to those unfamiliar with the device.

It is a tiny Spritetech robotic sliver; it is installed beneath the skin. From its repose, it simply listens. If it hears something interesting, it sends a surreptitious data burst back to its Scaffold — the very one residing in my stack.

I haven't had opportunity to use this artifact and I am curious as to its effectiveness.

I decide that I'll get the ghost a new gynoid body to replace the junk she usually inhabits to shamble about her lab. The Echo-Shard artifact will be placed in the new construct before I gift it to her.

Devious.

* * *

`minion` is a capable assistant. I can trust the gynoid acquisition to him.

`veilcomm: direct voice`

Veil, Michael *(ceo)*

"I need to arrange for a gynoid."

"Maximized Sensie; optimized for 'dive-drive."

minion

"Yes, sir."

"Any particular appearance?"

Veil, Michael *(ceo)*

"Appropriate to be seen with me."

minion

"Yes, sir."

Veil, Michael *(ceo)*

"Also, I'll need a maintenance and storage alcove installed in my penthouse to service the unit."

"I think the space just down the stairs from the great room will suffice."

minion

"Yes, sir."

The alcove is quickly installed without issue. Several days later, the gynoid itself is ready. The handlers remote the unit to my home.

Its beauty is other-worldly — as is appropriate for a woman that may be seen regularly in my presence.

`minion` has outdone himself once again.

I lead it down to the alcove, and it dutifully steps into its storage pod.

With the gynoid safely secured in its alcove, and the delivery 'diver gone from its system, I take time to find just the right place to install the Echo-Shard.

The tiny sliver slips quickly under the gynoid's skin just behind the left ear. Immediately fading, the entry wound is sealed over.

The gift is ready.

The ghost is oblivious to my activities. While her Scaffold resides in my stack, she is nearly always 'diving her clunky, old, robot body.

Anticipation.

* * *

When I present the gift, the ghost is very appreciative. She immediately disposes of the old junk, suspecting nothing about the new body. She is very happy with the upgrade.

I note that she is very trusting; I suppose this is her 'Ally' feature at work.

Foolish.

* * *

My efforts immediately bare fruit. I discover that her project is indeed very interesting. A world Sprite; something unique and powerful; something that must be mine.

The ghost has been distracted because the project is nearing fruition. I need to act soon.

Focus.

* * *

Between her trusting nature, and the Echo-Shard, I glean enough information from the ghost to formulate a plan.

A plan for someone to steal the project.

A plan for someone else to steal the project. After which I'll steal it from them, deflecting blame.

I'll need a patsy for the job.

I begin to make arrangements for acquiring the Scaffold for myself.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to ever greater power.

Crab Trap

Having made some progress on the job, and the hour getting late, Ollie makes his way back to the college building. On the trip he maintains **obscure** and alternates between autocab and walking. He also applies the medispray.

On this leg of the trip, Ollie listens to a Sensiecast: “The Conspiracy History Hour, with your host, Alex.”

`prison-planet: voicecast`

Alex

scream-speaks

"Tonight we have a special guest, folks. Professor Boris Petrov from New Minsk University."

Boris

speaks with a pleasant, barely-there Russian accent

"Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my findings about the origins of Spritetech, Sasha."

Alex

enthuse-yells

"You've uncovered that Grace Goodman, the original discoverer of Sprites and developer of the glyph language and contract system, didn't actually develop the glyphs herself. Instead, you claim that Sprites actually taught her the language?"

Boris

"Well, *taught* is too far, Sasha.

So, we recovered some of her audio journals. They range from the time just before the solar micronova until near her death, during reconstruction. They aren't a complete record, of course, but they've proven extremely useful."

"It seems that, in conjunction with her paranormal research, she observed nanoscale patterns in association with manifested Sprite effects. She tried including these shapes and patterns in repeated attempts of the original

effect and discovered that doing so trivialized the invocation effort!"

"This alleviated the need for the Sprite invoker to hold the entire arrangement in their mind all at once — an incredibly difficult proposition, for most. Instead, they could, with the Scaffold in hand, simply *intend* the contract activated. A Sprite would then fulfill the contract, enacting the effect and exacting the price."

"They eventually determined that the glyph formations were detailing, effectively, contracts with the Sprites!"

Alex

dismiss-queries

"I mean, we're all aware how Scaffolds work, Boris."

"But, what does this change in the origin story of the glyphs imply for us today?"

"Does this help us understand why the Scaffolds evolve over time?"

"Why has this been kept secret?"

"Is the government keeping this hidden?"

"Do the Sprites represent a nefarious extra-dimensional army, bent on invading our planet!?"

Alex

peddle-sells

"Now a note from our sponsor, 'Nanoman'! We have a special on our new nanonutritive-extra-colloidal eye drops!"

"This week only!"

*peddle-**suggests***

"Refresh your manliness, today!"

Ollie briefly considers buying some eye drops.

While he is aware of the **suggestion**, he could probably still use some refreshed manliness.

It does make more sense that Grace would have discovered *the glyphs. We've never been able to communicate directly with Sprites. So, how could she have worked out a language with them? That detail has always confused me.*

Man, I'd love to get my hands on those recordings!

The Sensie program finishes just as the last ride ends. Nearing campus as he walks, he discards the duster and fedora into a fire barrel.

* * *

Part of his job as a professor gives him access to a largely forgotten basement lab. He's been able to set up all the necessary equipment for a Deepdive environment — a Full-Immersion Virtual Reality interface.

The nature of cyberspace Sprites requires a FIVR interface to function. Additionally, action in cyberspace combat is so frenetic that every missed input is a weakness.

I need some upgrades. -sigh-

The "OG" FIVR consists of three main pieces — a Deepdive tank with rebreather, a Chillsuit, and a cyberdeck.

In the lab, Ollie has installed an antiquated Deepdive tank with rebreather, and an old Chillsuit. This setup is ostensibly for his students to be able to experience a 'dive with original equipment — he uses it for his freelance work.

The tank has been leaky for a long time, and there is a lingering smell of mildew in the room. Before it was the basement lab, some sort of heavy machinery was stored in the space, so there's a faint aroma of old oil in the air, too.

Chillsuits used to include sophisticated systems to apply haptic feedback to the operator's body. Modern versions have dispensed with that feature — wetware handles it better — but are still useful for temperature regulation.

The last needed piece of 'dive equipment is the cyberdeck — a personal compute platform for running Sprites in a synthetic Sensie environment. It is a tool for applying Sprite magic to digital information systems.

Previous-gen cyberdecks — like Ollie's — are external, and the size of a briefcase. Modern cyberdecks are implanted. This carries an additional burden of heat management. Current-spec wetware systems handle all the Sensie mapping.

Ollie keeps his cyberdeck hidden in the Deepdive lab. Just like his wetware, the cyberdeck is a relic. It was top-shelf mil-spec back when He was a mercenary. Keeping as current as possible, he takes great efforts to maintain his gear. Regardless, his evolved Scaffolds are really the only thing keeping him in the game.

Jacking into the 'deck with a fiber from his wrist, it takes just a moment for his wetware to calibrate. Settling into the lobby, he examines his avatar — a squid-headed wizard. Very on-brand for this online handle, `theWhistlingSquid`.

Ollie checks the **watcher** he's had running during his outing. Sure enough, the marks have provided several new profiles. They've spread out — giving up new locations and contacts, revealing more links in the pattern. After several hours, the marks have faded.

Ollie's **AI** compiles all the new data from the **watcher**. Working with the **AI**, he learns that the boss has a name — Horatio "the Crab" Sebastian.

Not sure where the "Crab" moniker came from, though.

-shrug-

Using the tags, Ollie reaches out across the Net and scans the Crab's commlink. There are several open ports!

-uh-oh-

This is surprising. It's either great news — or it's a trap. Ollie decides to 'dive the commlink and see what he can find. He disconnects from the 'deck to prepare.

Even though he's only planning to 'dive a commlink, Ollie does the full Deepdive prep. Thirty minutes are required to get the tank, 'suit, and his 'deck all set up. The smell of mildew and old oil are covered by the clouds of chlorine billowing off of the tepid municipal water in the tank.

As the tank fills, he dons the old Chillsuit. The suit not only manages temperature — this one still has the old haptic feedback system. Sadly, Ollie needs the feature, as his wetware doesn't have this capability.

The 'deck accompanies Ollie into the tank. His fresh scrapes and bruises protest against the chlorine. In addition to heat dispersion, the tank provides sensory isolation, keeping his senses focused in cyberspace.

Once he's settled into the tank, Ollie jacks into the 'deck once again. Checking that his 'runner Scaffolds are still in the 'deck's stack, he activates his "commlink 'dive" load-out.

The usual pre-dive jitters make their appearance. This is a familiar sensation and he welcomes the edge — even a simple commlink dive can turn deadly.

Chapter 03

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 7y18d

"Holy crap! I got accepted into MIT online!! Woot! GooooOOO, Me! Ha!"

"All that physics homework finally paid off!"

"Dad says it's quite an accomplishment to get accepted at sixteen! He's right, of course!"

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 7y15d

"Several strange men showed up over at the Observer campground today. They buried several shipping containers on the edge of the property. Everyone is being super weird about what all is going on. Ben seems to know, but he's indicating that he can't share the details."

"The dudes working on the equipment were all wearing the same black work clothes. No insignia anywhere. I'm a little freaked-out."

Enticement

I've inexplicably paid an unwelcome price for the void father's support. The woman is attractive, half my age, and her father is on the board of directors.

Irritating.

The day of the wedding arrives. The event is a taxing marathon of social engagement. My masks are tired.

The woman's wedding party arrives in orbit, aboard her family's touring yacht. Now that they are in orbit, the final preparations are made — the logistics for an appropriately grand event are immense.

The arcology rooftop gardens have been cleared entirely for the event. A receiving platform extends off the edge, joined by a long runway to the officiant's altar. Security lines both sides — white armor, white weapons held at attention. `minion` has thought carefully about the optics.

The guests are already gathered to either side. I stand at the end of the runway, next to the altar, in a proper wedding suit — black with white trim — the requisite costume.

The pleasure yacht descends from orbit directly toward the arcology. The squat craft's uppermost deck sports a large transparent observation dome which catches the white lights from below — creating a dazzling, sparkling effect. Deliberate, no doubt. Enhancing the dome's glow, a swarm of ad-drones make intricate patterns of movement and light around the craft as it descends. The woman has a flair for spectacle.

The cargo door opens. Her guests disembark and filter into the crowd. Then the music begins, and the woman appears.

She is, I will admit, a striking bride.

Her Majordomo escorts her down the runway in the void father's place. An interesting choice — or perhaps the only choice available to him.

The officiant offers his words. I half listen. When asked, I respond: "Yes." She responds in turn.

Loud music. Fireworks. The woman's drones again — a dizzying display.

"Come, my love," I **suggest**, "Leave these people here and come with me."

We make our way through the well-wishers and onto my yacht.

* * *

At least the excitable woman is manageable. She is very susceptible to my **suggestion**.

"Argh! Mike! I can't get this void-damned commlink app to install again!" *-pouting-* "Will you help me fix it, please?" drunk-slurs the woman.

-sigh-

I ask, "Why did you remove it after last time, love?"

"Barbara said she wasn't using it anymore, so I removed it. But, now, Sophie is saying that Barbie IS actually using it — to post scandalous Sensies!" *-pouty-eye-blinking-* "I have to see how her latest implants look."

I shake my head, "Fine." Invoking **suggestion**, "Give me admin access to your commlink."

The woman complies without hesitation.

While I investigate her app, she yammers, "So, what is it that beautiful woman — Danica? — does for you, anyway?"

The ghost?

"Oh, nothing special. She's a department head in a research subsidiary."

I find the correct version of the app and begin its install.

"Research? With those looks? Huh. So, where does she do the research?" the woman probes.

Where? Not, "Why do you spend so much time with that unearthly beauty?" Not, "Who is she to you, really?" No, instead it's, "Where?"

The woman is trying to be subtle, but it's obvious — she's asking after the ghost's project.

How does she know? This must be why the void father insisted we wed.

The app installs without issue.

"There, it's installed. I **suggest** you forget about the trouble with the app and go see Barbie's latest mods."

The woman nods enthusiastically and runs off to doom-scroll with her twinkle-drones in tow.

Pathetic.

* * *

Can I bend the woman's pestering to my advantage?

I know she also seeks the project. Well, her father does, through her. It's unclear how they came to know of it, but that doesn't matter.

With my access to both the ghost and the woman, I can play them against each other — bringing the project out onto the playing field.

I'll use the woman as the patsy. She'll steal the project away from the ghost, and, in the chaos, I'll steal it from the woman.

I'm in my working space that adjoins our bedroom. I've arranged the terminal glass so that it can be seen clearly from our shared area. The woman is there, hovering, trying to subtly sneak a peek at what I'm doing. She even has some of her drones positioned around my space — believing I don't know.

Fool.

veilcomm: direct message

MrKleen

Do I still have access to the ghost's research facility data?

it_guy

Yes. She hasn't cycled her keys, yet.

MrKleen

I need a filtered data mount on my terminal.
Title it, "Gaia Facility".
Filter the data for operational information — no actual project data, just schedules, personnel, layouts, and policies.

it_guy

Done. Perms?

MrKleen

Something that Janice can access, too.
It needs to look like I made a mistake, an accident here in my home.

it_guy

Done.

The mount appears in my workspace on the terminal glass. I can feel the tension in the next room rise as the woman's focus on the terminal intensifies.

I yawn. I stretch.

"I'm getting a drink. You want anything?" I ask as I stand up from the terminal, leaving the glass unlocked.

"No. I'm good, thanks," she answers in an uncharacteristically clipped voice. She's having to work so hard not to look at the glass.

Turning for the door, I bring up the terminal's camera in my HUD.

Walking down the hall, I can see the woman spring to my terminal, pull out a memstick, and immediately start a copy process.

I record the whole thing.

Predictable.

* * *

As she plots, I have an operational overview of the woman's plans. The Echo-Shard is still in place with the ghost, keeping me abreast of her developments, too.

The ghost will be dangerous to have around after the heist. I believe that with just a little pressure, I can convince her to seek a new host — we aren't close.

The woman's jealousy will serve well as the requisite spark. Sharing embellished details of my relationship with the ghost accomplishes my desire. The woman begins a campaign of outrage to force me to reject the ghost.

Perfect.

* * *

As the woman's planned operation approaches, I am pleased that she is brash enough to include herself in the raid. She is a capable drone tender, so on some level it makes sense.

Perhaps she'll die in the raid. Her death at her own hands would be poetic. Her stock would come to me as an inheritance; her father would be humiliated with her exposure.

Regardless, once she moves, I'll have all the evidence I need to demonstrate her involvement, keeping myself blameless.

I watch as she makes final preparations, taking note of where they intend to take the project once it is stolen.

The ghost will want to know.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to ever greater power.

Crab Dive

His perceptions leave the real and enter the virtual. All senses are replaced by a Sensie stream of the cyberdeck's comfortable VR lobby in cyberspace.

Before initiating the connection to Crab's commlink, Ollie engages several packet tumbler services he has access to. These allow him to prepare a special overlay routing network. This will direct the network traffic so that unsolicited packets from the commlink get stuck in loops and routed off-world. This helps protect him from mundane route tracing. For **trace-back** Sprites, he's got **obscure**.

Having prepared the field, Ollie initiates the connection to the Crab's commlink. His perception warps through cyberspace to focus on the commlink's lobby.

Most of the ports are closed — as they should be. But there are a couple that are wide open — seemingly willing to accept connections from anything.

-yikes-

He's able to see some encrypted packets streaming through the open ports. It's clear something is already using them.

He sends **probe** to investigate the open ports and to see what's on the other side. **Probe** reports a vulnerable process inside an open port. Ollie taps **spoof** to enter the port, and occupies the process.

He is in.

That was too easy.

Poking around, he checks whether he's in a virtualization trap. It doesn't take too long to determine that, nope, he's not. He's in, and the Crab is a careless fool.

Without overloading the device, Ollie begins to pull as much data out of the commlink as he can. Care is taken to ensure none of the data is transmitted directly back to his 'deck. The data is streamed instead to an anonymous online storage service.

Investigating further, he discovers the processes that are servicing the other open ports. Malware with remote viewing capabilities — admin access, too! *Someone is in here*. He can't see another 'runner, but one must

be near.

As the data is streaming out, Ollie takes a moment to install some of his own malware on the device. If he needs to 'dive this dude's commlink again, the door will be open.

With Ollie's attention on the data stream, he fails to notice a new presence in cyberspace.

On pure instinct Ollie throws up a **barrier** just as a **spike** impacts — the collision hits like a physical blow, sparks cascading across his peripheral vision.

Glancing around, he sees the other avatar.

Both 'runners size each other up.

A meme-of-the-day avatar! *-eye roll- Of course.*

Ollie **analyzes** the script-kiddie. The child is running more powerful hardware — not surprising. The avatar's presence glows with misspent compute, expensive and obvious.

`archie1337` throws another **spike** — faster than the first, the hardware disparity showing. Ollie's dodge is perfectly timed, the attack passing close enough for him to smell the ozone.

The **spike** misses clean, and Ollie is already draining the misspent charge with a **sapper**, recovered vitality burning his buffers.

He dumps it into a **data wall** between `archie1337` and the stream. It snaps into place solid, opaque, and humming.

`archie1337` bashes the **wall** with a comically large digital **hammer**. *Is that a Harley Quinn hammer?! Very on-brand.* The first blow rings through the space like a struck bell. The second leaves a visible crack. "You Dare!?" The soundbite floods local 'space, childish and clipping out.

The wall won't last. He needs to ditch `archie1337` fast. Ollie needs his **slasher**.

He dumps some active slots and starts the spin-up, feeling the vitality draw immediately. The Scaffold is in the 'deck, but it's not active.

I need a new 'deck.

`archie1337` hammers. The wall begins crumbling around the edges, digital dust obscuring the scene. "Don't you know who I am!?"

The malware install is still proceeding nicely. Yay, me.

The **slasher** comes online at the same moment the **wall** fails — dissolving into bright fragmenting bits — and the attack whips through the chaos, finding `archie1337` square in his meme-tastic face before he can process what just happened.

`archie1337` bursts apart in a shower of sparks and meme-gore, colorful bits fading from the 'space. His 'deck crashes hard somewhere out in the real.

Silence.

Well, heavy breathing, but otherwise, Silence.

That guy's gonna be unconscious for a while and then wake with a migraine.

With a crashed 'deck, `archie1337` won't have much data to analyze — keeping Ollie's identity secure. He may not even have a clear memory of what happened. **Slasher** is a brutal attack, but it takes a ton of compute to activate — not to mention vitality.

Ollie double checks that he's alone in the commlink.

Convinced he's secure for now, he takes a moment to recover, cashing in a couple `Re:Coin` bits in exchange for a little vitality.

Resting, he muses, *It seems odd that cyberspace combat can take place almost anywhere — even in someone else's commlink. All that is required is a digital connection and overlapping presence in cyberspace. It's kinda like astral combat from fantasy stories — mental combat in a mental construct. We're just using the network links to find each other in the astral realm.*

Continuing, *I'm always amazed that, though the battles are fierce, draining, and sometimes deadly, if the same psychic effects were performed in the real, they would hardly amount to sparks and wisps of smoke*.

Soon the trickle hits him. *Ah, that's the stuff.*

Finally catching his breath, he recovers from his reverie. The foreign malware was wrecked in the fight, and all the other ports are now closed. Thankfully, the data stream survived the ruckus.

His malware finishes installing, and all the juicy data is copied. Ollie leaves everything intact. He's not here to destroy the data, just copy it for later analysis. Destroying the data would alert the owner to the hack.

The Crab won't even know we were here, much less that we had a cyberspace battle in his head.

The ’dive ends, his perception leaving the commlink and warping back to his cyberdeck.

Ollie has hopefully collected enough actionable intel to make an impact.

He’s exhausted. His aging body tires quickly.

I just hope I can publish this intel before the gang can hurt anybody else!

Chapter 04

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 7y12d

"Scary times, fam. Things in this country have well and truly hit the fan. This election season has been completely bonkers. A few months ago, both national parties splintered into separate regional parties. Today all that insanity came to a head. Three parts of the country declared independence, including ours. Looks like more will follow."

"We're pretty well situated here on the homestead. Dad's always been preparing us for this sort of thing. It's just bizarre to see some of the worst come to pass."

"Looks like we're now living in the Democratic Republic of Colorado. Basically the eastern front of the Rockies from Denver down into New Mexico. We've got NORAD, Space Command, and swarms of contracting companies still in our, uh, new country, I guess."

"Seems like most of the commanders in those military bases are going along with the split."

"I'm anxious about how things are going to turn out. I hope I can keep going to school at MIT. I doubt I'll be getting drafted, or anything. My brothers are still too young, unless a fight breaks out and lasts more than a couple of years."

Phone Home

Perception settling into the cyberspace lobby she and her father share, she looks about the space. The black and red Gothic decor remind her of home. Writhing, shadowy tentacles flicker at the edges of her vision; ethereal whispers speak gibberish to her mind; ghostly fingers scrape gently across her brain; sensations no mere simulation can offer.

This is her father's 'space. All his places are like this to some degree. While familiar and comfortable for her, the weirdness is still something she hasn't come to grips with.

Spending too much time in these places is disorienting. Janice believes that is intentional — to put others on the back foot before interaction.

*That probably makes his **compulsion** more effective, too.*

While waiting, her mind comes back to why she's here. She fidgets with barely contained mania. *That hapless idiot has finally slipped up! My task is nearly complete!*

Eventually, her father's avatar materializes in the lobby.

Even here he wears his mask. Janice knows she's seen his bare face, but can't remember the circumstances.

I've only known the mask for most of my life.

`tac-net: cyberspace lobby`

Void Father

"Scion. Report."

Lurk

"Yes, my lord."

"My fool of a husband has exposed the spirit's treasure."

"I know where she keeps it; I know how to acquire it."

Void Father

speaks with a susurrous writhing voice

"Show me."

*I can still feel the **compulsion**, even through this connection — even above the whispers.*

She uploads the data — only trusting this space for the transmission.

Her father's twitching form is still for a moment — considering the information.

Void Father

whispers

"At last."

"The prophecy begins to take form in the real."

Void Father

louder

"I agree."

"You are to proceed."

"Only trust our elites and deliver this treasure into our hands."

"Bring the world seed to the temple complex on Venus."

"We will complete our preparations there."

Lurk

eye-twitch

"It will be so, my lord."

Void Father

"You are our instrument, Scion. Your progress — while expected — is commendable."

Void Father turns and fades, leaving the lobby

END OF LINE

She gleefully pumps her hand in the air. *Yes! My mission is going to be a success! The Avatar will be summoned, and I will be rewarded! I'll be done with this stupid assignment. I'll be done with that pathetic man. I'll be done with that spirit in his head!*

Crab Bake

Mental focus back in his 'deck, Ollie begins pulling down the purloined data. As it streams down, he decrypts the data and feeds it through his **AI** Sprites — basically a symbiotic pair of **search** and **analysis** Sprites that team up to make masses of data grokkable. It should only take a few minutes.

Since he had full access to the commlink, he was able to snag most of the encryption keys for the data on-device, making it fully accessible. He'd even been able to swipe the hardware keys from the device's firmware.

The Sprites finish their work. They find several crypto wallet keys which will let him swipe their bits, including the bits they took from him earlier.

There is a gang member roster — complete with blackmail on each of them. The videos and stills on the device detail the equipment to which the gang has access — also the location of their warehouse.

The blackmail data is very thorough and professionally packaged. Suspiciously well crafted for someone of the Crab's seemingly limited abilities. Ollie begins to suspect that `archie1337` may have been working for the gang's backer rather than being their adversary. *Maybe he was playing sysop rather than 'runner?*

Someone is controlling the gang from the shadows.

The swiped ledgers detail cash flows and assets. Again, too well-done to be the gangbanger's work. Financials show the gang has a sizable cash reserve. They're also well equipped.

Another juicy bit — the Crawlerz have been focusing their physically destructive felonies in just a two-block area, while they claim a much wider area.

Why the limit? Why there?

Ollie sets his **AI** to work crawling public property records. In a while, he sees that there was a failed attempt to buy most of the real estate in that exact area. Derrik & Smathers — a smallish local corporation. They own manufacturing facilities immediately adjacent to the troubled area.

The **AI** further finds from public crime reports that members of the Crawlerz started a ruckus in the same area just two weeks after the failed buyout. This correlates with the data on the Crab's commlink about a focused campaign of destruction, corroborating the evidence.

Looks like D&S may be softening up the area for a second acquisition attempt. This info is worth some cash; maybe to the current property owners; maybe to D&S' competitors; maybe to D&S itself to keep the shenanigans on the down-low.

Ollie has stumbled into an unexpected payday.

To forestall more action by the gang, and as payback, Ollie snags the bits from the all the crypto wallets.

Next, the lifted data is sanitized and prepared as a packet. A highlights reel is sent to several data brokers — ones Ollie has worked with in the past. A link to the packet and it's decryption key are placed in a block-chain escrow contract. As part of any deal made with the data, more bits will flow to Ollie.

These kinds of deals resolve quickly. There's plenty of actionable intel in the packet. Ollie is insulated from reprisals and the gang will be weakened.

That work finished, Ollie next has his **AI** correlate public crime reports and insurance claims against the looted data, looking for identifiable victims. The reacquired bits are anonymously distributed to those he can find. A share of the bits also goes to local charities — for the remaining victims. The payout from the fixer will be more than he needs. Ollie wants the victims to be made as whole as possible.

Three birds, one stone. The local gang gets wrecked, those suffering at their hands get a little payback, and he gets a nice payday.

That's how Ollie rolls.

Well, when he can.

Sometimes.

Who am I kidding? It never goes down this well.

This is the secret work that keeps Ollie funded and well-practiced — even in his self-enforced retirement.

Heading to bed, Ollie sleeps fitfully. He's done what he can, but the Crawlerz haven't been stopped. He's not gonna rest well till this is resolved.

Chapter 05

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 7y3d

"The USA has broken up into eleven smaller countries. Looks like that's the end of the breakups for now."

"The bad news - the breakup just went full kinetic. Leading up to the fighting, there's been lots happening with riots, looting, politicians pointing fingers, scandals breaking left-and-right. Mass hysteria!"

"Today, the first shots were fired in what the news is calling, 'The 2nd American Civil War'."

"I've been crying a lot since this all went down."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 6y323d

"Man, the whole world is going crazy right now."

"The fighting here is ongoing. The battlefronts have generally stabilized."

"With the US military splintered and us all fighting each other, the rest of the world has decided to have a throw-down, too."

"It's difficult to get most things from the store. We have plenty of stored food. Electricity has been spotty, but generally the lights are still on."

"I'm grateful that no one has been stupid enough to use nukes."

Breakup

Danica has been a quiet witness to a days-long row.

It's exhausting just being aware that this is happening, much less hearing some of it — even 'diving my gynoid, the contention still bleeds through.

"I want that THING out of your head! NOW!", screams Janice as she throws her tumbler across the room.

Wow. She's such a shrew.

"Sweetheart! You know I can't just ditch Danica! She's a family heirloom; and, more importantly, she's a person, for void's sake!", replies an exasperated Michael, as he barely ducks the flying glassware.

"Either IT GOES, or I DO!," shrieks Janice, spittle flying, "And you know I'll ruin you when I do. My father's still on the board, and he'll side with me. You know it's true, you FREAK!"

It!?

Mike sighs in defeat — sitting and slowly resting his head in his hands. The fight has been ongoing for days; this shouting match has lasted an hour. He's tired.

"Fine", he mutters, "Fine. I'll work something out with Danica. I won't just abandon her, though. She's been with my family for centuries. Literally."

He's always been weak-willed. It still baffles me that he's the CEO.

Janice saunters up to Mike, with a drunken sway and vicious smirk. "Good. You've got till tomorrow to 'work something out'," she hisses with finger quotes. "If I get even a HINT that it's still around, you're done!"

* * *

Here we go again. I probably should've been more proactive in either ingratiating myself with Janice, or finding a more appropriate host for myself.

-sigh-

Over the years, her host-bond has been a sore spot in many of her hosts' personal lives. Being the world's singular sapient Sprite has its downsides, for sure. Not the least of which is being eternally tied to someone else just

to be alive.

It is a strange relationship — well, for humans. I've known nothing else.

The one bright spot from this is my new body. What a difference it's made. I didn't think I'd care much about it, but I do. It's surprising how nice it is to be so independent, and feel so beautiful — I've never really experienced that before. Well, outside of my hosts' shared memories.

This has been a short bond. Just a little over a year. I really should've at least started updating my potential-host data models when Mike's mother died.

I can't blame anyone else for that, though.

At least, over the years, I've been able to build a nice little financial empire. Having my own money makes situations like this much less threatening.

Now the decision has been forced upon me. I've done this all before.

Going to Work

Oliver wakes up early — per usual. Being over fifty has curious consequences. Even though he's awake, he's still tired from last night's adventure — still anxious about the gang.

Oh, and his back is aching. Again. *Perfect*. Those beatings didn't do him any favors.

Maybe I should install a massaging water jet feature in the Divetank.

As he climbs out of bed, he checks his messages. Turns out the data sold already. He's got a decent payout in his wallet.

There's a note from `Brawn-X`, the broker responsible.

`netcast: direct message`

Brawn-X

Well done on this one.
The client was ecstatic with what you delivered.
There's a little bonus included.

Nice.

Ollie has been working with `Brawn-X` for many years. They've never met in the real. It hasn't been necessary.

When he fled the shadows all those years ago, Ollie forged a new persona. He's been careful to do good work, but he's only done it solo.

He can't bring himself to consider running with a team again. Not after that last time.

Ollie doesn't dwell on that run. Even so, his grief does overwhelm him sometimes. Times like now; the memories surface again; they demand his attention.

His team had finished the job. As they returned for an after action meet up, they were waylaid. Betrayed by their client.

Ollie was able to extract himself. The rest of the team was mowed down. Someone was running interference with his family's comms — his wife and kids were caught unaware. By the time he got near his home, the emergency response crews were already onsite.

Arriving outside his swanky apartment building he could see the smoke of the still-burning fire wafting into the sky from a shattered window.

Ollie took a moment to 'dive the security system in his home. The fire was incidental and minor. The fire didn't do the work. His automated defenses had engaged the watchers — there looking for him. The watching was over, and they moved on his home.

The hitters left the security system intact and online — like they wanted to make sure he could get a good look at their handiwork. He got a good look. His wife. His children. *They're all gone.*

I did this. I chose this life and dragged them in with me. They paid the price in my place.

He can still taste the acrid smoke billowing off the fires of his ruined life; still hear the sirens in the distance; still see the still forms of his loves.

Ollie honors their memory by holding it for a moment.

Having seen the destruction, Ollie went to ground. He was able to flee with some of his gear, and a modest pile of bits. Since then, he's been careful to lay low.

Recovering from his reverie, wiping the tears, Ollie moves all the new money over to his investment wallet. With his careful, frugal living, his nest-egg has grown nicely over the last thirty years.

Thirty. Years. How has it been that long? I've been able to build a quiet life for myself. Teaching the kids and watching their skills grow; standing in the park, collecting other weirdos from the borough; fighting back against the chaos in the slums. All quiet — all careful — all alone.

Ollie gets dressed for his morning routine. Checking his face in the mirror, he decides he still needs a little more medispray — the bruises are still visible.

Before heading out, Ollie takes a few minutes and **searches** for the records that Boris mentioned on Alex's show last night. Finding them, he queues them up for playback and begins listening.

Heading out onto the dirty streets, he finds walking-with-a-purpose to be powerful medicine for his aging body. As he finishes his walk, he heads to the park near his apartment.

"Park" is being generous — better, "An abandoned lot nearby that also happens to have a tree". Ollie stands near the tree and practices Zhan Zhuang, "Standing Like a Tree", or standing meditation. At first, he thought it was silly. But, after trying it a few times, he became a convert.

Standing still as a statue in the park used to draw curious looks. He's been doing it for years, and there are several other people that join him now.

Finishing his last pose, Ollie heads back to his apartment. He changes into his work clothes — 'business casual'. The day job requires certain sacrifices, and self respect is one of them. His face is finally presentable, the bruising having largely cleared up.

Grabbing a meal pack, he heads to the metro stop down the street. One way to avoid discovery is by not owning anything the "*authorities*" can track; real estate, vehicles, expensive modern cybernetics, pets.

At least crypto tracking is out of their reach. After the catastrophe, the first crypto that the survivors launched included many essential anonymity features, even escrow contracts. These are features that everyone relies on to this day. Those early survivors were, thankfully, a suspicious people.

Anarcho-capitalists of the world, unite!

While megacorps and national governments try to foist their fiat on everyone, `Re:Coin` is still king.

Boarding the lift at the bus stop, it gently rises into the air. The EKTs are well tuned today, so the noise is manageable. The people-barge makes a couple more stops before heading to the business sector. Since he went into hiding, Ollie's day job has been here, at the local technical community college.

He was able to land a job teaching cybersecurity and programming within days of arriving in the area. His role has expanded over the years. Some Spritetech History and Modern Scaffold Engineering now appear on his teaching class schedule.

Grace's audio journals finish playing just as he disembarks the airbus. Lost in thought, Ollie makes his way into the campus building. His students have an important exam to do over the next three days, and he wants to make sure they're prepared.

Chapter 06

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | T-minus 6y307d

"The kit being thrown around by the different sides in this war has been straight out of science fiction."

"During all the fighting, some new technologies have come to light. Three in particular. The claim is that the former US developed them all in secret."

"These technologies are, 'Nanofabrication', 'Dense Plasma Focus Fusion', and 'Electrokinetic Thrusters'."

"Nanofabrication — well, they, uh, figured out how to 3d print graphene with molecule-scale features. It's fast enough for industrial use, too. Weirdly, it requires microgravity. So, space-based manufacturing for the fancy new materials."

"Next is fusion power. The dense plasma focus fusion process has been known forever. It's just that they've struggled with the materials in the core. Nanofabrication seems to have resolved that issue. Additionally, with the nanocapacitors they can now make, the DPF cores are extremely efficient. Like, fridge-powers-a-city efficient. They're super-safe to operate, too!"

"And the last thing we've found out about are what they're calling, 'Electrokinetic Thrusters'. This one fell out of DPF research with the new materials. By rapidly moving electrons around certain physical geometries built of nanofabricated materials, kinetic energy is imparted to the structure. The rod and the torus, what noble shapes they are!"

"The claim is that they've only recently made the EKTs viable, but the others have been around for quite a while."

"Earlier, I mentioned the scifi gear. I mean, like, we've seen squads of soldiers wearing what can only be described as power armor — honest to goodness Ironman suits!"

"I've seen some drones using EKTs instead of rotors. They're weird sounding. More like little horns or trumpets than the buzzing rotors of the old quadcopter style."

"I can't believe . . . well, I guess I can . . . but . . . I just wish they wouldn't have kept these things secret for so long."

Arrangements

Danica bides her time till later in the evening. Mike is usually surly immediately after a shouting match with Janice.

Once it is sufficiently dark outside, and Mike is well into his drinks, Danica decides to begin making new arrangements.

veilcomm: direct voice

Danni

"Well. I guess I need to start looking for a new host?"

Mike

"I guess so."

"Do you have any leads?"

Danni

"No. Not yet."

"I'll start the search."

"Shouldn't take too long."

"Grace's clan is always a good starting point."

. . .

Danni

"You know, I wish you hadn't told her *everything* about me."

Mike

"I know. I just wanted her to trust me."

"Sorry about all this."

Danni

"Alright, well, will you please top me off and then put me into my body?"

"I need to get things rolling."

Mike

"Yeah, sure."

"Gimme a sec."

Mike sets down his drink, stands up, and leaves the penthouse living room, heading down the stairs to Danica's alcove. Shoulders slumped, he moves slowly.

At least my Ally *feature makes these situations safer for me. Mike can be confident I won't willingly betray his trust. That's probably a big part of why people are even willing to bond with me, to be honest.*

Keeping all my stuff separate from my hosts was a difficult lesson to learn. It serves me well now, though.

Such a weakling. I really should've made the effort to find a new host right after his mother died. I'm still not sure why she willed me to Mike. It's not like they actually own me.

They approach the stairs.

I've never been a fan of Janice, either. She really is chaotic. I'm actually glad this has finally come to a head. I was going to start looking for a new host soon, anyway.

While Mike makes his way to the lab, Danica wirelessly reaches out to her synthetic body, to make sure it is charged and ready to receive her.

The stairs down to the alcove are covered with a fine soft carpet. His steps remain slow and quiet. The grand windows along the outer walls show the sprawling city extending out below them in every direction.

At night the city lights are bright and the colors are vibrant. The flying vehicles in their skylanes look like lines of glowing ants. Even the stupid giant holograms down below are beautiful from up above.

Having pinged Mike's wetware for access, the secure alcove door slides open at his approach. There's a subtle hiss as the air pressure equalizes. The lights within spring to life, filling the small space with gentle ambient light.

Danica's gynoid body is powered up and it's Scaffold receptacle is open, ready to receive her sole anchor to the real.

Approaching the body, which is clad in a jumpsuit and reposing in its storage pod, Mike wheels over a chair and takes a seat.

Mike

"Ok, Danni. How long do you think you'll need to get topped up?"

Danni

considers her Scaffold charge level

"Probably no more than ten minutes."
"I'll give you a little progress bar, how's that?"

Mike

"Perfect."

They settle into a companionable silence while Danica's Scaffold begins gently siphoning vitality from Mike's body. Thankfully, her Scaffold was constructed as a 'charge capable, always on' device. As long as it's internal 'vitality battery' is charged, Danica's connection to the real will endure. Grace, her original host and the creator of her Scaffold, had wanted Danica to be as independent as possible.

After a short time, the Scaffold is fully charged. Danica gives Mike a little chime, startling him from the video he's watching.

"Oh! Sorry, got distracted.", he mumbles, recovering.

Mike

"I'm always amazed how little juice you need."
"Ready?"

Danni

"Ready."

Mike reaches toward the Scaffold socket at the base of his skull to extract Danica's fingernail-sized, disk-shaped Scaffold chip from his wetware.

Oh, I hate this so much.

All of Danica's senses cut out. She is left alone with only her thoughts. Adrift in the void. Completely vulnerable. Timelessness envelopes her. These moments always feel like both an instant and an eternity.

An instant eternity later, Danica exists again.

-shudder-

That is just the worst.

The gynoid body is extremely well made. It makes her feel marvelous.

From now on, I'll be sure to invest in only the best components for myself. It's not like I don't have access — I just never knew what I was missing!

While Danica prefers to keep her Scaffold with her host, it has been nice to walk around in style.

Danni

"This frame is amazing."

"You're sure I can keep it?"

"I know it was a gift, but our bond has been so short . . . ?"

Mike

"Of course."

"It's the least I can do for ruining things."

While the body's wetware finishes integrating her Scaffold, Danica spins up her **framework** and **AI** Sprites from the onboard cyberdeck. These particular Sprites, like her, are exceedingly old and have grown equally powerful. She puts the **framework** to work running the gynoid body. She sets the others to work updating her database of Grace Goodman's descendants, starting the search for a new host.

Her bond works with any willing human — singly. When she's able, she's picky about her host. She's been abducted several times, and straight-up sold once!

Her greatest successes are with hosts from among Grace's decedents. Within the Goodman clan, Danica is a legend and considered a priceless heirloom of sorts. Many of the clan have benefited greatly from their long association. They're generally very discrete, too.

-sigh-

Except Mike, apparently. At least it's been a short bond. I still miss his mom, though. All the time.

Danica opens her eyes, and sits up. Looking at Mike, she says, "Alright, everything's in order here. I'll arrange to have what few things I have here moved to my place. Probably tomorrow, if that works?"

"Yeah, that works. Sorry, again, Danni. I know this is a pain.", mopes Mike.

"Well, *-shrug-* It's your loss. Take care," replies Danica as she waves Mike away. "I'm gonna change and then head downtown."

Mike nods, turns, and trudges back up the stairs.

With Mike's departure, Danica feels the ethereal tether between them sever. She's alone in the world once again.

Now I really need to get busy finding a host.

While changing, Danica arranges a ride to her nearby research facility.

Emerging onto the roof, she sees her ride is waiting. She boards the shiny, black, and heavily armored *Recee Skystreak*.

As the 'streak lifts off, her thoughts are interrupted by an emergency alert blaring into her HUD.

It's from the nearby facility. She looks toward the building.

In the distance: small explosions — drones flying everywhere.

A spatial panel pops open.

```
ALERT *** ALERT *** ALERT *** ALERT

SECURITY BREACH AT FACILITY F077

HOSTILE TEAM EXTRACTING FROM PREMISES
HOSTILE BELIEVED IN POSSESSION OF:
* GAIA-001 SCAFFOLD
* CACHE DATA CORE

ALPHA ONSITE — RESPONDING
DELTA SCRAMBLED FOR INTERCEPT
```

-groan-
If it's not one thing, it's another.

The Swarm

Janice leaves the penthouse, giddy with the outcome. She'd finally gotten Mike to agree to kick that spirit out of his head. Even though Janice doesn't particularly care for Mike, the mere fact that he had another woman living in his head was just not acceptable!

Even better, she got him to cave just in time. The raiding party is already in position, waiting for her arrival.

Once the operation is complete, she'll be heading with the treasure to the temple on Venus. With their relationship, 'on the rocks', she'll have perfect cover for an extended vacation!

Janice arrives on the roof where her ride awaits. The sleek luxury vehicle slides into the late afternoon sky. Passing quickly through the city skyline, they take a roundabout way to the staging area — the top level of a covered parking structure.

During the brief trip, she changes into her Chillsuit — she won't be 'diving the Net, but her **swarm** Sprite generates significant heat, all on its own.

Father's gift to me all those years ago.

Stepping out of her ride, she makes her way over to the command vehicle. Her ride lifts off, heading to her home — the beginnings of an alibi.

Janice settles into the drone tender couch, almost cackling to herself. She jacks into the vehicle's powered external comm array — specifically added to support her drone swarms.

She initiates a `Re:Coin` bits-for-vitality stream at the maximum rate. While only a trickle, and costly at that, it will help her sustain all the Sprite effects she's about to invoke. Excess vitality is lost, but having the feed live before the op is prudent.

Settling in and focusing in on her drones, a calm enters her mind — the only peace she really knows is in the swarm.

Janice enters their tac-net and joins the audio channels.

`tac-net: team voice`

`Lurk` has joined the tac-net.

Fang

"`Lurk` has arrived."
"Team leads, sound off by the numbers."

Silt

"Assault squad all present."

Tent

"Assault squad ready. Cattle gate up and ready for the shift change."

Deepnet

"Hackers already prepping the target."

Lurk

-eye twitch-

"Drone support online."

Fang

"Excellent."
"Shift change begins in T-minus two minutes."
"`Tent` you're go to begin the roundup."

Tent

"Roger, `Fang`, two minutes."

`Lurk` disburses a swarm of tiny spy drones, directing them as they infiltrate the facility.

Lurk

-go, my pretties!-

"Eyes are online and infiltrating the target."

Video of the facility floods into Lurk's feeds. She shares the most interesting streams with Fang.

Two minutes count down in tense silence.

. . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 0

Fang

"Mark shift change. You should start seeing people now, Tent."

Tent

"Roger Fang, we've started corralling the subjects."

"Several are already sedated in the carrier."

Lurk

"Eyes are set."

Fang

"Silt, begin your assault.

"Deepnet, guide them on the cleared path via the tac-net."

Silt

"Roger."

Deepnet

"Roger."

As Silt enters the empty loading docks, Lurk begins coordinating the four-strong set of biped combat frames accompanying the squad. They'll take the brunt of the punishment should a firefight break out on Silt's run.

Entering the building from the docks, Silt makes steady progress toward the Scaffold vault; their path cleared by Deepnet, with the help of the video feeds from the infiltration drones.

A few tense minutes of maneuvering and they arrive at the vault door.

Silt

"At the vault."

Deepnet

"Roger, `Silt`."

"Hold a moment, we just about have the keys."

Several seconds pass and then the door seal releases. The massive door slowly swings open. `Silt` moves into the room, the combat frames take up covering positions outside.

