

The Everywhere State

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NaNoWriMo 2012

(30/Nov/2012 version, rough, unfinished!)

Chapter 1

The rain fell down on Jamie Denver as he lay back on the street, looking up at the bright displays on the buildings around him and the occasional pedestrian that stepped over him as if he was just some trash somebody left out. He thought about getting to his feet and leaving the wet street but decided he was safer on the floor, the nanites in his blood would be getting to work soon and if he was flat on the floor before they kicked in he would have one less fall to deal with when he became himself again.

He looked up at the displays on the building to his right, shining through a haze of fog and rain he made out the logo of *tree*. Were his drug of choice alcohol he would have raised his glass to the logo. *'Thanks for advancing technology and providing my high tonight, you're pretty swell'* would be the toast, but when your drug of choice is nanites, there's no glass to raise so Denver settled on just waving at the sign of the tech giant's logo.

No wave came. Denver tried again to move his limbs but nothing happened, he noticed his fingers were starting to feel warm and realised the 'nites were doing their job and his show would start any moment now.

A man in a trenchcoat stepped over Denver, the coat tails brushing across his face and pulling his limp head to a view on his left of the man walking further down the street. Denver fell in love with the man, surely he was a hero off to save some poor young thing, perhaps he was looking to save Denver but had just missed him. He might have seen if only Denver hadn't been turned into a glowing puddle, rippling in the rain.

'wait... that's not right.' Denver realised he was no longer in the land of the sober. The man was no hero, nobody worth falling in love with, just another random guy going about his business in the city. Denver decided to fall out of love with the man and wrote him many angry letters about how he would never let their children see him and that he wished they could both move on from each other.

Denver was distracted from this train of thought by the buildings around him starting to melt. The rain was getting much heavier now and, Denver thought, there was no way the buildings could see all that water without becoming jealous. The buildings exploded in a splash and became liquid, swimming around Denver with the rain in bright glowing currents with adverts of people becoming happy with just that one more purchase.

Reality would be lost to Denver for some time, and for that he was grateful now. But when his head cleared he would be completely ashamed of himself, these 'nite highs were the only thing that occupied his time any more. He would have to move on from this addiction somehow.

Chapter 2

A loud clap echoed across the labyrinth of concrete. The body of the young boy, gun in hand, collapsed.

Blood pooled where he fell, splashing a little in the rain that was just starting to fade.

The boy's blank, white mask was cracked where the bullet had passed through, beyond was a dark chasm of blood, mangled brains and a dead eye.

A suicide note was placed in his jacket.

Chapter 3

Andy Golapis took a few deep breaths and stepped onto the stage to thunderous applause.

"Thank you, thank you!" Golapis smiled like a man who was about to kill an enemy who was none-the-wiser. The crowd however ate it up, to them this was the smile of secret-knowing, the smile of someone who was about to perform miracles and save everyone from their old, tattered lives with a brand new toy.

Golapis took a moment to bask in the cheering. He loved these *tree* events.

"Thank you," He said again, flashing his well rehearsed smile "but I should be the one applauding you!" Golapis was careful to address everyone in the building but especially the cameras littered around the room, that's where the majority of the customers would be watching. "Without you, tree would not be where it is today. Yes we have the best designers, programmers and hardware people in the world..." he paused for a moment, put his hands together to allow what he said to sink in and the light applause and knowing chuckles die down a little, "but if it wasn't for all of you, your passion for our products, your creativity in using them, your remarkable ability to show the world what they are capable of... Well, we wouldn't be here without that." Golapis bowed to his audience slightly. A gesture to make them feel appreciated. "And we have prepared a little video about that, that I would like to show you."

The lights dimmed and Golapis walked to the side of the stage as a large screen behind him lit up. Speakers loudly played what focus groups had decided was the most optimistic sounding song in the company library this week. and the screen was full of talking heads explaining how great it was to have people buy tree products they worked on and others talking about how great it was to be a dedicated tree customer. Still pictures of happy families, young women with dogs, children and businessmen all using some tree product or another panned across the screen. The video ended, the tree logo appeared tastefully in a corner of the screen and faded as the lights came back up and Golapis walked back to the center of the stage to thunderous applause yet again.

Golapis smiled and said in his carefully rehearsed way "Thank you!". As the cheering continued Golapis maintained his smile and amused himself at how well he and his company were playing all these people. *'oh we're super grateful that you give us all your*

money, condemn the other companies and share everything we say with your friends and family as if it were the word of god! We think it would be just super if you could keep doing that!

Judging by the cheers of the audience, and the thumbs up from a guy in the corner of the room monitoring internet ratings, *just keep doing that* is exactly what they were going to do.

“Now as I’m sure you all know, our range of nanite technologies has proved particularly popular in the last 10 years. We took a technology that was barely anything but a *hypothesis* on some old professor’s desk, and turned it into an amazingly crafted *product* to share with all of you” Golapis smiled, adding to the end of the sentence in his head ‘*for your wonderful money*’

“Now, we aren’t the only company working with nanites these days. but with our proprietary software consumers know that we provide the best experience, and the *safest* experience. Our nanites are trusted throughout the world for use in everything from entertainment to medicine, from communication to security.” Golapis paused for dramatic effect, a trick that he didn’t come up with but that had been perfected by CEOs of his companies through the years since before the company grew to become *tree*. “And that’s why our nanite technology is the number 1 in the world.”

Deafening applause.

Chapter 4

“Well it’s easy to be *number 1* if you discount all the non-commercial or pirate ‘nites” Said a tall man in a long dark coat, looking at the screen built into the street.

“They don’t even say what they are *number 1* at anyway. Number 1 best selling nanites? Number 1 most used? Number 1 biggest marketing budget?” Responded the man’s friend before taking a sip of his coffee, it was cold morning.

“Probably the last one!” The first man said and the two chuckled.