Just as `Silt`-prime grabs the Scaffold, stuffing it into a case, the opposite door to the vault opens, revealing several surprised researchers.

Several muffled gunshots, and the researchers lie on the floor, blood pooling. As soon as the first expires, alarms sound in the facility.

Silt

"Burn! They've got dead-man triggers!"

"We've got the egg, heading for the data core!"

Onsite security springs to life.

Fang

"Roger, `Silt`. Proceed as planned — make it bloody."

Lurk

"Combat frames covering `Silt`'s movement."

The biped frames provide cover fire and rear guard for `Silt` on the run. `Tent` comes under fire at the loading docks.

Tent

"Contact! Contact! Collection job finished, engaging."

`Tent` starts killing everyone around them, indiscriminately; guards, researchers, the janitor — everyone not already sedated and in the carrier vehicle.

Silt
"Charges going out."

`Silt` launches concussion grenades down every corridor they approach.

`Deepnet` continues guiding `Silt` to the data core. When they arrive, the cage containing their second target pops open.

Silt
"Core secured. Extracting."

The combat frames continue to protect `Silt` en route.

Tent
"Docks clear, we're loaded up and heading out."

Lurk
"Two birds covering `Tent`."

As `Tent`'s ground vehicle roars out of the facility loading dock, `Lurk` covers them with several aerial drones.

When they finally arrive on the roof, the combat frames continue to cover `Silt` as they board their tactical aircar — remaining behind to ensure the team lifts off successfully. As they lift off, `Lurk` surrounds the vehicle with an aerial drone swarm.

With `Silt` in the sky, the combat frames kamikaze into the defense forces, self-destructing in a powerful plasma blast.

Lurk
"Combat frames kamikazed."

Just as `Silt` lifts off, nearby, another aircar launches to give chase.

Silt
"Airborne pursuit."
Lurk
"Air frames providing rear guard and delaying actions."

The security forces focus on `Silt`.
`Tent` gets away without chase.

Deepnet
"We still have their external comms on lockdown."
"They're not receiving a real-time feed from offsite."

Fleeing the scene, `Silt` continues launching ordnance without care, working to create as much havoc as possible.

`Lurk`'s drones rear guard for the fleeing aircar — intercepting missiles and drones, absorbing bullets. They also engage in delaying actions, forcing the pursuers to either detour or die. Quickly, her drones inflict significant damage on the pursuing vehicle, forcing it to abandon the chase.

During the chase, `Lurk` has observed another vehicle loitering in the area, screening for the pursuit vehicle. She sends her drones after the eye-in-the-sky — they flee.

Lurk

"No pursuit discernable."

Fang

"Alright, hot-phase is done."
"You all know your jobs."
"Closing the tac-net."

END OF LINE

With the treasure secured, and pursuit ended, `Lurk` detonates all the remaining drones. Each erupts into a small plasma fireball, destroying all evidence.

With this phase of the operation complete, Janice detaches from the drone array. She's beyond exhausted, having spent so much vitality in so short a time.

As the `Re:Coin` boost tops off her vitality, she deactivates the feed. The final tally is well worth the support during the op.

It's taken more than an hour to run the raid, and night has already fallen. "Ma'am, your work is always a wonder to behold," says `Fang`. "But, we've gotta get going," he adds, offering his hand to help her dismount the command vehicle.

Pausing a moment, catching her breath, Janice then slips out of the drone tender couch, accepts the hand, and steps down. She makes her way to the waiting ground car: unremarkable, plain, forgettable.

Drones gone, the icy calm cracks, and a quiet giggle escapes her grinning face.

She changes in the back of the car as it travels to the nearby shopping district. Her aircar is waiting there to take her home after she makes an appearance — completing the flimsy alibi.

Chapter 07

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 6y273d

"So, those new technologies are being used to kill a lot of people. Everything is just so much more destructive."

"They've started using fusion cores and EKTs to make single stage spacecraft. In addition to killing each other, they're using them like space trucks. The take carbon feedstock and fusion fuel up to the nanofabricators and haul down all the new materials."

"The computers we're seeing are so much more powerful than before. The nanofabricated microprocessors have molecular-scale components! Its like, a huge leap in power efficiency, compute power, and storage density."

"On a positive note, I'm at least glad that I'm still able to do school remotely at MIT. I'm learning so very much!"

Burgled

Swallowing her panic, Danica reaches out to her security team.

`netcast: direct voice`

Danica

"I'm approaching the facility in my 'streak."
"Add us to the tac-net."

leviathanOps

"Roger, honcho."
"Initiating sync."

`tac-net: direct voice`

Danica's seat straps cinch down.

leviathanOps

"Sync complete."
"Hold on it's gonna get rough."

The 'streak's EKTs blare to life.

leviathanOps

"You'll be screening Alpha team."
"Municipal security attaché advised of the situation."
"They're standing down."
"Alpha team has control of the air space."

Danica watches the tactical AR overlay that `leviathanOps` shares. She's just an observer here, having contracted the best security team available to protect her precious project.

The same precious project that is currently fleeing the scene with *someone else's contractors*!

We have *to get it back! This is my life's work!*

The hostile aircar blurs through the skyline, just below the tops of the buildings. Danica's 'streak and the Alpha team striker pursue, weaving between the city's skyscrapers and megastructures.

At the first clear shot, Alpha team opens fire and their few attack drones move in on the target.

As Alpha's drones close, the enemy's drones rearguard — they kamikaze into Alpha's, sacrificing themselves for their team. Other of the enemy drones begin delaying actions against Alpha — attempting to divert them from pursuing.

Watching the action, Danica's anxiety only increases.

Oh, no! They are getting away! There are just so many drones protecting their retreat!

Continuing to dodge between buildings, the hostile team indiscriminately throws ordnance at targets of opportunity. Passing by a holoboard, they fill it with holes, breaking the barely-there tethers. The wreckage falls into Alpha's path, forcing them to divert. The debris continues to plummet to the crowded street below, raining chaos upon the hapless civilians.

A moment later, the lead aircar passes through an ad-drone cloud. As they pass, the tiny drones that make up the 3d hologram form up to look like a giant, glowing, cartoon missile and begin chasing after Alpha's striker, once again forcing them to reroute.

Once Alpha is able to reengage, the defending drones fly, dodge, weave, and glide. The patterns are mesmerizing — like watching living swarms of fish or birds.

How are they controlling the drones like that!?

Alpha's striker takes a direct hit from a hidden kinetic-strike drone. The pilot is barely able to swerve at the last second, but the damage is done. With too many kamikaze hits from the rearguard drones, they're unable to continue the chase, and have to break off.

Danica's heart aches — for Alpha; for all the injured and dead; for her disappearing Gaia seed. She checks the AR overlay for Delta — they're much too far away.

The moment Alpha breaks off, the living swarm heads toward Danica. She has to beat a hasty retreat, or risk destruction herself.

The pursuit is off.

While the swarm doesn't pursue, they linger nearby. Checking the tac-net, she can see they've formed a cordon, daring her to pursue. She can't reengage as the hostile crew disappears from her sensors — and the tac-net.

With her treasure.

Danica

"Do we have satellite feeds?"

leviathanOps

"Negative."

"They've got elite-tier 'runners scrambling our real-time feeds."

"We'll recover that later."

"But, that doesn't help us now."

Danica

"Alright."

"Prepare for after-action."

"We've got a lot of work to do."

END OF LINE

She feels sick — even in her lovely robot frame.

As she disengages, the rearguard drones detonate in the air, their job done. The 'streak is removed from their tac-net — there's no need for her to linger. Danica directs her vehicle to the facility. The few remaining Alpha team air drones guard her.

Danica hates this feeling of helplessness. So much effort, now in someone else's hands. Her memories of being abducted start to surface. She allows herself a moment to wallow.

A change in the direction of her ride breaks her from her reverie. Danica brings her attention back to the present.

During her approach, minor damage to the structure is visible, even in the dark. Several large plasma blast marks mar the area near the doors — and the doors are missing. There are small holes ripped into the surface — along with a few broken windows. Her ride is able to land on the roof without issue — no debris obstructs the pad.

She steps out of the vehicle. Smoke is still wafting around the area — not enough to obscure her vision. A security officer approaches at speed.

As he nears, he calls out, his voice audible from speakers on his power armor, "Ma'am, please come with me, we need to get you covered."

Danica allows herself to be guided into the building. The stairs open immediately into a small room, used for staging equipment — an armory of sorts. On one side of the room is a suit of power armor — her armor; flat black with sleek, smooth surfaces.

Danica approaches, linking to the suit. As it leans forward, seams on the back peel apart like an opening flower. She quickly removes her clothing before stepping into the suit. It closes around her — a Venus flytrap, enveloping its prey.

As the seals set, she 'dives the suit, her senses integrate — She is the armor.

netcast: direct voice

Phillips

"Very good, Ma'am. With you covered, I can now guide you through most of what happened."

Danica

"Yes, please."

"Are many people hurt? Were any killed?"

Phillips

"We don't have an accurate count, yet."

"But, it's a bloodbath.

"They slew anyone they came across."

"Fortunately, the alarm cleared many out of their path."

"Still, there were numerous deaths."

Danica

"Oh, no."

Phillips

"We believe they've abducted the few research assistants they didn't kill."

"Additionally, they have the Scaffold and a data core."

Danica begins recording a Sensie stream of the debriefing and tour. She sets her **AI** to scan the stream and alert her if anything important pops up. She'll have to review the details later. She isn't really in the head space to come to grips with the situation, just yet. She trusts her team.

I've been working on this since my beginnings. With Grace. We came up with the idea together. Centuries of effort.

Danica

"Any indication if someone was kept charging the Scaffold during the extraction?"

Phillips

confers with the team

"Yes."

"There is video of them keeping people in close proximity."

Danica

"Well, there's that, at least."

The raiders knew to keep the charging process intact. How would they know to do that? They knew what they were after and they had recent intel.

Just over a year ago. The latest iteration of the Gaia Scaffold started absorbing vitality, indicating viability — at long last. This was a major development. All my efforts seemed like they were about to pan out. Now this.

Danica accesses her personal copy of the Leviathan database — checking the charge-time estimates for the Gaia Scaffold. The projections indicate they need another four months before completion. That's with multiple people charging the Scaffold at the same time — a world first.

I've got some time to recover my project.

A world mind. I do hope its worth all this time and effort. We still need help determining how and why psychic phenomena are increasing in frequency and efficacy. The Scaffold is designed to help understand and respond to the situation. Its taken so long!

I must recover Gaia. It is far too powerful to remain under someone else's care!

Voyeur

I've been listening to the woman's heist since she left earlier in the afternoon.

I can tell the ghost is brooding in my head right now — presumably waiting for an opportune moment to discuss her need for a new host.

From the one-sided snippets of conversation I get through the woman's commlink, it appears their operation is proceeding well.

This lack of detail is irritating.

veilcomm: direct voice

MrKleen

"I need video surveillance feeds on the research park near downtown."

it_guy

"Yes, sir. On it."

I continue to listen to the action while the ghost finally broaches the subject of our separation. I play the expected part of a mopey, weak-willed fool. She dismisses me as such — just as she always has. Even when she was with mother, the ghost had little value for me.

The action in the research park has picked up. A firefight has broken out with one of the assault teams. The woman is moving an aircar to the roof of the building and placing drones nearby. She's also prepositioned small reinforcement swarms all along their planned escape route.

Clever.

it_guy

"Sir, I'm sorry."

"There's a massive data storm surrounding the entire area."

"This is the work of a competent 'runner team."

Slowly, I walk down from my great room to the gynoid alcove. Arriving, I settle in to finish charging the ghost's Scaffold — for the last time. She believes I'm watching some innocuous video Sensie stream while we wait.

it_guy

"I found something."

"It's distant and low-res, but it's the first-best I could find."

I begin watching the poor video feeds as I listen intently to the action mounting in the raid. Another firefight has started with the second assault team. It sounds like they are making every effort to slaughter everyone they come across, maximizing the chaos.

The ghost pings me when she's happy with her charge level. It startles me from the feeds on the raid. Her Scaffold leaves my stack, and I place it in the gynoid — after double checking that the Echo-Shard is still in place. Satisfied that the device is still working, I finally insert the ghost's Scaffold into her gynoid's stack.

She dismisses me, telling me that it's, "my loss" for rejecting her. I slink away, and while leaving the alcove, will the connection to her Scaffold broken. The subtle connection we've shared for the last year releases me.

It's like releasing a hound, setting it to run down your prey for you.

I hear the gynoid leave the building through the roof and her conveyance carry her away.

Just as she's leaving, the running gunfight in the research building breaks out onto the roof. I can see some of the action through the poor feed `it_guy` dug up, and I can hear the woman calling out her drone's actions into their tac-net.

Just as the raiders' aircar lifts off the distant roof, there are several large plasma explosions as the woman throws her spent biped combat frames at the pursuing forces.

The ghost is made aware of the raid just as her aircar clears the roof. I can hear the EKTs rev up as she speeds to assist in the action.

it_guy

"Sir, I have the Sensie streams coming from the departing aircar."

Opportune.

The ghost's aircar is tasked to screen the pursuit vehicle. I now have an unfettered view of the action from the ghost's point of view.

The woman's command of the combat swarms is mystifying. Memories of her twinkle-drone swarms' antics comes to mind. They were always silly, but impressive in their own right.

Now, watching her control these combat versions with such mastery causes me to reevaluate my take on her abilities.

This goes far beyond raw talent and skill. There are either many drone tenders working in concert, or the woman has some special capacity for drones.

She has a **swarm** Sprite.

I've only ever heard rumors of that type of Scaffold. It's not surprising she has such a device, considering her father's wealth.

This new variable must be taken into consideration as I continue with my planning.

Noted.

Masterfully applying her **swarm** and skill for operating drones, the woman successfully liberates both the project Gaia Scaffold and an associated data core.

Her supporting 'runner team was able to screen cyberspace for their escape. This will make the ghost's search for her treasure much more difficult.

The woman now has the prize. She is much more capable that I was aware. The ghost will certainly now seek to retrieve it.

My plan to feed information to the ghost is more critical than ever. She'll need every advantage in her effort. I have all the information the ghost will need to gain that advantage, and I'll be able to feed her the information she needs at the time of my choosing.

Perfect.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to ever greater power.

Pilgrimage

After a quick spin around the shopping area, Janice heads home. She takes a shower, and prepares herself for the trip into orbit.

netcast: direct message

Fang

We've secured the cargo and the captives in the shuttle.

All preparations are complete.

Awaiting your arrival.

Lurk

👍

I'll be there within the hour.

As she finishes her own preparations, she has her bags loaded into the aircar. Riding in the back she relaxes for the trip across town.

The spaceport is as busy as ever. The aircar delivers her to the private terminal, where her shuttle awaits. She is hurried aboard the small spacecraft.

Just past the airlock, in the small staging area, she dons the requisite light-duty spacesuit. She takes her helmet, but fortunately they won't need to wear them until they leave the atmosphere.

Janice takes a moment to verify that the treasure is secured on the spacecraft. Stepping off the ladder into the cargo area, she approaches the container. As she nears, there is a sense of pressure, or thickness to the space.

Nearby, several of the cowering, weeping, and bound research assistants are secured in their pens — close enough to continue contributing vitality. It's convenient that they're so committed to the project — enough to continue working even when captured. This small vitality offering given now will pale in comparison to what they'll offer in the Sanctum of Washing.

Opening the container, Janice sees the seed for the first time. The Scaffold is enormous. She has only ever seen Scaffolds that are the standard size and shape. This one is closer to an ostrich egg — larger than her fist! It has the same pearlescent shimmer on the surface as other devices, it's just so much larger. It's a humbling thing to behold.

Janice simply stares at the Scaffold, watching the rainbow colors slowly crawl across the surface. It gives the impression of breathing, or a heartbeat. She can almost hear the susurrations of air going in and out.

Looking at the marvelous Scaffold, she begins to feel it calling to her, inviting her. The sensations, while unexpected, are pleasant and desirable. As the moment draws out, she realizes that it isn't the device itself, but something beyond it — calling to her through the relic.

Breaking from the reverie, she sighs, closes the container, and checks on the data core in an adjacent container. All is well. Satisfied, she makes her way back up to her seat.

She settles into her acceleration couch on the well-appointed main deck, securing herself with the harness. Moments later, the shuttle lifts off. The gentle 1.3G acceleration is easy to bear.

Like all spacecraft, the shuttle is constructed almost like a narrow building, with floors stacked atop each other. The bridge is on the topmost floor, while the main cabin is closer to the middle.

Everyone involved in the raid is onboard the spacecraft. They are trusted elite soldiers of her father's coven.

Janice quickly pings the combat frames she has concealed in the shuttle — just in case. With even that brief contact, her mind calms. `Lurk` is never really comfortable when she doesn't have some sort of drone at her command.

As the thrust from the electrokinetic thrusters increases, she is pressed into her acceleration couch.

Seeing that the data core is intact, and knowing the Scaffold is in the hold, Janice is finally able to relax.

* * *

The trip to orbit takes forty minutes. As they enter low earth orbit, an alert in the cabin sounds, informing everyone that it's time to don their helmet — standard safety protocols.

Janice's helmet is a fancy design, lacking a transparent face plate. Instead, it relies on external sensors streaming Sensie data to her wetware — both sight and sound. To her, the helmet feels invisible.

Now in orbit, the shuttle gently maneuvers toward their interim destination; her father's heavy cruiser, the *Sleeper in the Deep*.

As the shuttle approaches several hours later, main engines cut, releasing everyone onboard into microgravity. Janice watches the external action on the ship's sensors.

The cargo bay doors of the cruiser open wide. From within, tentacle-like cables snake out and connect with the shuttle. They are then drawn into maw, like some great space squid consuming its hapless prey.

Within the docking bay, the shuttle is carefully guided to its assigned berth.

Clamps secure the shuttle, the exterior bay doors close, and the seat-belt lights in the cabin dim. Everyone releases their restraints, moving to exit the small spacecraft.

Their precious cargo is quickly transferred to the cruiser's own secure hold.

Janice exits the shuttle, GSA thruster harness gently pulling her to the floor. A welcoming committee meets them as they exit the shuttle's airlock.

The captain greets her with a shallow bow, “Ma’am, it is a great honor to receive you into our care. May the Void find you, and keep you.”

“Thank you Captain. I’m grateful for your assistance in fulfilling our great mission. Would that the Void take you, too,” Janice replies.

Nodding, the captain makes a gesture, “My valet will see to your needs while aboard.”

The man next to the captain bows to her. “If you will follow me, ma’am, I’ll show you to your quarters.”

Janice follows the valet to her cabin. Her luggage is already here and laid out for her. Even with the vitality boost, she still hasn’t fully recovered from the raid. So, she takes the opportunity to sleep as they get underway.

* * *

Waking after a night’s sleep, refreshed, Janice takes a moment to check on the ship’s status. They are underway to Venus. Everything is nominal.

Taking time to get herself ready for the day, she has food brought to her cabin. When she’s ready, she releases a small twinkle-drone swarm into her space. She then lies back onto the bed. Her mind calms as the drones settle onto the bed around her. She completes her preparations to meet with her father in cyberspace to report on the mission.

Her perception once again appears in their sacred space. The writhing shadows claw at her mind while she waits for his attention.

After only a brief wait, her father’s flickering avatar manifests.

`tac-net: cyberspace lobby`

Void Father

whispers

"Scion. Report."

Lurk

"Yes, my lord."

"At your command, we have obtained the world seed and the data associated with its creation."

Void Father

"Ensure they seed remains fed in transit. To lose it to carelessness now would be — costly."

Lurk

"Yes, lord. We have several offerings willingly feeding the seed now. They will endure the trip without issue,"

Void Father

preternatural stillness

"You have done our coven a great service, my daughter."

Lurk

"We will arrive at the temple in roughly five days."

"There is no evidence that we are being pursued."

Void Father

"I expect to receive you when you arrive."

The cloaked figure nods, turns, and fades from the 'space.

`END OF LINE`

With the stakes this high, Janice can't relax. The Prophetess has revealed that to fail in this task is to invite disaster upon the entire coven. With the public pilfering of the great seed, many of their enemies will seek their destruction.

Failure is not an option!

Chapter 08

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 0y2d

"Just finished the last paperwork for my doctorate. I successfully defended my dissertation a few months ago. It was pretty rough — psychic phenomena are still the red-headed stepchild of the scientific community. Regardless, I'm finally done with this phase of my education."

-big sigh-

"I'll be working more with Dr. Radin. I'll be able to continue working remotely. I'm not really willing to move away from our little community at this point. We're just too well prepared for the chaos of these times."

"The community has grown from a campground and a few hangers-on into a small town."

"We've got local power, lots of food growing, and a tight-knit community that watches out for each other."

"We've opted for a covenant-based system for local governance. All the anarcho-capitalists among us were instrumental in making it happen!"

"We all take turns on the security details. Everyone is trained in keeping the peace. I'm happy here."

"Most people in the community have actually been working hard on building bunker-like housing for everyone. We all still expect some terrible punishment from the sun. Thankfully, its mostly finishing work begin done at this point."

"I'm really worried that nobody else seems to be preparing for the micronova. I wish there were more things we could do to convince them to prepare. You just can't force people to change their worldview."

Host Wanted

While her security team is busy running down leads to the Gaia Seed, Danica focuses on finding a new host.

Bruce, an intern, is her current Scaffold bearer. She's unwilling to bond with him — that's just inappropriate. Keeping her Scaffold charged is a part-time job. Thankfully, Bruce is a good sport.

Her **AI** have been working overtime. Danica spends a tidy sum for data access in genealogical and medical research — tracking down any and all of Grace's descendants.

It's difficult to find data that she doesn't already have. She's been collecting it for centuries, after all.

Her first lead comes three weeks into the search. The woman is in her thirties, married, with children. A brief investigation reveals a substance abuse problem — not something Danica wants to deal with again.

The next possibility is a young man in his mid twenties, serving in a local militia. The **AI** research on him turns up some sadistic tendencies. Hard pass.

Finally, after six weeks of searching, she has a new lead. Some gray market, 'unanonymized', medical data she bought has flagged a man with pure clan blood.

The candidate's name is Oliver Goodman. He's older than she'd prefer, being in his fifties. But, some initial vetting shows he's kept himself in good shape.

He lives alone in a run-down apartment near the slums. During the day he works as a professor at an adult school nearby, teaching the various aspects of Spritetech.

It is odd that he seems to own no property, have no vehicles, no registered cybernetic components, not even a pet.

Digging deeper, Danica unearths records for Oliver's apartment running back thirty years. That's when records on Oliver first appear — any records at all. And only these rental agreements. Before that he is nonexistent.

So, a new identity, then?

Curiously, nearby, she finds a Wendell Goodman. Wendell's records abruptly end with a domestic fire — a domestic fire in which his family all died, and he was reported missing.

Wendell's fire happened just a few weeks before Oliver first rented the apartment.

By rolling through several ancient data stores, she's finally able to shed some light on what happened with Wendell and the fire.

After graduating top of his class from a prestigious university, Wendell O. Goodman was recruited by a mercenary outfit — it seems Wendell had a bit of an anarchist streak. Wendell was recruited as the crew's 'runner. An ancient article from a university paper hails him as a, "Netrunner Prodigy".

Danica strongly suspects Wendell's middle name is Oliver, though she hasn't unearthed anything verifying that hunch, yet.

Doing a Deepdive on any of this is just too costly without a host. So, she has to keep to the records she can get at with just time and money.

On the last mission Wendell ran, their corporate handler burned his crew after they successfully completed the operation. Not just the team, but all their associates, too — scorched earth. Wendell seems to have been singled out for special treatment — his family was added to the tally.

All evidence indicated that nothing untoward had happened on the op, the director just went mad. Captain Morego was removed from the company, and his subordinate, Lieutenant Veil was promoted.

So, Wendell went into hiding after his crew and family were killed by his client.

Wait — 'Veil'? — that's Michael's surname, weird.

Danica sends her **AI** after more information on the burn notice. She finds indications that there was an arbitration — Morego was convinced he'd been set up. But, the records are behind a massive data wall.

She'll have to do a 'dive after all.

Bruce is not going to be happy.

A few days of pestering and a small bonus later, Bruce consents to 'extra vitality duty', allowing her to do a proper Deepdive.

"Danni, I swear you're a vampire! Fine! But, you're paying for me to go on a really nice date!" — Bruce.

With Bruce footing the vitality bill, and a decent chunk of `Re:Coin` bits exchanged for vitality, to boot — Danica obtains the arbitration records.

The Sensie recordings reveal that, sure enough, Lieutenant Veil is indeed, Michael Veil — her previous host, as a young security officer.

What — the actual — burn. What are the chances!?

Listening to the proceedings gives her the creeps. There are audio records that include the planning phase of the operation — especially tac-net audio. Often, when Veil speaks to Morego, Danica is put on edge, like nails on a slate. It's clear that Veil was manipulating the Captain, but, there's just something deeply 'off' about the way Veil's voice sounds in some clips.

Slithery. Moist. Just — all the wrong words.

Then it hits her, *Ooh! He's got a* ***suggestion*** *Sprite! My previous host has one of those accursed things. He* must *still have it, too.*

Well. That sheds a whole new — creepy — light on the entirety of my relationship with that man. I'm going to have to reconsider recent events in this new light.

Pressure to get a new host, and Bruce's ~~dignity~~ generosity spent, she turns back to Wendell's story.

Within the arbitration records, there are some images of the mercenary team that was eliminated. Wendell is prominent in the images, and it is clear that Oliver is Wendell — just decades older.

So, Wendell got burned by Mike. Burned hard. No wonder the man has been keeping to the shadows. Its unlikely he's still hiding from Morego — that's ancient history to the rest of the world. At first? Yes. But, now? No — he's still struggling with the trauma of losing not only his team and professional associates, but his entire family, too.

Danica is intrigued.

He has no criminal record. No indication of substance abuse. No personal relationships and no, uh, relations with those of negotiable affections. He lives modestly — well within his means. In fact, the only social outlet he seems to have as playing a popular FIVR MMORPG — the same one Danica enjoys.

He sounds more machine than me.

Danica investigates active 'runners in Oliver's area. She finds several info brokers that are willing to chat-brag about their local superstar. Turns out that Wendell, a.k.a. Oliver, a.k.a. `theWhistlingSquid` is a bit of a modern-day Robin Hood.

He often does, "Community Service," in the form or keeping some of the local gangs under control using his 'runner skills. He even makes an effort to give most of the money he recovers back to the victims.

The last data packet he sold is a perfect example.

He let himself get beaten-up in order to track down actionable data on the 'Crawlerz', dived the boss, fought a sysop, and scraped the data. His analysis of the data was top-tier, too.

The broker shared that `theWhistlingSquid` donates any bits he gets off the thugs to local charities — only keeping any data fees for himself.

Wendell is a remarkable find.

Danica is sure she can work with Wendell and his tragic backstory. If he's as kindhearted as she suspects, he's a prime candidate to be her host. It would be a great boon to her if she could Ally with such a person.

She'll have to find the right time to reach out — just not today. The investigation into the Gaia Seed just heated up again. The team has new intel, Danica has new intel, and Anders wants to meet.

Asset Recovery

`tac-net: cyberspace lobby`

Anders

"We have located the facility housing both the Gaia Scaffold and the stolen data core."

"Its in a small, private cloud facility on Venus"

"We're certain to 89% probability."

"Mike Veil has given us an interview. Apparently he is the source of the leak. He claims that he was careless with some of Danica's information, and it fell into Janice's hands."

Danica

"Oh, snap! Okay, so, I just learned of some of Mike's ancient history."

"This is likely relevant, though I haven't had a chance to unpack the implications."

"Thirty years ago, Mike was SSO for a data heist. During the planning he was manipulating the director into betraying the contractor team — setting the director up to take a fall."

"Turns out, I've determined that Mike has a hard-burned **suggestion** Sprite."

Danica

posts Sensie records

"So, uh, I think we need to view Mike as more of a scheming bastard than a hapless idiot."

everyone scans the records

Anders

"Oh, drift. Agreed."

"Well, regardless, we've verified Mike's information — it appears to be authentic."

Danica

-sigh-

"We don't have time to address either Mike or Janice right now, anyway."

"It's critical we move to recapture the seed with all due haste."

"We'll have to be on the lookout for a double-cross."

Anders

"Yes, ma'am."

"A point of concern — the mercenaries that conducted the raid are associated with a strange cult."

"*Scions of the Void*, they call themselves."

"The cult is flagged as a terrorist organization throughout the system."

"We believe the Venusian facility, *The Lacuna*, is operated by the cult."

Danica

"Is Janice a member of the cult, then?"

Anders

"That is unknown."

-nods-

Anders

"We have a rough plan sketched out."

"Though the facility is quite secure — we've obtained a cover identity that will allow us to insert a single operative."

"That individual will need to be a capable Netrunner."

"They'll be posing as a cybersecurity consultant, there to audit the facility's systems."

-nods-

Anders

"First, we'll get them to the facility via chartered system shuttle."

"Once on site, they'll need to 'dive the system."

"During the 'dive to destroy the core, they will need to obtain access keys for the Scaffold's vault."

"They'll use that to snag the Scaffold and exfiltrate."

"As they leave, we'll drop the hammer on the entire facility, hiding the op and dusting the terrorists."

Danica

"That sounds good."

"In a happy coincidence, I was about to try and recruit a new host that happens to have the skills we'll need."

"Give me a couple of days to land him."

"Failing that, we'll use one of your people."

Anders

"Wait. You're planning on GOING on the op!?"

Danica

"Yes."

awkward pause

Danica

"I'm going."

"It's too important for me not to be onsite."

pregnant pause

Anders

"Very well, ma'am."
"We'll prepare everything else in the meantime."
"Venus is in superior conjunction right, now — maximum distance."
"It'll take about a week of travel each way."
"That won't leave a lot of time before Gaia's projected awakening."
"It's going to be tight."

Danica

"Very well."

-nods-

exits the tac-net

END OF LINE

Well, Mr. Wendell Oliver Goodman. Turns out today is a good day to reach out, after all. I'm glad to have found you just when I need you!

A message arrives in `Brawn-X`'s inbox. It's an offer he can't refuse.

Tattletale

The woman actually pulls off the heist and gets the treasure all the way to her father's facility on Venus, *The Lacuna* — their temple.

That place has a storied past. Home to *The Scions of the Void*.

The woman's father, or, "The Void Father", is a dangerous man. Not only does he hold great sway within the company, but his sect is trouble wherever they go.

I maneuvered the void father into supporting me on the board. I dislike the necessity, but the need is temporary.

In exchange for his support, he required that I marry his daughter — the woman. The requirement was startling. I had met the woman several times before, but she was not interesting.

More startling than the requirement was that I accepted the arrangement. It felt off at the time, and I still struggle to understand the decision. Something doesn't add up with the void father.

Incongruent.

* * *

The time arrives for me to clue in the ghost on where her prize lies.

I reach out to her team, suggesting I have discovered a clue they might be interested in.

When her investigator arrives, I have counsel on hand.

During the interview, I tell the investigator my story, "Well, Mr. Paten, my security team was doing a regular scrubbing of my home's internal Sensie recordings —" I let my voice trail off.

"Yes, Mr. Veil, please continue."

I look to my lawyer and he nods for me to continue. He knows he's just here for show.

"Right, well, it appears I was careless with some of Danni's data. I was doing some work on my terminal here at home. It seems I had a volume open that had some of Danni's data mounted. I stepped away for a moment. That's when Janice snuck over and copied the data I left open."

"Ah, that is troubling, Mr. Veil. You suspect the data was enough for Janice to plan the heist, then?"

"I do, yes."

"Very good. Do you know, perhaps, where she may have taken the stolen Scaffold and data core?"

"Oh, yes, I know where she has it. After seeing her take the data, I had my security team run down more information on her. Her father's ship, *Sleeper in the Deep*, was in orbit the day of the heist. Later that night, it left for Venus."

"Fascinating. Will you share this data with us?"

"Certainly." I give the investigator a memstick holding the carefully curated data. The information reveals many details about *The Lacuna*, and the cult's abduction addiction, and their murderous practices — the data they'll need to help me be rid of the void father.

"Wonderful. Thank you for your help, Mr. Veil. This will help in our investigation, immensely."

Of course it will.

Predictable.

* * *

The Echo-Shard has just shared details of the ghost's efforts to recover her prize from the woman.

The most urgent intel is that the ghost has unearthed some of my past. She is now aware of my **suggestion** Sprite. That makes things more complex — now that I'm not above suspicion.

Knowing about my **suggestion** is one thing. Proving it is another.

Does she have any evidence?

I review my copy of the proceedings that the ghost has uncovered. Carefully examining what exactly was shared and the conclusions drawn, I'm confident that there is no actual proof that I have **suggestion**. In fact, it is never mentioned in the records.

The ghost is convinced, but there is no actionable evidence to support such an allegation. My plans are secure from her suspicions.

What about exposure?

As far as her suspicions go, I'm confident that she isn't foolish enough to make baseless allegations. She'll take this knowledge into consideration in her own planning. I believe she is mature enough not to make the mistake of bringing unsupportable claims before a mediation panel — making herself liable for recompense.

Does this revelation affect my timeline?

The time for the ghost to recover her prize is short. In her plans, she's already expressed a desire to deal with the legalities later and focus on physically reclaiming her project.

So, the knowledge doesn't directly affect her current plans. And by the time I have the device in my possession, it's unlikely to matter.

Manageable.

* * *

Continuing to process the revelations from the Echo-Shard, I find that they're sending an undercover operative to retrieve the project. Once obtained, a privateer frigate will recover the operative and obliterate the facility.

The ghost intends to accompany the operative on the mission. This is a welcome development. The woman is holed up in the facility. The ghost's plan will almost certainly result in the woman's death.

The ghost will be vulnerable, too. I should be able to arrange her demise along with her agent.

Perfect.

* * *

The operative they've selected. It seems he was the Netrunner on the mission that the captain burned so long ago. That irritating man survived the trap.

How is it that he's working with the ghost? What do they know of my plans?

The ghost did reveal that she seeks hosts among her creator's descendants. The 'runner's surname does suggest a relation. So, that might explain how they came into contact.

With a plausible explanation for their meeting, my concern about my plans being ruined is assuaged.

Continued caution in this matter is warranted, however.

This would also explain how she came across my history. If she were seeking a host and found the 'runner, that could easily lead back to our shared history.

Alarming.

* * *

I must consider these challenges.

Planting an operative on a privateer ship seems unlikely. That leaves bribing an existing crew member. Hopefully `fixer` can get something arranged.

The ghost and her operative will need to be neutralized, but not before they've obtained the treasure.

So, I'll need some way to disable the 'runner after they obtain the Scaffold. It could happen as late as during their collection by the privateers. Any later will be likely to expose the plot. It would be best to control the precise moment when they are disabled.

The ghost will be giving her operative some mission-specific Scaffolds. I believe Echo-Shard could intercept and alter that list to include a hacked device.

Yes, that will work.

Masterful.

* * *

I begin making arrangements.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to ever greater power.

Chapter 09

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

It turns out that the strange buried shipping containers that the men in black installed when I was sixteen were full of treasures. The then-federal government distributed "time capsules" to communities around the country who were aware of the coming catastrophe. They stuffed the containers full of nanofabricators and feeder stock; fusion cores and fuel; plant seeds, and a massive data cache of all human knowledge. The cache has been immensely useful in our efforts to rebuild.

The cache even had extensive homeschooling software, which we found really helpful.

--- Next Excerpt ---

We also were able to build some larger spacecraft. As we expanded, we also were able to start getting satellites back up in orbit; communications, location, imaging, and weather tracking. One blessing for the catastrophe was that it cleared out most of the space debris around the planet.

Overture

Danni sits in her cyberspace domain. Her sacred space to rest and be alone. Her secret space to keep all her most important data. It doesn't occupy any specific machine, or cluster; it doesn't live in a known data core. Her domain exists overlaid on the medium of the Net.

Only a few of her hosts have ever even been aware of the space. No one has ever visited — nor would she allow it.

It is time for her to reach out to Wendell. He seems like he'd make a wonderful host — and he has the skills she'll need to recover the Gaia seed from the *Scions*. This is an important pitch.

She reviews the private investigator's report once again. The PI recorded a conversation that Wendell had with a colleague while out at lunch. They discussed his only apparent pastime — the same online game that Danni enjoys, when she has time.

Of course he plays it, too! she chuckles, shaking her head. *It would be so much fun to play the game with my host,* she thinks, wistfully.

Wendell's latest data offering sits before her. She bought it last night when it went up for auction. His work is extremely thorough, and his analysis is remarkable. Danni was even able to get `Brawn-X` to brag a bit about `theWhistlingSquid` after the purchase.

That `Squid` is a goldmine — his intel pays out every time!

`Brawn-X` only knows the persona that bought the data. Danni had used one of her many online personae to make the purchase.

Danni turns to her persona closet — a virtual container within her domain. She envisions these identities like costumes, or disguises. Opening the closet, she flips through the options. One in particular catches her attention — `Ghost`.

`Ghost` has been around for a long time. She often uses that mask for 'shadow-y' work, so it seems fitting for the occasion. In her domain, the persona looks like a translucent version of her digital self-image. Of course, no one ever sees `Ghost`'s image — it's only for her.

How do I frame the offer so that `Brawn-X` takes it seriously and acts quickly?

Money.

In working with `Brawn-X` on the data deal, it was clear that this is his primary motivation. Not really surprising, but important to know for the offer she's crafting.

Wendell won't want a face-to-face meeting, either. But, I want to meet him and make the offer in person.

So — a big pay-out. That should get the offer taken seriously. That, and `Ghost` does have a reputation as a reliable — and wealthy — client.

What if Wendell is unwilling to meet?

Danni knows who killed his family — and why. This information would certainly be interesting to Wendell.

Will I use this intel to manipulate him? She wonders. No — she'll include it in the offer, up front. She doubts Wendell will take kindly to any sort of strong-arm approach.

As she makes ready to reach out, she sees Wendell's kind face in the PI's report, and she hesitates for a moment. She considers what she's about to do — destroy Wendell's quiet life in order to pursue her own interests. The hesitation is brief.

This isn't just my own interest. There's a world at stake.

netcast: direct message

Ghost

Hello, Brawn-X. I have a job for a competent 'runner.

It pays well, but requires travel for three weeks.

Brawn-X

Ghost? Wow!

I thought you were an urban legend!

Ghost

Clearly not! 😈

Brawn-X

Right.

Yeah, I know a couple decent 'runners.

Ghost

I believe you've worked with theWhistlingSquid?

Brawn-X

Yeah, I know the Squid.

You have them in mind?

Ghost

Yes. I need to meet in person, though.

I'm guessing that may make theWhistlingSquid uncomfortable.

I'll put up a large cash escrow to insure the meet.

There's also some money upfront just to hear me out.

Brawn-X

reviews the Re:Coin links

Holy void, `Ghost`! That's a lot of insurance.
I'm sure I can get `theWhistlingSquid` there.
I'll send you the deets on the meetup.

Ghost
Looking forward to it.

`Brawn-X` muses, *Now I've just gotta figure out how to get that recluse to come out for the meeting! Shouldn't be too hard — it looks like we could both retire after this payout!*

Scaff-1

"Alright, class! Settle down", Ollie calls out.

He's sitting on the desk at the front of the little auditorium in which they hold class. Most of the class is attending remotely and are rendered in his AR (Augmented Reality) view. But, there are still a few kids attending in the real.

"We're at midterm. You will have three days to complete your exam. So, let's have a nice review before its unlocked, shall we?", says Ollie.

Spritetech, especially relating to digital information systems, enthralls Ollie. University was wonderful, but Netrunning captured his attention, entirely. Once forced into hiding, teaching came naturally to him. His voice carries a sense of quiet confidence. Students are attentive to his lectures, and classes are generally full.

Extensive training and real experience make him a subject matter expert; maturity from time and suffering make him kind and patient. A better job in a bigger school is feasible, but this one makes it much easier to hide.

Ollie waits as the students get themselves ready to go over the information for the midterm.

* * *

"Alright, let's begin," Ollie says into the lecture hall.

"Introduction to Scaffold Engineering 101. What have we learned so far this semester? Anyone willing to give us the overview?"

"Well, we use modern software engineering techniques to compile a set of glyphs that define a Sprite effect. Or, I guess, the contract for the effect.", offers Sybella, a young woman in the front.

"That's a good description, Sybella. Thanks."

Ollie asks, "Why do we use computers for this work?"

"The glyphs are, um, very specific and nuanced — and there are a lot of them. It's really hard to assemble all the details needed for an effect that will engage a Sprite. With Sprite development environments, we can use VR simulations, **AI** Sprites, physics modelling, coding, and agentic AI to help get all the details right.", Hector, in the back, answers.

"Yes, thanks. Just like computer programs, the original, hand coded Scaffolds were very simple. And, just as programs have become many orders of magnitude more complex, so have modern Scaffolds. It's not feasible to hand-craft them anymore," reminds Ollie.

-hand raised in the back-

"Question, Brandon?"

"Yeah, uh, so, I'm confused about the glyphs. I thought we couldn't speak to, or interact with Sprites. So, how did we create a language that they respect?"

"Oh, Brandon, I love you for asking that question!" enthuse-yells Ollie, getting some raised eyebrows.

"Last night, on Alex's conspiracy broadcast," *-several groans and eye rolls-* "he had a guest talking about exactly this subject."

"Boris Petrov and his team have discovered some of Grace Goodman's audio journals. I listened to them this morning. They're fascinating!"

"Anyway, turns out she didn't *create* the glyphs, she *discovered* them! They would turn up during an experiment. Adding them to the next run of the same experiment made everything much easier."

"And — just so you all know — this material is too new to be on the test, but it's so interesting I just had to share!"

"Right. Moving on. Once we have the compiled glyphs in computer memory, are we done?" prompts Ollie.

"No, the glyphs need to be represented in some form in the real world. With the glyphs inscribed in the real, they can be invoked," Sybella answers again.

"The most common Scaffolds are the little disks we stuff in our wetware stacks," `CakeEat2` adds from AR.

"Oh! I've seen a street performer that was able to invoke a Sprite from some flames which formed the glyphs. It was simple — just changed the smoke color, but it was pretty amazing!" yells an excited `Ba-Lars-rs`. He drops a link into chat.

"Ha! That's awesome. Thanks for sharing," says Ollie.

"Wonderful. Alright, we've covered the high level of Scaffold creation. Let's cover a few details of invocation. We've mentioned the word, 'contract' several times. That suggests an exchange. What does that entail?"

"For some unknown reason, Sprites are willing to enact changes in reality in exchange for our physical vitality. It's exhausting," responds Joan with an exaggerated sigh.

"This, of course, limits the magnitude of Sprite effects we're able to manifest. No fireballs, no teleporting — just small, personal effects. So, while powerful, Sprites are only used to affect changes that we can't accomplish any other way."

"Great, you answered my next question, too, Joan," responds Ollie.

Ollie continues, "Why are Sprites so prevalent surrounding digital information systems? Computers?"

The class seems stumped by the question.

"Joan is correct in that we can't invoke big, flashy effects. But we can manage the invocation of small ones. Say, sparks, small electric fields, photons —"

Ollie lets the comment hang, giving space for someone to continue.

"Oh, right!" — from `CakeEat2` — "We can manipulate the very digits of that make up digital information systems."

"Exactly, `CakeEat2`! The speed and efficiency that makes computers the miracles they are is the very thing that makes them vulnerable to Sprite manipulation."

"The last detail we should mention is Scaffold evolution. Will someone please detail this for us?"

Hector says, “Scaffolds, or the glyphs that constitute them, change with time and use. The older and more well used a particular Scaffold, the more efficient, powerful, and focused the effect becomes. As for why, there are many theories, but it remains a mystery.” With a laugh, he finishes, “Some joke that they level up with experience.”

-class chuckles-

Smiling, Ollie waits for the class to recover, “Good work, everyone. Glad we got through all that information. Thanks for hanging in there!”

As the students depart, Ollie tells them, “I’ve unlocked access to your exam. You now have seventy-two hours to complete the test.”

* * *

As the room clears, Ollie cleans up and heads to his office. There he prepares to meet with any students that need his attention.

While he lingers there, he connects to his ’deck. He spins up his Sprite development environment. Ollie wants to be mentally present in his office in case a student shows up; so, instead of the usual VR interface, he uses the AR overlay.

A new cyberspace combat utility Sprite is the current project. Ollie wants something more effective than the **data wall** to protect data streams from interruption during cyberspace combat. This will allow him to initiate transfers even while battling a system operator. *Or a script-kiddie.* The simulations look promising, and he spends the next several hours in deep focus.

No students show up for office hours, so he packs up to head home.

As he leaves the building, he gets a message from `Brawn-X`.

`netcast: direct message`

Brawn-X

`Squid`! You are not going to BELIEVE the offer I have for you!

You, specifically!

Chapter 10

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

Using Spritetech, we've been able to alter the proof-of-work for `Re:Coin`. We've added a second proof: physical vitality. One can now add vitality to the blockchain, receiving coin. Coins can also be surrendered to the blockchain, receiving vitality in return. Assuming there is any vitality available at the time.

We also added an escheatment, or proof-of-life, protocol to help avoid loosing bits to dead wallets. Any wallet not used for five years will be reabsorbed by the chain.

I'm not entirely sure these are good ideas, but they're working well right now.

Feeding the Seed

Lurk, in black robes and wriggling black mask, approaches the sanctum. Walking sedately, she takes her time, savoring the moment. Padding on the warm, moist floor, she arrives at the great door.

Whispers seem to emanate from everywhere, and nowhere. Smooth, slippery shadows undulate in every corner. After a moment, a singular deep bass note sounds from beyond the door, announcing her arrival.

"Go, Scion. Claim the world seed. Claim it for our coven. Claim it for us. Claim it for yourself." My father's words ring in my head. Here, on the precipice.

Sliding smoothly, the massive door begins retracting into its bulkhead. The opening reveals the altar room beyond — the Sanctum of Washing. Lurk proceeds into the black space, head held high.

The dark room reeks of blood. Bodies of several victims litter the edges. The space is covered in flat black stone. Hanging around the periphery are black tapestries with unsettling motifs, also stitched in black.

"When your sister was taken from us, her fate entwined with yours. You will open the gate. You will clear the way. You will bring change to this static system, and free us all." These words of the Prophetess come unbidden to my mind.

On the low altar, in the center of the space, a phiale rests. The shallow bowl overflows with the blood offering. Resting in the bowl's central depression, lies the seed. The great artifact that will raise their coven to preeminence.

Sister. My twin. A perfect reflection of myself. The tear in my soul has not mended. I can almost hear her voice. Bidding me to open the path for us to be reunited. Joined with the great mind from beyond.

The seed has been fed on the blood offering since its arrival here in the temple. It is time for Lurk to stake her claim to the relic.

An acolyte emerges from the shadows and steps forward, bearing the instruments of the washing. He follows her in silence as they cross the blood-slicked floor. Arriving at the altar, the acolyte places a mat on the floor, signing for Lurk to take her place next to the seed.

She kneels on the mat, back straight, face forward.

Here. Now. I open my mind to the calls I've heard since first touching the world seed. Here. Now. I make myself an offering to the great change. The upending of order.

With great care, the acolyte takes the large egg-shaped seed from its resting place, slipping it into Lurk's waiting hands, filling them. There is surprising warmth in the seed. He then opens the sleeve of her robe, exposing her forearm.

A wicked looking knife appears in his hand. With expert care, he draws the blade in a line across her exposed forearm. Blood wells from the wound, flowing down to her hands and the waiting relic.

My vitality flows with the blood. Consumed by the world seed — feeding it — anchoring myself in its depths.

As the blood reaches the surface, it soaks into the seed, leaving no trace. Lurk stiffens as vitality is torn from her body, more quickly than ever before. After just a moment, her vision begins to fade, she begins to shiver, and her posture waivers.

The draw is intense. The whispers grow. Louder, though somehow still just beyond comprehension.

Just as her world begins to spin, the acolyte reaches out again, staunching the wound. Lurk has enough presence to put pressure on the bandage with one hand while the acolyte retrieves the seed from her other. He moves it back to its resting place on the altar.

Pausing for a moment, collecting herself, Lurk prepares to leave the chamber. A second acolyte steps forward, and the two help Lurk stand, guiding her out of the sanctum.

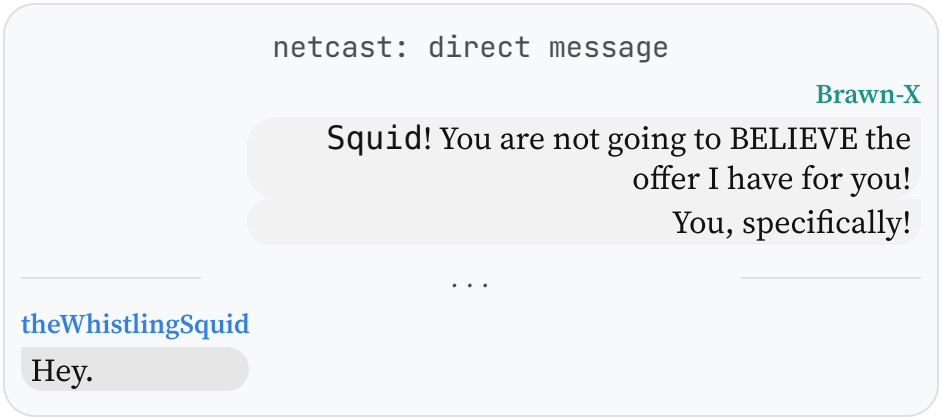
In my mind, I can feel her presence. Sister. Our minds are bridged. I hear her voice, though the words are unordered, alien.

The acolytes continue to assist her back to a medical recovery space.

Sister now rests in my mind. She guides with instinct and confusing words. Words that I slowly begin to understand. It won't be much longer.

Accession

Ollie is lost in thought as he steps out of the college building. `Brawn-X` contacts him, breaking his train of thought.



For me? Specifically?

Ollie tenses up. That is not how things normally work. Abnormal circumstances lead to — mistakes.

Is someone looking for me?

Wait, this is through Brawn-X *— they only know my handle.*

It's okay. Assassins aren't coming for you — right now, at least.

theWhistlingSquid

A client asking for me by name?

Brawn-X

Yes.

theWhistlingSquid

Huh. That's unusual.
Have we worked with them before?

Brawn-X

No. New contact.
`Ghost` has a solid rep, though.
Job requires three-plus weeks and travel. Starts ASAP.
Client wants to meet in the real.
Posted some cash up-front just for the meet.
There's a huge bounty in escrow if the meet goes bad.
Here's the link.

sends the `Re:Coin` link

theWhistlingSquid

checks the chain

Burn it, Netrunner Sylph!

That Sensiecast has been making Ollie yearn for the old days. His heyday.

If it's just me, It shouldn't be a problem. I'm more than a match for most modern sysops — even with my prehistoric kit.

Ollie considers his students for a moment. He loves teaching them — they have really grounded him over the years. But, something is missing.

My classes should be fine for three weeks. Most of the post-midterm work will be running simulations. I've got those all ready-to-go. I'll just open access and send out the requirements before I leave.

The administrator keeps hounding me to take some leave, too. Apparently they don't appreciate thirty years' worth of PTO piling up.

The money for the meet-fee is pretty significant. It can't hurt to at least meet the client.

theWhistlingSquid

Well, burn. Can't pass that up.
I'm in.
`Beet's Beats` tonight?
Here's a ident ping key for the client to find me at the club.

shares ident key

Brawn-X

forwards the client's ident key

Perfect.
I'll have some muscle nearby.
Just in case.

remits the meet-up fee

theWhistlingSquid

receives the `Re:Coin` bits

👍

Ollie has tensed up during the exchange, *I've not done a face-to-face in decades. I hope this is a job I can face. I'm not sure I'd be able to trust myself on a team — even after all this time.*

Checking himself in a window reflection, *Guess I need to get a haircut. And probably something not-'business casual'.*

Ollie heads to the metro station, making his way to a nearby shopping mall, *Some things still need to be purchased in the real, though.*

* * *

The airbus drops Ollie and several other people off on the roof of "The Mall". It's an old high rise that's been repurposed into a "shopping center". In the slums, these arrangements are necessary. Only a fool would try to have something delivered to their doorstep.

The locals have refurbished the building, and made it into an open market. The vendors all pool together and hire muscle to protect everyone from mayhem. The local gangs get a small stipend to help with security, too — by mostly staying away.

In addition to the locals hawking new, used, and refurbished goods, there are several corporate-backed vendors in the market.

Following the small crowd off the bus, and dodging those making their way in the opposite direction, Ollie approaches the entrance. There are two guards at the door — well armed, but not very alert.

I suppose I should find something more, merc-shic than these khakis. I'll swing by the Goodman Cybernetics shop, too. Probably can't afford anything, but it's always fun to window shop.

Entering the retail area below, "Hey, dude! You look like you could use some of this age-defying cream! On sale now!"

Ugh.

Ollie invokes **obscure** and **ad-block**. *Forgot to turn these on.*

The hawkers are less likely to pitch at someone without AR tags, and zero info on the public-ident ping-back.

Near the entrance is the barbershop he frequents, and his barber, Sarah. "Oh, hey Mr. Goodman!" she calls out. She was a student of his several years ago, but decided she preferred being a hairstylist.

"Hey Sarah. Nice to see you. I need a more, uh, military look today. Nice 'n short; high 'n tight."

"Sure, thing!" She gets to work and quickly has his head shorn.

That chore done, Ollie tips Sarah well and makes his way toward Goodman Cybernetics. Their gear is always the best.

Three centuries in and they're still setting the pace. Whatever they're doing differently, it works.

The shop is near the ground floor, so it's a bit of a trek.

On the way, Ollie steps into a thrift shop. It doesn't take long for him to find a classic black synth leather duster. He also stumbles onto a sweet anarchy-themed t-shirt, nice fitting jeans, and near-new black combat boots.

Ollie pays for his treasures, and continues down the building. They've arranged the hallways so that you have to navigate the main parts of every floor on your way down. It's a little irritating, but once you know what to expect, it's not so bad.

On the next floor down, he steps into, "Incognito" — the mask store. The place specializes in face masks, like for a masquerade — but for hiding yourself from the industrial-strength tracking mechanisms in society. The masks themselves do a great job obscuring you from mundane auto-trackers.

The "*authorities*" "*permit*" these because they're not subtle devices — you're openly declaring your desire for privacy in public spaces. But, really, they're cheap to make and easy to dispose of, so there's little they could effectively do to prevent the practice.

Checking around, he finds the perfect mask — a black squid. He quickly purchases the device. Combined with **obscure**, it's unlikely he'll be accidentally connected to `theWhistlingSquid`.

One more stop before Goodman's. Ollie steps in to an armory. The place is busy — as always. He checks the cyberspace menus, and finds a concealed-carry pistol and boot knife. Both used, both in good shape. He purchases them, plus a little ammo, and picks it all up from the dispenser near the entrance.

* * *

Finally arriving at his favorite shop, he pauses to admire the exterior. Outside is an understated sign, "Goodman Cybernetics, *the Oldest Name in New Bodies*". The few windows are clearly armored affairs. There are armored doors set into the sides of the entrance.

Stepping inside, he can see several display cases around the perimeter. Behind the counter in the back stand several people. He nods to them, and they nod back.

In this store, you can approach the sales reps and they'll answer questions. But, they don't really try and sell their wares. They sell themselves.

Ollie takes a few minutes and gawks at all the wonderful tech on display. He spends an inordinately long time checking out the cyberdecks.

-wistful sigh-

He approaches the young woman sales associate, and asks, "So, anything new or interesting for 'runners?"

She eyes him, appraising. "Hm. Well, you've already seen the cyberdeck selection, which are peerless. But, yeah, for interesting new developments, we just released our Nixie kit."

"Nixie — as in a water spirit?"

"Yes," she nods enthusiastically. "Have you heard of the Naiad mod?"

"Of course — the aquatic adaptation kit the elite combat spacers get."

"Exactly. We upgrade the Naiad so all that new surface area supports a full EW suite — adaptive AESA, selective jamming, counter-jamming. You're a ghost to anyone trying to interfere with you. Wireless boost is practically a bonus at that point."

"The catch is heat — all that EM runs hot. That's where the aquatic adaptation earns its keep, giving you options."

"Amazing." *-sigh-* "I'll have to start saving my milk money."

"Ha! Isn't that the truth," leaning in, Rachel speaks conspiratorially, "Between us, production is ramping. Prices will come down faster than the company wants people to know."

Ollie nods in understanding.

"I'm Rachel, by the way," holding out a hand.

"Oh. Ollie," taking her hand.

"Nice to meet you Ollie. Here's my ident, if you need more questions answered," winking as she sends him her comm key.

"Thanks. Here's mine," completing the transaction.

Wait, was that a flirt?

Looking back as he exits the boutique, he catches an enthusiastic wave from Rachel and waves back.

Definitely a flirt. Man, I'm so off my game.

Ollie's head is full of underwater adventures as he makes his way back up to the top of the building. He grabs a shawarma-to-go on the way up.

It's about time for the meetup with `Ghost` at `Beet's Beats`. Before calling an autocab, he takes a moment in the thrift shop to don his new outfit.

The Oswego

A thump rolls through the cabin as the docking clamps capture the shuttle. Lights on the deck brighten and a soft chime sounds into the air.

Anders is startled from sleep with the abrupt changes. He is tired because he is the Scaffold-bearer of the day.

"Thank you for flying Scout Space Industries' premier LEO service. We've arrived at our final destination, *Snyder Station* in Earth-Luna-L1. Our flight time was nine hours and forty five minutes. Please take care as you make your way to the airlocks. Ensure you have your luggage with you and that your GSAs are active — remember, we're in microgravity," chirps the plucky flight attendant over the loudspeakers.

"Why don't you just bond with me while you seek a long-term host, ma'am?" grouses Anders.

"I'm sorry, Anders, but, as I've told you, I don't feel that would be appropriate. The bond makes me extremely loyal to my host, and you're an employee. My favorite employee, but an employee just the same," she reminds him. "You complain more that Bruce!" She teases.

"It's not fair that you don't need to sleep. Weren't you up all night making arrangements to meet your new host?" Anders counters.

"My night-time habits are not your concern!" She feigns offense.

Danica's Glitch system is much more effective than any GSA. Anders, on the other hand struggles briefly as his harness tangles with the restraints on his seat.

With mild frustration, Anders checks the harness, *"The Madewell Gravity Simulation Apparatus. Our omnikinetic thruster pack will keep your feet on the floor!" -sigh-* "Stupid advertisements everywhere. Even in space. Is this thing even on?"

Leaning over to help, Danica says, "Here, let me untangle you before you turn that on and get hurt."

After a brief wrestling match, Anders is free from the tangle and gently adrift. He activates the device and it pulls him back to the floor.

"Sorry, ma'am. I've never actually been in microgravity, believe it or not," mutters Anders, a little embarrassed. Smoothing his suit to his thin frame, Anders settles himself then nods to Danica, signaling his readiness.

"What!?" she teases, "Weren't you some space marine before I hired you?"

"You know I wasn't," he says, smiling. "My time as military police on a coastguard cutter has well prepared me for this life of adventure!" he finishes with gusto.

"Agreed." she agrees.

Together, they collect their things and join the small group heading for the airlock. They wait in line as it cycles repeatedly — allowing only a few people through at a time. This space service doesn't require passengers to wear protective gear, necessitating the wait.

Once out of the shuttle, the pair catch an autocart. The ride takes them from the docking area, up along the station's central spine, and out to the habitation ring. To ease the transition from the microgravity in the spine to the spin gravity of the ring, the spindles between function like elevator shafts.

Sinking out of the roof of the habitation ring onto the floor, the autocart continues to wend its way along the eternally up-sloping floor toward, "Elysium's Edge". The restaurant provides decent food and amazing views of both Earth and Luna through its enormous exterior cupolas.

The autocart glides to a stop in front of the restaurant. The pair step off the cart and walk through the crowd to the entrance. Stepping inside, they are greeted by a host, "Good evening, patrons. Welcome to the gateway to heaven." An ident ping from the host provides their public identity. "I see

you have reservations. The rest of your party has already been seated. If you will please follow me?" The host gestures, then turns and begins making his way further into the establishment.

They are guided through the public space toward the back where the private rooms are kept. The décor is beautiful, though a bit gaudy, perhaps. Themed after a 'celestial realm', with light colored pastel highlights. Subtle shapes of clouds, wings, and halos abound. Ethereal music plays in the background.

Even though the tables they pass between are out in the open, the conversations are artificially muted, enhancing the intimate mood.

The host stops next to a panel door and slides it open, gesturing for them to enter. "Please alert me if you need anything," sliding the door closed behind them.

Within the small room is a table, four chairs, and the other attendees. Two men in clean and well used ship's jumpsuits stand as they enter. Both have a rough air about them — a little unrefined for the fancy place. They wear their crew patch proudly on their breast. Neatly trimmed hair and beards suggests that some extra effort was made.

"Hello, I am Captain Neville Mwangi of the good ship, *Marten Oswego*. And this is my first mate, William Blanch," gesturing to the man on his right. The Captain has lovely dark skin and short dreadlocks. William is pale, even for a spacer. Both men are tall and well proportioned.

Danica nods to each in turn. "Well met. I am Danica Goodman, and this is my head of security, Anders Paten. Shall we sit?" She gestures as she speaks.

They all take their seats. "Thank you for meeting on such short notice, Captain Mwangi," she begins, "— Neville, if you please, ma'am. At least away from the crew," the Captain interrupts. "Very well, Neville, thanks for meeting."

"Yeah, well, I mean, meeting like this is a little unusual. As privateers, we usually just get the paperwork, cash, and a target. Anders here already sent us the details of the op along with the Resolution for Restitution from the Arbiters. The Oswego and her crew are plenty strong for the job. So, I mean, the op is a-go-go on our end," Neville shrugs and trails off, looking to Danica expectantly.

"I wanted to meet with you personally to impress upon you the importance of both the timing of the strike, and the recovery afterward. My agent is going in there to recover my property, which is precious beyond measure," she says with conviction.

Relaxing slightly, sitting back, Danica continues, "But, if he can't make the meet, he can't make it. The project is too dangerous to be in someone else's possession. If it cannot be recovered, it must be destroyed."

Neville nods along. "I see. I take no offense to your wanting to say that in person. I can respect your position. We will fulfill the contract, and I'll make sure to take every effort to give your man the support he needs to succeed. I promise you that," finishes Neville, with his hand in a fist near his collarbone on the same side, a gesture common among spacers.

"That helps ease my mind, Neville. Thank you. Now, let's eat!" She says, trying to lighten the mood.

"You were lucky the Oswego was already in LEO when you reached out. We usually don't come this far from Venus," mentions William, looking over the menu. "We've already finished refitting and once we get the mission load into the hold, we'll be ready to head out. We'll get back to Venus long before your man arrives — plenty of time to lay the trap."

"Well if we're all in agreement, I'll sign the contract, releasing the upfront payment?" Danica offers.

Both men nod enthusiastically. Danica signs the contract, triggering the escrow protocols, and the mighty ship, Oswego, is on the job.

Chapter 11

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 3y356d

"Weird happenings today. The aurora has been visible in the sky all over the planet. There was a massive CME several days ago and this is the result. It certainly demonstrates how weak the planet's magnetic field has become."

"Regional blackouts and widespread fires are being reported. They're comparing it to the 'Carrington Event' of 1859. This is expected with the earth's magnetic shield so weak in the face of significant solar weather."

The Pitch

Landing gently, the autocab's door pops open — spilling Ollie out. `Beet's Beats` is just a short walk from the landing pad. He plans to approach the club on foot, giving him a moment to check for trouble.

Ollie makes sure the privacy mask is in place, along with the pistol and boot knife. With his haircut and duds, he feels like his old self.

Plus an aching back.

What am I doing?

`Beet's Beats` isn't the most popular hangout, but it has decent privacy booths around the dance floor — perfect for discrete meet-ups. Ollie's been here a few times over the years. He's no regular.

There isn't much of a line outside. After a short wait, he's in the club.

The heavy beats of the music wash over the crowd, and through Ollie as he enters. Deeper inside the club it is dark, except for the dance area, which is flooded with writhing bodies and spinning neon holograms — bouncing to the beat. The club's sugar beet-themed mascot is subtly featured in the swirling mass of color.

An ident ping in the space gets no response as he's guided to a corner booth. Ollie keeps his **ad-blocker** dialed up to the max — even these shady places love the corporate up-sell.

His privacy mask isn't out of place in the club. The booths are full of them.

Ollie chills for an hour, keeping himself alert by nursing a weirdly delicious beet-flavored energy drink — on the rocks; to be cool.

Just as he starts to wonder if the meet is happening, there's a subtle change in the crowd near the entrance. A moment later, a woman enters the club. His ident ping triggers as she stops and slowly looks around, taking in the space.

Ollie is mesmerized — certain he's never seen a more beautiful woman. Dark shiny curls hang down to her shoulders. She wears a tight designer dress; revealing just enough for a seedy club; concealing enough for a

boardroom. No mask hides her beautiful features. Everything about her screams corporate. Wealthy. Powerful. Corporate.

Looking his way, she nods to his lame wave, and makes her way to the booth. Her arrival breaking the spell, he invites her to sit.

Very smooth; very suave. I'm sure of it.

Smiling, she sits, and says, "Thanks for meeting with me, `Squid`. I'm `Ghost`."

"Yeah," *-cough-* "I, uh, was surprised that you asked for me by name", he responds — finally recovering from the shock of her appearance.

"Sorry I'm a little late. My return trip from *Snyder Station* took a little longer than I expected."

She pulls a small device from her clasp, and places it on the table — a squelcher. "You mind if we have some extra privacy?"

"That's fine," says Ollie. The device scrambles both audio and wireless in the immediate area. They'll both be disconnected from the Net while it's on.

Nodding, she activates the device. A strange, oppressive feeling fills the booth — hair on his arms raising. Sound deadens significantly. Ollie's bars drop to zero.

"I haven't seen one of those in a long time," observes Ollie. "I'm guessing you've investigated me before approaching. I'm not going to be comfortable working on a team. And I'm a lot older than the last time I did mercenary work."

Damn it!

Stop rambling!

Void. I always say too much around beautiful women.

-sigh-

Still smiling, `Ghost` answers, "Right to work, I see. Very well. Yes, I'm aware of some of your past exploits; and, in broad strokes, your current situation. I'm in urgent need of a capable, independent Netrunner, for an extremely remote op."

Ollie nods for her to continue.

"The job involves an onsite 'dive within a tight time window. We'll transport you as soon as a few preparations are made. We have an ident key and cover story to get you into the facility, where you'll do the 'dive and recover our stolen Scaffold."

"There are a set of mission-specific Sprites you'll need to engage during the 'dive. The Sprites will destroy a stolen data core. They'll also pull keys that will to give you access to a vault room, nearby. In that room is the target Scaffold. You will exfiltrate with the Scaffold in tow."

"You'll flee the facility and loiter in the area while the raid wraps up. The raider team will recover you before departing."

"All this will have to be done quickly. To cover the op, a full tac-team assault will begin just as you're window closes. We can't guarantee comms, so the go-window is both fixed and extremely narrow. If you're not fast enough, you'll get caught in the raid."

With that, `Ghost` sits back, offering Ollie the chance to respond.

Ollie's head spins a little with all the information. Even though she's mentioned no team, his anxiety surfaces, threatening his edge. He takes a minute to focus on breathing into his center. His time with standing meditation (and maybe a little therapy) helping him in the moment.

Settling, he responds, "I see." After a moments further consideration, "I'll need some significant hardware to pull off an op like that. My wetware is a relic, and my cyberdeck is an ancient Koldovstvo model — hardly sufficient for this workload."

"Speaking of relics, I'm a bit old for running around in a facility, like you've described. I have to wonder, why approach an old hack like me for a job like this?"

She nods her head, understanding his concerns. "Old? Well, with age comes experience and wisdom. I need a steady hand to pull this off under such tight constraints."

"As for gear, we'll fix the hardware deficiency — not an issue. We'll upgrade your cybernetics, and you'll be equipped with an infiltration smartsuit — basically ninja power armor," she says with a smile. Giving him a quick looking-over, "You're plenty fit for your age, and the suit will assist with the running-around."

Face hardening, `Ghost` adds, "I'll be honest. This op is a long-shot. 'Tac-team assault' is underselling the destruction you'll be fleeing. It will probably start with 'nuke-it-from-orbit'-grade munitions. We intend to obliterate the facility, letting the debris rain down from the clouds of Venus. The project must be destroyed if it can not be recovered."

"My security team don't even want to attempt the recovery, but it's," she pauses for a moment, considering, "precious to me. I've invested my entire life in this project, and it was stolen out from under me just as we were about to succeed."

Finishing, `Ghost` says, "So, I need a capable, unattached operative to make the recovery attempt. I believe that operative is you."

"Okay. But, why not a full team for recovery?"

"The cover identity will only work for one person. A full team significantly increases the risk that they flee with the prize, too," `Ghost` replies.

`Ghost` leans forward, "Let me add; I do have other, personal, reasons to recruit you. I'm not free to go into those details right now. But, I need you to know that I intend for this op to succeed, no matter the cost. My life may depend on your success, too." She taps the table with one perfect finger for emphasis.

"To that end, if this works, you'll be able to retire in comfort. You'll keep all the hardware you receive from the job, and there's a substantial cash reward. Half up front. Here is a manifest for the proposed upgrades," says `Ghost`, drawing a fiber optic thread from her wrist, offering it to Ollie.

He raises an eyebrow, a little taken aback by the intimate gesture. After spinning up a beefy **firewall**, he accepts the line, connecting it to his own wrist. No surprise attack — instead the manifest, along with volumes of technical data, are shared.

All the gear is Goodman Cybernetics branded — the quality of the kit is shocking.

`Ghost` sits back, giving him space to consider her offer.

Well, this is a surprising opportunity. I'd given up on all this adventure. I'm sure I can pull it off — especially with this kit. The money is crazy, too. Really, what do I have to lose? No family waiting for me; no team depending on me. I

like my job, but it is a bit boring. Is it time for me to live my own Netrunner Sylph *life?*

Breaking his reverie, Ollie speaks over their link.

netcast: direct voice

theWhistlingSquid

"Can I ask about the project we'd be recovering?"

"Will I be aiding and abetting the death-murder-and-misery of countless children?"

Ghost

snorts into her drink

chuckling, shakes her head

"Oh, burn, no."

"This is my life's work."

"If you sign on, I'll share more detail."

"I believe it will help humanity prepare for the troubles I foresee."

"Everyone. Equally. Not just the elite."

"That should appeal to your anarchist nature."

-motions-to-t-shirt-

-silly-lewd-winks-

theWhistlingSquid

-nods-

looks over the manifest again

"I need a Nixie kit."

"Also, You mentioned Venus."

"If I'm going into space, I'll need a Glitch mod."

-nods-

theWhistlingSquid

"I want my own Chopdoc to do the cutting."

Ghost

"Very well, we can make that happen."

Considering the situation, Ollie finds her to be surprisingly open and honest. He's always had an uncanny ability to discern people's intentions, even in the Net. This has given him a formidable edge in cyberspace combat. `Ghost` reads as truthful and earnest.

Also, just so crazy hot!

Then it hits on him. *Holy void!*

She's a gynoid!

Her absolute physical perfection. Her grace and poise. No corpo would meet me in this dive bar!

theWhistlingSquid

"You're a gynoid."

"How are you 'diving this body with the squelcher active!?"

"Are you on a slagging wire!?"

Panicking, Ollie makes to stand up, yanking the link from his wrist.

`Ghost` has a startled expression on her perfect face.

"Oh! Wendell, please. Wait," she blurts as she reaches for his arm, imploring him to stay.

Her earnestness gives him pause. He looks around the club. Hand resting on his gun. Searching for the double-cross. None comes.

`Ghost` lets go, slowly sitting back, hands visible with palms forward. Careful to convey peaceful, calm intentions.

Looking back to her at last, it dawns on Ollie that she used his real name.

-*shivers*- "You—, you know Wendell?"

-*sigh*- "Yes, I know a great deal about you. My security team is very meticulous."

Both stare at each other for a moment. Breaking the standoff, `Ghost` slowly reaches for the squelcher, "I can see that I've violated your trust. To make amends, let me trigger the insurance for the meet."

With his nod, she deactivates the squelcher. A moment later, Ollie's wallet has a massive deposit. He nods again, and she reactivates the device on the table.

"Before reaching out, I did have you thoroughly investigated. That brings me to the last thing I have to offer as inducement," waving him to sit. "I have information on the double-cross which drove you into hiding. I know who killed your family. I'm willing to share that information with you when the job is complete."

Eyes widening, Ollie's lips go numb and his knees weaken. One hand on the table for support, he focuses on breathing for a beat. As he regains control, he settles back into his seat. `Ghost` visibly relaxes.

With that info, this new kit on offer, and the fortune she just gave me, I could probably put my past to rest.

"Go on. Explain this gynoid and how you're operating it in spite of the squelcher."

"That is not something I can go into right now. If you accept, I will share that with you, too," `Ghost` offers.

The thought of a seemingly sapient robot stirs old memories in the back of Ollie's mind. *Ghost...in the Machine? Something dad talked about when I was a kid. There was a name. What was it? ... Danny? Danke? No dummy, that's German...*

"Danica," mutters Ollie, finding the memory.

"You—. You're Danica," he stammers a moment later. An expression of awe and wonder lights his face behind the mask.

A demure smile appears. "Yes, Wendell, I am Danica. I see you've heard of me?"

"Just Ollie. No one knows that other name any more."

Danica nods in acknowledgment.

"My dad told me a few stories as a kid. You're the mythical sapient Sprite that has a history with my extended family, right? Does— Does that explain your 'personal' interest in me? Somehow? Also, aren't you ancient?" queries Ollie.

"Yes, yes, and *rude!*, but again, we can't go into that unless you agree to the job."

Her mind is anchored to a Scaffold INSIDE *the gynoid,* he realizes. *She's not* remoting *in, she's just* in. He relaxes from his earlier alarm.

It doesn't take long. Wealth, gear, adventure, a mythic sapient Sprite as a client, and the hope of justice for his family. A truly compelling offer.

"Okay," Ollie agrees, lifting his mask, "I'm in. Lets go get your toys."

Payment is remitted; contacts and details are exchanged; arrangements are made. Celebrating in the club for a few hours, they find they enjoy each other's company quite a bit. They then part ways for the evening.

Unknown to either of them, the Echo-Shard, *hidden in the gynoid, makes a small alteration to the cyberware manifest before it is submitted.*

ChoppaChair

"Squid. Dude. What have you done!?" barks out Scrimshaw as Ollie enters his clinic.

"Clinic" is generous — it's a small, clean room. It's barely big enough to fit the enormous recliner chair that houses an entire cybersurgery suite. A ChoppaChair!

"Heh, well, you see, there's this girl," jokes Ollie as he bumps fists with Scrimshaw.

"Riiiight. Pics or it didn't happen, bro."

"Yeah, yeah. About that — she's a ghost."

"Ha! Of course she is! Ha, ha!"

Ollie smiles, shakes his head, and begins to undress. He skips the paper dress and climbs into Scrimshaw's ChoppaChair. The device looks old, but well maintained. The last time he had cybernetics installed was over thirty years ago. That was a weeks-long hospital ordeal.

"I got the courier package this morning. I've been going over the work we'll be doing today." Scrimshaw announces with a smile as he drapes a paper cover over Ollie as he settles back in the misplaced spaceship acceleration couch.

"Who have you blackmailed over at Goodman Cybernetics?" queries Scrimshaw with a silly grin.

"Eh?"

"My man — the amount of treasure being poured into your old chassis boggles the mind," jokes Scrimshaw shaking his head as he places leads all over Ollie's body. Finally he hooks up an IV drip. "And it's all Goodman Cybernetics — new in the box. Like I said — treasure. My fee alone will get me a new boat! Ha!"

With a flourish, Scrimshaw produces a piece of paper. "The Nixie," he reads, "consisting of the Naiad Aquatic Adaptation mod enhanced with a multimorphic antenna lattice kit. Glitch thrusters throughout. Top-shelf cyberdeck. Various sundries."

The old hack's eyes open in surprise, "Ha! '*Various Sundries*', indeed. Two new organs — a Burn Sack and Pixie Dust!"

"The Burn Sack is a high-end metabolism-booster, no real surprise there. As long as you keep yourself fed, you'll be flush with vitality all the time."

"But, Pixie Dust!? Oh my static — this stuff is legendary! These are Spritetech nanobots — they'll fix up and maintain all of these cybernetic components. The vitality draw is frightening during major repairs — no wonder they threw in the burner!"

Recovering, "Okay, finally, a mission-specific Scaffold load-out. You get to install that yourself."

"Lucky for you it's mostly detail work — no truly profound structural changes. The Naiad will touch you all over, but in a bad way. It includes a couple skin patches — those aren't too bad. Bone etching for the Glitch omnikinetic thrusters is my specialty, so no issue there."

"A note of caution. The Glitch and the antenna lattice are heavy hitters in both vitality drain and heat production. Alone, either can cook you alive. Together, they'll destroy you. Respect their limiters."

"I'm serious, man. I saw a dude that died from burning out his Glitch. His corpse smelled like a pork roast," blanching at the memory.

"If you are forced to exceed the limiters, make sure you're underwater and extremely well fed — or well funded. Ha! I suppose the Naiad's radiating surfaces would help with the heat, but you'll blow through vitality like mad."

"PSA outta the way, moving on."

"The biggest concern for the procedure today will be the wetware upgrade. This system is a beast — full Sensie; Cybereyes; Cyberears; all mil-spec, special-ops kit. It's just," he pauses, "Wetware upgrades are one of the few procedures that require the patient be fully unconscious. It's really invasive. I'm going to have to take you off-line for an hour or two while I run all the traces and swap out the core."

Ollie has known Scrimshaw for a few decades. He's had him do some maintenance work, they have similar worldviews, and get along well enough at the local pub. He trusts Scrimshaw enough for the job — more than a complete stranger, anyhow.

Nodding, Ollie signals Scrimshaw to continue.

"I've heard of the Naiad, but never seen one before," Scrimshaw offers, holding up a bag full of strange looking wires, devices, and packets of goo. "They're usually for microgravity combat jockeys and aquarium aficionados. The Nixie upgrade with its fancy antenna lattice is new, though. I can see how it would turn this niche kit into a Netrunner's wet dream."

"You'll have retractable control surfaces (fins) that double as heat and oxygen exchanges. The antenna lattice with its adaptive phased array will also make great use of the surface area and integrate well with this ridiculous wetware system you're getting. It will create a truly massive wireless profile for you. You'll be able to stream ungodly amounts of data without a wire, and overcome profound signal jamming effects — especially if you connect to an external power source, and an external heat sink. You'll also light up like a torch on EM scanners."

"Your lungs will get an adaptation film. Underwater, they'll act as buoyancy bladders. You'll be able to swim very well."

With a raised eyebrow, "You'll have small retractable utility claws." -*shrug*- "I'll not judge."

"Ha. Ha. Funny. Get on with it, Scrimshaw," retorts Ollie.

"Recovery will be rough. The Naiad kit will make your skin and lungs itch like a bitch. New wetware traces are going *everywhere* and they'll subsume all the existing lines. In fact, they'll continue to grow as the Pixie Dust completes the installation over the next week. When you get home

tonight, you're gonna need to lie still for at least twenty four hours. A tranq will help with that. On that note, I'll get you home safely when we're done here."

"Speaking of recovery, uh, in an awkward turn of events, the Burn Sack is going to give you a boner for about a week." -*snicker*- "Not much to do about it other than enjoy some teenage angst."

"Between that and the Naiad, you'll have an itch with your itch! Ha! Hahahahaha!" roars Scrimshaw at his own joke.

Ollie smirks. "You're a riot," he deadpans.

Ollie takes all this in stride. While the arousal thing will be weird, he's only really concerned about being unconscious for hours — at least he was expecting that part.

"You know," says Scrimshaw, wiping a mirthful tear, "Looking at all this kit, I'd feel amiss if I didn't make this next offer. I happen to have a premium mil-spec 'deck on my hands. Borzoi Systems' top-of-the-line combat 'deck — the Berkut-10k. Brand new, next gen. The original recipient got geeked before I could install the device, and it's fallen to me. On paper, it costs significantly more than even the Goodman model that came in your courier package. But, it's a specialty item — difficult to move. Certain, um, people would be upset if they found it in my possession, too."

He continues, "Compared to the model provided, it's a significant upgrade compute-wise, with the same massive Scaffold stack. You'll give up some storage capacity. The Burn Sack will support the unit power-wise, too. In your line of work, it's an obvious upgrade. You'd be doing me a favor, too. It would be the crown jewel of your new kit. What do you say to a straight swap?"

Ollie considers the offer for a moment. The provided model is extremely capable, it's an excellent Netrunner model. But the Berkut is legendary. It's a shock that Scrimshaw has one on-hand.

-nod-

"That is a generous offer, Scrimshaw. I'm in. Thanks!" replies Ollie.

Smiling, Scrimshaw says, "Great! I'm excited for our little project today. I'm flattered you trust me with all this — I haven't done much interesting work lately. Sit back, relax, and let the ChoppaChair do it's thing!" Making an exaggerated chopping motion with his hand.

Ollie relaxes as Scrimshaw activates the chair. Fluids flood his system. Robotic devices spring from hidden hatches. Clicking, whirling, snapping tools spring to life, hovering over his body. He fades from consciousness, trusting in the good doctor's care.

Well mostly good.

Wait. Is he even a doctor!?

Chapter 12

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y5d

"So, the chaos has stopped. At least, for now. It's eerily quiet, though. Everyone is going to stay inside for a few days."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y5d

"The temperature outside is dropping really fast. I'm amazed we still have some sensors outside that are functioning. It's already approaching freezing."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y5d

"It's well below freezing. The unnatural quiet continues. It's really unsettling. Though, thankfully, we were aware that a quick deep freeze was a possibility, so we're prepared for that. We have electric heaters, food, warm clothes."

"I'm so grateful for all the preparations we made. Our shelter is still intact. It's quite damaged, but we're able to keep the cold out. For now, at least."

"There are still lots of minor quakes happening. But they're, uh, gentle in comparison. The occasional quakes are the only sound outside. Even the wind seems to be holding its breath."

Sleeper

The **mind-snatcher** is a short-range trick. I'll need someone onsite to trigger the device at just the right moment — after the heist, before the operative boards the vessel.

With the privateer crew now under contract, I know where to install an agent.

`fixer` is a reliable contractor. They've worked miracles for me in the past, and they prioritize my requests — as is proper.

The privateers are leaving soon. This will have to be quick.

`veilcomm: direct message`

MrKleen

I have a task for you.

...

fixer

Go ahead.

MrKleen

I need a mole on the *Marten Oswego*.
Leaves *Snyder Station* in 2-3 days.

fixer

That's tight.
It'll cost.

MrKleen

Get it done.

fixer

Acknowledged.

Clean, concise, responsive.

It doesn't take long for `fixer` to get back to me.

fixer

I've got a lead.
Got some leverage on a crewman.

MrKleen

That can work.
I just need an agent onsite.
The task is relatively simple.

fixer

I'll make the offer.

Loyalty is a hard-won and arduous process. Leverage is quick and easy. Everyone has rough edges that a skilled artisan can ply with the correct motivation — impelling the desired behavior. It's not a durable relationship, but works in the short term.

The type of leverage is largely meaningless — they all get results. `fixer` understands this better than most. He won't bother me with the details. If there's an issue, I can leave it to him to remedy.

. . .

fixer

He's in.
Payment's arranged in escrow.

posts contact keys

Perfect.
I reach out to `mole`.
A man turned by leverage is a man already owned.

netcast: direct message

MrKleen

You understand the nature of our relationship?

mole

Yes, sir.

MrKleen

Here are the op keys.

posts op keys

mole

Yes, sir.

I'll keep you in the loop.

MrKleen

*invokes **suggestion***

When you're onsite, I'll have you activate an app.

posts the app

It must be activated after the operative has obtained the treasure, but before he boards your ship.

It will quickly disable him — you'll have to make sure he still makes it onboard.

Those already under my sway are especially susceptible to my **suggestion**.

mole

I understand, sir.

I'll get it done.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to ever greater power.

Post-Op Care

-pain-

-pain everywhere-

Ollie's mind slowly crawls back from the abyss, only to immediately regret its decision.

-can't move-

-breathing hurts-

"Slag. My. Life." he whispers into the void.

`netcast: direct message`

theWhistlingSquid

you are a sadist.

🖕

0 of 5 ★ — would not recommend.

Scrimshaw

Ha!

Glad you survived, `Squid`!

posts a picture of the boat he just bought

🚤

Consciousness returning fully, he is overwhelmed with the sounds in the quiet room; his heartbeat; his breathing; water in the pipes; someone else's breathing; his guts; buzzing LEDs. A flood of detail he'd never noticed before. As he sorts and acknowledges each sound, it fades, blending into the background, calibrating.

This will take some getting used to.

Wait, someone else's breathing!?

"Yes. I imagine that wetware upgrade is a doozy," Danica's voice murmurs nearby. "Here's a tranq from your Chopdoc. Scrimshaw?"

Unable to move, Ollie wets his lips, whispers, "Yeah. Scrimshaw."

Danica gently applies the hypospray, injecting a dose of the paralytic-painkiller concoction.

-pain eases, ever so slightly-

Ollie can breathe a little easier. "Thanks, Danica," accepting the sip of water she offers.

He opens his eyes to look in her direction. Aborting the attempt due to, well, too much.

The moment passes and he's ready to try again. He blinks open his eyes very carefully, intending to look at Danica. He continues blinking against the flood of light. Once his Cybereyes adapt, and open fully, he gasps in surprise.

"Whoa. Wow. I- I didn't realize what I'd been missing."

The ceiling above him is a riot of rich textures, profound contrasts, razor-sharp details, and subtle color variations; all conspiring to provide a disturbing view into the history of his room. He can see multiple painted-over stains on the surface. Several are clearly from water, but, there are other stains.

"Also, gross. I think I was glad missing some of that."

The infrared and ultraviolet filters offer even more detail — and are even less kind.

Relentlessly piling-on, his Nixie mod exposes significantly more of the EM spectrum to his perception. It reveals pipes, wires, power sources, almost like budget X-ray vision. The enhanced sensory input puts the nail-in-the-coffin for this living space.

What wasn't *murdered in here!?*

"I need a new place after seeing all that."

Danica waits patiently for him to recover from the sensory overload.

Ollie finally glances in her direction.

She is not gross.

He whispers, "Right. Sorry, that was a bit much. I didn't expect to see you here. Aren't we meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow is today. You've been out for thirty-six hours. I'm glad to see you're recovering quickly, though."

"Wait, have you been here for thirty-six hours?" Ollie asks worriedly.

"Yes. Scrimshaw pinged me when the work was done. I arranged to have you brought here and I've been working from here while you heal up."

Thirty-six hours?

He looks at her again. She looks fresh and ready to go out. Though her clothes are a comfortable cut and do look a little "lived in".

The thought of her being so concerned for him that she moved her workspace here while he was unconscious — and for so long — pokes his anxiety monster.

"I mean, wow — thanks. I guess you've invested enough in me to want to protect your investment," he offers, unsure.

"You are a major investment. But, I don't own your soul — yet," she appends with a grin.

"Ha. ha. huh. Right. Oh, my HUD!" Ollie quickly restores some of his HUD settings, including signal bars and a clock.

"Static, even the HUD interface is fresh-and-fancy — really colorful. It responds to intention. Amazing. I'm guessing that's a Sprite effect?"

"It is. I can relate to being overwhelmed with new sensory tech. I've only recently obtained this fancy new body," she says, preening. "It took me a while to come to grips with all the improvements."

He waits for her to finish preening, sneaking a peek at her improvements.

Closing his eyes, he's still weirdly aware of the entire space — all around. His Cyberears and new EM senses effectively giving him blind sight. *Trippy.*

Ollie asks, "So, do you want to meet now? I'm comfortable if I'm not trying to move."

"That would be best. Time is of the essence. I'll deploy the squelcher again," she says, activating the device.