Jamie Denver just looked at the screen in a bit of a daze, the *tree* sermon continued with another pleasantly edited video explaining how *tree* nanites had help a paralysed girl walk again, and had also allowed her to search the web and find her long lost mother. Another happy family. Denver blinked, this was far too boring, he must be sober again. He looked to his right and saw the two men chatting about the complexities of nanites and generally being a little bit critical of *tree*’s claims. There was another person watching the screen too, and the men’s conversation had just gone for longer than she could tolerate.

“You don’t have any idea what you’re talking about!” She shouted all of a sudden, making Denver jump. the two men looked at her with questioning gazes as if to say ‘*what did we do!?*’

Their situation became very apparent when the woman spoke next. “People like you, you always like to mock *tree* and pretend you’re better than everyone else, but you’re not!”

An evangelical fangirl, probably raised with nothing but *tree* products.

“All we’re saying is that just because tree is the most commercially succ-” the man with the coffee was interrupted by his friend.

“I’m very sorry we upset you,” he tried his best to sound sympathetic, “You’re welcome to follow whatever company you like, and tree has an exemplary track record. We’re just a couple of old programmers who like to let off steam.” he bowed his head a little to the woman.

“Well watch it in future, if it wasn’t for tree you wouldn’t even be able to watch this screen here!”

The man with the coffee bit his tongue, the screen was clearly marked with a Sakura logo. but he knew it was no use. her faith in her chosen brand was too strong, she probably even believed that tree invented the internet. He just bowed apologetically and walked away with his friend into the cool morning.

Denver looked back from the scene to the screen. neither were providing any entertainment anymore. The tree event stream had finished and now there was nothing on except a news report about some dangerous cyber-terrorists that had been becoming more threatening lately. He set off down the street and began to collect his thoughts. A sober person is supposed to have those, he thought to himself.

Chapter 5

“-LL DAY AND ALL NIGHT TOO! NON-STOP CLASSIC HITS FROM BACK WHEN MUSIC WAS GREAT! WE HAVE THE BEATLES, QUEEN, SKRI-”

“Radio off!” Denver had a massive headache and he didn’t need radio-screen blaring noisily at him the moment he walked through the door. He made a mental note (as he often did when returning home) to find out why the hell his flat’s alarm triggered a media screen instead of a security warning.

His headache after coming down from the ‘nite high was only made worse by his rude malfunctioning living-space, he held his hand over his eyes in the hopes that brocking out the bright morning light bleeding in through the smartglass window would give a little relief, but the action was only a reminder of how much he ached.

“Dim windows.” The room became a more bearable place for an addict recovering from an extended trip, but Denver’s body itself was still an unpleasant to be even if the room that held it was less offensive now.

Denver walked over to the fridge to try and deal with his body as best he could. He pulled out a bottle of uncommitted tech-tonic and said aloud “I feel like shit, give me something to fix me up.”

The fridge responded “What is the nature of your problem?”

“I got crazy fucking high the past few nights, and now I feel like shit. same as always.”

The fridge didn't judge, it simply downloaded the required software, sent it over the air to his bottle of tech-tonic and charged his account.

"If you are having trouble with nanite abuse, there are hotli-"

"shut it"

Denver closed the fridge door and waited a second before the progress meter on the bottle was full before opening it and downing the whole thing in one go.

Software for recovering from nanite highs were rarely up to date, the anti-viruses always one step behind the latest trip somebody had designed. Denver knew the tonic wouldn't get him back to full health right away, but it did help.

he sat down on the sofa by the fridge looked through the dim window out onto the street. he could make out the clouds of condensation as the pedestrians passing by below were breathing. *when did it stop being summer?* Denver wondered.

His highs really had gone on for too long, if he kept up his current rate of use he would be too far gone to ever return to reality, he'd have no chance of keeping his business going (which was bad enough anyway, when *was* the last time he had a client?). he pictured himself living on the street exchanging sexual favors for money to pay for the next ridiculous program.

Looking away from the window Denver surveyed his flat/place of business. it was a wreck, the front door opened into the kitchen/living-room/office. he wondered how he managed to even make his way from the door to the sofa without tripping on all the old food packaging, old books and files, and mountains of bottles.

"The fuck..." he said aloud, if a client did come in here they'd probably turn right around and leave. the place looked more like a landfill than the office of a private detective.

A light came on and illuminated the room as though the windows weren't even dimmed. The screen in the center of the room displayed the bank's logo for a couple of seconds and then announced "This is an automated notification from the United Approachable Bank, you are now in negative credit. Please feel free to use your arranged overdraft. Reminder; you will be charged 36 credits a day until your balance is positive." the screen went off again and Denver swore loudly.

This was it, he had fallen too far and had to do something about it, the 'nite highs had nummed the feeling of reality for a good while but reality was making it's precense known quite passionately today. He decided to get his affairs in order, booking an appointment at the local EMPclinic to clear out and leftover 'nites that weren't actually doing a respectable function and grabbed a bag to collect all the junk littering his front room. He would deal with his other two rooms (the bedroom and the bathroom) when he could tolerate the state of this one. (it was part efficient organisation, part dread. Heck knows what knind of shit he'd gotten up to in the other rooms during his months-long high.

Chapter 6

There weren't many people from at the funeral, a mother, and aunt and one very distant cousin who had been made to attend by her mother. The boy didn't have many friends locally, and of the people he did know most chose not to attend, committing suicide in this age carried a significant stigma that resulted in a lot of people becoming disgusted with someone they thought they knew. It may have been an excuse for people just to not feel anything whenever someone died though.

The speaker in the headstone spoke as the coffin was lowered into the ground. "Daniel was well loved in his life. with 2,344 friends, 36 of whom who have commented on his departure. But who was Daniel? Daniel was a fan of several bands-" The automatically generated eulogy proceeded to list things Daniel had liked, rated highly or watched/ listened to multiple times on the social nets. Making sure to list any artists whose agents had paid their advertising fees to the eulogy programmers, a little louder. "All in all, Daniel will be remembered by all the members of his close family especially, his mother and sister."

The mother had been holding back tears throughout the burial but couldn't hold back any longer. she just couldn't believe that her son would take his life, no matter what the police had said.

Her sister tried to comfort her but it was of little use other than making herself feel good to be such a compassionate sister. The distant cousin looked between her pad, checking the time, and the trees in the distance. keen to avoid accidentally making eye contact with grieving relatives, what if they saw how bored she was?

Chapter 7

Denver made his way down the street and felt the chill of the cool autumn air, he had to settle for an old coat as he'd lost his decent one on some 'nite binge. According to his GPS app the EMPclinic was a couple of blocks away, through an area of the city he wasn't familiar with, though he caught a homeless man on a corner giving him a certain look that made Denver feel that this place at least knew him, even if he couldn't remember ever knowing it.

At least it wasn't a run-down place, the streets were lined with shops, some were even locally owned things offering stylish designer haircuts, luxury clothing, expensive food, custom nanite programming, solid art pieces (which Denver had always secretly preferred over the motion, noisy or interactive stuff. *A good painting or statue that never changes, people need some constants in their life* was his thinking).

through the center of the streets there were market stalls, attended by people with large coats and hats hoping to cover the cost of their warm coffee, being browsed mostly by people wearing the same, debating if the tits and tats on offer were worth the money they put aside for their own coffees.

Denver rounded a corner and saw the sign for the place he was looking for right away 'REBOOT CLINIC' read the sign in large illuminated letters, with the following available in smaller type for those that ventured closer 'Want a fresh start? We wipe 99% of body nanites, get rid of those outdated models and make way for newer tech, or just want to

return to nature? We're the place to go with certified, professional staff and prize-winning service!

Denver was wondering just what prizes they even gave out for flashing people with an EMP for a few seconds but was distracted by a handful of people hanging out in front of the building, kept out by a couple of police officers with flashing badges.

The first two people in the group Denver tried to address were in the middle of a heated argument so he asked a third person what was going on.

"What's going on hmm," the man sat on the kerb took a drag of his cigarette and nodded toward the two people fighting. "Boss's kid messed around with the EMP machine, got the safties wrong and the machine fried itself."

"So... no 'nite wipes today?"

"Not for a while, those machines are expensive as fuck and it seems we weren't insured."

"Is there anywhere else I could go?"

"You could try climbing into your microwave at home, but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Aren't there any other EMP clinics nearby."

"Out of comission," the man nodded again, this time toward the officers guarding the entrance to the clinic, "protocol is if an EMP malfunctions, nobody is allowed to use one until they have all been recertified and the cause of malfunction has been established in the original. There won't be any wipes for a while, though hospitals will still use theirs to treat a 'nite overdose if you're particularly desperate."

"I'm not that desperate."

"Thought not. look," the man pulled out his pad tapped it a few times and held it out to Denver "If you add yourself to the mailing list, we'll let you know when we're back in business."

Denver tapped the screen once, it read a little DNA in the transfer, cross-referenced with a database online and then displayed the message 'email address added, thank you Jamie Denver'

"Thanks." Denver said, before turning and heading back. The sound of the argument getting quiet in the distance, Denver was annoyed, but he could deal. He just had to be extra careful not to use until he had a wipe, and added another mental note to keep an eye out for cravings that the 'nites might try to induce and to ignore them or knock himself out till they passed.

Chapter 8

As Denver climbed the stairs of his building and stepped to his floor he saw a woman waiting outside his flat.

“Can I help you?” Denver asked from a distance as he approached, not wanting to startle her.

“Um, are you... Are you Jamie Denver?” her eyes were red, she had been crying a lot “the private detective?”

Denver nodded, “That’s me.”

He thought it was unusual for a client to turn up out of the blue on his door without an appointment first, but it had been so long since he had even had a client that he wasn’t entirely sure of it.

“Let me get the door, would you like something to drink?”

The woman said she did and followed Denver through his door into the office. It was quite tatty and the woman wasn’t expecting the fridge or sofa, but at least there was a desk to make it look a little professional. She supposed private detectives these days didn’t need much in the way of office space, plug them into the net and they will do their thing.

Denver gestured toward the sofa for the woman as he prepared her drink. “So,” he said as she got settled, “What can I do for you?”

“My son.” She started and stopped, not experienced in saying what she wanted to say and unsure how to go about it. after a moment she decided to just commit, “My son died recently, the police tell me it was a suicide but I think they are wrong.”

‘*Crap*’ thought Denver, these sorts of cases never work out well for someone in his position. nine times out of ten the kid will have killed themselves and that means having to tell the parent ‘*Actually your kid did off themselves, guess you didn’t know them as well as you thought huh. now, about my fee...*’ and good luck getting paid at all under those circumstances, it wouldn’t do to push for payment either (Denver wasn’t the type) and there were *never* any bonuses.

“I’m terribly sorry for your loss.” Denver said as he handed the woman her drink.

“Thank you.” she took a sip and peered out Denver’s window into the street below. Denver sat in the chair at his desk and tended to his own drink, waiting for the woman to continue. When she failed to say anything Denver pressed on (he was an investigator after all).

“What makes you think that the police have... misinterpreted your son’s death.”

The woman looked back from her window as if looking back from a dream her eyes were misty and she had to take a moment to process what had been asked of her. Denver assumed she had just been off with her son in some memory or other when things were good for her.

“Cyber-terrorists” she said finally, bluntly.

Denver blinked, this was a new one. “I’m sorry?”

“Daniel was into tech in a big way... I suppose everyone is to some extent these days, but he was *really* into it. He liked to study logic and circuits and network packages and stuff like that. and I think he got in with a bad crowd on the net.”

“... a bad crowd, of cyber-terrorists.” Denver was certainly in uncharted territory here.