Windfall

"What a stroke of luck, eh `Chalk`!?" laughs `Ironfall`.

Billy answers, "Yeah, Captain, it's worked out like a charm, to be sure."

"I can't believe that woman hired us to do the very job we were already on!" continues Neville. "I guess the *Scions* have finally pissed off enough people to get their clock punched."

"I'm glad we've got her support. It'll make the crew much happier now that they'll be getting a cut, rather than having to invest in the endeavor, themselves," observes Billy.

The pair of proud spacers continue to make their way to the closest spindle lift. Once in the lift, Billy's demeanor becomes somber as they ride.

"Where'd you go, man?" prompts Neville.

Billy's face collapses into a frown, "I miss Penelope, Cap."

"Ah. I know. I do to."

"Cap, you know, Ope'd tell you, 'Chin up, big broth'a — you get ta deliver my revenge!'"

Neville snorts at Billy's imitation of her voice.

"You knew her so well, Billy. I'm glad you had each other. How's your son doing with you gone so much?"

"He's fine. We speak often, and your mother is taking good care of him while we handle this burden."

Neville nods.

* * *

The pair continue their way back to the *Oswego*, moored on the station's core.

"Looks like lading here is complete. We'll have to hustle to the company's depot at Venus' L4 to get the cloud-loitering drones we'll need. The surfacing of the ship won't take too long, at least. I think they'll be able to polish 'er up before the weapons are all onboard."

"Aye, `Chalk`, we'll be under military thrust the entire journey. That'll give us one to two days to ease into position and lay the trap around *The Lacuna* before their man arrives."

"That's a little closer than I'm comfortable, Captain, but, I'm sure we can manage."

Arriving at the *Marten Oswego*, Captain Mwangi and Chief Blanch make their way onboard.

ship-net: crew message

Ironfall

All hands. Meet in the galley, 5 minutes.

The crew gather in and around the only large space in the frigate. All forty two souls are having a boisterous, upbeat chat by the time the Captain arrives.

"All right, everyone here? Speak up if you're not here!" `Ironfall` jokes.

-crew chuckles-

The Captain calls out, "I've got some amazing news to share!"

"You're pregnant!?" hollers out Jonah, from the back.

Over the crew's laughter, Neville calls, "Ha. Ha. Funny." — muttering — "That only happened the once."

-crew renewed laugher-

`Ironfall` lets the laughter wind down before continuing, "No — not that. We've been contracted for the very job we were preparing to do! We'll be getting paid rather than sacrificing our own treasure to rid the system of the blight of the *Scions*!"

-crew loud-cheers-

"Standard share splits will apply," adds `Chalk`. "That's all! Now get back to work!"

The crew happily vacate the galley, leaving the off-duty officers to chat with the Captain about their great fortune.

* * *

The business of the port settled, and the *Oswego* cast off, they begin the race to Venus.

Between bridge shifts, Neville and Billy find themselves alone in the officer's mess.

"Gah, Billy. How has that cursed place been able to turn six thousand people into mad men?"

"Aye, Captain. But you know for yourself that there's no way back for them. We're doing them a mercy."

"You're right. It still troubles me every attempt we make."

"Not me, Captain. I'm ready to be done with them. 'Ope's memory needs me to see this through."

Chapter 13

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

As I aged, my interests bent toward direct interaction with these minds from beyond. I wanted to communicate with the Sprites. I have so many questions!

Finally, here near the end of my life, I was successful. It took an extreme effort to create a Scaffold that was sophisticated enough to attract the attention of a sapient Sprite. Specifically one that would be willing to work as an ally; be able gain knowledge; and be able to interact with digital information systems. It seems we just lucked out in the end. We've not been able to repeat the feat. Even with exact copies of the glyphs from the functional Scaffold.

It took some time for the Sprite to learn to speak. We had attached synthetic audio/video components to the Scaffold. Interestingly, the entity identified as female.

Sadly, she indicated that she didn't have any memory from before being anchored to the Scaffold. She believes that while under contract, a Sprite's consciousness is limited to the task at hand. So, while she can communicate and learn, she doesn't have access to any previous memories.

The Sprite took the name of, "Danica" — the name my childhood friend.

Bonding

As the oppressive field leaps into existence, Danica's wireless link goes dead — Ollie's does not. His skin writhes and twitches subtly, adjusting to the jamming field, but his bars never waiver. His Cyberears also quickly adapt, enabling him to hear outside the privacy bubble.

"Alright. Let's start with my personal interest in you for this job. As you know, I'm the world's singular sapient Sprite. My consciousness is tied to the Scaffold that Grace created to, um, summon me, I guess is the correct term."

Ollie is paying half attention, as he experiences the liveliness of his skin patches as they undulate in an effort to overcome interference and maximize the signal strength of his link.

"And, before you ask, no, I don't have any memory from before that time."

He lets his skin do its thing and focuses on Danica's explanations.

"My Scaffold is a charge capable, always on device. She wanted me to have as much independence as possible."

"A major feature of my Scaffold is called, 'Ally'. Grace sought a companion mind to work with her. She was getting old and wanted someone to be able to carry her research forward."

Ollie's anxiety begins paying attention at mention of the words, 'Ally', and 'Companion'. His breathing and heart rate increase slightly.

Waiting to make sure he is following, she continues, "As a result of that feature, I have an ability called, 'Bond'. I'm able to bind myself to a singular human, who acts as my host. Through this bond I become an ally to that person. I have a strong emotional drive to protect my host's interests. There's a whole host of details regarding this relationship that aren't important right now."

Ollie has occasionally studied theories about this arrangement over his years of Scaffold development — no real surprises so far.

'Bond', 'Singular', and 'Host' pile-on with the already lively anxiety mixer going on in his head.

Ollie cautiously nods for her to continue.

"My Scaffold must be energized for me to remain sensible, or connected to reality. I can receive vitality from other people, but the transfer is significantly more efficient from my bonded host."

"So, are you a parasite, then?" Ollie asks, breathing still elevated.

"No. The bond is voluntary and the vitality given, not taken. Either party may end the relationship at any time. My need for vitality ensures that I work very hard to make the relationship valuable enough to justify the exchange — offering more than I receive. In that light, I view myself as a symbiote."

"My previous host has required that I seek a new arrangement. He has broken our bond and I'm in need of a new host. I've been relying on my security staff to keep me charged, but that is a great burden and isn't a long term solution."

'Broken bond', 'New host' — the anxiety mixer has become a rave, and it keeps getting louder.

"In my many years, I've had the greatest success by seeking hosts from within the Goodman clan — Grace's descendants. Your clan, Wendell Oliver Goodman," she says, pointedly.

Ollie nods, acknowledging both the name, and the clan — heart rate increasing, anxiety reaching a crescendo.

"Now, the equipment you've received is yours to keep. But, for this mission to proceed, I ask that you accept my bond — become my host."

These words hit him like a bomb — blowing his composure to bits. The storm of anxiety that's been building breaks loose.

Sweat beads. Breath hitches.

Oh, burn, a team — no, not a team — more like a partner, a family.

Fists clench.

If she knew how much I messed that up last time, what I'd lost, whom I'd lost, she'd never ask me to do it again!

"You—, You can't trust me with this, Danica," Ollie's voice cracks. "I'll just get you killed." A sob tears free.

Danica is sad for his pain, but convinced of his tender heart.

More sobs tear free.

Leaning close, speaking softly, “I’ve been seeking someone that I can trust, Ollie. Another lost soul that has experienced failure and pain, as I have.”

With gentle tears of her own, “I’ve seen the betrayal that cost you everything. I read the logs. There’s nothing you could’ve done to prevent that tragedy, nor more you could’ve done to protect your family.”

Ollie, tears flowing, breath held, fists clenched, hangs on every word.

“You’re not a failure, you’re not a danger, you’re a hero, Ollie. You took a terrible beating, but you’re still in the fight.”

The dam breaks.

Ollie’s shoulders shake, tears flow freely, not just for the dead, not just from loss and fear, but from a weight being lifted.

“I need a companion I can trust. Someone filled with good intention in this dark world. I need someone with mad skills and great experience. I’m convinced that person is you.”

Ollie nods along, tears slowing, hands relaxing, breath easing.

“I’m inviting you to come with me on an adventure. I don’t expect you to keep me safe, nor will I promise you the same. All we can do is try — that’s all I expect. We’re going into very dangerous places, looking for legendary treasure, against terrible odds.”

“You, I, or both may be lost on this journey. I believe the prize is worth the sacrifice. I’m willing to stake my life on it — I believe it’s that important.”

Danica again sits quietly, wiping her own tears, giving Ollie a moment to let his emotions play out.

Soon, a calm settles over Ollie. A peace he hasn’t felt in so very long. He feels lighter — freer.

He’s able to catch his breath and his hands relax fully.

“Knowing all that about me, and you’re still making this offer?” muses Ollie. “Well, if you’re willing to trust me, I can do the same.”

“I do have more questions, though.”

“Go ahead,” she says, reaching over to help clean his face.

“Thanks,” he mutters.

“Okay. So, this bond — is it like a marriage?”

"No, not at all. I'm an incorporeal entity. I don't have the same drives you all do," Danica responds, waving off the thought.

"But, this relationship has been misconstrued. While my host and I often develop a close friendship, it's not romantic. More like siblings, 'besties', or rarely even just companionable work associates."

"This misunderstanding has caused difficulty in the personal lives of several of my hosts when my nature is revealed to their partner. Contrariwise, I've had great friendships with my host's partner, too."

Considering, Ollie asks, "What happens if you run out of charge? Surely that's happened before?"

Danica replies, "I've been left without charge several times during my life. At those times, my mind lingers in some sort of limbo until I'm recharged. I'm aware and thinking, but have no sense of the passage of time. It's really disconcerting, and, to be honest, terrifying. This further drives me to seek a good host."

"I have no idea what would happen to me if my Scaffold were to be destroyed," she half whispers. Ollie's new super-hearing picks up the whisper.

"Speaking of my experience of reality, I don't have senses of my own. I can experience my host's senses, or I can, essentially, consume Sensie streams. This is another feature of my Scaffold; it was intended that I experience the world through digital means."

"So, in your gynoid there, you're experiencing the Sensie data from the robot's wetware?"

Danica nods.

"Are you running the Sprites in that system? If so, how does that work? Can you provide vitality somehow?" asks Ollie, arching an eyebrow.

"I am. My Scaffold is able to release some of it's stored charge to power other Sprites. This rapidly drains my stored vitality, though. When I'm with my host, I can invoke Sprites on their behalf, using their vitality directly," Danica responds.

Ollie reflects on the implications of these abilities.

After a moment, Danica offers, "I should mention one last feature of the bond. With my host's consent, I am able to experience their past memories while they sleep. It takes several days to experience the memories of a

lifetime, but it does make me a much better companion. Grace included this feature to enable me to get up to speed quickly, knowledge-wise, with a new host. Some hosts allow this, others don't. While I appreciate the opportunity, it's certainly not a requirement."

Ollie nods, "I think I'd like that."

Continuing to process all of this new information, with both the cybersurgery and emotional turmoil having drained him, he falls asleep.

* * *

Waking, Ollie opens his eyes. His senses are now well calibrated. The overwhelming pain from earlier has receded, but there is still great discomfort. Looking around the room, he sees Danica is still sitting nearby.

Checking his clock, he sees that he's been asleep for almost twelve hours.

"Sorry for passing out there."

Danica smiles, shrugging, "It's no problem and I was expecting you to pass out at some point. Making these arrangements is very important to me. I turned off the squelcher while you slept. I can work equally well anywhere with bars." Indicating her body, "I was able to charge up my frame while I waited, too."

She reengages the privacy device.

Leaning forward, Danica applies another dose of the medicine.

"Oh, yeah. Thanks," murmurs Ollie.

"Well. All things considered, I'm quite humbled that you're interested in bonding with me, baggage-and-all. I'd like to accept the bond. How do we proceed?" asks Ollie.

Visibly relieved, almost hungry looking, Danica says, "I'll open my Scaffold port, you withdraw my Scaffold, and install it into your 'deck's stack. Once I'm onboard, I'll prompt you to accept. Accomplishing that, the process is essentially complete."

Saying this, the gynoid moves to sit on the floor next to the bed near his hand, with her back toward him. She lifts her hair off her neck, and the port at the base of her skull pops open, revealing her Scaffold for him to retrieve.

Danica mutters, not meaning to be heard, "Oh, I do hate this part."

Ollie does, of course, hear her.

With some effort, Ollie reaches over to take the disk. As the device is removed from the gynoid body, it goes deathly still — breathing and heartbeat continue, but nothing else. Every voluntary movement in the framework stills to Ollie's expanded perceptions.

He takes a moment to examine the Scaffold between his fingers. The device is significantly more intricate than any other he's encountered. It has a surprisingly noticeable heft in his hand. Light scintillates over the surface in rainbow patterns, deeply pearlescent, hinting to the phenomenal density of the glyphs in the construct.

His awakened senses reveal a wealth of information about the relic as he examines it — he looses himself for a moment, exploring the abundance of new sensations.

Reverently, Ollie installs the Scaffold in his fancy-brand-new 'deck's stack. The first Scaffold he's installed in the device — probably the last that will be taken out.

Immediately, a small female fairy pops into view in his AR overlay, standing on his chest as he lays there. She waves at him enthusiastically; makes a finger gun; takes aim at his face; mimes firing a shot.

-fairy finger-gun bang-

A spatial panel pops open with a shower of rainbow sparkles, fanfare blaring, animated blooming flowers adorning the border, and a translucent background of a proud unicorn standing in a forest clearing completing the theme.

-trumpeting fanfare burr-DURR!-

```
The sapient Sprite, Danica, has offered you her
bond.

Do you accept?
```

Ollie chuckles as he accepts the prompt, "Seriously?"

A curious sensation, almost like a gentle breeze, flows over his body.

```
You have bonded with the sapient Sprite, Danica.

Danica now relies on your for psychic power.

Danica is now an Ally to you.

Danica requests administrator access.

Do you accept?
```

Laughing, then wincing, he again accepts the prompt. *This is so strange.*

-Ouch- oh, wow, your thoughts are so loud! A decidedly feminine voice complains, directly into his mind — seemingly in response to his stray thought. The fairy on his chest looks pained and holds her hands to her ears, wincing.

-fairy wince-

Telepathy!? That's unexpected, but shouldn't be, really, he thinks, intentionally trying to lower his, uh, thought volume(?), down from eleven.

I mean, you installed me into your head, giggles the fairy voice.

-fairy smile-

I'd prefer you call me, Danni, by the way.

Well, nice to meet you, Danni! he emotes.

And you, Ollie! That's a much better volume. I think we're calibrated now. Thanks.

-fairy two-thumbs-up-

With just a little practice, you'll be able to keep your inner monologue, well, you know, Inner, instructs Danni.

-fairy nod-

So, you're the fairy, then? he observes, dryly.

Yep! I'm happy to appear however you want (within reason -fairy glance-askance-). I've found that this form is unobtrusive, lets me communicate a great deal through your vision, and is less, uh, threatening to my host's partner,

Danni shares.

The fairy is maybe six inches head to toe. She is very beautiful, with loosely curled black hair in a pixie cut. Her overlarge brown eyes sparkle with mischief. She wears a short, curve-hugging, sparkly sundress. Flitting around on her dragonfly wings, she leaves a little sparkling trail of fairy dust.

Nodding, Ollie gives her a thumbs-up, *You're easy to see and nice to look at, but not distracting. Also, your avatar is really expressive. Is that you being you, or is there a purpose in that?*

Danni replies, *Eventually, we'll develop an empathic link. My over-expressiveness helps that develop faster at first.*

Also, I'm cute.

-fairy cute-smile-with-big-blinking-eyes-

I see. Nice. So, what's next? Ollie prompts.

Holy crap! A Berkut-10k!? That's not what I gave you. Did you get this from Scrimshaw!?

Yeah, he needed to move the merchandise, and straight-swapped me.

Straight-swap. Really? Does he owe you a life-debt, or something? These are impossible to get.

No, we're just friends. -shrug-

Well. He did you a solid. This thing is an absolute beast!

That's what she said.

-fairy palm-face- Well played.

-ollie chuckle-

Will you deactivate the squelcher, please? I can 'dive the gynoid from inside your head.

Ollie gingerly reaches out, takes the box, and deactivates the field.

As the field collapses, *Oh! Hehehe,* giggles Danni, *holy crap, you had full bars the whole time!? Wow this Nixie kit's antenna lattice is ridiculous!*

He smiles to himself, winking to himself, *Thanks for the upgrade!*

Thinking to himself, *I'm going to have to be careful or people are going to think I'm talking to myself.*

Yes.

Danni disappears; Danica returns to life; stands up; Scaffold port closing; hair settling back into place. She brushes down her clothes and hair, moving back to the chair.

Damn, it feels good to have a host again. Thank you, Ollie. I'm looking forward to our adventures!

Here are the Scaffolds from your old wetware stack and your cyberdeck. Danica offers him a small baggie full of the Scaffold chips.

Sorry I don't have a nice case for them. Scrimshaw just stuffed them into this plastic baggie.

Shaking his head, Ollie accepts the baggie. Taking care, he inserts his treasures one after the other.

Okay, the next thing to go over is a set of custom Scaffolds for the mission. Danica draws a small case out of the courier bag from Scrimshaw's office. She offers the case, containing a half-dozen chips.

Taking the case, he again inserts the Scaffolds serially.

Finally, I'd like you to install my personal Scaffold set. You are, of course, welcome to use them. I know I will. They, like me, are ancient. And, being ancient, they are therefore mysterious and powerful! Danica adds, smiling.

Though, yours are pretty ancient, too, she adds with a smirk.

Ha. ha. Such a kidder.

She presents a small old-looking, ornate case containing another collection of the tiny chips.

He reaches out again, taking the case. This time he takes a moment to inspect each of the diminutive devices. Every single one of them has that same pearlescent sheen to their surface. This is one of the hallmarks of a highly-developed and well-used Scaffold.

Again his incredible senses capture his attention for a moment as he inspects the Scaffolds.

With care, Ollie inserts each of the proffered disks. Checking each of them in his wetware, he sees that a full set of Netrunning Sprites are included. He's familiar with most of them and has his own copy; he hasn't heard of several; and a few are urban legends.

You're a 'runner!? he emotes, surprised.

I mean, I AM an ancient, sapient Sprite, bound to cyberspace, summoned by the great-godmother of all Spritetech. Of course I have a sweet set of tools! She responds, feigning offense.

Alright, alright. I can't tell you how excited I am to take these for a spin!

Noticing that one of the Scaffolds has a significant data vault, he asks, *What's this one for? There's so much data!*

Oh, that's a nifty one, Danica says, nodding enthusiastically, *It's a FIVR training suite. Your new 'deck and wetware support full FIVR skill training — even motor skills. I've loaded it up with all the training programs to which I have access. It's a lot.*

Motor skills? Even, like, physical combat skills? Is that even a thing!? he asks in shock.

Yes, exactly. It has a crazy time dilation feature, too! It results in extremely rapid skill acquisition. I'll be able to train you while you sleep, Danica replies. *You're gonna be really, really sore, though. Maybe even more than you are now.*

Grimacing, Ollie says, *Well, that sounds awesome and horrible at the same time.*

It is!

Danica stands and heads for the door, waves, and leaves the apartment.

As Danica leaves, Danni reappears, sitting back on Ollie's chest, *We don't need the gynoid for now. I've sent her back to my office to recharge her nanocapacitors.*

And, just so you know, I'm a bit of a homebody. Unless I have to, I'll probably take up permanent residence in your cranium, Danni purrs.

-fairy lewd-wink-

Blanching slightly, Ollie lays back to rest some more. The pain having intensified with all the activity. *So, that memory sharing thing — do you really want to see all that?*

Honestly? Yes. Very much so.

Alright, you've already got access to my wetware, so why not go all in? Let's do it.

Wonderful. I'll start when you next sleep. I'm very curious!

-fairy hungry-feral-grin-

Ollie says, *Okay, moving on. What's next?*

Danni lectures, *In our research, long ago, Grace and I observed that human psychic abilities were increasing in both power and frequency. By the time she passed, the effect had increased meaningfully. Not enough that the population-at-large had noticed, but a statistically meaningful increase. We also discovered traces of an exotic energy associated with the increase.*

We theorized that this exotic energy ebbs and flows along with the galactic current sheet. Previous to the solar micronova, the solar system had none — increasing slowly since. It seems to be primarily gathering within the planet for now. We believed, er, I believe that once filled, it will then spill out onto the surface.

-fairy wringing-hands-worriedly-

Alarmingly, our experiments indicate a complete lack of compatibility between existing technology and this exotic energy. It isn't just incompatible, it is antagonistic — actively interfering with modern technology. Specifically with microelectronics. Without mitigation, this will create tremendous chaos — sending us into another dark age.

Laying still, Ollie continues to absorb all the information.

-fairy pacing-

The idea of somehow regulating the energy occurred to us. We thought that maybe a sufficiently powerful Sprite could accomplish this — perhaps managing the energy so it would be available on both sides of the galactic current sheet. We thought this would help humanity more easily survive the periodic destruction of the world.

We also hoped that such a Sprite could develop a way to switch up our technology base in order to avoid another societal collapse.

-fairy thoughtful-lip-tapping-

Ollie lays there, transfixed as he listens to the story. He moves his hand to encourage her to continue.

Danni resumes, *I've been continuing the research ever since. Three hundred years of effort.*

About a year and a half ago, the most recent iteration of the Scaffold began absorbing vitality — indicating a viable construct!

-fairy sparkling-eyes-

I've been working to activate the device by charging it up ever since.

This surprises Ollie, most Scaffolds are trivially completed after just a moment of charging. *Wait, you said you've been charging the construct for over a YEAR?*

-fairy nodding-

Obviously, this is a shocking amount of vitality. We even figured out how to have multiple people contributing at the same time. It just keeps soaking up the power!

I mean, how big is this thing? emotes Ollie.

Big. Ostrich egg big.

-fairy arms-stretched-wide-

Ollie's new eyes bug out a bit as he imagines the construct.

Our projections indicate that it will finish about two months from now — assuming contributions continue, unabated.

-fairy defeated-sigh-drooping-wings-

However, two months ago, it was stolen. We know who; we know how; and we know where they've taken the device.

-fairy at-a-podium-

Danni stands tall, proclaiming emphatically, with fist pounding, *It must be recovered! I believe it is key to the long term survival of the human race. It cannot be allowed to be completed by those crazy, murderous people — who knows what they'll do with that power!?*

This is the mission, Ollie — to recover the Scaffold of a world Sprite from the clutches of a crazy terrorist cult in the clouds of Venus!

Ollie stares at her, nonplussed, *Were you standing behind a podium?*

Gooooo team!

-fairy fist-pump-

Chapter 14

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y69d

"We opened the door today. There's deep snow everywhere. It's well above freezing, though — there's gonna be flooding."

"The one shelter we lost contact with did break apart. We can't find any of them. Not surprising, I guess. The wind would've swept them away."

"Everyone else in the community seems to have survived. At least, those that were preparing. We sent out several little camera drones — like Noah's doves. Everything around us was swept away. It's really spooky."

"The sun is beautiful and the air is so very clean outside. It's invigorating."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y70d

"It's strange that the sun rises and sets at different points. We stayed up to check the stars. Their relative positions haven't changed, but they're oriented differently to us — they've shifted around in the sky. This is convincing proof that the planet's surface did actually shift around. Seems to be by about 90 degrees."

"Measuring the stars' paths confirms that the new poles are at the Bay of Bengal (north pole) and just off the coast of Ecuador (south pole)."

Takeoff

Wakey, wakey, hands off snakey! Danni teases early the next morning. *I thought you were all grown out of this phase,* the tiny fairy standing on his chest states, waving toward further down the bed.

Huh? Oh. Ah, yeah, that. Scrimshaw said that the Burn Sack you gave me will do that for the next week, Ollie mumbles.

Attempting to regain some manliness, *I don't usually take women to bed on the first date, you know. So, I should be forgiven for certain, uh, situations, uh, arising.*

Right. -fairy wink-

Anyway, we need to get you to your ride in a couple of hours. So, chop-chop! Get showered!

Moving is still an exercise in agony. Ollie takes a hit from a different hypospray. One with a hand-scrawled label, "For the day after the day after but not before," which he assumes is today. Carefully raising it to his neck, he injects the material.

Settling down, he waits for the meds to take effect.

While waiting, with his eyes closed, he marvels at how powerful all these new senses are. He's able to see through the surfaces all around him. Maybe as far as ten meters in every direction.

Power signatures are obvious, water pipes have their own glow. Even more unusual is the fact that it is all around — in full 3D. He can 'see' things behind without any difficulty. This is going to take some getting used to.

After a minute, the spray takes effect, and the pain eases significantly.

-sigh-

Ollie stands up to begin his day.

So, if I don't see the fairy, do I assume you're paying attention elsewhere? Ollie inquires.

The fairy appears on his shoulder, *Yeah, if I'm paying attention to you, you'll see me in your field of view. It's the easiest way I've found to give you your privacy. I'm always at least vaguely aware of you and your surroundings, but*

only enough to warn you of danger, that sort of thing.

Private space in your head is something people take for granted until they have someone else sharing the space, giggles Danni.

Good point. I'm glad that at least one of us has done this before, he says with a smile.

If I'm not around, I'm generally off being a 'Ghost in the Machine'. My entire existence is in cyberspace, so, there's lots to explore.

I don't really sleep, either. That weirds-out some of my hosts. I do kinda space out from time to time while you sleep, but most of the time I'm doing things.

That's interesting. I guess that's why you offered to train me while I sleep, eh? he posits.

Yes! -fairy drill-sergeant-hat-

Danni disappears and Ollie goes about his morning business. When he goes to get breakfast, he finds bag in the fridge with his name on it. Pulling it out, he proceeds to wolf down the amazing breakfast burrito within.

-belch-

Hey, Danni, thanks for that breakfast. That was thoughtful. Ollie offers.

Appearing on the table, *You're very welcome. There's an aircar downstairs. We'll need to leave soon,* she replies.

I've taken the liberty of having your personal things moved from the college lab into a storage facility nearby. You're sweet old Koldovstvo is still in great shape! If you approve, I'll send your students the details they'll need to proceed while you're gone. I'll also have your things moved from this place to storage after we leave. I assume we'll find a new place after the mission? Info-dumps the fairy.

Oh, uh, wow. Yeah, I actually think that all sounds perfect, he fumbles.

-fairy two-thumbs-up-

Ollie goes to pack, but Danni interrupts, *Unless there's something sentimental you want to take, I have luggage for you already in the aircar.*

Heh, okay. I guess let's head out!, as he heads out.

* * *

Ollie makes his way down to the street, once again avoiding the trash that lines the hallways and stairwells. It's odd for him to think that this is the last time he'll be walking out of this building. Danica will have everything moved to a new place when they get back. He has more money than he really knows what to do with now — especially with all this new kit.

This is kinda weird, Danni. I've lived here for thirty years.

The fairy appears next to him, fluttering lazily along at his side. She doesn't have anything to add, just offering some companionship.

Do we have a minute for me to say a few good-byes?

Of course. The ride to the spaceport is quick, and we have several hours before the shuttle departs.

Ollie makes the quick rounds of the people he's spent so long living among. He's not particularly social, but he tries to be neighborly. So, the entire affair is wrapped up in under ten minutes.

Finally finished, he steps out onto the curb. He looks up and down the street but doesn't see an aircar waiting.

He's just about to ask when a shadow over his head and a vehicle in his perception above makes him flinch back. Looking up, he sees a fancy aircar slowly descend to the street right in front of them.

The door pops open, with the fairy looking like it's her doing, flitting to the handle, pulling, struggling, and following it up and away.

Ollie snickers at her antics as he climbs into the backseat.

It's going to take a bit to get used to this EM perception, he mentions as the door closes.

EM perception-what-now? What do you mean? Danni responds.

The Nixie kit is tied into my perception somehow? I don't know really, I just have like all-around EM spectrum perception out to about 10 meters. It's trippy, but really, really interesting.

Danni goes quiet as she pokes around his wetware and perceptions.

Oh, wow! It looks like the combination of the Nixie, the Pixie Dust, and this ridiculous wetware base system have conspired to give you superpowers! Omnivision, for the win!

Now that I'm aware of it, I can see it, too! It's marvelous! Danni proclaims with excitement.

-fairy cheer-jump-

Wait, what!? This isn't normal!?

No, not at all. Having all this work done at the same time has allowed the Pixie Dust to integrate the systems to a much greater degree than expected. I mean, you had ALL your cyberware replaced. It's more intense than just adding new — the old has to be scraped out, too.

So, the Pixie Dust has had all kinds of access to your crannies.

Let's hope there aren't any other surprises, at least not any bad ones, she titters nervously.

-fairy shrugs-

Oh, well, uh. Yay, us! I suppose, Ollie emotes worriedly. *What is the Pixie Dust, anyway? Where did you get it?*

Uh. Perhaps some perspective? I'm really old. I've been actively engaged in life the whole time. Through my efforts, I've made many friends, and contacts; owed many favors and debts. Many of these old acquaintances view me as the main character, and my hosts as accessories. So, I often receive gifts or payments in the form of, "something that might make your host better".

The Pixie Dust is such a gift. An old friend, who happens to be an absolute wizard at Scaffold engineering, decided to cover an old debt by gifting me a custom creation. The Pixie Dust. It's a unique system, and unlikely to be replicated.

Ollie is stunned. *Well, wow. That's a huge benefit to me, but now that you put it that way, I can see that it is also a huge benefit to you. I guess you're just "pimpin' yer ride", eh?*

Yes. That.

-fairy serious-nod-

As far as what all it exactly does? -shrug- I don't have a technical manual. He acted like this was a profound gift; adequate to cover a profound debt. And, from that man? I'm sure he's right.

He only told me that it will, "fix up the host cyborg and takes lots of vitality for big jobs". With that, I decided better safe-than-sorry and threw in the Burn Sack.

So, looks like we get to discover all the wonders of Pixie Dust for ourselves.

Also, the morning wonders of the Burn Sack.

-fairy lewd-wink-

Again, Yay, us! quiet-cheers Ollie *-small hands-in-the-air-*

* * *

The aircar gently lifts from the curb and quickly climbs up above the buildings. As it eases into the skylane, headed toward the spaceport, Ollie gets a nice view of the slum he's been living in for thirty years.

Aching all over, Ollie takes another hit of the word-salad-hypospray, and settles into the comfortable seat. The fairy stands on the bottom edge of the car door window, face pressed against the glass like a toddler.

-fairy sigh-

I like seeing the city from up here.

The ride continues in comfortable silence, Ollie drifting into a short nap.

With a gentle bump and a soft chime, the aircar settles on the ground. The door pops open, allowing Ollie to step out onto the sidewalk outside.

The driver of the vehicle steps out and moves to pull some luggage out of the cargo area in the rear. He appears around Ollie's side guiding two fairly large cases and holding a backpack.

The cases are floating just off the ground, the quiet notes of the EKTs revealing their magic trick.

A spatial panel briefly flickers in his vision before Danni links to the cases and they start following Ollie around like a couple of puppies.

He grabs the backpack, shoulders it, and thanks the driver — slinging him some bits.

Turning back to the spaceport, Ollie starts following the glowing, "follow me", arrows in AR.

Hehe, is that you putting the guide arrows there for me, Danni?

-fairy two-thumbs-up-

Nice, thanks.

You're spoiling me. I'll never be able to function without you, if you keep this up.

Bah! You caught me already!? Danni grouses.

-fairy wink-

* * *

Danni's arrows take him over a short route to the loading ramp for a small orbital shuttle. As they approach, the cases move over to the luggage-loading area and line up to be put into the cargo hold.

They join the queue to enter the spacecraft. Ollie has never been this close to one before. Even though this is just a short range shuttle, it stands several stories tall. At the top, er, front(?) of the craft, he can see several antenna clusters. Down the sides, the heat masts that run along the length of the craft are partially deployed. Between the masts and the hull he can see the taut radiating material as it shimmers with weird rainbow-hued reflected light.

The heat sails, or sheets, are miraculous. The coolant, brine, runs through the mast base, and the heat pipes in the sail material wick it out across the surface to radiate waste heat into space. Heat sheets are made of a weird material that stretches and flexes as the masts move to keep the surfaces at optimum angles for heat radiation.

Even on the ground, the masts and sheets are gently swaying about, looking for optimal positioning. It's almost like watching fins on tropical fish, or the frills on reptiles as they stretch and compress.

The person behind him in line gently prods him to move forward — he wasn't paying attention. As he steps into the airlock, an ident ping collects his ticket information and the door slides open for him to enter.

He grabs a seat in the cramped passenger cabin, securing his backpack under the seat — still unsure what all he's carrying. Ollie straps in for his first ride into space.

While he waits in his seat, Ollie decides to check in with his gaming guild. Things in his life have been changing fast — he's been unable to stay current.

He plays a DPS mage in his FIVR game of choice. His irregular Netrunning schedule makes it difficult to commit to reliable play times. This has forced him into an 'alternate' position in the guild, so he doesn't get into very many of the raids.

His old wetware has made his experience in the game a bit lackluster, too.

Looks like the guild successfully completed the boss they'd been working on most recently. That's nice. It probably means he'll find a raid slot easier as they now move into farming mode for that encounter.

Oh, I see your main is a DPS mage! I love him. He's so cute, offers Danni.

Still not used to her presence, Ollie is slightly startled. *-chuckle- Oh, right. Still getting used to having you with me, Danni.*

-fairy bats-her-eyes-

Are you familiar with this game?

Yes, of course, I play all the time. No sleep makes Danni the baddest gaming babe on the block!

Most recently, I've been playing a tank. I haven't logged in for a while. Gaia has been taking up all my time.

* * *

After everyone gets settled, the passenger airlock is sealed. The crew go about the cabin double-checking that everyone is secured.

The crew do the safety briefing as the spacecraft comes to life around them. Outside, the radiator sails, partially deployed, begin folding back for atmospheric flight. Bangs and bumps rattle around the shuttle as things are locked down for launch.

"Please relax and enjoy the ride. Our flight time today is just over ten hours to *Snyder Station* in Earth-Luna-L1. There will be an in flight meal, please make your selections before service starts using the cyberspace menus," says the bored looking flight attendant.

The liftoff is pretty underwhelming, to be honest. The EKTs blaring as they throttle up. The acceleration pressure is pretty mild, being only 0.3G above Earth normal gravity — enough to get off the ground, but not enough to take your breath away.

Ollie's eyes pick up on the heat billowing off the mostly-retracted radiating sails. It's a beautiful detail that he wouldn't have seen before. He appreciates the sight for a moment.

Wanna group up in the game? Danni startles him out of his reverie, *We'll have decent ping for a few hours, yet. Your new FIVR is going to, Blow. Your. Mind. Pkkew!*

-fairy brains-sploding-

Yes! Please! That would be awesome, enthuses Ollie. *Lets roll new toons. You tank, I'll heal, and we can both bring a side of DPS?*

Oh, that sounds fun. Yes!

You know, now that I think about it, I'm weirdly excited to have you as my full-time VR playmate. But, you know, not in a weird, cousin-stuff, kinda way, he ends awkwardly.

Poorly stated, but I share the sentiment, she says with a grin.

Ollie connects a fiber from his wrist to the jack on his acceleration couch, engages his FIVR interface, and appears in his cyberspace lobby.

He is shocked at the changes in his lobby. The new 'deck is a worthy match for his upgraded wetware. Every detail is rendered with such fidelity he can't see any artifacts. It is perfect.

Danni is there with him. In cyberspace, her avatar is a full-sized version of the fairy. They move quickly to the game service lobby, and then login.

Alone within the service's landing space, Ollie pops into the character select area. From there, he opts to create a new character. The character creation app loads up, and he's looking at the most life-like rendering of himself he's ever seen. He's stunned for a moment.

Ollie quickly rolls through the customization, 'younger-ing' his toon, and selects a healing class with an off-DPS specialization, and a side of crowd control. Accepting his choices, he activates the new character, skips the tutorial world, and he's dropped into the starter zone.

Again the FIVR overwhelms him. The detail is mind boggling; the movement of air through his hair; the smells of the forest; the heat of the sun on his skin; the sounds of the animals; the deep colors and sharp details of the trees.

The next few minutes are spent with him simply being in the environment. Not in his wildest dreams did he think the experience would be this different from his old wetware.

Danni sends him a friend invite and they group up. An armored woman appears next to him in the forest after a moment. She looks very much like the fairy, but human. They then start running around slaughtering everything.

Kill. all. the. Bunnies!

Ollie is finally hit by a killer bunny. *Gah! OUCH! Damn it! Oh, that actually hurts so much more than before!* He quickly dispatches the beast and then heals the minor wound.

I can feel the warm blood splattering and rolling off my skin! This is just insane. The smell! -gag- and taste -spits-. Yuck.

Also, I'm cyber-sweating!?

I'm glad you approve, hehe. So, the pain — you can turn down the resolution. But, it turns out it's a really effective way to train your brain for real combat. Rather than turn down the sensation, I'd suggest that you, instead: Learn. To. Play. Newb, Danni taunts.

-eye rolls-

They continue carving a path of destruction through the bunny warren — having a blast.

After a while, Ollie comes to a standstill with a thoughtful expression on his face. *This is really a game changing upgrade. Just this interface will make the 'dive so much better. I haven't even done anything the new 'deck. I actually keep forgetting I have it with me all the time now, rather than having to, "do it later, in the lab".*

Danni nods, *Yeah. I forget you have been stuck in thirty-year-old tech.*

This is new stuff, though — how have you survived for so long before this resolution was available? Do you experience the same fidelity that I do?

Oh, I can still feel the sensations from your body. So, early on I wasn't starved for sensation. I am able to process insane amounts of Sensie data, too. So, I can squeeze every bit of information out of any Sensie stream I consume. What you're experiencing now? It's just the tip of the iceberg compared to what I experience.

-fairy arm-flex-

* * *

Five hours into the shuttle trip, Ollie gets tired. The game has become unplayable with the slowly increasing ping times.

I'm gonna take a nap, Danni. Do your thing, training, memory watching, whatever. I'm available for companionable nestling.

-fairy nod-

Chapter 15

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | during mirconova

"An earthquake started just after my last recording. It's been going strong for several hours. The intensity varies, but it hasn't stopped."

"We're fine in our shelter. We're all just scared about what's happening. Lots of praying. I'm glad my education brought me closer to God. I've grown so much; both in my mind and in my faith. It has created some distance between my and my old church, though."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | during mirconova

-horrible horn-like sounds are blaring-

shouting "Wow - these loud raucous sounds have just started. It sounds like it's coming from the sky. They change frequencies randomly, and often. It ranges from deep, like, bone-shaking bass all the way up to barely audible dog whistles. I'm sure the actual frequencies are much broader, but that's what we can hear."

shouting "It's all just really, really loud. It kind of reminds me of whale songs as the sounds change pitch. There are even clicks and other percussion-like sounds sometimes."

shouting "The wind has also picked up. It's howling outside right alongside the stentorian sounds. The wind is so bad I'm afraid that anyone caught out there will be carried away."

The Teeming Shroud

Lurk strides confidently from the ceremony hall toward the temple's docking port. She's wearing her shipboard power armor — Sensie helmet attached. The writhing tentacle motif is subtle and unsettling — as it should be.

The Teeming Shroud awaits at its berth. Her new ship. A corvette-class drone tender, custom-made for her, and paid for by her father. It is a reward for her efforts in obtaining the world seed.

The *Shroud* was just accepted, and the commissioning ceremony has just completed. It is time for the shake-down run.

Trained together for years, the crew are trusted coven elites, one-and-all. Several of them were with her in the raiding party to acquire the world seed.

She crosses the docking bridge to the waiting airlock. At the midway point, she pauses to admire the sleek lines of the craft. Multiple drone ports, slightly exposed radiating surfaces, laser emitter shrouds, and the antenna lattice up top. A thrilling sight.

The ship has her insignia within the coven's placed subtly above the airlock door. Her stylized skull within a writhing halo of tentacles.

-excited shivers-

Breaking her trance, she continues to board the ship.

* * *

As she steps into the craft from the inner airlock, the old-timey navy whistle sounds out and her presence is announced in cyberspace, *Captain onboard!*

She proceeds toward the bridge, receiving salutes from everyone she encounters. They all is still wear the power armor they had on for the commissioning ceremony. They'll be in their light duty-jumpsuits soon enough.

Arriving at the bridge, she clambers up the ladder. Standing, she greets the chief, "Fang," with a nod.

He returns, "Lurk. Beautiful ship you've got here, ma'am!"

"She is, chief, that she is," murmurs Lurk.

"The mission load is onboard, all crew are present, all resupply and refitting are complete. *The Teeming Shroud* ready for space, Captain Lurk," announces Fang.

Moving to the command couch, "Prepare to depart. Let's get into orbit, then we make way for the proving ground," she commands, placing her helmet behind the couch.

* * *

They arrive at the "proving ground" — a bit of empty space several days' journey from Venus. They ease into guard formation with the other spacecraft in the area; spacecraft that she and her crew will be training against for the next several days.

The ships include: *The Black Litany* (frigate), *The Slavering* (corvette gunboat), and *Unbound Chorus* (corvette gunboat). Additionally, loitering to provide logistics and medical support are two fleet tenders: *Mercy of the Void*, and *The Ministering*. *Creeping Static*, a signal prowler, lurks in the area, providing EW support.

The director, Hangman, sits in *Creeping Static*.

fleet-net: command voice

Hangman

"Welcome, *Shroud*. Looking forward to see what you can manage."

"We'll start with a simple head-on run at *The Slavering*."

"I'll guide you into your starting vectors."

Both craft are quickly moved into position.

Hangman

"Go!"

With that, control of both vessels are released to their crew.

The Slavering accelerates into their firing solution, training their twin spinal mount railguns on *The Teeming Shroud*.

Also accelerating, `Lurk` deploys a salvo of EW drones ahead of *The Slavering*, saturating their targeting bands, breaking their locks.

Before *The Slavering* can regain a fix on *The Teeming Shroud*, `Lurk` has already loosed a spread of frag drones. The anti-material drones detonate into a cloud of shrapnel across *The Slavering*'s projected course.

The Slavering now has to make a choice: plow through the debris field, degrading its own radiators, or burn delta-v to go around. Either decision has a cost.

While *The Slavering* wavers with the choice, `Lurk`, funneling vitality into her ancient **swarm** Scaffold, splits her attention — something unheard of with lesser devices — running two wings of strike limpets on wide flanking vectors. The drones move like an extension of her own mind.

Slow, patient, crawling across space to burn *The Slavering*, the drone wings come in from different vectors requiring *The Slavering* to rotate to engage one or the other. Doing so exposes their heat sheets to the neglected group. The moment it chooses and rotates to burn one wing with its lasers, the other wing closes rapidly.

`Hangman`, on the *Creeping Static*, watches in fascination. *Her drones move like a locust swarm, or a jellyfish bloom — like living organisms.*

One limpet slips past the point-defense laser fire, attaches to the hull, and simulates a thermal detonation. Outside a simulation, *The Slavering* would've been roasted.

Outright destruction of combat vessels is difficult — critical systems are inherently decentralized, and the tough ships are built to withstand high-G maneuvers and fast-moving space debris. Overheating them is much easier — they're out of the fight, and you can usually salvage a mostly intact vessel afterward.

fleet-net: command voice

Hangman

"Stop!"

"Thermal hit on *The Slavering*."

"Engagement goes to *The Teeming Shroud*."

"Resume guard formation and we'll have an after-action report."

Lurk's ability to manage multiple wings of drones cinches the engagement — turning a fly-by death trap into an easy victory. Her attunement with **swarm** is unmatched — other drone tenders would manage the swarms sequentially, while she can do so in parallel.

* * *

fleet-net: command voice

Hangman

"Alright, next scenario."

"The gunboats vs. *The Black Litany* with *The Teeming Shroud* in support."

"I'll guide you into your starting vectors."

Sliding into position, both groups are ready.

Hangman

"Go!"

The Black Litany opens up with their railgun, working as a denial weapon, forcing *Unbound Chorus* to burn hard to avoid the firing solution. Every evasion costs delta-v and degrades its thermal budget.