“Quite.” the woman opened up her handbag, pulled out her pad and made a gesture indicating she would like to offer some files to Denver, he pulled out his pad and the woman swiped the files from her pad onto his. Denver opened them up and the woman continued. “That’s the police report, they were kind enough to give it to me. I know they normally keep that kind of thing confidential but I suppose they felt sorry for me.”

Denver surveyed the files, so written reports, witness statements (which immediately stood out to Denver because they were unusually short), a copy of the suicide note and photos of the body as it was found. pretty graphic images. Denver did not envy the woman having to see her son like this.

“If you look at the...” the woman trailed off a little, the word ‘images’ was proving difficult to voice so she skipped it “you’ll see he was wearing a mask, do you recognise it?”

Denver swiped back through the files to a close up image of the mask, a plain white thing. it looked as though its designer had taken great care to avoid adding distinguishing features to it. a closed mouth, a simple nose with air-holes and two cut out holes for the eyes. there was a crack through its forehead part where the bullet had passed through, taking off a sizable portion of the mask above the eyes. there was also some scorch marks from gunpowder burn, and blood down one side where the mask had rested in a pool of the stuff.

“I can’t say I’m familiar with this mask in any way.”

“You should watch the news more, it’s practically the uniform of the most dangerous group of hackers in the world, *freeState*.”

The name rang a bell somewhere in the back of Denver’s mind, perhaps he had heard of them during some high or another? “And how do you believe this group, *freeState* was involved in your son’s death?”

“I...” The woman hesitated, she realised all she had to say was the least helpful thing she could say “... I don’t know, maybe he tried to join and failed some initiation thing? perhaps he was doing something with tech they didn’t like and killed him. All I know for sure is... that Daniel wouldn’t kill himself, and that he wouldn’t leave a note like that.”

‘*There we go!*’ thought Denver, ‘*Something concrete perhaps!*’

“What about the note is unusual?” Denver asked, taking a sip of his tea, and swiping through the file to look at the note. he realised the moment he saw it. he didn’t even have to ask the Mother it seems.

“It’s hand written,” the mother said, “Sure it looks like his handwriting, but he was far too into tech. even if he... even if he-”

“Even if he did do it, there’s no way he wouldn’t write his note using some kind of digital media” Denver saved the mother from having to say it.

“Precisely.” The woman nodded, dabbing her eyes with a hankchief.

That was enough for Denver, there was still a very good chance the kid had done himself in, but the freeState angle took his curiosity, and the note took his interest. Denver explained his rates to the mother, and that he would inform her of whatever he found out, even if it ultimately confirmed what the police had already told her. She nodded in understanding, and made a payment to him so that he could get started.

When the mother had left and enough time had passed for her to be safely out of earshot, Denver punched the air and cheered, he was out of debt again! It wouldn’t last for long, so he ordered the shopping he needed and got ready to go over the files he had been given in more detail.

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The glow from the screen lit up Denver’s office as the sun went down. He typed notes on his keyboard as he studied the files; officer’s names, skeptical notions about witness statements, details of the scene where the body was found. Not much stood out, the police hadn’t really looked into the case much themselves but that wasn’t particularly unusual, there is nothing present to indicate to them that this was anything but another kid feeling out of touch with the world and wanting a ticket out. Denver decided to re-read the note again.

Mother,

I am sorry, I know you have been good to me but you just aren’t enough anymore. Life is too much for me so I’m going to end it now. Please know that I won’t die in pain, I’ll make sure it happens quickly.

If you ever see Sarah again, tell her I’m sorry to her as well. maybe if I’d been a better brother she would have stayed until Dad died, maybe she could have helped me through this.

But maybes won’t do, I’m here right now and I can’t cope with it.

I’m sorry, please know that I love you.

Daniel.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary on the surface, but a quick snoop had shown this kid was way into his tech and was a show-off, there’s no way in hell he would have made a suicide note that wasn’t interactive.

Denver stared at the page looking for a pattern, if a kid like this was forced to write his suicide note, surely he would have included something secretly to pass on something to Denver. He tried substituting certain letters or words for ones and zeroes to see if there was a message hidden in binary code, looked for repeating words and counted them looking for some meaning in that. read the first word of the columns of text backwards and

a hundred other things. As far as Denver could tell the only clue this note was giving was the clue he noticed right away, that it was hand written.

Chapter 9

General King bounced and swayed as the jeep ploughed through the jungle. he held onto his pistol in one hand, his whiskey in the other and a kind of bemused rage in his head. He looked at the paper that held the message again, it's words illuminated by the light bouncing from the headlights off the dense brush. "General King, our villiage is now under the protection of freeState. we shall not be supplying you anymore and you will not bother us again. Go fuck yourself."

He looked up and saw his jeep in front, overflowing with men armed with rifles. King turned to see the his other men in the jeep behind, similarly beweaponed. '*This villiage has some nerve, and they are going to pay for it*' King thought as he turned back to face his driver. '*freeState*' he thought, and laughed. some hacker kids were going to stop his army? in King's turf? not very likely. He would teach these nieve peasants not to turn on him. first he would round them up, he thought, that always did well. the women would be terrified, but the men would be defiant, until he killed a child or two, and threatened their wives. then he would find out who the village had appointed it's leader, and rape their wife, daughter or son. It was a simple approach to dealing with dissent, but it always worked. King had spent his life building up a reputation in these parts, he was a man to be *feared*.

He looked at his watch, they couldn't be far now.

King smiled, if they didn't submit to his satisfaction, he could burn the village to the ground, it would serve as a suitable lesson to the other communities in his kingdom.

The jeep in front started to slow down and the general's driver almost drove into the back of it, they were still a little far from the village to be stopping. The jeep behind didn't slow fast enough and bumped into the general's jeep just hard enough for him to drop his whiskey, and push the middle jeep into the first so that all three were wedged together.