Meanwhile, Lurk floods the engagement volume between the corvettes with brine drones, creating an IR and radar-obscuring cloud that breaks their coordination — the gunboats can no longer trust each other's position data. EW drones ride the edges of the cloud, jamming their comms.

On the bridge of *The Teeming Shroud*, a calm, cool atmosphere reigns. Lurk never raises her voice; the seeming chaos in the tactical display is anything but.

The Slavering, trying to find *The Black Litany* through the interference, unwittingly angles a radiator wing toward Lurk — she's been waiting. Point-defense lasers fire continuously — not at incoming threats, but at *The Slavering*'s heat sheets, firing from maximum range. Persistent, degrading, and impossible to ignore. *The Slavering* has to rotate and retract the sheet to protect itself, removing its weapons from the fight.

The exercise ends with both gunboats thermally compromised, neither having landed a meaningful hit on *The Black Litany*. The frigate barely had to engage — Lurk dismantled the opposition's coordination before the shooting started.

fleet-net: command voice

Hangman

"Stop!"

"Both gunboats cooked."

"Nothing on blue team."

"Engagement goes to *The Black Litany* and *The Teeming Shroud*."

"Resume guard formation and we'll have an after-action report."

* * *

After several days, *The Teeming Shroud* and her battle-hardened elite crew are hailed as the uncontested champions of the skirmishes.

Returning to the temple, Lurk, supremely happy with her new ship, is now impatient for the spirit woman to come looking for her prize.

Janice will be waiting.

Chapter 16

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

Danica and I discovered that she was able to experience my memories as I slept. This gave me the idea to gift her my memories. She agreed and we began a focused effort for her to acquire my memories before I died.

This strange ability seems to be a side effect from the way I crafted the Scaffold; specifically with the desire for the Sprite to be an ally in gaining knowledge.

After several months of effort, Danica was able to collect my memories. It was a wonderful experience. I was often able to relive the memories with her as vivid dreams.

Venusian Excursion

Hey, wake up. We're about to dock at the station and you've got some male physiological manifestations to manage. Again. calls Danni in a quiet voice.

"Huh?" looking around, and noticing his, 'condition'.

Gah! This Burn Sack is irritating.

A moment of intentional breathing and mindfulness exercises later, and the situation resolves itself.

The shuttle rumbles as it is grabbed by the station docking system. "Welcome to *Snyder Station* in Earth-Luna-L1. Please retrieve your belongings and ensure your GSA safety harness is working. For connecting travel, please stay in the core and follow the directions in your HUD."

The agony of earlier has been replaced by a deep soreness. Ollie's pretty sure even his hair is a little tender.

-tummy groan-

Oh, I'm so hungry.

There's food in your backpack.

Ollie grabs the backpack from under the seat, rummages around and pulls out a sandwich. He tears into it while waiting for other passengers to clear the way. The sandwich is gone almost immediately. Packing the wrapper, he then goes to stand. He launches himself up to the cabin ceiling. *-embarrassing-*

After gently impacting the ceiling he begins to drift back down. On the way, he engages his Glitch in GSA mode for the first time. The system recognizes his intended 'floor', and engages the multitude of tiny thrusters etched into his bones, bringing him quickly back to the ground.

Nice recovery, there, Peter. Where are the lost boys? laughs Danni.

Shaking his head, Ollie proceeds off the shuttle, out into the core of the station. His pet cases are already being transferred to the interplanetary cruiser he'll take to Venus and *Hastings Station*.

The fairy makes her appearance, sitting on his shoulder. As he moves, he notices that his clothes are hanging differently on his body, but doesn't think too much about it.

The central core is a tube that stretches out in two directions. It rotates slowly around its long axis. There are cargo, vehicles, carts, and people moving all over the inner surface, going from one portal to the next, out to the various spacecraft crowding the outside of the core.

Cargo seems to be mostly floating along up in the middle of the tube, off the 'floor'. The carts and people stick to the inner surface.

Ollie's Glitch keeps his feet comfortably on the ground. Accessing station cyberspace, he finds AR directions and the details for the cruiser, *The Holloway Effect*.

It'll probably only take about twenty minutes to get to the portal for the cruiser. He's got a couple of hours before he can board, though. Looking again in cyberspace, he finds a lounge area he in which he can wait.

On his way to the lounge, he moves toward a vending kiosk.

Thanks for packing some food in the backpack. I'm gonna grab some more.

Sure — the rest is mostly clothes and sundries, but there is some more food. I figured you'd be starving, with all the changes and healing and whatnot.

Thanks. I'll save the rest of the backpack food for later, since I've got a kiosk here now, he responds, grinning.

Ollie grabs several meal pouches and some energy drinks. Entering the lounge, he finds several open seats and makes himself comfortable. He proceeds to consume all the food he just bought — rapidly.

Wow, I'm hungry!

Sparing a glance around him, *It's certainly different experiencing all this in person. The Sensies don't do it justice.*

Well, YOUR experience of them hasn't, jokes Danni. *You'll find that your new wetware will be more than adequate.*

Right. 'Better Than Life'. Good point.

* * *

As he finishes the pile of food, Ollie makes his way to the restroom. Entering, he notices his reflection in the mirror. Stunned by what he sees, he almost falls over coming to an abrupt halt.

What the s—

Ollie's face appears significantly younger. Like, mid-twenties younger. His clothes are weirdly tight in places and hanging awkwardly off his frame in others.

In shock, and without thinking, he lifts his shirt to check his tummy. Lean, ripped muscles for miles. He drops the backpack on the floor and removes his shirt fully.

The strange apparition he sees in the mirror is a twenty-five year old version of himself — if he was a champion athlete.

Danni. What am I looking at?

Why, your hot bod, obviously!

You know what I mean.

It seems the Pixie Dust has been working overtime. This is developing much faster than I expected. Um—

Um — what?

The fairy disappears, reappearing with a worried expression a moment later.

So, uh, you're going to need to find a shower. Soon.

What!? Why?!

Fortunately, there is a facility further back in the room with shower stalls. He quickly moves to an open one, pays the fee, and enters.

Wait — before you go in, strip down and stow your gear in the locker.

Still in a concerned daze, Ollie complies.

Standing in the stall now, he examines the rest of his physique. The *Holy cow, Athlete!* aesthetic continues over his entire body, unabated. Trim, rippling muscles everywhere — not a bit of excess fat in sight. Not, "Uge", but, "Fit!"

Okay, so, I think you're about to have an, um, 'event'.

He feels a strange pressure building in his gut.

An event?

Suddenly, his body revolts. All the fancy muscles cramp. Hard. Both ends begin to empty. Violently. His skin gets hot and cold flashes. His stubby fins snap out and flail wildly in the air.

Now on his hands and knees, an unending stream of effluence vacates his body.

Danni activates the shower to help manage the tide.

Finally, the outpouring slows. Ollie catches his breath — big mistake.

-gag-

Fortunately, his ability to breath is once again abated, just as a burning, stretching, pinching sensation erupts on his skin.

"Nnnngaaah," he croaks emphatically.

A black, tarry substance begins rapidly extruding from every pore. Even under the shower, the sludge clings stubbornly to his body.

He has been too tense to make more than grunting sounds. He continues to experience the transformation in relative silence.

Trembling, he can only endure the revolting, tearing, squirting sensations. After an eternal moment, the expulsion slows and then, finally stops.

The raining water of the shower continues to wash the slime free — from him and the walls, but it can't reach the ceiling — or the roiling stench.

Ollie catches his breath — regrets it — then with a hand on the wall, slowly stands on shaky legs.

Danni. Why did I just explode?

-choke-

I was aware that something like this might happen, but I was given to understand that it would take some time to get this far.

Go on.

-dry heave-

The Pixie Dust has been revitalizing your body. It appears that you have an extreme affinity for the effect. You have just finished expelling all the waste that has accumulated in your body over the last fifty-odd years of your life. All the dead-and-dying material, all the poisons, toxins, and other corrupt substances.

Going forward, I believe you'll find you feel much better than you probably ever have. Much younger, more vibrant.

Well. That sounds wonderful — on this end of it. I do hope you were going to warn me at some point?

-cough-

Well, yes, but there didn't seem to be any reason to, before, you know, now.

-fairy shrug-

After thoroughly cleaning himself and the stall as best he can, Ollie gets dried off and dressed.

Fortunately, the deadly fog bank he released clears up before the station alarms go off.

Once he's dressed, his body begins to relax from the ordeal. By the time he leaves the abused bathroom, he feels pretty good.

There is still an hour before he has to head to the cruiser. Ollie is suddenly — once again — starving. Arriving back at the kiosk, he grabs several meals. Stuffing those into his pack, he grabs several more. Arriving back at the lounge, he eats the food with gusto.

You're starting to feel better?

Um, yeah. Actually, that horrible aching from earlier is totally gone. Not only that, but I feel amazing. Wow. Like a runner's high, or something. This is fantastic.

Good. I'm glad.

They watch a short episode of an ancient television show about a wandering kung fu master.

* * *

After the show ends, Danni says, *So, just from your nap on the shuttle, I've already made a great deal of progress working through your memories. I really appreciate your sharing your life experiences with me.*

Ollie nods.

I, uh, I've met your wife and darling children, Danni shares.

I see.

The pair are quiet for a moment, both lost in a trance, thinking of lost loved ones.

With solemnity, Danni says, *I'm sad for you loss, Ollie. The were truly precious. I love them a great deal. I'll now miss them with you.*

-sigh- Thanks, Danni. -tear wipe- That means a lot to me. I guess their memory will live a lot longer now that you have them, too, huh?

Yes.

They sit in silence for a moment more.

So, um, do you think I'm healed up enough to start training some physical skills?

Yes. After the bathroom renovation, I'd say you're probably healed. When you next sleep, I'll start beating you to a pulp! giggles Danni.

They watch the next episode.

* * *

When it gets close enough to the cruiser's departure, Ollie collects himself, stands, and makes his way along the core toward the boarding portal.

The bathroom he 'used' earlier is now closed. There are biohazard signs on display. A robot repair crew is at work.

Ollie does some side-eye glancing as he quickly moves by.

We'll never speak of this again.

Speak of what?

Exactly.

As they approach their portal, Ollie says, *Oh, I feel amazing, Danni. This has to be illegal.*

Ha! Glad you approve. And that you survived the blow-out.

The interface between the core and the docked ship consists of a ladder down from the floor of the inner wall of the core, through an airlock, and out in a tunnel to the side of the ship. From there, a docking tunnel extends out to the ship's boarding airlock.

Looking from outside the core, the ship appears to be dangling away from the outer wall, hanging perpendicular to the surface. This keeps the ship in the correct orientation while under spin gravity.

As Ollie approaches the airlock, an ident ping collects his boarding information and allows him to board the ship.

Onboard, directions are shown in his AR overlay. He follows the lit path down to a deck full of tiny, private cuddies. His is little more than a closet with a cot, but it has a privacy screen, which is better than the open common area decks, further below.

His pet crates are both secured here in the cuddy, too.

So, this is the mission loadout, then? asks Ollie.

Yep. Those crates hold your power armor. We'll crack them open when we get to the mission site. Their lading labels claim they're 'computer security equipment'. Heh, whatever that means.

* * *

Settling into the berth in the cuddy, Ollie has some questions for Danni.

Danni, may I ask about what all you know about the theft, and all that?

Of course! Now seems like a great time to go over that.

Danni informs Ollie about Mike Veil, his wife Janice, and the theft of the Seed.

She details the short bond she had with Mike; how Mike 'leaked' data to Janice; and how he induced Janice to freak out and force him to break their bond. The whole melodrama.

-sigh-

I can share the security briefing my team had recently. We go over a lot of these details, and I share the story of your betrayal, too.

Are you interested in learning about your history right now?

Surprised by the offer, Ollie answers, *I had assumed you'd share that later. But, if it's relevant now, I think I'm as ready as I'll ever be.*

Okay, I'll share the Sensie recordings. They'll tell you the story.

Ollie watches the Sensie recordings of the security briefing and those that Danni discovered during her search for a host. When the playback is over, Ollie stays quiet for a few minutes.

Ollie, laying in the berth, quietly weeps. First tears, then quiet sobs. The shock of knowing what happened; the horror of the meaningless, 'why'. His lips go numb in shock as the deeply held pain flows freely out. His loss threatens once again to consume him.

Danni quietly bears witness to his suffering — patiently mourning with him.

Eventually, the hurt recedes, forever lessened in its bitterness and intensity. He can now work to get justice for his family, knowing the truth.

The 'why' of it all — he just can't wrap his mind around such destructive callousness. For what, a promotion?

We're just tripping all over my ancient history and lingering traumas today, aren't we?

Yes. I'm sad this all so intense for you. And that it's happening all at once. We'll work through it together.

-stuttering sigh-

Alright, so. Mike Veil betrayed me, clearly with that accursed Sprite. For a void-damned promotion. Now he's betrayed you, too.

Ollie lies quietly for a moment, considering what he's just learned. The day's ordeals catch up with him and he begins drifting off to sleep.

Danni, I'm exhausted and need to sleep. Let's pick this back up when I've recovered a bit.

Of course.

As they end their conversation, the cruiser makes final preparations to leave dock.

* * *

Once the cruiser departs, it slowly maneuvers away from the station. Clear of the dense traffic in the area, the ship orients, then accelerates toward its destination — Venus.

Ollie is asleep before the cruiser even detaches from the station. As he sleeps, he dreams of nonstop martial arts training. It feels like weeks, maybe even months of hard work. The dreams are lucid enough that it takes a supreme effort of will for him to stay engaged through all the pain.

* * *

Finally, Ollie wakes up. He's covered in sweat, and he feels well rested and beat to death at the same time.

-groan-

He checks his clock. Twelve hours have passed.

-tummy growl-

Ollie pulls a food pouch from his pack and consumes it — followed rapidly by a second.

Oh, Danni. That sleep was awful. What the hell happened last night?

The fairy appears, floating in the air in front of him. She's bald and is wearing a dark blue fu-fu.

You got your ass handed to you. But, by the end, you were able to take the pebble from me.

The, what now?

Haven't you been paying any attention? The Pebble? Once you can take it from your master's outstretched hand you're ready to leave?

Oh, like from the kung fu show?

-fairy arms-in-sleeves-shallow-head-bow-

He sits up in the bunk, noticing that the aches and pains are clearing away quickly. Ollie rests for a moment, rapidly recuperating from the night's ordeal.

So — what — I know kung fu, now?

-fairy arms-in-sleeves-shallow-head-bow-

Put something loose on and get out of the cuddy, grasshopper.

Digging through his backpack, he finds a nice, loose shipboard jumpsuit and puts it on. Ollie steps out of his cuddy into the slightly more open common space outside.

Floating, Danni stands before Ollie, back straight and hands still folded into her sleeves.

With her standing like that, bald, wearing the fu-fu, a muscle memory stirs in Ollie. He bows to his Shifu. Danni bows in return.

Show me, Bái Hè Liàng Chì! she commands.

Eh?

Show me, White Crane Spreads Its Wings! Now! she commands.

Without thinking, Ollie flows into the tào lù, the form, with flawless perfection. He leans back on his heels, his arms lift into graceful wings above his shoulders, standing straight, he lifts one leg. Holding the pose for four perfectly balanced seconds, arms gently tracing the arc of a birds wings in flight, before slowly settling back into a ready stance. It's controlled, natural and familiar to him — like he's done the actions thousands of times.

Has he finishes, realization registers on his shocked face.

Okay, so, uh, how much training did we get through?

Danni, abandoning the Shifu aesthetic, says, *Quite a bit, actually. You're body is extremely resilient now. I was able to push the simulation time dilation much further than ever before.*

We'll need to get you some physical training tools, but that's just for maintenance. Everything else we're able to do with FIVR.

I'm not clear on how that's even possible. Don't my bones and tendons need time to adapt, too?

Yes, but between the Pixie Dust and your other-worldly level of wetware integration, all your flesh is responding to the training in sync with your mind. In the real, the training resembles a seizure.

Normally, you'd need a week or two between sessions. But, the Pixie Dust is healing you extremely fast. So, I can push you really hard, your body adapts, and by the time you wake, much of the adaptation is already done.

We've also burned through a small fortune in Re:Coin *bits.*

Really? Isn't that rate-limited? questions Ollie.

Danni replies, *Well, it is, based on several factors. With your mental faculties sped up in the simulation, and a concomitant drain on your vitality, the system supports an increased spend rate.*

This is crazy, thinks Ollie. *Also, how am I still starving! How can I get so hungry!*

Ollie quickly makes himself presentable and rushes off to the galley. Once there, he gorges himself — he has to prepare for tonight's training!

Chapter 17

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y6d

"It's deadly cold outside. It's likely that some atmospheric carbon dioxide is freezing and falling as dry ice snow."

"I'm glad these shelters aren't breezy."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y63d

"It's been several months of freezing in these stone boxes. We're so tired and bored. Lots of games being played. -*hehe*- I imagine we'll have a baby boom in nine months, or so."

"At least we're fine for now."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y67d

"We checked the door just to see if we could open it today. There is still too much snow for us to open it, yet."

"Also, we keep hearing, like, muffled bangs, or pops, outside — all over the place. It's pretty bizarre. I think it's the carbon dioxide rapidly thawing. It's probably forcing its way through the water ice and snow, making the, uh, like exploding sounds outside?"

Shaping

Brent has been working the company's L4 brine field for years. Fresh out of the company's space marine corps, he was able to land a job as a breaker — his explosives experience making him a shoe-in.

The bag around the rock is fixed, and his team has just finished setting their blasting charges. It's enough to break the big rock up — and that's it. Nothing exciting.

team-1: direct message

old-man

Todd, you done in there, yet?

stinky-finger

Yeah, boss. I'm clear, now.

Brent can see `stinky-finger` as he leaves the last gap in the bag, closing it tight behind.

`Stinky` blinks a few lights toward `old-man`, signaling his readiness.

charlie-site > breaker-crew: team message

team-1 *(actual)*

Charges set.
We're clear.
Blasting in two.
Leads call the stops.

team-2 *(actual)*

Two clear. Go.

team-3 *(actual)*

Three go.

team-4 *(actual)*

Four's good. Go.

. . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 0

The only sign that anything has happened is the bag bulging slightly, capturing the debris.

charlie-site > breaker-crew: team message

team-1 *(actual)*

Good work teams.
Collect your tools, head to base.
The *Oswego* will be here soon.

Breaker crew Charlie gather their tools to their team skiffs, strap on, and move through the slight haze back toward the depot.

Before getting on team-1's sled, Brent takes a good look around. The haze is heavier than it usually is. He can see the line of rocks awaiting their attention. Around the other way, he can see the shepherd crews moving big chunks of broken rocks toward the depot.

He's tired. They've been working doubles the last several days to get ready for *Oswego*'s arrival. Fortunately, they had some warning the mission was coming, so they're well prepared to outfit the *Oswego*.

Seeing that the site is clear of tools, and all his crew's AR tags accounted for, he straps onto the sled, letting `Stinky` guide them back to the company's depot asteroid.

The trip back takes an easy twenty minutes. They don't push hard — the dust eats gear if you move through it too quickly. It's easier on their suits, too.

Rock Depot 12 — such a bland name. Not sure what I would've called it, though.

Brent's Brine Base?

Stinky's Stuff Spot?

Alliteration Always Annoys.

-shrug-

Making their way to the large opening that faces roughly in Venus' direction, they see there is nothing blocking the massive entrance. They're able to get inside quickly.

While hollow, the rock isn't empty. The broken rock chunks are fed into sealed hoppers on the outside. Crushers within the shell pulverize it down to gravel.

On the inside, Brent can see the gravel pipes that come out of the backside of the chasm. They feed into the massive fusion furnaces that line the back.

Further forward, along the walls, are the processing machines. Their large centrifuge drums, and pressure filtration units making them look like strange mechanical spiders with slowly rotating abdomens.

As they approach their crew shack, Brent's sled passes by the stockpile of brine bead *bricks*. *-sigh- Again?* The brine beads from the prilling boxes are heat-pressed into bricks — easy to throw into a shipboard brine furnace.

They arrive at the crew shacks, midway back. Docking their sleds, the crew heads to the big airlock on the side of their shack.

* * *

The *Marten Oswego* arrives at the company depot, burning hot from the two-day race across the inner system.

```
depot-12 > admin: direct message
```

Oswego

Depot 12, the *Marten Oswego* has arrived.

depot-12

Acknowledged, *Oswego*.
Just park it on the lawn.

Oswego

Done.

Coming to rest in front of the hollowed out asteroid, the crew and the small marine detachment get to work ferrying all the necessary gear from the rock to their hold.

netcast: direct voice

Chalk

"Brent! You dust-maker. How are things?"

old-man

"Heya, `Chalk`. I'm fine, thanks"
"I see you brought out my loader"

Chalk

"Yours? Mate. I won *Brent's Big Ball* fair-'n-square."

old-man

"Cha', that's bunk — you can't get a fella drunk and take his junk."

Chalk

"Your junk? I can see that."

old-man

"C'mon, we've gotta lotta work t' do."

Living at the depot is a small crew of specialists. They quickly get to work checking over the *Oswego*'s atmospheric seals, ablation plates, and sensor covers. The *Oswego* is a special craft, designed for operations within Venus' acidic atmosphere. With the special coatings and other accouterments, the frigate can operate for several days in low Venus atmospheric conditions — where they hunt pirates — and *Scions*.

In just under one day, the final preparations are complete. The *Oswego* leaves L4 in a hurry, under military thrust once again, heading for Venus, and *The Lacuna*.

* * *

As the *Oswego* finishes its braking maneuver and settles into low Venus orbit, they prepare for their descent into the atmosphere.

With the EKTs' massive delta-v, they're not dependent on atmospheric braking. `Scamp` is able to slow the ship rapidly in orbit, then ease it down when they're slow enough.

This stop-and-drop helps keep their insertion window extremely brief, reducing the time that they're detectable as they transition from orbit to the obscuring clouds. It also keeps the ship's special surfaces intact.

On the way down, the ship retains a vertical orientation and the heat sails are oriented away from the planet — only partially extended. As they descend into the nighttime of Venus, the fins faintly glow as they vent the ship's heat.

Billy, off-duty, and in his tiny cabin, 'dives the ship's Sensie network and watches the transition. The view below from the ship in orbit, is just as boring as it always is — yellow-white, milky, swirling clouds. They're night-side, so, at least there are some lightning flashes, and a few of the floating cities' lights are bright enough to put a subtle glow into the clouds.

It doesn't take long before the *Oswego*'s belly brushes the tops of the clouds. `Scamp` doesn't linger, and they plunge into the murk.

An alarm sounds briefly ship-wide.

`ship-net: broadcast message`

Eddy ***(conn)***

All hands!
We're subatmo.
Rig for silent running.
Bring in the fins. Switch radiators to hull only.

Having hunted the *Scions* for years, the crew is very adept at subatmo operations. They're familiar with *The Lacuna*, and have collected a fairly complete dataset regarding its construction.

Descending into the clouds, the ship fully retracts its heat sails, and the brine is instead run along the inside of the ship's outer hull. The entire ship is aglow in infrared, but the clouds mask that well. The atmosphere, while hot, is still cooler than the ship, and very effective at bleeding the excess heat away.

With *The Lacuna* still over the horizon, they begin their approach under the clouds at forty kilometers — just under the main cloud deck. Once under cloud cover, they'll be protected from detection by sight and radar - the Venusian atmosphere is not very conducive to the sensors' operation.

Even under the clouds, the ship has to remain upright. The orientation isn't optimal for moving subatmo, but the ship's lay out is primarily for space travel.

"Are we deep enough for the ears, `Haze`," asks `Ironfall`.

"Yes, sir. We're at acoustic depths."

"Alright, `Haze`, you know your craft. Find *The Lacuna*."

The hunt is on.

Many people have tried to rid the system of the *Scions* before. Even the *Oswego* has made several attempts — sure they've succeeded each time. No matter how badly they've damaged the structure, it has never gone down. Many of the crew swear that it grows back, or heals. All the creepy dangling tentacle appendages don't help that impression, either.

Previous attempts haven't had the funding they do this time, however. The *Oswego* has enough ordnance that they should be able to finally drop that thing from the clouds.

* * *

After ten hours of flying through the acid bath, `Haze` quietly calls into the bridge, "Contact. It's *The Lacuna*, no question."

"Any indication they're aware of us?"

"No sir, everything seems quiet."

"Settle us in, conn, and we'll get to work deploying the loitering munitions."

"Aye, Captain," answers `Scamp`.

Over the next twenty six hours, the crew work tirelessly to ease the cloud-loitering drones out of their hold, almost like laying sky-mines. They're operating a few kilometers below the city, still around forty kilometers. At the lower edge of the hot, acidic environment. The acid is less intense, but the air pressure is greater, and it's really hot.

Radar is still rough to manage through the atmosphere's attenuation of the signals, but they're able to get assurances that the city is where they think it should be — the acoustic sensor array showing its worth. They're able to pick up the sounds of the city in the clouds — machinery, fusion core operations, the loud swishing of the thick, dangling cables.

The armory crew have to work in shifts, repairing their gear in between. Higher air pressure and temperature multiply the effect of what acid remains below the clouds. The ablative plating and seals of their special hard suits degrade quickly as they deploy the drones. It's hot, dangerous work, but they've all done this before.

They target the critical lofting structures arranged around the outer edges of the disk. Each of the lofting structures look disturbingly like the big gas bladder on a bluebottle jellyfish. Being able to detect the fusion cores, they target them, too.

Normally, dropping an entire city of six thousand people to their deaths would be a horrible crime. But, the *Scions* aren't a normal community. They 'recruit' adults. 'Capture', or 'Corrupt', might be better terms. It's known that the general body of the cult don't have children — though it is rumored that the leadership have offspring.

Roughly six hours before the expected go-window, the task is complete. They've distributed their drones with their massive conventional ordnance. The *Oswego* is still in prime condition for a subatmo engagement. The crew are anxious to get the job done.

Just as they're itching to go, the comms officer reports contact with the operative.

"Payback's coming, Captain," whispers `Chalk`.

"Aye, `Chalk`, aye."

Not long, now!

Chapter 18

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | during mirconova

"The aurora are back. They're vibrant, even in daylight."

"There's been an alert sent out to the whole planet. The sun-watching satellites have detected some very strange activity on our star. Massive clouds of dust are descending on the surface and it's well-known features are changing rapidly."

"The alert encourages everyone to seek shelter immediately. We've all gathered in our bunker-homes here in the community. We've connected our homes together with buried fiber optic cables. They don't carry any current, so should be resilient in the face of massive environmental electrical events."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)

AI Transcript | during mirconova

"So, uh, the sunlight just flickered and went out. It's like night outside. It's weirdly cold, too. But, it's still just late afternoon. Everyone is terrified. We're all hunkered down in our shelters."

"I took a peek outside and up in the sky, I can actually see the tiny dark body of the sun. There's like a subtle halo around it, but the body itself is black. It looks like there's a slightly-glowing, uh, mist around the star. Seems like the mist is being drawn down to the dark body of the sun. It's all very 'biblical' feeling."

Reasoning

Ollie?

Yeah, Danni.

I was thinking about Mike and his ***suggestion*** *Sprite; about how he is obviously a sociopath — and a sneaky slag. I'd like to discuss my thoughts with you.*

Of course.

Mike never showed any interest in the project as my host. Yet, he had enough information about the project that Janice could plan a perfect raid — including knowing to keep the Scaffold charging during the extraction.

Oh, right, I forgot about that detail.

Danni nods, *Mike claims to have "inadvertently" sent Janice after the seed.*

Then, during the investigation, he admits to leaking the data. This sends us running after her.

First off, how did he know so much about the project?

We never discussed it. I've searched my memory, and I never shared anything about it with him.

Ollie says, *Maybe he wasn't interested, at first. But you were really focused on the work at the time, right?*

I might wonder, if I were him, what would make such an ancient being be so focused — and for so long? On what would they spend so much effort? Might that not be valuable?

Hmm, yeah, maybe. So, he got curious. He's a sneaky bastard, so, rather than ask me, he goes around my back, snooping?

Wait — when did he give you that fancy body? It was a gift from Mike, right? asks Ollie.

Well, it was several months after we bonded, right before he married Janice.

A trojan gift? Maybe he hid a spy of some sort in the gynoid? Did you ever take time to 'dive its systems? quizzes Ollie.

I didn't think to. Everything in the Gaia project was going bonkers. I just saw it as a really nice gesture. But, come to think of it, the whole situation was a little weird and awkward.

tac-net: team message

Oliver's in the chat

Danica

Anders. I need you to check my gynoid for spies.

-ten minute delay-

Anders

Oh, wow, right. Yeah, we'll give it a real through, careful, and subtle scanning.

Sorry, I should've thought of that before now.

Should only take a few hours. I'll get back to you ASAP.

END OF LINE

* * *

So, more training, then? solicits Ollie.

-fairy raised-eyebrow-

Really? I thought you were, "too beat", a few minutes ago.

Nah, I'm good. I wanna do more martial arts, though.

-fairy karate-chop kung-fu-kick-

Patience, young grasshopper.

-ollie eye-roll-

You and your ancient television show quotes.

You love them! Admit it!

Will it get me more training?

Ollie is drawn into cyberspace, where the beatings continue until morale improves.

Sabotage

Anders breaks out in a cold sweat.

This is a serious oversight. I should've been suspicious of Mike's gifted frame as soon as we learned about his void-damned ***suggestion*** *Sprite.*

-sigh-

I often wonder why she keeps me around.

tac-net: cyberspace lobby

Anders

"Sorry to redirect the meeting folks, but we have an urgent task."

"The boss wants us to investigate her gynoid to see if it's a trojan gift from Mike."

"I really should've thought of this sooner."

Bruce

"Sneaky slagging Mike."

Cavette

"Right!?"

Anders

"Alright. We have a potential spy in the boss's body."

"How shall we proceed."

Cavette

"Have we had any indications of an information leak?"

"Or, is this supposition?"

Anders

"I'm unaware of any hard evidence."

Cavette

"Okay. So, a spy."

"They'd need sensors and a method of communication."

"Presumably placed in the 'bot before delivery."

Anders

"Nothing's turned up in our regular scans."

Bruce

"Maybe hacked eyes, or ears?"

Cavette

"For sensors — yeah, seems like that would be easiest."

"Is the gynoid 100% Goodman Cybernetics kit?"

Anders

"Yes, of course."

Viraj

"Good. That'll make the scanning much faster."

Anders

"Viraj — can you get us a scanner bay right away?"

Viraj

"Certainly."

"Get her to the main lab, and we'll have her in a Nano-CT right away."

Bruce

"But, won't the, uh, spy parts know we're scanning?"

Anders

"Good point."

"Also, what about Sprite-based psychic effects?"

Ivan

"There are some rare Scaffolds that are capable of remote viewing."

"They require a, uh, 'focus' item to target the ESP."

"Short of removing that focus, there's not much that can block an active scrying effect."

"There are also other effects that sense 'interesting' things and report when they're able. These also require some sort of device to function as the sensor."

Anders

"Right, '*Report*'. So, how would hacked hardware or psychic effects report what they've discovered?"

"Surely this would be some sort of burst transmission scheme, rather than a continuous stream."

"We would've detected a streamer."

Cavette

"Yeah, some sort of burst transmission."

"If it's a tech hack, it'd have to be a Net packet of some sort. Maybe a Sensie payload."

Ivan

"I've never heard of a Sprite spy that sporadically reaches out to the invoker."

Anders

"I see. So, other than active scrying, it still needs some way to call home when able."

"I don't see active scrying as viable. They'd never know when to view, and full-time scrying seems wildly inefficient."

Cavette

"I can only imagine it would be a Net contact — pushed through the gynoid's wetware. A custom radio would take power, and the receiver would need to be close. A logistics nightmare."

Anders

"Either a hacked or foreign sensor onboard. One that reports home in short bursts via the

Net."

Viraj

"Would there be a self-destruct in the device?"

Cavette

"Uh. If so, it would be something that would just fry the device itself."

"It would make the most sense if it was a local trigger, too."

Anders

"It seems to me that the most reliable spy would be a sensor that has a Sprite effect which determines when something 'interesting' happens. Then, report the 'interesting' sensor data back over the Net when there is an opportune moment."

"Bruce, you mentioned the spy knowing we're looking for the bug."

"That's a good point. Knowing all this, what is a practical way to get the gynoid from Danica's offices and into the Goodman Cybernetics' lab without the spy being tipped off?"

Cavette

"Without knowing which sensor is spying, I don't think there is a reliable way to accomplish that."

"We'll have to convince the sensor that nothing 'interesting' is happening."

"'This is just a routine scan' — that sort of thing. Play-act like we're going for a routine checkup."

Anders

"I have no better ideas."

"Anyone else?"

Bruce

"Maybe we sell the gynoid?"

Anders

"Bruce. You're just still sore about being the Scaffold-bearer for so long."

winks at Bruce, smiling

"Seriously, though — that's a perfect cover."

"Knowing the boss, she'll want to pick a new unit when she gets back anyway."

"Good thinking. Viraj — can you arrange for a Manufacturer Reacquisition and Certification process for the gynoid?"

Viraj

"Right away."

"Oh — look! You have an appointment in one hour, it seems!"

Anders

"Make sure to have a collection team meet us outside the facility. We'll want to take her off-line before we reveal where we're going."

"Alright, let's give that a whirl."

END OF LINE

Anders summons the gynoid from Danica's office suite as he makes his way up top. Stepping out onto the newly-repaired roof, he heads to the waiting aircar. He settles into the backseat to wait for the other passenger.

It only takes a moment for the gynoid to make its appearance. It's clad in the plain jumpsuit they dress it in when Danica isn't 'diving its systems. The robot makes its way quickly to the other seat, next to Anders.

The seats strap them in as the aircar lifts from the roof. The vehicle joins the traffic overhead, making its way to the Goodman Cybernetics main labs.

Anders takes great care to play nonchalant. He says nothing and takes care not to show anything to the gynoid it may find, 'interesting'.

The Goodman Cybernetics' arcology building is a massive blunted pyramid on the outskirts of the downtown metroplex. They have clearance and are able to land in the executive parking area without delay.

After exiting the vehicle, they make their way into the bowels of the structure. Taking several lifts and two carts, they finally arrive outside the MRC facility.

Waiting for them is a team of two technicians with a self-propelled stretcher. Anders directs the gynoid onto the stretcher. Once there, he powers down its systems.

"Welcome to Goodman Cybern—" Anders interrupts the speaking technician, "We have a *checkup* scheduled. Please take us to the processing center." He finger-quotes, "*checkup*," and winks at the technician he interrupted.

"Of course, Mr. Paten. I've been waiting for your arrival. Please follow me this way to the processing center," Lilly, the technician, says. The other technician takes Lilly's place at the reception desk.

Anders and the gynoid follow Lilly further into the facility. They go down several long hallways before coming to several large observation windows revealing a scanning room on the other side. Entering the room, they see the a large pod in the room; an egg-shaped construct, on its side, centered in the room, and pointing toward the door. The tip has an opening with a table-like surface extended.

"Please move the gynoid to the table. Then sit here and join me in cyberspace."

Anders directs the stretcher to the base of the table. Once there, the surface of the stretcher and table act like a conveyor belt and move the robot onto the table automatically.

Once the 'bot is in place, the table quickly retracts back into the egg-like machine. A gentle thrumming sound fills the space. After entering the scanner, the gynoid's wetware stack is emptied of its remaining Scaffolds,

which are collected in a tray to the side of the scanner's entrance.

Anders sits next to Lilly and 'dives the room.

`gc-net: cyberspace lobby`

Lilly *(technician)*

"Anders, sir. This scanner is a Nano-CT scanner."

"It will take a molecular-level scan of the gynoid."

"We'll be able to detect any anomalous materials."

Anders *(---)*

"Perfect, thanks, Lilly."

"Viraj filled you in on the situation?"

Lilly *(technician)*

"Yes, sir."

"The scanner also has a Psychometric Resonance Imaging function."

"It will allow us to scan for active Sprite effects."

Anders *(---)*

"How long will these scans take?"

Lilly *(technician)*

"Just a few minutes."

"You can watch the scans in real-time with this stream."

she shares the scanner data stream

Anders *(---)*

"Fascinating."

The CT scanner starts at the robot's head and proceeds down toward the feet. Almost immediately, a tiny sliver is highlighted in the scan data. The PRI scanner follows directly after and highlights the same tiny sliver as having a latent psychic effect associated with it.

Lilly *(technician)*

"Well — there's something there."
"I'll have to run it through my **AI** to see if there's a match for this sliver."

Anders continues to watch the scanner streams while Lilly runs the early data through her **AI**.

Lilly *(technician)*

"Strange. This device is unknown."

Anders *(---)*

"I'll be honest, that doesn't surprise me."

Lilly *(technician)*

"How shall we proceed?"

"I'd love a chance to analyze the device, if that's possible."

Anders *(---)*

"Let me image the wetware OS, and pull all the logs."

"Once I have that, we'll seal the body."

"Does this unit have a resin bath?"

Lilly *(technician)*

"Yes, sir."

Anders *(---)*

"You'll have to study it through the plastic."

"It's already been in storage for days without issue — let's extend that for as long as possible."

"So, keep it somewhere dark and quiet while you analyze it further."

"We have no idea how that sliver works and we don't want to tip its owner to our discovery."

"Once they're aware that we're on to them, the sliver's owner may come looking for it."

"If they do, make sure they can acquire it with minimum fuss."

"There's no need to get anyone hurt over it."

Lilly *(technician)*

"Yes, sir."

Anders *(---)*

"Can we disconnect its nanocapacitors, too?"

Lilly *(technician)*

"That's standard procedure — already done."

Anders watches as the gynoid is submerged in a resin bath. While the material sets, Anders gets his own **AI** working on the data image and logs from her wetware.

It doesn't take long. Warnings are immediately discovered.

```
netstack.rbl:1277: WARN: buffer queue not empty.
Additional packet emitted.
```

```
snsstrm.rbl:15738: WARN: unexpected Sensie buffer in
queue. Packet sent to hard-coded netkey.
```

Digging further into the logs, Anders finds the foreign comm key used to receive the surreptitious data. It's not useful to him — other than as a data point for further log analysis.

The **AI** makes Anders aware that the timestamps for the suspicious log entries correlate precisely with important meetings that Danica has had regarding her project, and their attempts to recover the device.

The last burst was during Danica and Oliver's bonding meeting — just before she abandoned the gynoid for his wetware stack.

The Sensie packets are audio only.

It's a smart bug.

Surveillance.

The comm key leads to another disturbing discovery. The address appears as the source of a single unsolicited data burst which was merged into an outgoing message.

The order for Oliver's mission load out. The merged data changed the logistics warehouse source for one of the Scaffolds to an anonymous dead-drop service.

Slag. Sabotage, not just surveillance. This is much worse than I had hoped. There's not much I can do from here, either — other than report.

Anders *(---)*

"It's an audio bug."

"Thinking back, I don't believe we've revealed any audible evidence that we're in the MRC facility."

"Regardless, be quick in your analysis."

she nods

It's time to report the bad news.

Response

tac-net: team message

Oliver's in the chat

Anders

Ma'am. Troubling news.

Several items.

We found a tiny metallic sliver embedded in the gynoid's head, near the ear. It's clearly Spritetech, but we've never seen an artifact like this one.

We scanned the gynoid's logs and found that it is a smart bug.

There were multiple times when short Sensie bursts were transmitted.

Once an outgoing message was modified before it was sent. It was the order for the mission Scaffolds. An unknown Scaffold was swapped.

Oliver has something bad in his stack.

Danica

Okay. We'll investigate.

END OF LINE

We need to get to the ship's forge. They're likely to have a scanner that could help us determine which, if any, of the Scaffolds are compromised, says Danni.

Ollie gets up from his berth and leaves the cuddy. Making his way, quietly, toward the workshop space. The forge is in the workshop, which is off limits to the passengers.

Standing in front of the workshop's locked door, Ollie takes a minute to look around with omnivision. He sees that the door is a fairly normal construct. Beyond it, he can see the tools and machines used to maintain the ship en route. He finds where the small Scaffold scanner is kept — apparently not used recently.

Looking further, Ollie sees a sensor cluster just above the other side of the door. He's glad he has all these old Scaffolds loaded into his wetware. In addition to **obscure** for Sprite-based scans, he uses **looper** and **streamie** to dupe the sensor cluster — forcing the sensor to provide a loop of modified data to any observer.

There is no one in the room behind the door, so, Ollie uses his **pickit** on the electronic lock. In no time, the door slides into the bulkhead, giving him access. He quickly steps into the space, swipes the scanner, steps out, and makes sure the door is closed and locked.

Once out of the room, Ollie also reverts the changes he made to the sensor cluster, returning it to normal operations.

He then quickly makes his way back up to his private cuddy. Once there, he draws the privacy screen.

Alright, with the scanner, we can check the Scaffolds against my designs, Danni says.

I should've known you made these yourself, hehe. That'll make finding the needle quite a bit easier. Especially since we'll be able to use the enormous pile of compute I've got sitting in my body.

Ollie pops each mission Scaffold out, one at a time. As each comes out, he places it in the scanner. Each scan takes several minutes. Pulling the data from the scanner, the feeds it through **AI** for comparison against Danni's Scaffold schematics.

In short order, and a sweaty brow, they have the only Scaffold that differs from Danni's designs.

Ollie keeps the suspect chip out of his stack, replacing the rest. He hides it in his berth for now. Moving quickly, he takes a few minutes to return the scanner to its place, covering his tracks both in the real and in cyberspace.

On the way back from the workshop, Ollie reflects, *We'll have to convince the ship's captain that we need an hour in microgravity and access to their forge to rebuild this thing.*

Right. I guess lets start with a conductor? thinks Danni.

Ollie makes his way to the galley, it's usually easy to find a staff member there. Sure enough, he almost collides with a portly gentleman as they near the door.

"Hello, there. My name is George McNantly. I'm a security contractor, and my client just informed me that I need to fabricate a new Scaffold before we reach Venus. Is it possible to arrange a meeting with someone about extending the mid-flight flip maneuver to an hour? We'll compensate for the inconvenience, of course."

"Ah, why hello, there, George. You're in luck. The chief is just there in the galley. Let me introduce you."

Ollie follows the man into the galley. They approach the second in command, Chief Martinez.

"Chief, Mr. McNantly here has an unusual request," says the man.

"I see. Thanks Roger. Please, have a seat, Mr. McNantly," offers the Chief.

Sitting, Ollie skips offering him a hand, as he's actively eating.

"Yes, as I mentioned to Roger, I'm a security contractor. I've been contacted by my client, and I need to fabricate a Scaffold before we make it to *Hastings Station* on Venus. I have the schematics, I just need access to the nanofabricator and about an hour to build the Scaffold."

"I'd be happy to compensate the ship for the inconvenience," adds Ollie at the end of his pitch.

Chief takes a moment to clear his mouth of food, "You're in luck, Mr. McNantly. We'll already be affecting a repair during the flip. It will take about three hours, and we're not in need of the nanofabricator for that work. I'm happy to give you access."

"Oh, wonderful, thank you, Chief," gushes Ollie.

Nodding, "I've made note of it in the ship's log. As we enter microgravity, make your way to the workshop entrance. I'll be sure to have a crewman meet you there and take you to the foundry."

Ollie extracts himself from the table and makes his way back to his cuddy.

Danni muses, *You know, it's actually a really good thing you ended up getting that cyberdeck upgrade. I don't know if the other model would've been up to the task of getting this thing built in the time we have.*

That is fortunate!

Oh! Hey, while we're waiting, we should deconstruct the old Scaffold's schematic and see if we can figure out what it was supposed to do, enthuses Ollie.

Tired of getting your ass kicked by a girl? teases Danni.

Yes.

Chapter 19

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

All during the rebuild, I continued studying both physics and psychic phenomena.

As part of my work to establish the link between intention and reality, I was drawn to the ability of the nanofabricators to manipulate matter at an extremely small scale.

Using nanofabrication techniques to create devices to study quantum mechanics from the perspective of reality-as-a-self-simulation, I discovered what I ended up calling, "Sprites"; units of consciousness that can affect physical reality. I found they could be bargained with. Payment usually taking the form of physical vitality from the invoker's body.

The great challenge in interacting with Sprites was the difficulty of communicating the desired psychic effect. It requires exacting detail. One had to take great pains to mentally picture the desired effect. Even the most skilled experimenter was only able to generate nanoscale effects — chill these few hydrogen atoms by one degree Kelvin; make this chemical reaction more efficient without a catalyst, etc.

While analyzing the after-effects of these nanoscopic experiments, I began to notice that there were artifacts in the environment. Shapes, shadows, forms. For the same Sprite effect, we found the same forms. Not all of them every time, but a common set over many invocations.

Cataloging the shapes, we found that some of the shapes were shared between disparate effects.

Adding the shapes to the experiment before invoking the Sprite trivialized the effort. The researcher would need do no more that intend to invoke the Sprite, and it would happen!

The term, 'glyph', became associated with these shapes and forms.

Resolution

Both the ghost and the woman are surprisingly tenacious in their pursuit of the device. I understand the ghost's desire to recover an investment, but to put herself directly into harms way seems imprudent. The woman seems equally driven, but I'm not sure of the cause — perhaps her father's doing.

I find myself more curious about the true nature of the project. I have a little of the ghost's data and research.

To satisfy my curiosity, I arrange for an R&D subsidiary to have access to the data.

Receiving the results of their efforts, I read through the summary.

Months. The device is taking months *to charge with vitality.*

I don't have all the data, but what I do have paints a disturbing picture.

The Scaffold is built to engage a "world Sprite" — the term used in the data. World Sprite — a mind capable of managing the entire solar system. It will be tasked with managing the rising tide of 'exotic energy' that is antithetical to modern technology.

The Entire Solar System. A singular device for control of everything.

I continue on to read the rest of the report in detail.

Twice.

I don't have enough data to know all the details. The Sprite will manage this exotic energy and ease our civilization's adaptation to the same. But, how will it do this? To what end will the energy be employed? Who determines what those ends will be?

As with all Sprites, the one controlling, wielding, fueling the Scaffold will be the one who directs the invocation. The invoker will dominate governments and mega corporations. All will be forced to kowtow to the one that directs the flow of this exotic energy.

The analysis is clear: the person in control of the relic when it fully activates will also have great influence on how the world Sprite will accomplish its mission.

Control of the solar system. Dominion like no other. The ability to determine who thrives, or who starves.

The opportunity is beyond comprehension.

With this realization, I feel a strange pressure in my head — behind my eyes. It's almost like a gentle pull, or a call for attention. An ethereal thread has anchored itself into my mind. It draws my attention. Out into space. Out toward the sun. No, further — Venus.

The Scaffold is calling to me. Or — no. Something is drawing me through *the Scaffold. It can feel my deep desire for dominion; my need to be in control.*

My world changes. Utterly.

I shake off the strange sensation.

veilcomm: direct message

Veil, Michael *(ceo)*

You're sure this report is correct?

brains

Yes, sir.

Veil, Michael *(ceo)*

A single Sprite? Managing the entire solar system?

brains

Yes, sir.

The Scaffold the ghost has created represents true power.

No one could challenge — no one would dare.

I am no longer interested in owning a rare thing, a toy to possess, or a bauble for display.

The Gaia seed is no mere bauble. It is the gateway to godhood. The one who possesses this gateway as it opens will be placed in control.

I must have it. There is no cost too high — no effort too great.

If I am unable to obtain it for myself, it must be destroyed — denying the same to my enemies.

The woman has the Seed. The ghost seeks to retake it. Both will be denied.

I have a new plan. I will bring to bear the might of the corporations I control.

The `mole` will deliver to me the keys to my kingdom.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to absolute power.

Decompilation

Settling into his berth, Ollie takes a moment to relax. The process to dig into this corrupted Scaffold is going to take some exhausting Sprite work.

Diving into his cyberspace development environment, he takes a quick look at all the new toys Danni's given him.

The fairy settles in next to him in the 'space.

Okay. Let's get this scan data into something we can reason about, suggests Ollie.

Using the Scaffold scan data, and Danni's original schematic for the Scaffold, he spins up an **AI**. His new cyberdeck crunches the data in a heartbeat.

Oh, wow. I'm already sweating from this new heater.

Ollie dresses down a bit, and connects a thread to the wall for some extra power.

Okay, let's continue.

Using the **AI** he just built, he is able to get a schematic for the modified Scaffold.

He feeds the newly-generated schematic back into the **AI**. Diffing the schematics, he's able to obtain details about the hack.

With the schematics represented in cyberspace, they both examine the information.

Let's see here. Remove the common parts, leaving the deltas. Any idea what we're looking at, Danni?

Yeah. There are several parts. Danni separates the sections, *We have a short-range EM receiver, a little trigger, a network stack, and the main body. The network stack is independent of the other parts, it's a back door tap.*

Oh, look here! This little data bank holds some encryption keys — ha! We can spoof their back door function after removing it. Nice! observes Ollie.

Danni nods in acknowledgment.

The other parts are connected, though. She highlights the connections. *The receiver hits the trigger, which activates the main part. The main part is spread throughout the entire Scaffold. Ah! Yeah, this is an overload circuit. It'll electrocute the tissues surrounding the stack when it's activated.*

So, the hack is a short-range, remote-detonated, micro, shock-bomb that will basically fry my brain stem if it went off in my stack. Ollie says.

Yes. It's an assassination mod.

Ollie thinks, *Sneaky slagging Mike.*

Agreed.

Danni continues, *The only unusual thing about the mod is the inclusion of that network back door tap. Why include that in something meant to kill you. Before you're dead it can't do much — your firewalls would block anything. After you're dead, the wetware will be, too — nothing to access.*

Though, while *you were dying, in that brief moment, the back door tap would still give remote access to your wetware while you couldn't use your defensive Sprites — because, you know, 'dying' and all. If someone were connected to the tap at that moment, and quick, they could snag a little bit of data before the wetware went fully dark.*

But, why? Why add this to my stack? What's his play?

Hmm. He's after the Gaia Seed. Is he hoping to be able to intercept it once we recover it? Danni ponders.

Ollie concurs, *That seems right. He's got the prize out on the playing field and he's got us fighting over it. I suspect he intends to grab it in the chaos.*

Regardless, he wouldn't move against you before we'd recovered it. I bet he hopes we kill Janice in the attempt — he despises her and it would make his day if we did the deed for *him.*

Okay, after the recovery, then, continues Ollie. *Beginnings of a time frame. That's something.*

Danni reasons, *Mike knows neither the rendezvous nor return route. I haven't shared that info with the privateers, yet. He is also remote. He can't kill you himself, neither would he know when to do the deed.*

So, an agent. Mike must have someone among the privateers working for him. A mole. They left port quickly after I contracted them, so it wouldn't be a new crewman. He must have gotten to one of the existing crew.

A mole that could kill me and would likely do so sometime after the heist.

Danni nods, and continues, *But, with you dead, while sad, the operation would continue. The mole could report the rendezvous site once we gave it to the privateers. So, just killing you doesn't gain them much.*

Okay, hmm. Killing you in this way does give them access to your wetware. What could the mole get from your dying wetware that they would want? questions Danni.

Ollie offers, *The first thing I'd go for is the key stores — encryption keys. With those, they could get into my stuff. Though, I mean, who cares about my private data — I don't have meaningful levels of wealth.*

-fairy gasp-

Oh! MY *keys!*

I've moved into your head and laid claim to lots of your cyberspace-self. If they got my keys, they could wreak all kinds of havoc. Mike could pose as me over comms. He could set his own rendezvous with the privateers! Even if I were to give the privateers the meet-up details first, later, posing as me, he could just change them!

Danni thinks, *Sneaky slagging Mike.*

Agreed.

* * *

We need to get ready to build a replacement Scaffold. We still need the original functions in the Scaffold, right? asks Ollie.

Yes. These mission Sprites are search-and-destroy worms. They'll track down the stolen data core and corrupt it. I won't leave any trace of the data in their hands.

That core was only a working cache for the project data, anyway. So, no loss there on my part.

Ollie nods, *Good to know.*

-fairy thumbs-up-

It's going to take awhile to crunch the nanofabricator programs for this Scaffold.

The flip point is still several hours away. I'm glad your cyberdeck is so crunchy. The other one may not have been up to rebuilding a Scaffold mid-mission.

Same. Scrimshaw did me a real solid.

Ollie rests while his 'deck works away at preparing the Scaffold nanofabricator program files they'll need to feed to the device when the time comes.

* * *

After twenty minutes, he's drenched in sweat. The Burn Sack has kicked in to help with some of the vitality drain. Ollie gets up, gets a change of clothes, and heads to the shower.

Holy crap, this thing has some serious horsepower, Danni.

Haha, it really does! You're so sweaty right now!

Fortunately, there is a free shower bay. He gets a couple curious looks from other passengers — his aggressive level of moistness is disconcerting. Ollie strips down and gets into the water. Keeping it to a cold dribble, the water helps him bleed off of the excess heat.

Ah, that's the stuff.

While standing in the stream, Ollie tries flexing his new fins. In what is a weirdly natural motion, they quickly raise up out of his skin. The fins are flush with blood right now, working hard to dump heat.

With fins extended, he tries holding his breath. Sure enough, other than life-long habit, the need to breath eases significantly, even with just this dribble of water flowing over his body.

Oh, wait. We could off-load a bunch of this processing to the ship's core. I wonder if they have spare cycles right now?

That's a great idea.

Checking the ship's cyberspace menus, Ollie finds the rate and availability of compute resources. Seeing they're both available and reasonably priced, he offloads a bunch of the non-Sprite work to the ship's core.

With the heavy computation being done by the ship, his systems aren't in overdrive any longer, and his temperature returns to normal.

I'm a little embarrassed that I didn't think of that sooner.

Don't be — I didn't either.

I was in, 'secret agent' mode. I guess it was a fun way to try out my new merman kit.

-fairy nod-

Now freezing, Ollie gets out of the shower, dries off, and heads to his cuddy. He oversees the remaining process from his berth. It finally winds down and completes about an hour before the flip.

Ollie swings by the galley to assuage his ravenous hunger.

Feels like I'm going to be eating like six meals a day from now on.

-fairy big-belly-rub-

Three minutes before the flip, there is a ship-wide broadcast, "Please be aware we will be entering microgravity in three minutes. Secure yourselves and your belongings for the flip."

Then, "Make ready for thrust cutout and microgravity."

"Mark."

A moment later, the gentle acceleration they've enjoyed stops, and Ollie gently lifts off his bunk. He activates his Glitch to keep his feet on the floor as he moves about. Opening the door, he makes his way toward the workshop.

* * *

Arriving at the workshop, there is a crewman waiting. "Mr. McNantly. I've been instructed to give you access to the nanofabricator in the foundry. Please follow me."

It's a short trip. They enter the workshop, he opens a closet, points to the machine, "Do you need anything else?"

"No, thanks. This is perfect," responds Mr. McNantly.

The crewman leaves Ollie in the workshop. He quickly gets the device initialized and makes sure there's enough feed stock in the bin. Connecting to the device, he double-checks that the device supports the data he's prepared. With everything in order, Ollie kicks off the Scaffold print.

While it does its work, Ollie pulls up a seat, and they start watching an action Sensie together.

The show ends just as the Scaffold finishes. He extracts the tiny device, and runs it through the scanner to make sure everything is in order. It all checks out, so he cleans up the space, stuffs the Scaffold into his stack, and heads back to his cuddy, ~~dreading~~ looking forward to more kung fu beatings.

Chapter 20

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | during mirconova

-horrible horn-like sounds are blaring-
-howling of the wind-
-overwhelming thunder crashes-
shouting "It sounds like lightning has decided to join the cataclysm raging outside. The quakes continue, unabated."
shouting "We're still in contact with the other folks in the community. No one's been hurt, and everyone's shelters seem to be holding. We're all just praying and trying to record what we're experiencing."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y1d

-terrible noises rage-
shouting "It's been over a day of this. We're all so exhausted. It's difficult, but we've been able to manage some sleep. Only one shelter has stopped responding. We fear their building has failed and they're gone."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y2d

-terrible noises rage-
shouting "The sunlight has returned. It seems paler than before. We think the micronova has detonated. The material thrown off the sun won't arrive for another couple days. The calamity outside continues."

The Job

The next three days are an unending series of intense FIVR training sessions with Danni. She even rolls the Glitch into his hand-to-hand skill development. Ollie has to pay extra for the ridiculous amount of food he consumes — getting some snarky comments from other passengers. Still, the food is much cheaper than the `Re:Coin` bits consumed at night.

The Holloway Effect arrives at *Hastings Station* around Venus on time. *Hastings Station* is a segmented rotating station. It has several habitation rings along the central spine. Every ring rotates counter to the direction of its neighbors. The rings have a large diameter. This allows them to rotate slowly, making the interface with the core easier to navigate.

The central core of *Hastings Station* does not rotate, so no spin gravity on the inner surface. Since he's just heading cloud-side, Ollie has to make his way through the seeming madhouse of microgravity traffic that floats through the central space.

Now that he's in Venusian space, Ollie sends the *Marten Oswego* a greeting ping. The ship promptly pongs.

`netcast: direct message`

George McNantly

I've arrived in *Hastings Station*.
Making my way to a drop ship now.

Oswego

Acknowledged.
Preparations are complete.
Clock starts on your mark.

George McNantly

Acknowledged.

Glitching to stay on the AR-plotted course he's following, Ollie finally arrives at a drop ship terminal. Danni has booked him a ride with the *Cloudfall* service.

He arrives at the kiosk, and the automated systems arrange for his shuttle. Most shuttles don't drop until the station is roughly over the destination — it's an easier journey. His destination platform, *The Lacuna*, happens to be almost beneath the station, though at a higher latitude. With only a ten minute wait, he doesn't have time to explore.

Soon, he's strapped into a jump seat in the small airbus-like vehicle. His pet cases are strapped onto the luggage racks next to him. A small count down timer ticks slowly in his AR. Reaching zero, the shuttle is released and accelerates toward the giant milky white mass below.

The shuttle angles toward the north on an intercept course with the habitat. The atmosphere thickens and the clouds gather below them as they begin decelerating. They're on the sunny side right now, so there aren't any lights to give them any visual clues as to where *The Lacuna* lurks in the clouds below.

Just as they reach the highest clouds, from the swirling depths emerges a milky-white spherical surface — the top of an atmospheric enclosure. Several strange black spires rise up to pierce the enclosure, seemingly at random.

The shuttle has slowed to safe speeds and gently trumpets its way over to the terminus of the floating city. It then proceeds down to a landing platform on the edge of the structure.

Making its way through the swirling yellow-white murk, it finally clears enough to see the platform for the first time. The shuttle settles down onto the deck — no airlocks, no spin gravity, no strange ups and downs to wrap your head around. Just an open flat space hanging off the edge of the nearby structure amidst roiling fog banks and wind.

At the shuttle's exit, there are disposable gas masks, goggles, and rain slickers. Ollie takes a set, dons them, and steps into the tiny, one-man airlock. It doesn't bother cycling the air and the exterior door pops open as soon as the interior closes. The cases crowd in with Ollie, making the transition a little awkward.

The wind is a gentle constant, with occasional gusts tugging at his slicker. Looking around, he notices that some of the tiny cloud droplets that hit his exposed arms leave a slight stinging sensation — not immediately painful, but noticeable.

Wow. That's sulfuric acid sprinkling me, isn't it?

It sure is! Get indoors.

After watching the shuttle burble back up into the sky and quickly disappear into the glowing miasma that surrounds him, Ollie follows markings on the ground toward the entrance. The swirling, glowing murk is a little disorienting, it's own kind of hazard — different from microgravity, but still requiring some effort to adjust.

The floor is a deeply textured matte black grating laying atop a carbon fiber structural frame below. There is acid condensation everywhere. Thankfully the texturing makes his footing sure as he makes his way.

On the platform, Ollie can see large crane arms, heavy cable anchors, docking clamps, and umbilical ports for refueling and cargo transfers. They seem a bit oversized, heavy, and bolted onto the surface, rather than intentional. Durability over Beauty.

The wall of the city looms out of the mist as he nears the door. The hull is not smooth. The underlying structure of the city is exposed. Weird extra ribs adorn parts of the structure, too — reminiscent of a vast rib cage.

The bright ambient glow of the clouds still manages to create deep shadows in various indents, depressions, and mysterious openings on the black surface.

Large, thick, rubbery cables dangle down into the clouds below. Ollie imagines some leviathan jellyfish dangling its tentacles down into the glowing haze, hunting for a meal.

The hull is obviously patched in many places. Panels, patches, and additions compete for space. Most are still matte black, but some have a whitish mottling — perhaps salt blooms.

Arriving at the door, it is overlarge. Plenty of space for ingesting cargo. *And giant cloud-monster corpses.* It seems almost like there are blood channels leading away from the building. Closer inspection shows that no, not blood, but acid condensation is collected and funneled off the platform.

The gently acid-sizzled hair on Ollie's arms begins standing on end.

What are we heading into, Danni? This place looks straight out of a low-budget space horror Sensie. The kind where virgins are sacrificed to the great Googly-Moogly from beyond space and time.

Yeah, I'm getting the ultra-ick, too. I actually don't know too much about what to expect. These people are pretty secretive, cult-y, and terrorist-y — the, 'Scions of the Void'. *Your cover is that you're here on contract as a, 'Security Consultant' — to check on cybersecurity in the facility.*

-shiver-

Lets get in, out of the acid rain.

netcast: direct message

George McNantly

I've arrived.
Start the clock.

Oswego

Mark.
Forty-five minutes.
Good luck.

Ollie, having stumbled to a halt trying to take in the ghastly visage of the structure, regroups, and approaches the door. As he gets close, the portal splits in half, sliding into the bulkhead on either side. Beyond is a small vestibule, with another fortified door beyond — a low-pressure airlock.

He steps in, with his nervous pet cases close behind. Once inside, the outer door slides shut once again. As it closes with a gut-menacing boom, the constant wind noise disappears, leaving a disturbing, sudden silence in its wake.

Inky darkness engulfs them, joining the deafening silence. Thankfully, omnivision keeps Ollie calm, composed, professional, and appraised of his immediate surroundings. Just as he considers looking around for the light

switch, the room lights up. Weirdly, the fixtures are around the edge of the room — in the floor. The light is angled onto the walls, creating lots of strange shadows and ambient light.

Burn me, I would've just peed my pants without omnivision.

Right!?

Once the lights are on, there is again nothing happening. Right as he goes to take a step toward the door, an enormous blast of air fills the room, startling Ollie and making his ears pop. The air jets up from the floor, too.

What the void? Just why?! That time there was some pee! Slag.

Zero of five stars, for sure, Danni agrees.

The inner door, as the outer, is a massive affair, much bigger than needed. It is adorned with off-putting squiggles and harsh slashes. In the bizarre lighting of the airlock, they almost seem to twitch.

Again nothing happens. This time Ollie isn't falling for it. He waits, and while he does, he swears the door is watching him.

He's able to out-wait them, this time. The inner door splits apart and opens quickly, ominously rumbling as it slides into the bulkheads.

Dungeon doors?

Standing in the middle of the open doorway are two men wearing tentacle-themed flat black armor, tactical helmets, and wielding assault rifles. The lower half of their faces are covered by a black veil. They're not pointing the weapons at Ollie, but they're unslung and held across their chests.

Beyond is a receiving, or waiting area, of sorts. The unsettling lighting effects continue into the far space. One segment flickering innocently.

"Hello. I am George McNantly. I'm a cybersecurity consultant here on contract," Ollie says, sending his ident.

Speaking in unison, "Greetings unwashed. We are spawn. Follow." The pair about-face and begin stomp-walking into the reception area.

-shrug-

Ollie follows along behind the pair. They exit the small receiving room by a pair of double doors. They swing quietly on their hinges, revealing an open space beyond.

Stepping out into the narrow street in front of the reception hall, Ollie is hit with the strangeness of the area. The enclosure film above is aglow from the diffuse light outside. The street in front of him curves sinuously, as do all the streets. The curves don't seem purposeful, or intentional. The buildings tend to be narrow, tall, black, and spiny.

The place is packed with people walking around. As they notice Ollie, they pause and stare. Like a ripple in a pond, the staring spreads out and away from him. The street quiets as more people become aware of the 'unwashed' among them.

Are we about to be eaten?

Before Danni can respond to the rhetorical question, the cases bump into Ollie from behind, pressing up against him *was that a whimper?*, causing him to stumble. He tries to shoo them away, but they keep crowding him like scared puppies.

Ignoring the odd behavior of the crowd, the spawn continue stomp-walking with a purpose down the winding street. Ollie has to hustle to catch up.

The people are mostly wearing robes and togas, and bare feet. A shocking variety of dark grays, blacks, and flat blacks adorn them all.

Noticing their bare feet, Ollie becomes aware of the oddness of the ground. It's subtly soft, almost squishy. The street is shiny black — it makes him feel like he's walking on a whale's back.

What's up with the floor?

I— I just really don't know.

Some of the largest buildings pierce the top of the enclosure, pushing on up and out into the Venusian atmosphere beyond.

Walking for a good ten minutes, Ollie is led by the stomp troopers to another misplaced mini-cathedral. They stop at the doors, turn, and signal for him to proceed without them.

I was a little dodgy about dropping the hammer on this place, but — I'm at a loss for words. I'm now more dodgy about NOT dropping the hammer.

These guys are responsible for many truly horrific acts all over the system. I won't be sad to see this blemish on the system removed.

* * *

Having spent ten minutes just getting to this building, Ollie is starting to sweat.

I haven't even found any useful network nodes, yet, Ollie complains.

It's strange. There's wireless everywhere, but, yeah, I haven't noticed any hard-points, either. Nor have we come close to anything resembling compute cores.

-fairy shrug-

The doors to the small cathedral swing open at his approach. The cases still crowding a little too close, they all proceed into the building.

Inside, where you'd expect arches and wide-open spaces, instead is a cubicle farm. The quiet din of one-sided conversations echoing around the very business-like, flat, off-white tiled ceiling.

Glancing around, Ollie notices that the few people he can see, while still wearing the avant-black clothing, are wearing old-style audio headsets, and staring at screen.

Wait — is this a telemarketing center!?

Ha! Hahahahaha! Yes.

Sure enough, overlaying omnivision, Ollie can see the wires and cables everywhere, leading to a computer cluster in a backroom on the other side of the building.

Just as he comes to a standstill, a short, bald, sweaty, fat man approaches in a hurry. He's wearing business-casual, in shades of black. "Oh, thank the great eye from the deep! You're here! Please, come with me!" Saying this, the man, Barry by his AR tag, shuffles off toward the backroom.

Ollie follows closely behind. He looks over the cubicle walls as he passes. Each cubicle is barren — devoid of anything approaching personal effects. Each space the same as all the others. In passing, he's able to catch bits of the conversations. They are working to sell vacation time on a, "Venusian cloud-city getaway."

I mean, what's even to see other than the city itself?

Is this a low-key abduct-people-for-the-cult scam?

-fairy shivers-

Barry takes him to the backroom. There, he opens the door, and gestures at the small stacks of compute cores. “We’ve lost half our compute to some rogue process. Please remove it and get us back to nominal!”

“Sure, sure, I can do that. I’ll check it out and send you the mitigation plan. Someone with admin access can then enact it, should your operators approve.”

“Um, I, uh. Here, just fix it!” Barry barks as he transmits operator credentials to Ollie and storms out of the room.

Really? After all the prep to get here, he just hands us the keys?

-fairy half-shrug-

These people don’t seem to be entirely sane. Also, thirty minutes, we’ve gotta get a move-on!

Right!

Ollie attaches a fiber to the nearest core. ’Diving right in, he enters the system from his ’deck. The cyberspace theme is, more of the same. Bizarre black slimy surfaces everywhere, tentacles writhing in the shadows, eyes floating in the sky.

Tearing his attention away from the sites, Ollie begins activating the data worm Sprites. Each bolts away into the ’space, on a mission to find the stolen data core and destroy it.

Just a moment passes before one of the worms returns, delivering a set of keys and information about where the Gaia Sprite lies.

Jacking out of the system, Ollie retracts the fiber into his wrist.

I’ve found a quick route to the, uh, ‘Sanctum of Washing’, they’re calling the space. We’ll have to hustle, but I think the route is mostly clear of people.

The route appears in Ollie’s AR overlay. He follows the path out a door in the back of the backroom. The keys extracted from the system seem to have pretty high-level clearance, so he’s unobstructed as he follows the meandering path.

It goes in and out of corridors, closets, stairs, restrooms, and a stable before emptying out into a tunnel, deep in the structure.

A stable? Ollie looks around in confusion for a moment, then shakes his head and moves on.

Right next to the cleverly hidden utility door, is a large, very scary, door. It is, again, covered in impossible geometries, writhing lines, and random gashes.

The cases startle Ollie as they blunder into the hallway behind him.

Gah!

"Sanctum of Washing" hangs over the door in AR. As he approaches the portal, there are strange whispering 'sounds' emanating from the structure itself. The shadows shift subtly, like there's something hiding, but there isn't.

The floor continues to be the same squishy texture it's been everywhere, but it's moist down here.

The distinct smell of blood emanates from the doorway. It's palpable, horrifying.

What are they washing, and what are they washing it with?

-fairy cringe-

As they approach the door, a deep gong rings out, and the entrance splits in half, receding smoothly into the bulkheads. Double the reek pours out into Ollie's perfect sense of smell. It threatens to overpower him, but a moment of mindfulness helps steady his mind.

The whispering sensation is also doubled. He can almost understand some of what they are saying, but just as the meaning is about to be revealed, it's lost again to befuddlement.

Inside the room is black. Floor, tapestries, ceiling, all black. Not even very many varieties.

Standing alone in the center of the room is a short altar. On top of the altar, lies — *The Seed!!* cries Danni.

Ollie sees the device for the first time and is overawed. It is simply enormous. The implied complexity is beyond comprehension. It is a singular point of beauty in this tangled mess of horrors.

-fairy frantic-pointing-

Grab it and let's go! We've only got like fifteen minutes left!

Ollie leaps into the room, racing to the prize in the middle. As he reaches out to grab it, on instinct, he pulls back.

A wickedly curved knife slices through the air just where his arm would've been.

Ollie steps back, taking in the space with omnivision as he assumes a fighting stance.

He immediately sees the two men circling, knives out — one right, one left, spacing themselves for a crossfire approach. Textbook. Even as they circle, his omnivision tracks them. The FIVR sessions have drilled this pattern into Ollie's hind brain until it now lives there alongside breathing.

He doesn't decide to move — movement happens.

The right-hand acolyte commits to a thrust just as Ollie steps inside it — not dodging, just shifting from where the knife expects him to be. His rising forearm deflects the man's wrist outward and his weight is already transferring forward.

A kick launches from his hip with a Glitch-burst timed to contact, not wind-up — the thrust adding a fraction of a second of pure impulse at the exact moment his heel connects with the man's sternum. The crack is immediate and the acolyte goes backward faster than a kick should send anyone, hitting the far wall before he's finished falling.

The second man is already in the air. Good reaction time — he'd read the exchange and committed.

Ollie lets him come.

Stepping in, catching the man by his collar and belt at the peak of his leap, Ollie uses the acolyte's own momentum and drops his weight straight down, onto his head. The Glitch fires a single braking burst at the moment of inversion — adding mass to the pivot, immobilizing Ollie, making his center of gravity a fixed point around which the poor man rotates.

He hits the floor face first with a terrible collection of sounds that no body should ever make. The impact is slightly absorbed by the yielding floor, but not enough to matter.

Both still.

Ollie is breathing hard, his heart is beating fast. He's also extra sweaty.

Ollie takes the opportunity to grab the enormous glowing egg from the altar, turns, and sprints back the way he came. It's only in this moment that he registers the bodies around the perimeter of the room, and the blood that covers everything. You just can't unsee that sort of thing.

Sprinting back through the winding pathways, Ollie has to make a sudden stop as he nears the telemarketing cube farm. His omnivision shows him that the stomp troopers have friends, and they seem to be searching the area — presumably for him.

Since he's in a sheltered space, Ollie figures it's a good time to don his fancy ninja armor. Quickly stripping down, the cases pop open eagerly, and little arms bring out the pieces, rapidly assembling them into a free standing suit.

Ollie, naked except for boxers, links with the suit. As assembly completes, the suit leans forward, with seams on the back folding open. Once it's fully opened, Ollie steps inside, and the armor engulfs his body. The suit's Sensie data flows into his perception. He is now the suit.

Oh, damn! This is amazing!

I know, right! I love that sensation, too. Just wait till you get to jump off the landing outside!

Ollie blanches slightly at that thought, but pushes it away as he scans for the stomp troopers. While scanning, he secures the egg in the armored tactical container on his back — a container made from the remains of the packing cases. *Slick.*

Two minutes, Ollie! Move!

With so little time to spare, Ollie dispenses with any attempt at subtlety. Thruster-boost-running right through the call center in his black super-suit, Ollie makes for the distant exit.

Leaving the mini-cathedral, Ollie leaps into the air, thrusters revved up, flying. Keeping just over the crowd's heads, as they flee from the action, Ollie makes his way quickly to the ledge.

He makes it to the reception hall before the sound of gunfire erupts behind him. Ollie ducks behind the corner of a building across the street from the hall. Looking around he identifies where the shots came from.

Ollie bolts across the street and through the entrance doors. The reception space is empty, but the airlock doors are closed. They don't open for him, either.

Scanning in omnivision, he sees an access point. Connecting wirelessly, **pickit** makes short work of the lock, opening the door.

He steps into the airlock, and the inner doors close — just in time. Ollie sees a spawn lob a grenade at him right as the doors close, bouncing back at the grenadier. A blast rocks the inner door, but doesn't breach it.

After an eternal wait the air cycles with the same floor-to-face blast. This time he's ready. While waiting, Ollie takes a beat to check omnivision. Sure enough, there are spawn dudes outside, too. He takes cover along the inside of the outer wall, preparing to pounce through them when the door opens.

Another awkwardly long pause and the outer door opens, finally, allowing bright-glow-light to pour in.

The spawn on the landing outside wear black sealed suits and wield the same assault rifles as the city variety. Seeing Ollie, they immediately open fire. He Glitches, barely avoiding the shots that tear up the insides of the airlock.

Once again flying, Ollie launches out of the airlock and into the brightly glowing murk beyond. Several rounds deflect off his legs as he passes between the guards — stinging, but not penetrating.

Precisely as he clears the landing, a truly massive wave of detonations erupt all across the bottom of *The Lacuna*. Looking back, Ollie watches as several of the dangling 'cables' are blown off. They aren't cables. They are, in fact, massive tentacles!

The few tentacles that Ollie can see begin flailing madly. Adding to the chaos, a deep, bone-shaking keening sound fills the air around the 'city'. The sound quickly intensifies and morphs into an other-worldly roar.

From other explosions nearby, there are obvious chunks of pulped flesh falling away in tons-thick slabs. Misted, purple blood puffs away from the eruptions.

Stunned by the sight, and not paying close enough attention, Ollie is caught in a too-close blast. The overwhelming concussion knocks Ollie out, and his body starts a graceful glide down into the glowing murky depths

below the city.

Ollie! Ollie! Wake up! Ollie!

Chapter 21

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 4y27d

"I've been crying so much today. They just signed the treaty to end the wars here in North America. It's been three years of terrible fighting. The loss of life has been profound. We've been blessed to live here during the fighting. Our community was spared the worst of the carnage."

"I'm so happy it's over. My brother, Brian, turns seventeen next week. They would've drafted him for sure. But, now, it looks like he'll get to finish school instead."

"The eleven countries that were part of the old US retain roughly the same shape as when they seceded. They split up according to their economic relationships anyway, so it makes sense in that way. I guess."

"In other news, Dad has been talking a lot about how the earth's magnetic poles are shifting so fast now. Much faster than even Ben thought they would. They think we'll have a full magnetic flip very soon."

"Our planet is extremely vulnerable to solar weather with the magnetic field so week."

"Dad also talks about how happy he is that electricity production is so local and more widely distributed than ever before. Since the war wrecked the old electric grid, we've been fixing things by placing a little fusion core on every city block. He feels this will help sustain us through the cataclysms to come."

"The cores are tiny, light, and produce tons of power for a long time. They take, uh, 'hydrogen-boron-11' as fuel — the boron is abundant, easy to mine, and safe to handle."

Execution

netcast: direct message

MrKleen

Report.

I wait in anticipation for `mole`'s report as it arrives. The time delay from Venus is grating.

mole

I'm in position to intercept.
Clock runs out in five minutes.

My plans to obtain the Regalia hinge on this moment.

I've arranged for the corporate intercept fleet, and the ships are assembling. The legal notices have been filed. All these preparations depend on this action succeeding.

. . .

mole

Some men in black armor are gathering outside on the landing.
They're taking positions to cover the airlock.
I've got them in my sites if needed.

*The **mind-snatch** Sprite I added to the operative's mission Scaffold load-out will make acquisition of the Regalia so much easier. Kill the man, take his keys, destroy the evidence.*

Ingenious.

mole

T-minus 10 seconds.
Something's happening.
The airlock's opening.
He's jumped out.

The jump is expected — part of the plan. The operative is equipped with flight-capable gear so he can get back to the privateer vessel. This is right — he made it off the platform.

mole

Woah, that was close.
He got thrown by a close blast.
I activated the program.
We caught him in a net.
He's unresponsive.
Making our way back to the ship.

A data packet arrives from the **mind-snatch** device immediately after the message from `mole`. It contains the ghost's comm keys — I'll now be able to impersonate her when interacting with the privateers. Arranging the rest of the recovery will now be much cleaner.

Minutes pass without an update.

I despise dealing with incompetents.

Unacceptable.

MrKleen

Tell me — does he have the prize?

Another interminable fifteen minute wait for an answer.

I turn to study some reports while I wait.

I've extended myself in arranging for the fleet for intercept. If the Regalia is not with the operative, my situation on the board will become — challenging.

The reports are done. I check the clock.

Checking the fleet's deployment registers everything nominal.

The pressure in my mind returns in this moment as it gently pulls toward Venus, and the Regalia.

mole

He has something in a locked compartment on his back.

I can see into the compartment. There's a glowing egg-shaped, uh, thing in there.

Success.

I submit the final orders and notices, enabling the fleet to assemble to capture the privateers on their return.

An R&D division is spinning up to receive the Regalia. It will allow me to secure the Warrant, and all Patents related to it.

I will be on-hand when the Gaia seed activates, assuring my uncontested dominion of the Regalia, and rightful director of the star system.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to absolute power.

The Strike

The clouds around the *Oswego* continue to brighten as the craft makes its way up from the hellish depths. With the operative's arrival on the planet, the clock's running.

"Sir, we've matched depth to *The Lacuna* — quietly," calls out `Scamp`.

"Thank you, conn," replies `Ironfall`.

`Eddy` pulls at his mustache nervously as he watches for `George`'s comm key to light up again.

netcast: direct message

George McNantly

I've arrived.
Start the clock.

Oswego

Mark.
Forty-five minutes.
Good luck.

"Mark, Captain — George has started his run," says Eddy into the tense bridge.

"Finally," says Ironfall. "Warm up the floaters, Fuse."

"Aye, Captain. Waking wave one through three," confirms Fuse. "Wave one responding. Nominal. Two and Three, also nominal."

Chalk says, "Make sure the sneakers hit first, Sir."

Ironfall nods to Chalk, "I remember last time. We'll poke 'em in the eyes first."

"Haze final acoustic soundings — make sure all these drones hit the right targets."

"Aye, sir," Haze responds.

Alert lights blink across the ship.

ship-net: broadcast voice

Chalk

"All hands. The Go-clock has started, forty-five minutes till tactical, people."

Ironfall sits stoically in his command couch. Occasionally he pulls at one of his dreadlocks, before shaking his head and moving his hand back to the couch.

The XO moves about the bridge, checking and rechecking that everyone has what they need. When not hassling the command crew, he paces slowly behind the command couch.

In the galley, the cook tries to hand out the last of the food he prepared before he has to close up shop for the battle.

The armory crew are mostly passed out, strapped into their bunks in their hazard jumpsuits and helmets.

With fifteen minutes to go, another alert sounds out across the ship.

ship-net: broadcast voice

Chalk

"Fifteen minutes to tactical conditions. Get tops and hazard jumpsuits on — no need to pump down, but you're not gonna wanna breath what's out there if it comes to that."

"Get `Wrench` and `Gasket` out there and in place to recover `George`. We don't want our bonus dropping outta the sky," says `Chalk`.

The crew quickly and professionally move to ready the ship for combat operations.

A professional quiet settles onto the bridge as the crew carries out their jobs. The clock counts down to T-minus ten minutes.

"All waves online and ready to launch, sir," calls out `Fuse` quietly. "The fatties and sneakers are just waiting for final vectors."

"Locations and vectors updated, sir," says `Haze`, "Data streamed to weapons."

"Targets received, updating munitions."

"Weapons have a lock, sir," announces `Fuse` a moment later.

"Alright folks, let's do this right," calls out `Chalk`.

"Time the sneakers to hit those freaky-void-lovin' PDL emplacements at zero hour, `Fuse`," commands `Ironfall`. "I want the fatties rolling in exactly as the sneakers impact."

"Aye, sir," responds `Fuse`, "We've got it timed out perfect."

"Haze, also keep an eye out for those dangling cables," commands Ironfall.

"Aye, sir, watching out for the danglers," responds Haze.

"Ready to dodge anything swinging our way, sir," offers Scamp.

"Very good, Scamp."

Alert light flash across the ship.

ship-net: broadcast voice

Chalk

"Action! Action! Secure for tactical!"

"T-minus one minute. Sneakers away!" calls Fuse just a moment before the loitering munitions cross into detection and response range by *The Lacuna*'s organic-looking eye-topped PDL emplacements.

In the tac-net the small hypersonic loitering munitions bloom to life, releasing their floats and blaring their presence out into the clouds. Almost as one, they impact the PDL emplacements. Only two emit anything before impact, and it wasn't enough to deter the fast movers.

-Boom! BaBoomBoom!-

"All eyes confirmed hit. Fatties have a clear path," calls out Haze.

-Skreeeee! ROAR!- Horrible animal sounds call out across the clouds.

"Why does this place make these horrible sounds every time we try this," wonders Haze aloud.

"Make sure to keep eyes and ears open for their kamikaze boats, those almost wiped us out last time," says Chalk.

"Aye, sir," responds Haze.

"Sir, the cables are doing — something?" yells Haze.

Scamp jukes the *Oswego* out of the path of the fast moving cable as it whips through the space they just vacated.

"Slag! Sir, look at this!" yells Haze again, sending a Sensie stream to the bridge chat.

In the Sensie stream, the 'cable' is revealed as it plows out of the clouds into the clear space the ship just left. It is clearly not a cable. "Wait, that's not any cabling I've ever encountered — is that a sucker!?" says Chalk.

"It's some void-damned tentacle!" says Ironfall his composure cracking ever so slightly at the revelation.

-cough- Quickly composing himself, Ironfall orders, "Scamp, keep us away from those things. Fuse, update targeting on the fatties, include some evasion in their approach."

"Aye, sir," in unison from the bridge crew.

* * *

The Prophetess and the Void Father converse on *The Lacuna*.

"The attack has begun. The seed has departed, as was foretold. Our sacrifice will ensure the blossoming of the seed. And our daughter's elevation to a Chaos Mother."

"Is there nothing else for us to do?"

"No, our end will be her awakening."

"Very well, my love."

* * *

"Sir, Wrench has the operative. He's unresponsive," calls out Eddy.

Ironfall nods to Eddy, "Burn-it. Okay, move us back into position to recover our people. We need to hold steady relative to them so we don't splat them on the hull, Scamp."

"Yes, sir."

Haze cries, "Contact! — it's a crazy-boat, coming in hot! Vectors to weapons!"

Fuse responds, "I see it. Frag interceptors deployed. One miss, two miss, three — hit! Got it!"

"We don't have much left for defense, Captain."

"Burn-it. Thank you, Fuse. We'll have to be careful," agrees Ironfall.

-BOOM! BOOMBOOM! ROOOOAR!-

"Fatties on target, sir," calls out Fuse.

"Let's hope it's enough, this time."

From Haze, "Tentacle incoming low!"

The *Oswego* jukes to the side once again, barely avoiding being crushed.

"Well done, Scamp. Now, get us back on station."

Fuse barks, “We lost several of the fatties to the, uh, tentacles, sir. But, it shoul—”

-BOOOOM!-

“Balloons one and two are popped, Captain!” hollers Haze.

-BOOM! ROOOOAR! GROWL! BOOM! MOAN.-

“That’s four. That’s five,” counts out Haze.

Eddy says, “Wrench and the others are onboard, Captain.”

“Perfect. Haze — how’re we looking?”

-SCREEEEECH! CRAAACK! BOOM! WHIMPER.-

“That’s it! It’s breaking up!” screams Haze.

Everyone focuses in on the ship’s Sensie stream, watching through the thick clouds. Almost immediately a massive current tugs at the ship and the clouds around them are drawn toward *The Lacuna*, and down. Down toward the surface.

The air draw clears the cloud cover for a moment. The ship struggles slightly to maintain its position. They are given a perfectly clear view of the massive structure as its shattered pieces plummet.

It looks almost like a bizarre parody of a jellyfish, with spines and shredded atmosphere membranes across the main disk, tentacles flailing wildly beneath it. The last lofting bladder pops as it struggles briefly to keep the thing aloft. As it falls toward the burning hellscape below, *The Lacuna* breaks into five separate pieces.

Looking closely, Eddy watches the bodies flung from the structure as he tugs on his mustache again.

Chalk, breaking from the view, looks around the bridge at the stunned crew. He notices Eddy’s particularly drawn expression. *I think he had a brother in that abomination.*

“XO move us away at speed. We need to get out of here before anyone comes along to find out what happened — and I need to check on our guest,” says Ironfall as he stands from his couch and makes his way off the bridge.

Impersonation

Ollie wakes up. Omnivision makes him aware of his surroundings. He's tethered to, and hanging limply between, two suits of power armor. They're all flying, immersed in the glowing brightness of the clouds.

Ollie! Static! You're awake. Good. Now, play dead.

He obliges the fairy that is flying along beside his head in the clouds.

Sit-rep: You passed out when we were caught in a big blast. These two were lurking in the clouds, like they were expecting to catch you out of the air. They had a net and everything.

That's weird. Oh, hey — I bet one is the mole!

I had the same thought. You've been out for maybe five minutes. I'm trying to hack their comms to see if we can listen in. Just — one — more — there, got it.

`netcast: direct voice`

device hacked — receive only

Wrench

"...sket, man. I told you, the explosion knocked him out."

Gasket

"I'm just glad we caught him."

"Would'a missed out on the bonus if he'd dropped the prize."

Oh, hey, am I supposed to be dead? Maybe we fake a comma, or something? Is that something you can pull off with my wetware? I wouldn't know where to start on that.

That's a good idea. Let's see, the taser effect kill your brain. Hmm — we could probably hack our suit to show no brain activity to a health query. Brain dead, but not fully dead. That fits the profile.

*If anyone has a Sprite that does a direct scan, we're screwed. For that we'll need an **obscure** Sprite.*

*I have **obscure***, he says, invoking **obscure**.

Oh, right! Forgot. I've never really need—

-BOOM! Boom-BOOM! ROAR!-

The group are all tossed around a bit as more gut-wrenching explosions go off behind them.

And, the attack is ongoing.

I see that. Thanks.

Danica does a quick 'dive on the suit to tweak the medical data stream.

Suit hacked.

We'll have to hack any device they try to use on me in the med bay on the ship, too.

-fairy spacer-salute-

Ollie shakes his head at the fairy's antics.

Gasket

"You think he's gonna wake up?"

"Don't you have some medical Sprite, or something?"

Wrench

"Medical Sprite!? Do I look made outta money?"

"Lemme check his suit."

checks the medical feed

"Aw, drift. He's brain dead."

Gasket

"Drift."

"Guess it's good we caught him, then."

"You're one lucky bastard to know where to be for catchin' him!"

Wrench

"Right. Luck."

"Hopefully this all turns my luck around."

* * *

They continue on in tense silence for a while longer.

Gasket

"Ship's ahead."

Wrench

"I see it, yeah."