"What the fuck is going on!?" King stood and peered into dark jungle ahead, the headlights not providing much help other than to light all the leaves blocking the view, but after a second King saw something in the first jeep, the driver wasn't moving, the other men were very agitated, one shaking the driver. The windshield had been cracked, a bullet hole in it. His convoy was under attack, by at least one sharpshooter.

"Someone's shooting at us, fan out and kill them!" he yelled to his men in the jeeps around him, and sat down so as not to become a target himself.

The men poured out of the vehicles, guns gripped ready to fire. Still a little unadjusted from taking a ride through a jungle to being under fire, they cautiously formed a perimeter around the jeeps, peering into the brush looking for movement. There was silence.

King reached down into the footwell to collect his whiskey, the bottle hadn't smashed when he dropped it but most of the contents had pooled out onto the floor. he drank what was left and cursed the villagers. Losing some whiskey AND a man? the village was definitely going to burn.

The jungle was still silent, King wasn't keen on that. "Just fire into the brush!" He decided he wasn't a wise target for an ambush, anyone too close was going to get a nasty sting. He smiled as his men prepared to pepper the surroundings with bullets.

but no gunshots came, just a series of clicks. "What the fuck is going on!?" he demanded, but before anyone could answer one of the men in his perimeter screamed, everyone looked to see his friend's head rolling across the hood of a jeep as his body fell to the ground.

More silence, sometimes a bush around the jeeps would rustle a little and everyone would turn to face, but nothing would happen. The jungle was more silent to King than it had ever been before, he just couldn't hear it over the deafening sound of his own fear. a feeling of fear he had not felt since he was just a child.

A ghost appeared, just a white, human head hovering. moving slowly through the jungle toward them, a series of 'click' noises came from a man who tried to fire on instinct upon seeing the spectre. Then another head appeared, and another, The general's convoy was unarmed, surrounded by people with masks and swords.

The general tried to swallow whatever was stuck in his throat but his mouth was too dry to have any effect. he stood in his jeep, trying his best to look his usual, intimidating self and demanded as forcefully as he could manage "What do you want!?"

One of the masks responded "Turn back, and never return. We are freeState, if you disobey us there shall be no escape for you, we are infinite, we are unstoppable, and we are really pissed off."

They sounded like arrogant children to King, but he saw their blades flashing in the headlights. a blade in the hands of a child will cut you just as well as a blade in the hands of a trained warrior. but King was not in the habit of letting anyone stop him having his way, he reached for his pistol but before his hand could even get half way his head rolled. And the dynasty of General King was no more.

Chapter 10

Denver sat in the cafe, cradling a hot mug of coffee in front of his laptop, waiting for an old friend to come online. He stared out through the frost of the window into the cold morning outside. He drew a couple of curious looks from the other customers, he wondered if he was exhibiting some anti-social behaviour that marked him as a 'nite addict, but realised the real thing drawing people's curiosity was his laptop. most people were used to pads these days, and keyboards had become somewhat alien to the youth. but Denver preferred the tactile sensation of a proper laptop even if it was a little more inefficient to the first time user, even with all the tricks of a modern machine, they simply couldn't compare to having actual buttons to be depressed, with small rubber springs that made the keys click slightly as they bounced back into place.

He tapped the screen a couple of times to bring up his contact list, she still wasn't online. understandable since she was in a timezone a few hours behind his. she would still be asleep for some time so Denver decided to continue his search alone for the time being.

His searches for information regarding freeState had largely turned up media articles about the latest cyber-danger. Lots of vague scary stories about people hiding their identities online and doing unpleasant things to the unwitting everyman; a leaked hard drive of a store manager who fired a kid he suspected of being a freeState member, a woman in tears because her daughter had received thousands of threatening messages after she had allegedly bullied some minority.

Denver had almost immediately noticed the dissonance, the articles were simultaneously trying to paint the freeState organisation (or movement, or whatever it was) as some dangerous monster, whilst at the same time trying to paint them as fickle and harmless. Within the same articles the writers would bounce between describing them as 'cyber terrorists that might not stop at mere pranks' to 'kids on their parent's computer, getting mixed up in a community of childish bullies' and back again.

It smelt more like a smear job than journalism, and it's what flooded the top search results when he looked. He figured somebody powerful wanted these kids to be seen as the 'other' by the general populace, to be looked down upon. That message might have been getting through to most, though anyone looking to the comments sections would find a different story.

There almost appeared to be a war happening, lots of people claiming the article misrepresents freeState, and counter arguments with lots of personal anecdotes about how bad things happened to friends and family who got involved in freeState. But the vast majority of the comments had been deleted, which was surprising to Denver as there was some completely hateful rubbish mixed in that had nothing to do with the topic that survived the comment moderator's heavy handed editing.

but by far the most visible comments consisted of something along the lines of "Who is paying you to write this?"

Somehow, Denver had found himself caught between conspiracy theorists and the conventional media. All he could take away from the digital conflict that was visible to him, was some people thought freeState was good (or at least not-evil), and some people thought it was bad.

He would need to get a different opinion, and his old friend from school was candidate number one. He searched the net for her name to see what she had been up to lately, most articles were older than a couple of years (*she must be taking things easy of late* he thought) but what information there was painted a familiar picture of Denver's friend. "Fiona Silvor cripples child-sex cartel networks, allows raid to go ahead. 43 children rescued!" - "Young woman exposes dictator's secret files and allows American forces to prevent a biological attack." - "Hollyvine exec admits *Fiona Silvor* movie 'probably won't happen', says 'she is no doubt a modern heroine, but a movie about someone at a computer just isn't engaging'."

Denver scrolled through the comments finding lots of fans dedicated to his old schoolfriend outraged that anyone would consider *not* making a movie about her. He smiled to himself, recalling how even when she was getting started out with tech she had a way of collecting people who admired her, which often surprised even her.

The icon at the corner of the screen popped up, indicating Fiona was online.

“Sup?” Denver started out, he may be getting in touch for info, but they were old friends and a casual greeting suited them best.

“Well if it isn’t Denvs!” The text flashed onto the screen, “as for what’s up, usual I guess. I do awesome things with computers and sometimes people pay me! :P”

“I heard something about a movie too, is that really a thing? hard to think they would waste their time making a movie about some kid like you ;)”

“lol, neither of us are kids anymore D, but it was never a thing I don’t think, probably some fan hacked some hollyvine database and dropped in some fanfic about me. you know how they are.”

“Actually I don’t :P”

“Awww, well you always at least have me as a fan ;)”

Denver watched the little winking face in the screen animate for a second before the next message came through, “So, what’s up?” They had moved past the friendly banter.

“Got a case, could do with your help on something.”

“D, you can’t afford my help :P though I could make an exception, but you’re enough of a wizard to do stuff yourself, or are your tech skills going rusty in old age? ;)”

“It’s not that, I was hoping for insight on something I figured you might have come across, nothing to hack other than your own brain ;)”

“Something I may know? lol you want government secrets or something now? :P”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, truth is I’m looking into a kid’s death. somehow he was mixed up in an organisation called freeState. was wandering if you knew them?”

it was several seconds before the response came through.

“You’re asking me about freeState? I figured you’d know all about it tbh. have you been living in a hole or something lately?”

“...something like that. truth is all I can find on it are a mess of op-ed articles and conspiratorial comment threads, the net is flooded with that stuff and no place seems to have anything solid that isn’t constantly getting vandalised.”

a few more seconds pass.

“Look, freeState is a problem. I don’t know what the deal is with your kid, but I hear that’s how people who fuck around with freeState end up. they are no good, If you want my advice, drop the case right now.”

Denver had barely typed “That’s not how I work and you know it” before his screen flashed and a new chat window popped up, one he didn’t recognise. It held one line of text “I’ll talk

to you about them, but in person.” the window vanished after a couple of seconds and Denver changed the response to Fiona.

“I think if they are as bad as you say, I’ll definitely be wary of them. thanks.”

“np, anything for you denvs ;)”

“Hey, we should catch up some time, it’s been forever.”

“Sure, I’m out of the country for a bit, but I’ll be in the city on Thursday. We can have a drink and reminice and stuff.”

“Sounds good.”

The two signed off, and Denver ordered another coffee. He thought on the conversation, somehow even Fiona was afraid to talk openly about freeState through the net, which was surprising to him as he had always thought of her as this fearless girl, often too fearless for her own good.

He looked out the window again, and he was reminded of the early part of their conversation, they *weren’t* kids anymore. this girl had matured into a very successful woman, how had he changed? Sure he’d started his business since school, but after the things that happened later on, he had totally gone off the rails. Everything was a blur of drunken nights that then blended into mild ‘nite highs and eventually even heavier stuff.

Denver realised he hadn’t had a ‘nite craving for hours. *‘a good mystery is life’s best distraction’* he thought. and went back to studying the suicide note and searching the net for info about the kid’s sister, the freeState angle would have to wait until Thursday anyway.

Chapter 11

Fiona Silvor took a deep drink of her hot chocolate, a favourite of hers on winter mornings like this one, as evidenced by the brown stains previous cups had left on the borders of her screens and interfaces. She reviewed her findings and looked over the portrait photograph of her old friend that was displayed on a screen, the stubble on Denver’s face certainly gave him a charm Fiona liked, but it was clear by looking at his eyes that his life of late had taken it’s toll.

She closed the windows of data, got up and walked to the actual windows. looking out on some wet, green hills, framed by distant mountains capped with snow. Fiona held her drink with both hands, absorbing all the warmth she could and sighed. *‘Of course things were that bad for him,’* she thought *‘of course he would go off the rails on his own.’*

Fiona watched some sheep canter down a hill towards a large tree, probably to shelter from a coming rainfall. *‘I’d heard his father died, but I was so busy with my own life I assumed he had someone with him.’*

Little specks of water appeared on the window making a light tapping noise and casting tiny rainbows on the carpet. *‘That’s all there is to it’* Fiona thought, having resolved to help

Denver. She felt she owed him a debt, and decided she would do what she could to help him through his current predicament. *'but...'*

Fiona turned from the window and walked toward the kitchen. "Omega, Pony, Nine Thousand And One, Legion" she said aloud as she passed her workstations, and they proceeded to erase all of their recent activity and downloaded data.

Fiona put her cup into the sink and turned on the tap. *'I'm being watched too closely.'*

Chapter 12

The thin wooden door wobbled a bit when Denver knocked on it. he stepped back and looked around from the porch as he waited, the street was pretty run down, he suspected nothing had been repaired or built since as far back as the 90s. Old cars lay abandoned in driveways and by the roadside in various states of decay, you couldn't see into the ones that had any windows left because the frost had taken hold in such a way that it looked like they were a solid white.

Denver heard footsteps coming from inside and the door opened, a young girl in her late teens stood in the doorway.

"Hi, I'm Jamie Denver, are you Sarah Ridgely?"

"You're that private investigator huh?" The girl turned and walked inside "Shut the door on your way in."

Denver crossed the threshold into the house, the light was dim and it wasn't much warmer than it was outside. but there was a small heater in the center of the room which gave off a little faux-candle flicker that illuminated all the various furniture and paraphernalia dotted around the room. Denver judged they were mostly salvage pieces found around the neighbourhood except for a few bits and pieces lying around, some pads, a screen, a kettle and some posters of various bands, movies and historical movements. A striking poster for the old movie 'The Matrix' was framed by a poster of somebody wearing a Guy Fawkes mask and another poster of an anarchy symbol with the text "fuck the police" written over the top.

"I'm surprised you know who I am, I thought you weren't in touch with your mother." Denver enquired as he lowered himself into a tatty discoloured armchair near the heater.