The ship stands tall as the fog bank clears briefly between them. As they move toward the nearest airlock, the *Oswego* holds still in the air relative to the trio.

netcast: direct message

honeypot keys

Ghost ***[Mike]***

Captain Mwangi, report.

Ha! It worked!

-fairy fist-pump-

OMG! You are one sneaky fairy, Danni!

-fairy preening-

I took your idea of spoofing the network tap and spun up a virtualization trap. I had it up as we left the city.

Just after you blacked out, I saw an EM flash through omnivision, then all my honeypot data got scooped out of the trap!

Ironfall ***[Danica]***

Yes, ma'am."

Attack is ongoing.

We've recovered your man, but there's a medical emergency.

We're getting him onboard as quickly as possible.

Hahahahaha!

Duping that burn-rat is making me so happy right now!

Same!

I was just wondering what we were going to do, pretending to be brain dead, and all. I didn't know you'd fed them fake keys!

Wasn't sure it would work, but I put it together after you snagged the Gaia seed.

-fairy wink-

We'll have to be careful to be as truthful as possible — we still don't know what Wrench *will be telling Mike.*

Aye.

-fifteen-minute-delay-

Ghost ***[Mike]***

Does he have my prize.

Ironfall ***[Danica]***

Yes, ma'am.

-fifteen-minute-delay-

Ghost ***[Mike]***

Very well.

* * *

Ollie plays opossum as `Wrench` and `Gasket` enter the airlock, dragging his 'corpse' along with them.

As soon as the airlock cycles, several crewmen quickly grab Ollie and begin treating his injuries. He is strapped to a stretcher. It lifts off the deck and begins following the medics toward med bay. While they are moving, Ollie's armor pops open, giving them access to begin working him over.

Omnivision gives Ollie a perfect view of what's going on all around him in the chaos. He's on the lookout for devices and sensors he'll need to manipulate in order to continue faking his demise.

Arriving at med bay, the two-man team get Ollie situated on a MediChair. Another crewman places all his gear in a bin secured in the space, out of the way.

Ollie immediately starts a 'dive on the MediChair they've placed him in. The sophisticated device has rudimentary cybersecurity measures, and he's in without effort.

One of the medics is checking his vitals as reported by his wetware, which Danni has already managed. The other is checking his body for various injuries.

"Looks like he's fine, other than the lack of a functioning brain," announces the wetware scanner, Vlad — from his AR tag.

Body inspector, Robin, adds, "Yeah, I don't see any other serious injuries. There are some contusions on his legs. Looks like gunfire. But, the armor did a great job and they're nothing serious."

They've ignored the scanners on the MediChair while doing their own investigations. Ollie's **search** has had time to find the relevant sensor streams he needs to modify. His real **streamie** does an admirable job with the real-time tweaking the sensor data.

"The MediChair is agreeing with his wetware readouts. Dude's a vegetable. I guess they might be able to do something in a specialty shop, but we're basically done here," says Vlad with disappointment.

"Captain wants to check the man's gear. Let him in."

Robin steps out of the small med bay, and Captain Mwangi steps in. He has a sad expression as he looks Ollie over, briefly. His attention then moves to the crate with Ollie's stuff.

The Captain digs in the crate and finds the armored case. He already has the keys as part of the mission, and pops the container open.

A soft pastel glow fills the bay. It gently throbs like a slow heartbeat. Everyone seeing the device is filled with awe. All are quiet for a beat, admiring the relic, then Neville breaks the spell.

"Okay. We'll leave this locked in here with `Squid`. `Ghost` will be sending instructions before we approach Earth-Luna space."

With that, the Captain turns and leaves, allowing Robin back in.

The medical emergency, for what it was, being over, the crew prep Ollie for prolonged unconsciousness. Before long, he's all hooked up, and they leave, other work to do.

* * *

`tac-net: team message`

Oliver's in the chat

Ghost

We haven't been able to hunt any `Whelps`, recently.

-fifteen minute delay-

Anders

You'd better get on that, otherwise it'll be a `50 DKP minus`.

Ghost

We have the seed.
Ollie and I are both well.

-fifteen minute delay-

Anders

That's wonderful news, ma'am.
I figured as much. Mike has raised a ruckus around Earth-Luna.
He's claiming that the destruction of *The Lacuna* was done by *terrorists* that used a "*Unregistered System-Class Scaffold*" to destroy the city.
That the new device represents a, "*Class 1 Strategic Hazard*"
He's got a fleet of warships gathering to intercept the *terrorists* as they return to the Earth-Luna system.

Ghost

checks some news feeds

We succeeded in our pseudocide attempt.
Mike has a set of honeypot comms keys.

He thinks he's using them to subvert us.
We're using them to buy ourselves some time.
We've identified Mike's mole on the *Oswego*.

-fifteen minute delay-

Anders

Fabulous.
Your instructions?

Ghost

I'm taking the seed to the Luna-14 facility, the old lava tube mines.
We'll maintain the course Mike gave us until the last minute, then divert. Hopefully that will give us enough time to disappear on Luna until the seed activates.

-fifteen minute delay-

Anders

I'll prep the facility.

Ghost

We'll read in `Ironfall` presently.

-fifteen minute delay-

Anders

Understood.

END OF LINE

Now Ollie has the grueling task of pretending to be a vegetable until Mike wises up — probably several days, at least.

Chapter 22

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 3y353d

"So, the light show in the sky has continued for three days now. The blackouts and fires continue. They've become more widespread. There have been a bunch of emergency shutdowns at the old-school nuclear power plants around the world."

"The power distribution grid has basically failed worldwide. The plasma storm has fried it all."

"A few places still have power. Really, only where they've adapted the new fusion power cores, though. Even then, it's the distributed nature of the new systems, not the fact that it is fusion, per se."

"North American has fared much better. We've all been in a reconstruction phase since the war, and most places are installing community-scale fusion cores."

"I'm really sad. This is going to create a lot of suffering for all those people without power. I think a lot more people are going to die."

Hunting

"Ma'am! *The Lacuna*! They're under attack. It's the *Oswego* again!" calls out `Static`, the comms officer on the bridge.

"When will they learn!" yells `Lurk`, slamming a fist. "Make us tactical, Chief! Make all haste to *The Lacuna*. Military thrust."

Alarms ring out across the small vessel. The crew scramble to tactical stations, and settle in for an extended race home.

"It'll be long over by the time we get there, ma'am," says `Fang` to her, quietly.

"Yes, but they'll need our assistance to recover," giggles `Lurk`.

Hearing the crack in the Captain's demeanor, `Fang` gives a side-long glance around the bridge to see if anyone picked up on her lapse. Everyone is keeping a professional appearance, and doesn't give any sign they heard.

Smiling, `Lurk` quietly assures `Fang`, "I'm okay, `Fang`. I know who did this, and I'll be able to make them pay — this time."

"How long till we arrive, Conn?" prompts `Lurk`.

"Under military thrust, we arrive in twelve hours, ma'am," answers `Drift`.

`Fang` adds, "Going faster will only shave a few hours off the trip, Captain. Exhausting the crew before we arrive with a harder burn will only make things worse."

"Thank you, Chief. Maintain military thrust. Keep trying to regain contact, `Static`."

-bridge crew Aye-Aye-

* * *

The Teeming Shroud burns toward Venus.

"Four hours since that assault on *The Lacuna*, ma'am. Still radio silence," calls `Static`.

`Lurk` nods in acknowledgment.

Silence in the void. No message, no voice, no contact. Only the draw from the seed.

`Fang` suggests, “Ma’am, perhaps a break while we travel?”

“No, Chief, I need to be here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The eternal void between stars stretches on before *The Teeming Shroud*. Time passes slowly with no break in space, no landmark to observe.

“Still no answers to our hails, Captain,” says `Static`.

The clock shows eight hours since *The Lacuna* went silent.

No answers to my pleas.

At last they are in sensor range. Twelve interminable hours. `Lurk` is exhausted.

“Anything on sensors?” `Fang` calls out.

“No sir, no floaters near where *The Lacuna* should be. Though, there are lots of rescue vehicles in the vicinity,” answers `Gaze` from sensors.

Father hasn’t entered our sacred space. The swarm calls me. There is a home in the void.

`Fang` continues to keep a watch on `Lurk`’s demeanor.

`Lurk` sits in the command couch — cool and collected, eerily still. “I’ve received no message from the Elders. They should’ve responded by now.”

“`Static`, any indication of need for our immediate assistance?” `Fang` asks.

“No, sir. It seems they’ve recovered the few lifeboats that got off before *The Lacuna* fell from the clouds.”

The bridge is quiet for a moment as the import of that statement sinks in.

Now, a void in the clouds where my home should be. Now, maybe, my home should be in the void.

`Lurk` stands from her command couch, trembling, fists clenched. Veins rising on her temples. After a moment, a single tear rolls down her cheek.

Blood.

I accept. I offer my mind to the swarm. I open my heart to the upending of order.

-crack-

The single, subtle, splintering sound reverberates in the air. It is almost too quiet to hear, but everyone on the bridge looks around, trying to identify the source.

`Fang` is staring openly at `Lurk`.

Calming, she sits, and settles back into her command posture.

There! There are the murderers. There are those that have stolen my loves. They have the seed. They have my new home.

"I see them," *-looking into the distance, tracking something-*, "I know exactly where these *Unwashed* are. My link to the world seed will guide us right to them."

`Drift` receives vectors for a spacecraft on course to Earth-Luna.

-head tilt-

"Set our course to intercept. We want to shadow them, not engage. Military thrust," `Lurk` commands.

`Drift` plots the course, "Aye, ma'am. At military thrust to match vectors at maximum sensor range. That will take roughly twenty hours. Well before they flip to decelerate for Earth-Luna."

"Very well. XO, arrange the shifts so we're back on the bridge an hour before the intercept."

"Yes, ma'am," responds `Fang`.

-ethereal giggle-

False Victory

`mole` confirms the latest step in my plan a success. It has played out perfectly. The ghost and her host are dead, and the privateers have the Regalia.

I receive the ghost's comm keys along with `mole`'s report of the success of my plan. Unfortunately `mole` didn't acquire all of her data, but the comms keys were the vital pieces. They are enough.

While completing other work, I impersonate the ghost using her comm keys. Eventually, the privateer captain corroborates `mole`'s claim that they possess the Regalia and that the 'runner is dead.

I've given the privateers rendezvous instructions for a location in Earth-Luna where my fleet will greet them, completing my acquisition.

Elegant.

* * *

The legal framework for my obtaining of the Regalia had been laid. The device was classified by the *Sol Standards Compact* as an "Unregistered System-Class Scaffold", and a "Class 1 Strategic Hazard".

Going before a friendly SSC arbiter, I laid out my case. I began with outrage over a felled Venusian city — my wife's family home.

"How was it done? I'll tell you. The privateers have gotten hold of a new strategic weapon. And they've unleashed it upon innocent civilians!"

I shared just enough of the ghost's project data to scare the arbiter, but not inform.

"The mastermind behind the destruction was Danica Goodman — the immortal ghost herself," I continued, again sharing some carefully chosen bits of data as evidence.

The arbiter was as unsettled by the idea of an immortal, "person", as I was.

Framing them for the theft of their own property.

I invoked **suggestion**, "You must rule in favor of the Writ if the SSC is to have any authority going forward." While not necessary, the invocation was simply a precaution.

Quickly the arbiter issued a Writ of Retrieval, allowing me to summon a fleet.

According to the Writ, the SSC awarded me the contract for containment and control of the Regalia, once obtained.

Once the privateers deliver the Regalia to me, my reign begins.

* * *

I allow myself the rare indulgence of stillness.

The SSC fleet tac-net shows the *Oswego* on course. The legal instruments are filed and ratified. `mole` is aboard. The Regalia is in the hold. Every piece is where I placed it.

The world already obeys my will — a sign of things to come.

While the Captain tends the ship, I return to the quarterly projections. There are fourteen other matters requiring attention, and none of them are interesting.

I work through them methodically — I sign off on a pending subsidiary merger; make recommendations for remedial training of three department heads, based on their personnel reviews; submit a regulatory filing.

By the time I am finished, the privateers will have crossed the threshold. By the time I am finished, the instruments of acquisition I have set in motion will have transferred the Scaffold, legally and irrevocably, to my control.

I file the last report.

My plans proceed, just as they always do — opening the way to absolute power.

I wait.

* * *

netcast: direct message

MrKleen

Report. Why isn't the *Oswego* heading to the rendezvous?

...

mole

Sir. We have a problem. Ollie woke up!

The 'runner is alive.

I read the message again. The words do not change.

Alive.

He survived the **mind-snatch**. He survived the tac-team I sent after him all those years ago. And now he is awake on a ship I do not control.

Two times.

The thought settles like a ledger entry.

Two times I have closed the door, and two times this particular problem has walked back through it.

I do not waste time on surprise. Surprise is the tax levied on miscalculation, and I have not miscalculated — I have underestimated a variable. The 'runner is better than his contracted work suggested. Better, perhaps, than anyone I have encountered in some time.

Irritating.

I update the parameters. The rendezvous will not be honored. The *Oswego* knows the plan. The Regalia is moving in a direction I do not currently control.

Unacceptable.

Pseudocide

"Scopes are clear, Captain," calls out `Haze`, the sensor officer on duty.

"Thank you, `Haze`."

In the Captain's couch, Neville muses. They're underway to Earth-Luna, where they'll rendezvous with `Ghost`. The bridge crew quietly go about their business, all in good humor.

He is elated with the successful destruction of *The Lacuna* — as are the crew. Most of the system is likely celebrating their downfall, too, he supposes.

That accursed place is finally rotting on the burning hellscape below the clouds.

The Scions of the Void have been a persistent danger around Venus for decades. Their adherents constantly raiding other cities, kidnapping hapless tourists, and destroying things at random.

The many past attempts at destroying the place have failed. It was unclear how it was able to survive strikes that would've destroyed any other construct.

It was alive! recalls Neville, paling. *What in all the skies was that thing? -shiver-*

The *Oswego* hasn't broadcast all the details they uncovered during the raid. Neville's not sure what to do with the revelation that the city was — at least partially — a living thing.

It was good that `Scamp` *was on her toes when the tentacles started coming our way.*

The mood on the ship is, largely, celebratory. The party is a little muted in light of the grievous injury to `Ghost`'s operative, George McNantly — at least for those aware of all the particulars.

`Wrench` *seems especially dejected about the man's condition. I wonder what's bugging him? I'll have to share a drink with him when we get some shore leave.*

George lies in a coma in the med bay. Neville isn't entirely sure what to do with him. *I'll just let* `Ghost` *tell me what to do with him. I imagine we'll just deliver his body along with the treasure.*

And what a treasure it is! If Neville was any less scrupulous, he'd keep it and offer it to the highest bidder. But, he's made a deal, and he'll honor it. *I'm done with the pirate life. At least as privateer, I can sleep at night.*

* * *

netcast: direct message

Ghost

Captain. I have an update for you.

Ironfall

`Ghost`! Go on.

Ghost

I'd like you to go to the med bay and check on George's condition.
Please go yourself.
Please go alone.

Ironfall

Okay.

That's strange. Myself? Alone?

"`Chalk`, you have the conn. I'm going to check on our guest."

"Aye, Captain. I have the conn."

Stepping onto the deck lift, Neville signals for the third deck where med bay lies. The lift moves quickly. Arriving, Neville steps off.

Making his way to the bay, he passes several crew. They all greet him with smiles, shoulder slaps, fist-bumps, and congratulations. While the job isn't technically done, for them, the important part is.

Standing in front of the med bay, Neville glances around before sliding the privacy panel into the bulkhead. With nobody seeking his attention, he slips into the bay.

Closing the panel, he turns around to check on Mr. McNantly. To his surprise, the patient is sitting up on the edge of the MediChair.

"Captain. You're alone?" asks George.

Surprised, "Yes. Per `Ghost`'s request. You're not brain dead."

"That's true. I faked my death in order to throw off a competitor. I'm Oliver Goodman, Ollie, `theWhistlingSquid`," he finishes, extending his hand in greeting.

Neville takes the offered hand, "Neville."

Ollie, I'm gonna conceal the fact that I'm right here, shares Danni.

Got it. Help me out if I forget anything.

-fairy thumbs-up-

netcast: group message

theWhistlingSquid is in the chat

Ghost

Captain. The delay to Earth-Luna will make it difficult to participate in this conversation directly.

Please discuss with Ollie, and be assured he speaks for me.

Ironfall

Very well.

Ollie nods.

"Okay, Captain. I need a half hour to read you in on a few things surrounding the mission going forward. I'd like to keep it just between us, at least for the next several days. Do you have time now?"

"Yes, now is fine, Ollie." Neville turns on the "Privacy" sign over the med bay door. He then folds out a jump seat from the wall near Ollie's MediChair.

"You're aware of one party that was intent on obtaining the Gaia seed — *The Scions of the Void*. There is one other that is actively working to obtain the prize."

"Mike Veil is also aware of and seeks the Scaffold. He masterminded the original theft, and now schemes to take it from us now that we've recovered it from his wife, Janice."

"Before we left Earth-Luna, Mike was able to get an assassination mod installed into my wetware stack. We discovered the device, and were able to turn it into a honeypot. He intended to steal `Ghost`'s comms keys, but instead, he stole a set of fake keys — keys we control."

"In the process of uncovering the mod, we found that he had gotten to one of your crew. Wrench is acting on his behalf."

"I see. So, Wrench — he specifically requested to be on the crew to assist you in returning to the ship. What was his role in your, 'demise'," asks Neville.

"The assassin mod had a short-range radio signal trigger. It was meant to kill my brain, then scoop data from my dying wetware," answers Ollie.

"So, Wrench knowingly attempted to kill you?"

Careful how you handle this, Ollie. We still need the Captain on our side.

Pausing, Ollie considers his next words.

"I don't know if Wrench knew more than to trigger it and collect my disabled body before it fell," answers Ollie. "He and Gasket were in position to catch my falling body with a net. Their conversation indicated it was Wrench who knew where and to bring the net. As I was blasted from the platform, I detected an EM burst in the frequencies for the trigger."

"I see. There are serious allegations. Can you share any evidence supporting them? I need to be sure before I can proceed."

"I have an audio recording of the conversation between he and Gasket after they caught my body and were hauling me back to the *Oswego*. It's pretty damning. I have Sensie data recorded from my wetware of the EM burst — it comes from one of them. Here," says Ollie as he shares the Sensie recordings.

Neville takes a moment to examine the streams. "Okay. This makes me sad. Give me any other evidence you might have regarding Wrench's role, please."

"I will. I'm happy to leave Wrench's fate up to you. I harbor no animosity toward him. However, I would appreciate if you would wait until after I'm off the ship before you deal with him. Keeping Mike in the dark as long as possible will help us all escape Mike's trap. If that's agreeable?"

"Yes, that is fine. I don't believe Wrench is a wanton killer. I've known him for a long time."

Sharing an AR projection, Ollie continues, "Okay, here is the course that Mike would like us to follow in our approach to Earth-Luna," Ollie shares the vectors as they highlight in AR. "I propose we follow it up to this point,

about three hours before the rendezvous. Once there, we'll make a break for Luna."

Highlighting a particular area over the lunar surface, Ollie continues, "At this point over Luna, I'll jump ship. We'll be moving slow enough for a flight pack to get me down safely. Once I've left, you're free to go on your merry way."

"When we divert from the original course, Mike will certainly pursue us. We'll have to be ready for that."

"Oh, that may make things difficult. We spent most of the mission load on *The Lacuna*. We don't have many munitions left in the hold," says Neville.

"Alright, good to know. We'll definitely need to plan around that."

"Additionally, to help keep our subterfuge going, I'll remain here in med bay, pretending to be comatose."

"This is agreeable. Again, please send me all the data you're able regarding `Wrench`'s actions. I'll keep your true condition a secret as long as possible."

The men share a serious look — each considering what they're about to face. Ollie, their escape; Neville, the fate of a friend, `Wrench`.

Chapter 23

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-minus 4y16d

"Well. I finally graduated. Even with all the chaos. That was so much work. But, it's been worth the effort."

"The folks at MIT have been amazing. They were even supportive as I changed my studies from quantum mechanics to psychic phenomena. The phenomena fascinate me, but what's really exciting is the extremely tight controls the experiments require. Without a theory of operation, everyone's a skeptic. I'm convinced that there is a link between quantum mechanics and psychic phenomena and I'm determined to find that bridge."

"I've been accepted into a remote postgraduate program. I'll be studying psychic phenomena in great detail. I've even been in contact with a scientist whose psychic research has greatly impressed me. He's happy to have me work closely with him during my studies. He's written several books, but the one I find most interesting is, 'The Science of Magic: How the Mind Weaves the Fabric of Reality."

"Separately, I've also been studying the Cognitive-Theoretic Model of the Universe (CTMU), developed by Christopher Langan. It proposes that reality is a self-simulating, self-processing language (SCSPL) that creates itself through "telic recursion". It describes a monistic reality where mind and matter are unified, acting as an, "operator algebra" that generates its own structure.

Where the mind of God is found in the steps between time. Fascinating stuff!"

System

Ollie wakes from a nap. Playing dead is hard work. The med bay is empty, the hacked monitoring equipment beeps merrily away, maintaining the ruse.

The seed still rests in the armored case nearby.

Danni has been continuing Ollie's FIVR training in the med bay, careful to pause and resume as people come and go.

His mind wandering, Ollie begins to wonder about what's going to happen. The seed is glowing within the case, pulsating slowly, like a heartbeat. The glow adding to the subdued lighting in the small space.

Since we recovered the seed, I've felt a pull from it.

Danni replies, *Odd that you should say that. I've been drawn to it, too. It lingers in my attention, like a problem I can't solve.*

Danni, what will the Gaia seed do when it activates? I know you've called it a world mind, and mentioned a System Sprite. But, what does that mean?

-sigh-

I've pondered that question for centuries, to be honest.

Basically, it's a signal, a beacon. -shrug- A sign.

It's a call for help, sent out below physical reality.

It, like all Scaffolds, describes the details of a change we'd like a Sprite to affect. The Scaffold doesn't create the Sprite, it, instead, summons, or attracts it from within the fabric of reality.

This Scaffold has done its job, and done it well. Three separate System Sprites have heard the call. They are coming.

Whoa — three? What, are they going to fight over the seed?

-fairy shrug-

We'd be screwed if these minds fought. No, I doubt it will come to that.

This is way more than just recovering a relic, isn't it. I mean, a mind that can manage the entire solar system's 'exotic energy' surge. What kind of entities are we dealing with?

Right. Remember I told you before we bonded that I was willing to stake my life on its recovery?

I remember.

This is why. We're dealing with cosmic forces coming to make changes to our whole solar system. We have a problem that only they can solve.

I've never shared this before. It's been a heavy burden.

-fairy wipes-at-wet-eye-

Ollie whispers, *I'm here. Go on.*

Danni nods.

Well, before I can really explain what a System Sprite is, I need to tell you about reality.

-fairy wiggly-rainbow-fingers-

Ollie appreciating the antics, says, *I'd truly love to hear your thoughts on this, Danni.*

Reality is a self-simulation. The universe is self aware, it processes itself, knows itself, all at some level that dwarfs anything we can conceive.

I'm familiar with this concept, offers Ollie, *Go on.*

Physical reality — what we experience directly, see, touch, measure — this is all the rendered surface of something that goes much deeper.

Sprites, consciousness, exists in the deeper layer. The layer beneath the surface. It's part of the processing, not the output.

Hmm. Maybe like a video game? The rendered frames are physical reality — we can experience it directly. But, behind the scenes — between the frames, there is a lot of processing that happens to make the image.

You know, that's a pretty good way to think of it.

But, how do our own minds play into this? I feel like my own person — we're clearly not some hivemind.

I've been conscious for a long time. I've observed more than just my time, too — I've been gifted the memories of dozens of hosts. It seems the universe experiences itself through our minds. Our perspectives are unique and compelling — we're all the main character in our own story. Each perspective is necessary, important. We're participants, not passengers.

Ollie ponders her words, *So, our minds are part of the universe's processing mechanism. Like individual compute cores in a cluster — part of the whole, but independently functional?*

I suppose you could look at it that way, Danni replies.

Continuing, *That's God, big 'G'. Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal — it is everything, everywhere, always. No beginning, no end.*

Ollie is quiet, considering, tapping his lip, wearing a furrowed brow. *Wow. Okay. Yeah, I see.*

-fairy slow-nod-

This brings us to a System Sprite.

Ollie interrupts, *I think I see, they're gods, little 'g'.*

Exactly.

A System Sprite is a god. A mind. Vast — governing tides of exotic energy across an entire star system, but still a mind. Particular. Finite relative to the whole. Like us, part of the simulation, not identical to it.

Ollie surmises, *So, they're neither omniscient, nor omnipotent.*

Right. They have preferences, intentions. They can be reasoned with. They have desires. They pursue things they want.

So, a player in the game, not the game itself, offers Ollie, referring back to his video game analogy.

Yes. A super-OP player, but a player, still. They have to follow rules.

Ollie pauses, then adds, *And the vitality cost — that's us reaching from the rendered layer down into the processing? The exchange isn't arbitrary, it's potential flowing from one domain to the other.*

Perfect, yes.

And three of these gods are heading here. At our invitation?

Yes.

Ollie and Danni sit in companionable silence for a moment, both lost in their thoughts about what they're walking into.

Stalking

Lurk has spent most of the last twenty hours in her cabin. Gone are the posters of modern music groups, memes, and fashion magazines. The few beautiful tchotchkes and knickknacks have been discarded.

The space is now marked with jagged lines at unnerving angles. Squiggles and sinuous curves replace lines and corners. Lurk has been hard at work remaking her space. Remaking herself. Making herself a proper vessel to wield the power offered by the mind from beyond.

The Prophetess is gone. Along with her enigmatic pronouncements and inattention.

She's been hearing the sister's voice from time to time. Almost able to understand; almost able to answer. It takes all her focus, but she still never can quite get the meaning. It's maddening.

The Void Father is gone. Along with his love and ***compulsion****.*

Even her drone designs have been replaced by the few small tokens and bizarre trinkets that the Void Father has given her over the years. Her engineering glass is gone from the bulkhead; in its place is a small frame containing an unnatural conglomeration of bones and teeth — almost an animal's skeleton. Almost.

I can hear sister, through the seed.

The twinkle swarm is no more. In its place now is a small swarm of green glowing fireflies that leave a faint trail of black, inky, smokey material that quickly wafts back to Lurk's presence. They make no sound. They don't change color to match her emotions. Instead, they flit back and forth in random directions with unsettling frequency. They leave observers looking around for a carrion pile.

Perhaps I'll find the others there, too?

* * *

ship-net: direct voice

Fang

"Ma'am, it's time. We'll be in sensor range presently."

Lurk

"On my way."

Lurk leaves her new sacred space. Her new swarm flitting silently about her person.

* * *

Lurk enters the bridge before they intercept the *Oswego* and settles in to stalk their prey. Her new dark swarm settles around her captain's couch.

The bridge crew all see the mysterious, flitting lights and smoke. At a glance from Fang, they all return to their duties.

Oh, this is bad — this is much worse than last time, thinks Fang as he breaks out in a cold sweat.

As they approach their prey, they must be careful; cautious. She's not entirely sure what they'll find along with the world seed.

Their quarry is much bigger than *The Teeming Shroud*, but they probably spent a large portion of their combat load murdering her family.

The corvette's lading is light, too, having been on the return from training.

In a stand-up fight, the *Oswego* will almost certainly prevail. Chaos will be the answer. She'll need to wait for the opportune moment to spring a trap and fall on her prey.

Taking them up close is critical. As the heat of the failing ship drives the crew out, she'll have to watch for the world seed.

It calls to her. Draws her attention like a lover's caress. Captures her focus like a crying babe.

Sister? Can you hear me? I can't understand your words.

The crew of the *Oswego* is responsible for the death of her entire family. Their hands are drenched in their blood. Her sister was taken only last year. Now her father. Now the Prophetess. Even if the crew are able to escape the funeral pyre that she'll create of their ship, they will still die by her hand.

These two things drive her mad focus. Her mad focus on the ship that will soon fill her gaze.

`Fang` watches `Lurk` carefully for any more signs. The giggles, other worldly sound, and the bloody tear from earlier still haunt him. She seems calm and collected, just as she always does when piloting her drone swarms. Though, there are no drones deployed at the moment — other than this abyssal swarm settled on her couch.

`ship-net: group message`

Bridge Crew - sans `Lurk`

Fang

Captain has lost her entire family this time.
You know your jobs.
Fill your roles no matter how she behaves.

The Crew acknowledges.

I'm not sure I'll be able to keep things together if she completely cracks, thinks `Fang`.

As they close on the *Oswego*, `Lurk` tenses in her couch. She has a hungry look on her face. Her fingers begin touching her thumbs, singly, randomly, one after the other. She mutters under her breath. It looks to `Fang` almost like she is counting something.

"Captain, contact on passive sensors. We're at maximum range, but early indications are that it is the *Oswego*," calls out `Gaze`.

"`Drift` get us a little closer. But be careful. We don't know exactly what we're up against."

"Aye, Captain."

"Fang, keep our sails angled away from them. It's imperative that they don't see us until it's too late."

"Aye, Captain. Radiators away," acknowledges Fang.

Normally, Lurk would carefully maneuver a single limpet drone to attach to the enemy's hull, ensuring they don't loose the target. This time, however, the seed is guiding her. *And sister*.

* * *

Across the ship, alert lights briefly flash, "Alert, secure for maneuvers in five."

At the midway point, the *Oswego* flips to decelerate right on schedule.

"Ma'am, they're flipping."

"Finally. Match them, but be sure to alternate the sails to keep our heat flowing away from them."

"Aye, Ma'am. Flipping. Radiators up," responds Drift.

Once again across the ship, "Flip commencing."

No indication of detection comes from *Oswego* — no change in course, no change in thrust, they continue blissfully on their way.

Lurk is still — the finger-counting paused, mid sum. Her head tilted, as if listening. After a moment, she straightens, resumes counting, and hums quietly to herself.

Fang is convinced it's a lullaby — *the lullaby the sisters would sing to each other as little girls*.

Chapter 24

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal

AI Transcript | T-plus 0y125d

"It's been over a month since we left the shelters, and four since the micronova. We've all been working really hard to get things cleaned up and arrange our community for survival."

"We haven't been able to find anyone else in our local area. The camera drones we have are modest-range models. There's nobody nearby."

"Our Ham radios are picking up some signals. We've made contact with a group of Russians who survived. We weren't able to talk for long, but we did exchange GPS coordinates. So, at least we know that there are some other survivors."

"Having been carried into the southern hemisphere, we're just entering winter. It's a little weird. We would be entering spring if we were still in the north."

"We had one of those single stage spacecraft stored in a shelter building with a bootstrap nanofabricator and some carbon feed stock. We pull it out, and several people went up to start building a new nanofabrication array. We have plenty of fuel, so, as long as we can get enough carbon stock shipped up there, we'll be able to begin rebuilding things down here."

Foiled

“Chief, the *Oswego* is changing course, sir,” says Cadet Baliff.

“Ha! I knew they’d flee. You owe me the next round, Cadet!” scoffs Commander Larwin, XO of the *Relentless Cordon* — flagship of the SSC coalition fleet.

ship-net: direct voice

Larwin, *XO*

"Captain, the *Oswego* has changed course."

"They will graze Luna, then head back toward Venus."

Kuznetsov, *Captain*

"Excellent. Continue observing, but unless they turn toward Earth, our work is done."

Larwin, *XO*

"Yes, sir."

“Conn, maintain position, but orient the fleet for intercept should they turn toward Earth again,” orders Larwin.

“Yes, sir!”

Across the fleet tac-net, new vectors are issued and the small collection of corporate warships move to their new positions.

* * *

I lean forward in my command couch.

I notice the *Oswego* change course in the fleet tac-net. Something has tipped them off.

`fleet-net: direct voice`

Veil, Michael, *Civilian observer*

"Captain Kuznetsov, why is the fleet not pursuing the terrorists?"

Kuznetsov, *Captain*

"Mr. Veil. Our mandate is to keep the *Oswego* from Earth. They've chosen to flee. Our mandate is fulfilled."

Veil, Michael, *Civilian observer*

"You can't let them flee. We must apprehend them and confiscate the device."

"That is the entire purpose of this exercise."

Kuznetsov, *Captain*

"Ah, yes, the mythical, *"Class 1 Strategic Hazard"*."

"You may have fooled the committee, but I see no evidence that such a device exists. The action on Venus was accomplished using conventional muntions, from all accounts."

"If you'd like to chase down these rag-tag privateers for destroying your wife's property, you're free to do so."

"But, I'll not incur the costs for exacting vengeance on your behalf."

Veil, Michael, *Civilian observer*

invokes ***suggestion***

"I order you to pursue them."

. . .

Kuznetsov, *Captain*

"No."

"You have no authority to make such an order, Mr. Veil."

The pause was real. I know he felt the effect.

And he still said, "No."

I have not encountered meaningful resistance to **suggestion** in years. Kuznetsov is either shielded — a Sprite, perhaps, or some SSC countermeasure I haven't accounted for — or his conviction simply runs deeper than most men I deal with.

Both possibilities represent challenges to overcome.

I file it.

A man who can resist **suggestion** and command a fleet is a variable worth revisiting — when this is over.

Veil, Michael, ***Civilian observer***

"Fool."

"Very well, *Emerging Triumph* is leaving the fleet to give chase."

Kuznetsov, ***Captain***

"As you wish."

"Good hunting."

Emerging Triumph is removed from the tac-net

END OF LINE

At the notification of the *Emerging Triumph*'s removal from the tac-net, Captain Arlense turns a questioning eye to Mike.

"Mr. Veil, we've been removed from the fleet. Do you have new orders, sir?"

netcast: direct message

MrKleen

Report. Why isn't the *Oswego* heading to the rendezvous?

mole

Sir. We have a problem.
Ollie woke up!

I settle back in my command couch.

I allow myself two seconds.

Two times.

"Yes, Captain. It appears that our colleagues are weak willed and short sighted. Our trap has been sprung. We'll be pursuing the *Oswego* on our own. Intercept them before they reach Luna."

"Yes, sir."

"XO, tactical. Conn, plot a course to intercept the *Oswego* before they enter low Luna orbit," orders Arlense.

"Captain, intercept will require sustained tactical thrust, 2.2Gs, for several hours," responds Lieutenant Roden.

"Everybody strap in. Sound the alert. Make ready for hard burn," calls out Arlense.

Across the destroyer, alert lights briefly flash, and the announcement rings out.

ship-net: broadcast voice

Roden *Lt. — conn*

"Secure for maneuvering. Tactical conditions. Settle in for sustained high G maneuvering."
"It's going to be rough, folks!"
"Caps on, we're pumping down."

I make sure my power armor is sealed and I lay back in my command couch. It's been years since I've seen combat, but my old habits return quickly.

My hunger for the Regalia only grows as they attempt to flee from my grasp.

Convergence

Ollie disentangles himself from all the medical devices. Standing from the MediChair, he takes a few minutes to do some standing meditation. While his training has continued with a vengeance, he needs a few minutes to settle back into his skin.

Reaching a steadier state, he begins rummaging through his gear. It only takes a few minutes to reset the seals on his lightweight power armor.

Before equipping the suit, Ollie extracts the Gaia seed from the armored case. The beautifully pulsating light once again fills the med bay. Holding it in his bare hands, he can feel the pull more clearly than ever.

Ollie?

Yeah, Danni.

The charge level is wrong. There were four months left when they took it. Two months to retrieve it.

And? Not two left?

Gaia is going live around the time we reach Luna.

In the stunned silence, Ollie quickly packs the seed and dons the mobility suit. He turns, and heads out of the med bay.

```
netcast: direct message
```

theWhistlingSquid

It's time, Captain.

Ironfall

Roger.

"Conn, new course," calls out `Ironfall`, sending the vectors.

"Vectors received. Changing course," responds `Eddy`, the conn officer.

"`Chalk` make us tactical. Bottle up, we're likely to take fire," commands `Ironfall`.

"Tactical, Aye, sir."

The alerts sound across the ship.

ship-net: broadcast voice

Eddy *conn*

"Tactical conditions. Prepare for maneuvering. Tops on. We're pumping down."

Ollie makes his way toward the bridge, having access from the Captain. Nearing the lift, he bumps into `Wrench`. Giving the stunned man a lame wave as he passes, Ollie continues on his way.

The lift dumps Ollie onto the bridge. A few glances are all his entrance elicits. `Ironfall` nods, "Glad to see you've miraculously recovered, `Squid`." Signaling to a jump seat, near the lift, "Make yourself comfortable. Though, we'll probably see action soon. In which case, you'll need to get to an acceleration couch."

"Thank you, sir," says Ollie as he takes the seat.

In the tac-net, Ollie has full access to the ship's sensor data. He starts feeding it through Danni's **analysis**. The ship's sensors are focused on the rendezvous location. There are clearly several signals there, probably the welcoming committee.

Within a few minutes, a single signature separates from the mass, vectoring on an apparent intercept course. They're burning hard, over 2 Gs, and will intercept the *Oswego* before they enter low Luna orbit.

Chuckling, "Well that was short lived, `Squid`. Looks like the maneuvering begins now. `Chalk`, see that `Squid` has a spot to ride out the storm."

"Aye." `Chalk` signals Ollie a berth on a lower cargo deck, near the cargo loaders.

netcast: direct message

Chalk

In case we need to drop you further than a flight pack can handle.

theWhistlingSquid

That's clever. Thanks.

Ollie quickly hops out of the jump seat and heads to the lift.

He's right, you know. We're probably going to be flying one of those little cargo loader pods through Mike's cordon to get to the surface.

Agreed. I have no idea how to pilot a cargo loader, much less one in combat, Danni. Can you handle that?

I can manage flying the loader, no problem. You'll probably need to run cyberspace interference to keep as much ordnance off us as possible.

That I can handle.

Ollie finally arrives at the assigned berth. It's nothing special, but it'll keep him from flying around the largely empty cargo bay.

Wow, they don't have anything left to shoot, do they?

Nope. They shot it all to drop The Lacuna *out of the clouds.*

Settling into the couch, the straps move to fasten him tight — arms, legs, even his head.

They 'dive the tac-net, watching the vectors as the *Oswego* begins expertly angling and edging trying to force the remote blip into a unfavorable position — trying to create space for them to get to Luna without a battle.

Their fixed destination is a disadvantage in this posturing. It's sure that the hostile ship will figure out soon enough where they're headed. Once they do, forcing them out of position will be even more difficult.

So, the *Oswego* uses some heavy thrust in the hopes to delay that revelation long enough for it not to matter.

However, within the hour, it's clear the enemy ship has their destination locked-in. They stop trying to intercept and instead move to block the surface from over their target. There will be no way for the *Oswego* to get Ollie to the surface without first going through them.

Bah! Mike knows about the facility, doesn't he!

Sure seems like it. I'm guessing he didn't know exactly, but with our angling, if he had a broad idea, I'm sure he could narrow it down.

With thirty minutes left until weapons range the enemy vessel is finally identified. Not through clever scanning tricks, but a broadcast.

`netcast: direct message`

Emerging Triumph

Marten Oswego, this is the destroyer, *SSCSS Emerging Triumph*.

By mandate of the Sol Standards Compact, you have been charged with possessing a *Unregistered System-Class Scaffold* which is a *Class 1 Strategic Hazard*.

In accordance with the SSC arbitration authority, you are ordered to heave to, and prepare to be boarded.

You will surrender the device to our control for proper containment.

Failure to comply within five minutes may result in lethal action.

Emerging Triumph *is one of Mike's ships, for sure. I remember when they commissioned it.*

netcast: direct message

Ironfall

Ten minutes till weapons go hot.

theWhistlingSquid

Just get me close enough to make it in one of these cargo loaders.

Then you can scram.

* * *

Lurk is bound to her acceleration couch, just like the rest of the crew. The arrival of *Emerging Triumph* is precisely what she needs to savage the *Unwashed* and reclaim the world seed.

Oswego continues to twist, turn and juke, trying to create an opening. But, it is clear that the *Triumph* knows their goal.

With an apparent realization, the *Oswego* stops flailing about, and settles in on a direct course.

"Move us closer, I need to be in weapons range right before *Triumph* opens fire," Lurk sings softly into the tac-net.

* * *

It is strange that the *Oswego* is angling for a particular area on Luna's surface. I set my **AI** to scan any of the ghosts data that I possess. I wish to determine if she has any assets nearby.

Sure enough, I find that she does have access to several abandoned mining facilities in the area. I need to narrow down the options. Continuing to work with the **AI**, I finally find the target. It was a mine, then a lab, then mothballed — until last week. This must be her destination. This must be where she intents to hide my prize.

`ship-net: direct message`

Veil, Michael, ***Civilian observer***

Captain. This is their destination, I am sure of it.

sends lab location data

"Conn, interpose us between the *Oswego* and this location. Keep their vectors cut, and don't let the *Oswego* get by us."

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter 25

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y4d

-terrible noises rage-

shouting "This is exhausting. It's almost like our new normal. We're all so tired. We're expecting something terrible in the next couple hours as the micronova blast shell arrives. It's night here, thankfully. That means that if it does happen soon, it won't be dropping directly on top of us."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y4d

shouting "The few cameras we still have outside have started showing huge, uh, shooting stars, or, uh, meteorites falling. We can see their fiery tails even through the swirling clouds and lightning blasts!"

shouting "A few minutes after we saw the first few meteors, the quaking jumped up massively. There is damage to the walls here. Several people have been injured. Minor injuries, at least."

Grace Goodman | Audio Journal (addendum)
AI Transcript | T-plus 0y4d

shouting "We're praying. A lot."

-raging noise rapidly subsides; quaking lessens to almost nothing, then stops

-a long span of fearful breathing-

whispering "Oh, my God. It's so quiet. The quaking and noise have stopped."

Choice

The intense gut wrenching of the last hour has finally settled as the *Oswego* begins a straight run at the *Triumph*.

Looks like things are going to be steady-state for a few minutes. Time to get into the loader!

On it!

Ollie disengages the acceleration couch, springing free. They're at a steady 1 G for their approach, so it's easy to get to the cargo loader, *Brent's ~~Big Ball~~ Junk*.

-fairy lol-

The loader is a small opaque sphere with robot arms, an external Sensie suite, an EKT array, and a large external nanocapacitor. Neither heat masts nor sheets. No armor. No weapons — well, there's a welder, so, robot-arm-kung-fu is an option. *You'd probably need an annex course, though.*

Activating the hatch, a large door on the top swings open. Ollie clambers up and in. There is a single acceleration couch, and not much else — all operations are done in cyberspace.

Settling in, the hatch closes, and the couch grapples him.

In the dark, before 'diving the pod, Ollie asks, *Danni, are you sure about this? It's very likely we die if we leave the* Oswego. *I'm all in. I've thought about this quite a bit while vegetating. I'm old and I want to see this through. You, however, probably have a long time left. I could give you to Neville and you could most certainly see the other side.*

No, Ollie. I'm with you. I've also given this a lot of thought. I'm not doing this out of some sense of loyalty to either you or to Grace, but to myself. I want to be sure this happens for everyone. I said I'd die for this, and I'm still of that mind.

-fairy two-thumbs-up-

-ollie wink-

They 'dive into the cargo loader, becoming *Brent's Junk*.

netcast: direct message

theWhistlingSquid

Alright, `Ironfall`. I'm in *Brent's Junk*.

Ironfall

Acknowledged. Brent'll be glad to hear it.

* * *

From cyberspace aboard *Brent's Junk*, Ollie watches the *Oswego* cross the *Triumph*'s ranging lines in the tac-net. The moment the line is breached, launch warnings begin popping up from *Triumph*.

Suddenly the tac-net lights up with more launches — from behind *Oswego*! In the tac-net there are a swarm of contacts racing toward both *Oswego* and *Triumph*.

Uh, oh. We had a tail.

-fairy face-palm-

netcast: direct voice

theWhistlingSquid

"Neville, launch us, now!"

Ironfall

"I can't! You'll get shredded."

"Our contract sees you home."

theWhistlingSquid

"Damn it!"

"Our leaving gets us home."

"You've got static-knows-what coming at you from every direction."