Not turning from the kettle, waiting for it to boil Sarah replied "just because I'm not in touch with her doesn't mean I don't keep an eye on her." She nodded to a sofa opposite Denver where a pad lay on the sofa, a green idle light blinking lighting up the worn cushions.

"You're a hacker?" Denver asked, to which Sarah nodded again. Denver sighed with relief a little, this meant she must know what happened to her little brother, and he wouldn't have to be the one to break the news.

"So, are you high right now?"

'She's a thorough hacker' Denver thought. "No, not for-"

“Look,” Sarah said, turning from the kettle for the first time, bearing a serious face, “I’m sure you didn’t tell my mother about your habits when she hired you and frankly I don’t care. But if you fuck up and she has to deal with some addict I’m not going to let it slide.” Sarah stared at Denver, a stare that demanded an answer.

“You have my word-”

“The word of a ‘nite junkie?”

“I’m going clean, if you checked my search history you’d see I booked an appointment at an EMP clinic recently.”

“Hmph.” Sarah turned to the kettle which was boiling now, “I don’t invade people’s privacy like that.”

Denver smiled, so she wasn’t talented enough to get through the security he set up, at least he wasn’t totally over the hill yet.

“So you care about your mother a lot, if you don’t mind me asking, why don’t you go back to her? I’m sure she would appreciate it.”

Sarah brought carried a coffee and sat down on the sofa opposite Denver, who was a little off-balance since he hadn’t been offered a drink. “I’m a different person to the one she knew. I have a different life and I don’t care for my old one.” Sarah took a sip of her coffee.

“And your brother?” *‘Fuck’* Denver thought, the moment he said it *‘too blunt’*

Sarah looked up from her coffee to the poster on the wall.

“He was a part of my old life too, but he had changed since Dad died as well...” She sighed and looked back to her drink “But of course I always cared about him.”

Denver held his tongue for a moment, not wanting to rush things for a girl who probably hadn’t spoken to strangers about her brother’s death before. “So what are your thoughts... about... well, y-”

“About my brother offing himself?” Sarah looked at Denver, who shifted uncomfortably and had to avert his gaze and look out the window. “I think my mum probably has the right idea, hiring someone to look into it.”

“So... you don’t think he would kill himself either?”

“He didn’t kill himself when I ran away, leaving him in that awful house with Dad. So I think he could handle anything without resorting to... *that*. Besides he sounded pretty happy lately”

Denver looked at Sarah “You spoke to him recently?”

“Sure.”

Denver pulled out his pad and flicked through some files. "Sorry, it's just from his... note, it seemed like you hadn't been in contact for some time."

"Can I have a look at that?" Sarah lent forward and held out her hand, Denver passed the pad to her and she read the letter and then passed the pad back. "He was forced to write that."

"How can you tell?" Denver had suspected as much, but was wondering what clue she had spotted that he had missed, maybe he was losing his touch.

"In the note he blames himself for me running away, when really it's not true at all. He blamed me for not taking him with me, he was furious at me for ages about it. We made up of course but it's clear he was trying to leave a message that he wasn't doing stuff of his own accord when he..." Sarah trailed off, her veneer of calm collectedness chipped a little as she stared into space, picturing her little brother's last moments alive.

Denver stared uncomfortably at the posters, of course he was relieved to confirm his suspicions and know that he wouldn't have to tell the mother she was wrong, but there was no real pleasure in confirming it. This was only going to lead to further questions, and he would have to sit through the unpleasant silence as Sarah collected her thoughts before he could ask them.

"Would you like some coffee or something?" Sarah asked suddenly, surprising Denver that she had risen from the depths of loss so quickly it was unusual she didn't have some emotional version of the bends.

"Oh um, yes," Denver managed to respond, a little off footed and added "please." before he forgot.

Sarah got up and walked back to the kettle, making Denver glad she had something to occupy herself and took the moment to press on. "So, you had been talking to your brother recently?"

The kettle clicked, the water hadn't taken long to boil since it was still hot, and Sarah poured into a mug. "Last week, he had some new algorithm he was having trouble with and wanted me to look it over."

"He came to you with tech help?"

Sarah stirred the drink "Only if he got particularly stuck." She picked up the mug and handed it to Denver before sitting back on the sofa and collecting her own drink.

"What kind of algorithm? do you think it was something that someone might kill for?" Denver was blunt again, but for questions like this that usually paid off, it's all well and good playing gently but it's useless if people miss the point and you don't get the answer you're after."

"maybe, it was only one part of a system." Sarah tilted her head to the side a little, trying to recall the details. "it was only a variant of a Wingston door, I'm not sure if you know about-"

“A digital version of a one-way door right? information only passes through, so it can’t be pinged and traced back.” Denver responded, adding “I’ve done some network code in my time.”

“Right, well it’s not like it’s anything radical, most everything has them these days, he was just playing with the concept a little with some other techs he knew, maybe for fun? It might have had important applications in whatever system they were working on, but the algorithm itself was pretty harmless.”

Denver nodded, processing. “You mentioned some friends, who are they?”

Sarah inhaled, exhaled, took a drink of her coffee and examined Denver, evaluating how much to tell him.

“Have you heard of freeState?” She asked.

‘Jackpot’ thought Denver, “Only bits and pieces about them, some hacker group right?”

“Right... something like that.” She looked to her drink. “Daniel was... he was into that scene. Truth is I introduced him to it.”

“You’re a member?”

“Well... I’d rather not say. but the point is, sometimes in freeState people interested in tech get together and do stuff. often it’s just for fun, but it’s not uncommon for their projects to have some purpose, like speeding up net access in third-world places for example.”

“freeState does things like that?”

“Sure, there’s plenty of trolling, no doubt. but there is more to freeState than the media would have you believe.” Sarah finished off her coffee “Anyway, if Daniel was working on a part of some freeState project... well, there are people who would want it stopped regardless, or stolen maybe? a lot of freestate software or whatever is released openly on the net, which *really* pisses off some of the big-money types I can tell you.”