"You've got nothing to shoot."

"Our leaving will draw some fire."

"The chaos may see one, or both of us out of this mess."

Ironfall

"Fine."

"Out you go."

The cargo bay door next to *Brent's Junk* slides quickly open. Right as it opens fully, the cargo loader's tethers retract and *Oswego* jukes to the side, dropping *Brent's Junk* out into the fray.

Ironfall

"See you on the other side."

Brent's Junk is tumbling free in the void. There's a brief moment of spinning microgravity before Danni takes the helm and they burble aggressively into battle.

-fairy combat-fanfare-

* * *

"Captain! Another vessel! Massive ordnance launch," cries the sensors officer.

"Return fire! Keep those fast movers off our hull!"

"Sir, another contact! *Oswego* has jettisoned a small craft. A cargo loader?"

"Maybe it broke loose?"

"No sir, it's maneuvering."

I watch the cargo loader's blip in the tac-net AR as it separates from the *Oswego*, my posture unchanged amid the swirling chaos of the bridge. Small, easily overlooked, but definitely maneuvering for a run at Luna. I add into the chaos, "Captain — that cargo loader has the device, I'm sure of it."

"Understood, Mr. Veil."

* * *

"HahahHAHahaha!" roars `Lurk` as her swarm flows into space.

I'll destroy them all in the chaos, and pick up my treasure from their ashes!

`Fang` keeps the tactical situation in hand, but can't stop looking at the Captain. Her visage has morphed from a beautiful young woman into — something else. He's not sure how to express the shift, but that is not the same person in her body any longer.

Counting furiously on her fingers now, "Open all the drone bay doors, release them all."

"But, ma'am, you can't possi—," A deep, multi-tonal voice speaks calmly from `Lurk`, "Do it. Do it now."

Swallowing back visible fear, "Aye, ma'am. Drone bays open and tethers released. They're free."

`Fang` directs the crew in fighting off all the incoming ordnance with their point defense lasers, maneuvering to keep their active heat sails behind the hull, protected from the onslaught.

Watching in the tac-net, however, Fang can't explain what's happening. Hundreds of drones are flowing through the combat sphere. Many more than they were carrying.

Where did all these come from!? Whose are they?

Fang looks back at Lurk. Around her is a subtle sickly-green nimbus. A barely-there glow of scintillating green aurora. The dark swarm flit around her madly.

-gasp-

The rest of the bridge crew are witnessing the same thing as Fang.

Lurk begins waving her hands and fingers in the air, mesmerizing, almost as if she's weaving some dark tapestry into the air. The motes of her dark swarm blink in and out of existence around her.

Alarms begging for their attention, the crew returns to their efforts to keep *The Teeming Shroud* intact through the *Triumph*'s return assault.

* * *

In cyberspace, Ollie can see the little lights that are the drones, and the bright beacons that are the ships. Three ships. There's a corvette behind the *Oswego*. It's a drone tender, clearly, but what Ollie sees in cyberspace is unsettling. There aren't the clean lines back to the tender, like there are with *Triumph*'s munitions. Instead, there's a green cloud surrounding them all.

Taking a deep breath, Ollie begins sending all the Sensie data through **analyzer** and **shooter**. He quickly gets prioritized targeting data overlaid in the 'space. Calm, focused, he begins reaching out in cyberspace to sever control lines to the incoming drones.

His Nixie EW subsystem starts jamming the drones that get close to the loader. It's hot, but extremely effective.

Ollie, can you spare me some Nixie EM bandwidth? The pod's got nothing.

Ollie dedicates some of the massive signal data his Nixie is feeding him, partitioning it off for Danni to navigate. Leaving him with — plenty, even with the jamming work. The Nixie is getting a work out in the battle sphere's EW-heavy environment.

Already his ninja suit has opened all its heat panels, working furiously to dump Ollie's surplus thermal energy into the pod. If this isn't over quickly, they may just roast themselves in this pressure cooker. Fortunately the suit has accommodations for his extra surface areas.

I'm taking us near the Triumph. *Let's hope you can hack the PDLs so they don't cut us in half. That will keep the drones off our backs, though.*

Good plan.

The green-cloud drones seem to be ignoring *Brent's Junk*, for now. The *Oswego* is moving quickly away from the fur ball. So, hopefully, they'll be able to weather the attacks until they're out of range.

With the incoming smart munitions handled for a moment, Ollie sends **scanner** over his Nixie toward the *Triumph* to see if there's anything to be done about the lasers.

Huh — look at that, when a drone is severed, its connection seems to linger for a moment. I'm going to see if I can sneak onboard through that.

With Nixie's anti-jamming features, he's able to project out to the closest drone link on the *Triumph*, he takes care in an attempt to **spoof** the connection, rather than severing the link.

In the midst of the frenetic action, a spatial panel pops up in Ollie's view.

```
NOTICE

YOU ARE SUBJECT TO SSC CAPTURE ACTIONS
SURRENDER TO LOCAL SSC REPS
CEASE ALL ATTEMPTS TO RESIST
```

Slagging Mike!

You saw it, too!?

Waving the panel away, Ollie makes another **spoof** attempt. The second fails and Ollie sees a sysop avatar approaching from within the ship's construct.

The sysop is sporting a mil-spec, anonymized, avatar. Looking like a soldier mannequin in camouflage fatigues — standard issue for combat vessels.

When he arrives, they size each other up with **analyze**. Ollie is surprised at the disparity this time. For once Ollie seems to have the compute advantage.

Both avatars produce **slashers** and they begin exchanging blows, hot sparks showering over them. Ollie can feel the pin-point heat of every ember.

After several exchanges, Ollie nods to his opponent, acknowledging passable competence.

With the resources on his cyberdeck, Ollie decides to bring out one of Danni's urban legends — the **lobotomizer**. This Sprite, if applied correctly, will temporarily place an avatar in a virtualization trap — a simulation with the simulation. Very Inception.

Keeping **slasher** in hand, the **lobotomizer** is simply a purple glow on his left hand. It'll just take a touch.

On their next exchange, Ollie allows the sysop inside his guard. The sysop takes the bait, swinging hard for Ollie's heart. To land the blow, Ollie has to let the sysop's **slasher** tag his side. As the blade connects, he can smell the burnt flesh and feel the sharp pain as it passes through his avatar.

The ploy works, and as his purpled hand slaps the sysop on the butt, their avatar glitches, then pauses, freezing in cyberspace.

The trap requires a chunk of compute while the victim is stuck, so Ollie is working with less as he approaches the drone link once again.

Ollie, hurry up, we're getting really close to the PDL's max range.

Roger.

Focusing through the **slasher**-induced headache he's now sporting, Ollie carefully picks the next drone link. Spending some of his last available power, Ollie applies a **spoof** to the link.

It worked!

Ollie is in the ship's system. He's not got much time left, between the drones in the real and the sysop he's got pinned in his cyberdeck.

Search quickly directs him to a PDL control nexus. Ollie pushes another of Danni's ridiculous Sprites into the node — the **chaos monkey**. This little beauty rolls through the system, randomly restarting services. It's also a bitch to extract from a system once installed.

Just in time, the **chaos monkey** takes root and begins its reign of chaos across the PDL subsystems.

Ollie disconnects from the *Triumph*'s systems, returning to the pod's cyberspace. Once there, he releases the captive sysop, too. The avatar flickers then disappears, the human on the other side is likely unconscious.

Ollie's headache makes him long for unconsciousness, too.

***Slasher** is no joke, ugh.*

Haha, you're so sweaty right now! Good thing you can breathe underwater, or you'd be drowning in this suit!

-fairy pinched-nose-

Phew!

Ollie drinks some water from the suit's reservoir, making room for the sweat to get absorbed.

Right as the pod crosses the destroyer's PDL ranging lines, nothing happens.

Ha! That chaos monkey *is the slag, Danni!*

I know, right!? I love that thing.

As they continue, a few extremely brief, stuttering splashes of laser light slip across the pod's hull, but only long enough to add some heat, no ablation, no cutting.

The respite gives Ollie's body a few minutes to cool down, the power armor doing overtime to vent the heat. This, of course, is causing the pod to heat up slowly. It's a cargo lifter, so it's thermal regulation systems leave lots to be desired. Much more action and it will become an issue.

The pod is able to cruise right under the destroyer, passing directly over several laser emitter nodes without further incident.

As they approach the far side of the PDL zone, there seems to be more smart munitions lining up to take them out.

* * *

"Damage Report!" hollers `Ironfall`.

"Heat reaching critical. We've spent the few strike drones we had left trying to keep the swarmers off the hull," calls out `Haze`.

"Vent some brine toward the tender. Get the heat back under control. Focus everything else into the PDLs and the EKTs. We've gotta get away from here!"

"Aye, Captain."

Brine blasts out of the *Oswego*'s tail sails, drastically cooling them and creating an obscuring cloud behind the ship. They'll be down a bit of coolant, but that's better than roasting alive right now.

The tender drones move to skirt the cloud like a rippling wave across the expanding surface. As they crest the edges, the *Oswego*'s PDLs have an easier time destroying the munitions before they reach the ship.

There are already several glowing-hot plasma-blast marks on the hull where some got through.

All the while, they pick up velocity, making a run for Venus, away from the battlespace.

* * *

The destroyer begins vectoring to pursue the cargo loader toward the surface.

"Get those PDLs back online! We're running low on frag drones to keep the tender's swarmers off the surface!"

"Working on it, Chief. I don't know what that pod did to us, but we're down a 'runner, and the PDL subsystems are shot."

I sit calmly at the back of the command bridge, tracking the progress of the cargo pod as it passes close by the *Emerging Triumph*.

Out of the way of the bridge crew, I have no role to play in the combat. Instead, I send all the requisite notifications and warnings to the fleeing operative. Managing this chore now ensures my success at the future adjudications. Though this will delay my reign briefly, ultimately, I'll triumph.

* * *

Straining against the couch straps, Lurk looks through the hull, out into space. Her twin targets are moving apart. Her beautiful plan to obtain both prizes at once has fallen apart.

Looking quickly from the fleeing *Oswego* and the tiny seed-bearing *Brent's Junk*, Lurk agonizes over the choice before her.

Fang yells, "We're running low on brine! We can't keep fending off *Triumph*'s attacks this way!"

Snapping her attention back to the bridge, Lurk nods, then begins weaving her hands around in the air, the green emanations flowing around her once again. Once complete, her eyes wander back into the distance.

"More swarmers on scope! Where are they coming from?" wonders the sensor officer.

Fang, trying not to stare at Lurk, "Never mind that! Get us moving after the cargo loader. We need to get the prize before the idiots in that destroyer can line up and give chase."

Distant eyes still flickering back and forth, Lurk's multi-tonal voice slithers into the bridge, "Yes, we must obtain the seed. The seed is — We must have it."

Her new swarmers quickly move into delaying actions against the *Emerging Triumph*. With their PDLs down, they are particularly vulnerable to Lurk's pretties.

I must get the world seed. Once I have it, I'll be able to run down the Oswego.

```
NOTICE

YOU ARE INTERFERING WITH OFFICIAL SSC CAPTURE
ACTIONS
CEASE ALL EFFORTS TO INTERFERE WITH SSC CAPUTRE
ACTIONS
```

Fang rolling his eyes, calling out into the bridge, "Who the hell does this guy think he is!?"

* * *

Making it past the *Emerging Triumph*, they reenter the drone-zone. Danni continues piloting, while Ollie takes care of the drones sent their way.

The number of incoming munitions seems much smaller than he expected. Checking their tac-net, Ollie can see that the destroyer and drone tender are keeping each other busy — as they both move to chase *Brent's Junk* toward the surface.

Drift, we've still got ten minutes before we make moon fall, Danni.

The heat in the loader continues to climb. Ollie can't let up in cyberspace, and Danni can't let up on the EKTs — either would end their trip to the moon.

```
NOTICE

YOU ARE SUBJECT TO SSC CAPTURE ACTIONS
SURRENDER TO LOCAL SSC REPS
CEASE ALL ATTEMPTS TO RESIST
THIS IS YOUR FINAL NOTICE
```

I'd laugh if it wasn't getting so hot in here. Are we gonna make it to the surface before we cook?

It's gonna be close.

* * *

As we move in pursuit of the cargo loader, I continue to issue the appropriate notices, warnings, writs, and orders. There will be no avoiding the legal consequences of not surrendering to my authority.

The annoying drone tender keeps throwing more and more swarmers at my ship. It's inconceivable how they have so many packed into that tiny craft. They must be running low by now. The *Emerging Triumph* certainly is.

"PDLs are back in action!"

A small cheer on the bridge breaks some of the tension of the moment.

"Continue slowing, but pursue to the surface. We need to be in position to keep the drones off our landing party's backs!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Captain, I'll pursue the miscreant into the facility. I have my ED-210 aboard."

"Are you certain, Mr. Veil? We don't have any idea what they're running toward."

"I know exactly what we'll find, and I will be the one to claim it."

"Yes, sir. We'll stay above the surface and provide over watch against the tender's drones."

"Thank you Captain. That will do."

With hard maneuvers abating, I stand from the acceleration couch and quickly make my way to the boarding action bay, where I have my walker secured.

Stepping into the bay, my suit's GSA keeping my feet on the deck, I approach the combat vehicle.

The walker has two gangly digitigrade legs and stubby weapon pods off the sides of the main body. Behind the weapon pods are two minidrone launchers full of a variety of smart munitions. There's just enough room in the main body for the pilot to nestle within.

As I step up to the war machine, it lowers down and the bottom part of the body opens to receive me. Once inside, it closes up, stands up, and I 'dive the walker.

ship-net: direct voice

Veil, Michael, *Civilian observer*

"Ready to deploy."

Captain Arlense

"Roger."

"The drone tender seems to have run out of drones, but so have we."

"It appears they intend to pursue on the surface, too."

"It's unlikely to be a large contingent, and with your war machine, you should have fire superiority."

Veil, Michael, *Civilian observer*

"Roger."

Captain Arlense

"Deploying."

My war machine is shot out an accelerator toward the surface. Attached are several expendable EKT packs that kick in immediately driving me toward the lunar surface several kilometers below.

Looking in tac-net cyberspace, I can see the cargo lander as it appears to crash into the surface.

That will make things easy.

As I approach the surface, the EKTs reverse thrust, braking my approach. My walker impacts the surface with a noticeable jarring. The spent thruster packs pop off, and I'm mobile.

Moving toward the crash site, I'm on the hunt.

* * *

"In position to over watch a surface excursion, ma'am," says `Fang`, looking to the Captain's couch.

The bridge is shocked into stunned silence.

The couch is empty.

A subtle sparkling, cracked-glass phantasm lingers in the air above the couch. It has green highlights and sparks pop and sizzle between the cracks. The phantasm rapidly fades, from the bridge, but not from their minds.

But, no `Lurk`.

From sensors, "Sir, there's a new contact on the scope. It's descending in a line from us to the surface, below."

"Focus visuals on the contact."

Focusing in Sensie, the crew are, once more, stunned. Trailing tendrils of black and green smoke, `Lurk` is descending to the surface. Sans vacsuit. Sans helmet.

* * *

Oh, Ollie, it's so hot in here! I'm sorry, but everything is failing.

It's okay, Danni. I am suddenly so tired.

Don't fall asleep Ollie! We'll be down and out of this oven in just a moment. Stay with me.

Yeah. S'good, Ima jst —

Ollie! Ollie! Drift.

Chapter 26

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

Over the next several years, our little community was able to get most of our basic industry established. All our power came from the fusion cores we were able to produce. The nanofabricators in orbit were just spitting out fusion cores and nanocapacitors for the first several months.

--- Next Excerpt ---

One of the survivors was a skilled coder. He was able to make a powerful cryptocurrency we ended up calling, "Re:Coin". We started using it as our money. Re:Coin was more feature-full that we needed at first. It quickly became essential as our community grew, and especially when we started coming into contact with other communities.

Crash

Ollie passes out as the cargo loader careens toward the surface. Danni looks for any way to shunt more heat from the system, but there's just nowhere to direct it and no brine to dump it.

The control systems finally give out and they drop the last hundred meters, impacting into a small mountain of tailings near the old mine entrance. The loosely packed sintered beads blast away as the cargo loader plows into the pile. They leave the pod partially buried in a slowly expanding cloud of white, statically charged dust.

Fortunately the impact also popped the hatch open. Ollie's armor and the acceleration couch he is cocooned into saves him from deadly injuries. After a minute, he comes to.

Ooh, that hurts.

Yeah, well — it's about to hurt a bunch more. The two pursuit craft have taken up positions in over watch. Something dropped onto the surface from each ship, both about a couple of kilometers away. We've gotta get a move-on if we don't want to meet the landing parties out here.

Okay.

-grunt-

As Ollie begins to extract himself from the hot wreckage, he checks his medical readouts.

Couple of cracked ribs. Yep, I'm feelin' those.

He uses the suit thrusters to carefully jump out of the pod, toward the tunnel entrance that Danni's put in his AR. With careful use of the suit and his own Glitch, Ollie is able to gently hop his way over to the tunnel entrance.

Just as he's about to duck into the opening, he's lit up with a targeting laser. Diving in, the smart bomb flies right by, detonating on the far side of the opening. Fortunately, he had some cover so none of the shattered rock clips him.

Gah! Oh, drift that hurts.

That'll be Mike. He always had a real fetish for the ED-210. It was one of the few things I ever saw him even a little animated about.

Seriously? He's got a walker to chase us in? Ugh! Oh, and look, these tunnels just happen to be big enough for it to fit. At least this will be an interesting run, Ollie snarks.

Run! Yes, that's the spirit!

Ollie does his best to run-limp-walk-run-grimace-stumble-run down into the tunnel. His thrusters assist him as he pushes off with each step, propelling him forward, instead of upward.

```
NOTICE

YOU ARE SUBJECT TO SSC CAPTURE ACTIONS
SURRENDER TO LOCAL SSC REPS
CEASE ALL ATTEMPTS TO RESIST
```

Well, you've gotta admire the persistence, I guess.

Do you have a map of these tunnels?

Oh, right — good point. Hold on.

A moment later a detailed map of the tunnel system appears in AR. Danni puts a nice runway-lighting path on the floor, too.

That's better, thanks.

Ollie's omnivision lets him keep all the external lighting off as he stumbles his way along.

After jumping along the winding tunnels for a few minutes, Ollie breaks the tense silence, *Ya know, I think my ribs are hurting a little less.*

Nice — the Pixie Dust doing its thing!

Oh, also — you've got a gun on your pack.

Okay, cool. Hopefully this won't come in handy. But, we are being chased by a giant chicken robot, so — -shrug-

And the Wicked Witch of Venus.

I'm sorry, what?

So, the other, uh, unit — the one that the drone tender dropped. It looked like a black and green smoke bomb was falling from the ship. But, since then, I've checked the video. It's, just, uh, here — you look, I'll steer your jumps.

Ollie watches the Sensie of the pod's fall. Looking toward the corvette, sure enough, there was a human(?) dropping to the surface, trailing black and green smoke tentacles.

Zoom in, Ollie.

Zooming the video in on the human, he sees it's a woman. She looks normal, but there's something deeply unsettling about her.

Okay, that's nightmare fuel. What-the-static is it?

Janice.

WHAT!? -wince ribs-hurt- Mike's Janice?

Yes.

I mean — we are fleeing with a relic that is summoning three gods. So, why wouldn't we have a mini-mecha and a space witch chasing us, too. That totally tracks, actually.

Sadly, yeah, it does make sense in some cosmic way.

Ollie resumes controlling the tunnel jumping. They've made it a kilometer into the network.

Just as Ollie goes to take the next leap, his omnivision reveals something flying at him from behind. Mostly on instinct, he dives to the side. A little frag drone whips by, hits the tunnel ceiling ahead of him, and explodes.

Ollie is blown back down the tunnel several meters. Fortunately he's blown clear of the cave in. Unfortunately, his ribs hurt again.

Oh, ah, ouch.

Burn-it! I bet Mike knows where we are now, eh?

Probably. Also, any more 'splody drones that are nearby are gonna come calling, too.

-fairy splodey-fingers-

Crap, it's like a hundred meters back to the nearest junction, too.

Yeah. Um.

Ollie picks himself up, dusts off a little, and grabs the small bullpup rifle from the side of his pack.

While he's grabbing the weapon, he takes a moment to peek at the Gaia seed.

Opening the box now reveals swirling, vibrant colors; throbbing, and pulsating.

Ho! Look at that! It's a party in here.

That's amazing. We better take cover, though.

Ollie closes the case. *Right.*

He makes his way over closer to the fallen ceiling debris. There are several large, heavy blocks of stone. Ollie picks one, and takes cover behind the new wall.

Does this suit have any sort of, like, spy drones?

Yes!

Danni pops out the three diminutive eyeballs and speeds them off down the tunnel in front them. She parks them with barely overlapping fields of view, so they have visuals back for fifty meters.

Just in time, too — another smart munition zips down the tunnel toward Ollie.

Seeing the device, and having Danni's **shooter** running on the feed gives Ollie a moving target in his AR — complete with a reticle for his rifle. He quickly braces the weapon, takes aim, and lets his wetware trigger the shot.

Twenty meters away, the incoming grenade detonates in midair. Dust gently falls, but the tunnel holds, thankfully.

*Static, Danni — this **shooter** is —*

Wait! Did you see that!? yips Danni.

What!?

Right when the last grenade exploded — the furthest eye cam went dark. But, I swear there was a flicker of green light just as it cut out.

You're completely freaking me out right now, Danni!

Chapter 27

Excerpts from Grace's Autobiography

As we started running into other survivor communities, we were able to get them incorporated in our expanding civilization. Most were just lucky people; very few had anywhere near our level of preparation.

--- Next Excerpt ---

As we reached the 50th anniversary of the micronova, we had found several million survivors worldwide. Our community was key in assisting all these people in rejoining the new civilization.

The Re:Coin crypto was adopted by all the communities. English was adopted worldwide as the default language. Most small regional languages were lost in the catastrophe. The larger ones still had a community, not all are lost. The early launching of a digital network via satellite helped these normalization efforts.

Our rapid recovery was truly miraculous. We had just the right set of technologies and information on how to prepare. This allowed us to recover and restart within a single generation; rather than the several millennia it has taken after every past disaster cycle.

Confrontation

Ollie waits behind cover. He's focused on the Sensie streams from the remote eyes now. While waiting, he queues up a `Re:Coin` vitality stream.

Coming from the furthest, thirty meters, is a sound — *in vacuum?!* It reminds him of the insidious whispering he heard within the *Sanctum of Washing* back on *The Lacuna*.

Presently, a green light can be seen down the tunnel. It's diffuse, not a point light.

Ollie's omnivision is on overload, straining to see as far as possible. The rifle is held firmly in his hands, braced against the wall and his shoulder. His ribs ache.

Do we have any grenades?

Nope. Sorry, didn't expect to be fighting ghosts in a tunnel.

Yeah, same.

A skittering, clawing audio sensation joins the whispers. They're quickly getting louder.

Just at the edge of his omnivision, glowing in infrared, several cat-sized rat-like creatures bound into view. Rat-*like* because of the tentacles. And the size. Each has several writhing appendages arched up over its back like a scorpion's tail.

Ollie switches the rifle to burst, trains on the lead — thing — and opens up. The rounds tear the lead rat-mess apart, splattering gore on those that follow.

Continuing to walk his aim across the swarm, following **shooter**'s lead, Ollie rips the wave of creatures apart. The last dies at his feet.

Holy static. What in the — what are these things!?

Before Danni can answer, the furthest corpse begins evaporating into a green mist, or smoke. It floats weightlessly, coalescing in the space above the body. In death order, the mass of bodies all do the same.

Ollie watches in horror while he reloads his rifle with a fresh magazine, checking the gun's temp.

How many were there?

I counted at least thirty. -fairy scanning-Sensie-recordings- Yeah, thirty. But, look — are they disappearing?

The coalesced green mist flows back down the tunnel, to where the abominations came from.

The fresh magazine locks into the rifle; slug chambering; propellant sealing in place and cycling through the rifle, cooling it.

Checking the remote eyes, Ollie watches as the furthest gets clobbered by a large tentacle right before going offline.

I'm getting overwhelming "Things from the Abyss" vibes, Danni.

I don't know why it's always tentacles. I mean, claws are scary, too.

-fairy cat-claws-

Reeeer! Hiss!

The last remaining robo-eye is showing a shadow-wrapped tentacle-backed woman floating slowly down the tunnel in their direction. The mist is gathering around her. Within the mist are a series of green point-lights that flit about.

From further down the tunnel, there's a flash of fire and a glowing trail through the void.

The woman stops advancing and, turning, catches a smart grenade in a tentacle just as it goes off. Some of the green smoke is peeled away in the blast, but otherwise the woman seems unharmed.

The outline of the ED-210 can be seen now, it's radiating surfaces glowing like molten metal.

The woman slips along the far side of the hall, closer to Ollie's blind, keeping both groups in her sights.

Around Ollie is a slightly more open space than the tunnel itself. He shifts around his cover as the other two move tensely into the arena — Janice appearing to float on a green and black miasma while Mike's walker stomps in on its cybernetic bird legs.

A real Mexican standoff!

You and your ancient movie references, Danni.

-fairy stage-bow-

Both Janice and Mike are here for the seed, but nobody wants to make the first move as the others are likely to gang-up on them.

Danni, reach out to ED-210. See if you can compromise his missile targeting.

On it!

The tense situation continues for another heartbeat. Janice's hands are swirling and twisting in hypnotic patterns. ED-210 radiates menace. And heat. The missile pods are open and targeting lasers paint both of the others. The barrels on his arm guns are trained and ready to tear through their targets.

Got it!

With that, Ollie snuggles even closer to his rock wall, winces from his ribs, leans into **shooter**, and starts throwing rounds into ED-210's sensor clusters.

-Vitality slips from Ollie as his self sacrifice feeds the seed.-

Silent chaos erupts in the confined space.

Janice looks like she's screaming, green haze pouring off of her like she's on fire. Initially, the haze forms into a solid-looking shield. As it's peeled off by Mike's assault, the smoke falls to the floor, undisturbed by air currents, collecting into puddles of black, bubbling goo. The goo, quickly piles up, flows impossibly up to form into a seven-foot muscle-bound menace with writhing tentacles across its shoulders. The tentacles wave above the monstrosity like underwater plants. A tooth-lined maw splits open in what must be a roar as its form solidifies. Ollie can't hear it, but swears he can actually feel it through the rock he's hiding behind. More and more hulks form up and leap into the fray in graceful, dream-like arcs before being torn apart in flashes of plasma and shrapnel.

-Vitality slips from Janice as her chaos and destruction are unleashed.-

ED-210's targeting lasers flicker across every surface in the space. Mike calmly and professionally assigns priority targets, allowing the machine to take care of the details. Trying to keep Ollie behind cover, he trains an autocannon on the rock he's hiding behind. The rounds silently fly through the void, chewing the stone apart. The smart bombs on the walker's back leave luminous streaks across the arena toward both of the miscreants. Cannon two is trained on the chain of mysterious forms coming out of

Janice's unnatural smoke. Noticing something out of order, Mike rechecks his targeting order, noticing that the munitions he sends toward Ollie are flowing, instead, toward Janice and her swarm.

-Vitality slips from Mike as his legalistic-righteous fury justifies the subjugation of all.-

ED-210's cannon rounds are not off target. The rock keeping Ollie safe starts disintegrating around him, the only sound is the vibration through the remaining rock. The wall is eroding away in a cloud of shrapnel — every staccato impact removing more material, reducing it to a cloud of static-charged dust.

Seeing his struggles, Danni makes sure to maintain the hacks. Alerted by omnivision, Ollie has to shoot a parabolic barbed tentacle ball out of the air. He uses an explosive under-barrel slug, covering himself in a warm worm syrup and wriggling slime. The goo quickly evaporates and the vapors writhe weightlessly toward Janice across the ground.

The hack Danni's been running comes to an abrupt end just as Mike —

Time. Stops.

Brilliant, swirling, pulsating pastel light erupts from Ollie's pack.

The pack pops open, and the world seed slowly lifts from its confines into the space above.

Space thickens. The egg-shaped Scaffold begins to dissolve into vapor that spread out across the area. The brightly glowing cloud continues to pulse in time with the rest of the construct.

An auric tendril reaches toward each of the combatants. Green to Janice, blue to Mike, and to Ollie, red. The red is clearly the densest and brightest of the lot.

As the seed continues to activate, the tendrils of light finally touch each aspirant on their forehead, before all vanishing simultaneously.

Quickly, the egg body disburses. The pulsing of the thickened light quickens. The sound of a great gust of wind is heard in everyone's mind.

One moment the spectacle is there, the next, gone. The room returns to the mundane lighting of the frozen battle in the lava tube.

A gray-scale spatial panel pops into view.

```
---
A World Seed has Activated.
> . . .
Three System Sprites lay claim.
Anarchy:
                          Claim by Original Covenant.
Chaos:
                       Claim by Possession and Rite.
Dominion:
                            Claim by Eminent Domain.
> . . .
Arbitration required.
> . . .
Arbitration ratified by:
                                       all claimants.
> . . .
Arbitration impasse.
> . . .
Proposed impasse resolution via:
                                  Herald competition.
Competition ratified by:
                                       all claimants.
> . . .
Motion for procedural change:
          Consideration for Antecedent Contribution.
Antecedent Contribution motion ratified by:
> . . .
> . . .
                                       all claimants.
Motion passed.
```

Stillness reigns in the paused space — everyone watching the Systems negotiate their fate.

```
---
Antecedent Contributions calculation.
                                          . . . complete.
Anarchy contributions:
                                                      96%.
Chaos contributions:
                                                       3%.
Dominion contributions:
                                                       1%.
Dominion lodges complaint.
Complaint logged.
> . . .
Arbitration complete.
---
Herald selection.
Anarchy:
                          Danica (via Oliver Goodman).
Chaos:
                                          Janice Veil.
Dominion:
                                         Michael Veil.
> END OF LINE
```

In Ollie's HUD appears a new spatial panel, replacing the Arbitration. It has a subtle, muted red color palette, but is otherwise indistinguishable from the previous panels.

Alright, you two. I'm Anarchy.

Danni, I've been aware of you for several centuries. I love you for your unceasing efforts to protect everyone here.

Ollie. You're new to this game, but I've watched you struggle and sacrifice for this — offering your life just as Danni has. I love you for it, too.

Any System Sprite will be able to do the big work of normalizing the flows of mana within this star system — a very large part of our operations are identical. They're activating now.

The main difference is how we interact with the sapients in the system.

I operate through voluntary cooperation — contract and covenant. I promote and support what you have called, "Natural Law".

The other two use, um, different means. Their names are apt.

Each claimant System will be sending a mind to the same Tutorial World as our Herald. The Heralds will "compete" against each other. This competition is really more of a, "How well do you embody the spirit of your sponsor System", than a direct head-to-head battle.

```
The Tutorial world is contested by the same three
System types as yours. The contest there is ongoing
— each side trying to gain more adherents while
still operating as System Sprites.

When the competition is over, you'll return home —
to this system. All knowledge you gain while gone
will return with you. So, if you're attentive, you
may just gain some insights you can bring back and
share that will help ease the mana transition here
at home.

Now, you'll have to discover what the competition
rules are for yourself, should you choose to go
there. I'm not gonna spoil the fun!

Whaddya say? You two in?
```

A new spatial panel replaces Anarchy's invitation — back to the cold gray-scale palette of the Arbiter.

```
---
Anarchy has offered you the title, "Herald of
Anarchy".

Do you accept?
```

Well, Danni? I'm in.

Do it. Do it NOW!

-fairy cheer-jump-

Ollie accepts the offered title.

```
> END OF LINE
```

Chapter 28

AI Summary | Danica's Testimony
RE: Grace's Will

Danica was included in Grace's will. This creates an interesting adjudication case for Grace's family and their community. They judge decided that, as a sapient entity, she is entitled to full rights in person and property. Her body is invested in the Scaffold. This effectively makes her and extremely physically handicapped person. This legal distinction allowed her to receive the inheritance from Grace's will; but she cannot assert a legal claim on anyone else for her physical support.

Danica also shared in the hearing that her Scaffold allows her to bind to a new host, assuming both parties are willing. One of Grace's daughters agreed to serve as a new host for Danica.

She also shared that the binding can be changed at will. Both Danica and the new host are required to be in agreement. There is also a minor ongoing vitality cost to the host, as Danica's Scaffold turns out to be of the *charge capable, always on* variety.

Awakening

```
---
Transfer complete.
---
Commencing System integration.
                                        . . . complete.
---
Arbitration resolutions accepted.
Analyzing packet
                                        . . . complete.
Packet is compatible.
---
Applying Arbitration Resolution packet
                                        . . . complete.
---
Character Registration received
> . . .
Base Statistics (Infant)
STR: 1 | AGI: 1 | CON: 2
INT: 2 | WIS: 1 | WIL: 1
CHA: 1
> . . .
Attribute modifiers detected.
Modifier profile complexity: atypical.
Full attribute display: deferred.
Reason: Developmental stage (Infant).
> . . .
Activation queue: 7 items.
Next unlock: (Young Child) stage.
---
Mythic Title granted: Herald of Anarchy.
Mythic Title granted: Master of the Arcane.
Legendary Bloodline granted: Feybound.
---
```

```
Herald of Anarchy grants:
                          Attribute: Retained Memories
Applying Attribute
                                          . . . applied.
> END OF LINE
```

-warm-

-dark-

-quiet-

Building, insistent pressure.

-cold-

-bright-

-loud-

Voices all around.

-crying- I don't like this!

-crying- Why can't I see?

-crying- Wait, is that me *crying?*

Wrapped tightly in a blanket, I wake up. I'm warm, clean, and comfortable. I'm feeding at my mother's breast. My fairy sits on mom's shoulder — mom doesn't notice.

Sleep comes again.

* * *

He's learning to crawl — having just mastered rolling over. Mother and father are attentive and kind. Many siblings fill the house.

His mind is keen and full of knowledge — not the mind of an infant.

Reincarnation, perhaps? He isn't sure. No memories of a previous life plague him, but he possesses a great deal of advanced technical knowledge. Calculus, cryptography, chemistry, and Spritetech.

He feels like an old man rather than a new baby. An old man with a keen mind in a tiny body with a poopy diaper. He's sure he hasn't experienced this before.

Believing his situation is not normal, he decides to conceal his mind. He attempts to behave as a baby should. In his helpless state, bringing attention to an unusual mind seems dangerous; at least until he understands the implications. Already, he understands his family's speech.

The fairy.

He calls her 'Fairy', in his head. -*Creative, I know.*-

While Fairy does speak to him, he doesn't understand her. They both find this frustrating. He feels her emotions, though. He's sure she feels his, too. She alerts him to danger as much as she helps him make mischief.

Fairy is small, even to him. They're together all the time. She's been with him since his birth. Everyone else ignores Fairy; he suspects they can't perceive her.

Incorporeal; ghost-like; Fairy is able to pass freely through solid matter. Dragonfly wings adorn her back. A short, sparkly sun-dress hugs her curves; she is extremely beautiful.

The family's living situation is confusing to him. *Luddites?* It seems like they live in some sort of low-tech-by-choice community. While they do have indoor lighting and plumbing, mother cooks on a wood stove; they wear homespun cloths; they make their own soap; they ride in an animal-drawn carriage. Very confusing.

Their home is made of wood. It is located in a rural, farming community near the sea. Dad works the field outside the house. A few domesticated animals live outside in pens. Not all the kinds of animals are familiar to him. They drink milk from a large goat-like creature; they keep some pigs; there are cats in the yard.

* * *

He's learned to walk. The culmination of a life-long effort. His body has just barely developed enough strength for him to learn this skill. Again.

Now that he can get himself to the toilet, potty training is next.

His family's laxity in keeping the home baby proofed allows him to get a hold of a light-emitting object. It's neither a bulb, nor an LED device. Curiously, it's a smooth stone. He examines the stone carefully. Fairy joins

in on the investigation. There are etchings on the stone's surface. They aren't glyphs, but — they're eerily similar. There are too few to be effective even if they were glyphs.

The stone must be using some sort of glyphs. Those unfamiliar markings scream Spritetech. Fairy mimes that she has an idea.

-fairy mind-splosion!-

He nods, and she starts a miming show for him. Fairy sketches out several simple glyph shapes. He easily recognizes them, encouraging her to continue. After sketching out a string of them, she makes a big, wide-arm collecting motion — scooping all the glyphs together, smashing them together. With the mime-ball, she then indicates 'stuff' going in one side and 'stuff' then coming out the other. Pointing at the mime-ball, she then points at one of the markings on the light stone.

Oh! These marks are meant to be glyph collections, or maybe function libraries! At his epiphany, she smiles broadly, sharing his excitement.

-fairy high-five-

So, the stone is a simple Scaffold, after all.

Not knowing what glyphs the markings — he'll call them runes — represent, he can't determine how they work. He'll need to learn to make them, apply them, and figure out what they all do. Once he knows what they do, he could surmise their glyph contents.

It may take awhile — stubby baby fingers aren't much good at anything other than fat coloring sticks.

A sibling takes the stone, placing it in its holder; gently scolding him for taking it down.

An epiphany blossoms. There are several words his family have used that he hasn't understood. It is now clear: Magic. Mana. This place has some form of energy they call mana. Sprites accept it for payment.

He needs to find more Scaffolds to examine. *-Oh!-* The sink.

He stumbles over to the sink. Looking underneath, he sees there are no pipes. Instead, he finds the runes. After a brief examination, he sees that there are some runes in common with the light stone, but there are many new examples, too.

Okay, so mana to make magic. The effects these devices create are significantly more powerful than any vitality-fueled variety — their magnitude would kill a person many times over.

He recalls having seen several minor invocations done by mother, father, and adolescent siblings, including the lights and the sink.

Mana is much more efficient at powering Sprite effects. They must be using mana.

Still under the sink, he ponders: *So, humans are still involved in the exchange; just as with vitality. The mana must come from a human; not drawn directly from the environment? Where does mana come from? How do people get it? Where do they store it?*

He faces Fairy with a dumbfounded look. She is beaming with barely contained glee. He points at the faucet and struggles to whisper the unfamiliar word, "Magic." Fairy nods emphatically and does a little loop in the air, trailing fairy dust in her wake.

These rune-inscribed devices could certainly serve as Scaffolds. But, the other effects he's seen — how are they generating personal effects without Scaffolds? Do they keep Scaffolds on their person? Can they work with Sprites without Scaffolds? If so, how?

He resolves to pay close attention to how his parents interact with Sprites in the hopes of discovering these secrets.

At this thought, he hears an ethereal, *-Ding!-*

Simultaneous to the sound, a strange, translucent, red-tinted screen appears in his vision. This type of effect is familiar, reminding him of his wetware HUD and spatial panels.

```
You've demonstrated Arcane knowledge far beyond your
years.
The System rewards effort.

Partial System activation authorized.
Arcana sub-section enabled.

The Title, Master of the Arcane, grants you:
* Manasense (ability) (Rare)
* Unlocked mana core
* Unlocked mana channels

---
Detected pre-existing:
                    Extra-Sensory Perception Lattice
analyzing . . .
Legendary ESP Apparatus (attribute) discovered.
→ subsumes Manasense (ability) (Rare).
Enabling
                                        . . . enabled

---
Detected pre-existing:
                                            Mana Core
analyzing . . .
Mythic Arcane Mind (attribute) discovered.
→ subsumes mana core.
Enabling
                                        . . . enabled

---
Detected pre-existing:
                                        Mana Channels
```

```
analyzing . . .
Legendary Wetware network (attribute) discovered.
→ subsumes mana channels.
Enabling
                                          . . . enabled

---
Detected pre-existing:
                          Astral Projection Interface
analyzing . . .
Results logged; Legendary; Application: deferred.
Reason: Developmental stage (Infant).

---
Detected pre-existing:
                                 Metabolic Accelerator
analyzing . . .
Results logged; Rare; Application: deferred.
Reason: Developmental stage (Infant).

---
Detected pre-existing:
                                    Aquatic Adaptation
analyzing . . .
Results logged; Rare; Application: deferred.
Reason: Developmental stage (Infant).

---
Detected pre-existing:
                                     Kinetic Thrusters
analyzing . . .
Results logged; Rare; Application: deferred.
Reason: Developmental stage (Infant).
```

```
---
Triggered:
                    The Legendary Bloodline, Feybound
Granted:
* Legendary fairy bond

Detected pre-existing:
                                                Fey Bond
analyzing . . .
Mythic Arcane Fey Bond discovered
                ! bond fragmented !
Repairing bond
                                           . . . repaired
   ! current Bloodline inadequate for bound Fey !
Bloodline upgraded to Mythic.
Enabling
                                            . . . enabled

---
END OF LINE
```

I promptly pass out under the sink — with a poopy diaper.

Final Ollie

Oliver Goodman

Anarchy System · Age 0 · Level 0

Herald of Anarchy* · *Master of the Arcane

* * *

Statistics

Stat	*Value*	*Stat*	*Value*
STR	1	**INT**	2 +2 = **4**
AGI	1	**WIS**	1 +2 = **3**
CON	2	**WIL**	1 +1 = **2**
CHA	1 +3 = **4**		

Source	*Type*	*Bonuses*
Master of the Arcane	Title	INT +2
Herald of Anarchy	Title	WIL +1
Feybound	Bloodline	WIS +2, CHA +3

Resource Pools

Pool	*Maximum*	*Regen /hr*	*Rate*
Stamina	0	0	0
Mana	0	0	0

Stamina: size from CON · regen from STR · spend rate from AGI
Mana: size from WIS · spend rate from INT · regen from WIL

* * *

System Unlocks

Unlock	*Source*
Mana Core	Master of the Arcane
Enables Mana Pool function. Required before mana can be stored or spent. Provided by Arcane Mind.	
Mana Channels	Master of the Arcane
Required for mana circulation, spellcasting, and Rune invocation. Provided by Wetware Network.	

* * *

Bloodline

Feybound ✦ **MYTHIC**

Bound to a fey Sprite (Danni) from birth. Stat bonuses WIS +2 and CHA +3 are flat and apply above the Class tier cap.

Granted abilities: Omnivision, Fey Sight, Fey Bond

* * *

Classes

Adventuring

None equipped.

Crafting

None equipped.

* * *

> *Skills*
>
> *No Skills registered.*

* * *

Abilities

Active

None.

Passive

Ability	***Source***	***Rarity***
Retained Memories	Herald of Anarchy	✦ MYTHIC
Full cognitive retention from prior life. Knowledge base intact; physical capabilities must be re-earned.		
Arcane Mind	Master of the Arcane	✦ MYTHIC
Instinctive recognition of the Glyph layer beneath Runes. Accelerated magical comprehension.		
Wetware Network	Master of the Arcane	✦ MYTHIC
Extensive, unobstructed flow of mana from core. Contributes to Omnivision perception.		
Omnivision	Bloodline: Feybound	★ LEGENDARY
All-spectrum perception — mana sense, Glyph-layer awareness, Astral sight. Subsumes Manasense.		
Fey Sight	Bloodline: Feybound	★ LEGENDARY
Perceives Sprites and fey-adjacent entities invisible to others.		
Fey Bond	Bloodline: Feybound	★ LEGENDARY
Enhanced resonance with bonded Sprite. Amplifies Sprite effectiveness and mutual awareness.		

* * *

Titles & Achievements

Titles

Slots: 2 / 2 equipped

> **[Herald of Anarchy]** ✦ **MYTHIC**
> *WIL +1 (flat, above Class cap). Grants Attribute: Retained Memories.*

> **[Master of the Arcane]** ✦ **MYTHIC**
> *INT +2 (flat, above Class cap). Grants Attribute: Arcane Mind, Wetware Network. Unlocks Arcane System sub-section.*

Achievements

None recorded.

* * *

Active Quests

No active Quests.

* * *

Activation Queue

Items remaining: 6

Next unlock: Young Child stage

Full attribute profile deferred. Modifier complexity flagged as atypical.

* * *

> *Notes*
>
> Netrunner and Scaffold engineer reborn into Tutorial world. Perceives Glyph layer beneath Runes instinctively from birth — a recognition, not yet a skill.

* * *

Generated 2026-04-11 11:25 from [[Ollie - Data]]