Denver took this in and processed it a little, it was certainly a conspiratorial angle but not one that would surprise anyone who realised people in the present are prone to doing the same old shit they did in the past; murdering and cover-ups over secrets and money were as commonplace in the modern world as ever. But he would have to take it with an extra pinch of salt, pro-freeState people did seem prone to point the finger at *the man* at any opportunity they got. and while the man is always an easy target to blame for something, he’s typically hard to pin anything dirty to.

“You mentioned that you introduced Daniel to his friends, could you perhaps help me get in touch with them?”

“freeState doesn’t work like that, if it did it wouldn’t be around for very long. I’ll mention you want to talk to them, the info will bounce around the state and if they want to help you out they will get in touch themselves. anonymity is kind of a big thing for us.”

Denver nodded “fair enough, thank you.”

“Is there anything else?” Sarah asked?

“No, I think that’s it for now,” Denver said as he stood up, “is it alright if I get in touch with you if I do think of something else though?”

“Sure I guess.” Sarah got up and made for the door, followed by Denver. he thanked her for her time and promised to let her know what he would find out after his investigation was over.

Denver walked back down the cold, run-down street toward the bus station for his ride home.

Chapter 13

“Are rumours of a new tree product backed up by more than just wishful thinking, we reached out to Anthony Katz, Head of design at tree to comment on the speculation.”

The screen flashes to some footage of a tall man in a coat getting a microphone shoved in his face, for a moment he looks annoyed but he recovers quickly and puts on his company face.

“It’s not company policy to comment on rumours, there is always a bunch of wild theories bouncing around the net on what we have to share with everyone next but the vast majority of it tends to have no grounds in reality.” The man stops the street reporter before he can even ask a follow up, “But, I can say we are working on something very cool right now.” The man flashes a smile to the camera before turning and heading off to wherever he was going before the reporter accosted him. The screen flashes back to the young woman in the studio with a beaming, show-business smile.

“So there you have it! As always we can’t confirm anything other than the fact that besides making wonderful things, tree are expert teases! and that’s it for entertainment news, tune in again tomorrow when we have a special report on freeState! for the first time ever we have a reporter who went undercover into the hacker group to find out just how dangerous they really are! We will also have the latest updates on celebrity gossip and an interview with the dreamy Mr Ma-”

“Screen off.” Denver tidied away his plates and boxes and went to bed, dimming the windows to block out the blue glow from the streetlights outside.

Chapter 14

Anthony Katz puzzled over the schematics at his workstation, occasionally picking up a sandwich from the side of the desk and taking a bite, or even standing up and pacing around the room whenever the image of the schematics was too imposing on his mind.

The head of design for tree envied his predecessors from years gone by, when the newest, coolest tech wasn’t nanites. for one, back then tech was big enough for people to see it. These days the only people who would take a close look at your machines were

obsessive hardware-minded people who all had ideas of how they could do it better, with no sense of aesthetics. But that wasn't the main reason Anthony Katz envied those that came before him, such small tech was just less *fun*. He would never build a prototype that wasn't virtual, he could never feel the weight of his work in his hands, appreciate the texture or the shape of it. It would always be too small, too distant for him (or anyone else) to get a sense of it other than the function it performed.

The particular machine Anthony was puzzling over was always going to be *ugly*, it had to be able to act on all sides of the device to interact with dense populations of cells, bacteria and even viruses without many partner nanites doing the same job. And the unpleasant appearance of these active components that had to line the surface of the 'nite was only a small part of Katz' headache, since there was no place for it on the surface the power had to be in the center of the 'nite, and getting it so the nanite could recharge itself was a complete nightmare, there was no easy way to get the usual chemicals into the nanite without removing some of the acting components and turning the 'nite into something far less efficient than the brief he was given. It was going to be another late night for Anthony Katz.

He lay down on a couch across the studio from his desk to try and get some physical distance between him and the problem. he looked out of the tall windows of the tree design headquarters and into the night, trying to think of how similar problems had been tackled with previous nanite designs as his gaze wondered over the lights of the city, glittering towards his building across the bay.

He remembered working with his former mentor on one of the earliest models of nanite that could pick up wi-fi, the competitors at the time had 'nites that had the receptors mostly on the interior and they would overheat sometimes, and if they were in a person who had a fever most would burn up. They had to put the receptors on the outside of the nanite and power was a problem there too, but they didn't have to cover the entire surface in that case, they still had a decent amount of space (in nanite terms) to get power into the thing. Sure they had to make some adjustments to the intake system but it's not like there was no way to use the known power systems of the time.

Then it clicked to Anthony, he stood up quickly and paced to the workstation where he grabbed the power unity at the center of the schematics pulled it out of the design entirely and started tweaking the acting components on the surface of the nanite to be more easily pushed about, added a few dynamos here and there and put a simple battery at the center.

It would need some work, but the 'nite should be able to charge just by having stuff move up against it. since it was mostly going to be used in labs or people that would do fine, the lab technicians could give it a shake to get the nites to act quicker and the people, well so long as they weren't dead there should be enough activity in their body to keep enough of the 'nites going to get the job done.

Katz decided he had earned himself a drink and had just started to pour it when the phone rang.

-

Andy Golapis smiled as his secretary accompanied the Judge out of his office, when the door was closed he slumped against his desk and loosened his tie. Having to stay on good

terms with legislators was important for a company so frequently trying to push products that were new and laws hadn't caught up with. One wrong product decision and the company could find itself in a mountain of legal difficulties.

Golapis wasn't a fan, but it was just one of the areas where his responsibility of CEO would mean he'd have to butter people up, and make sure decisions fell on the side of the company. Politicians were easy since they could be bought, but often judges would tend to lean on their principles so they required a certain special attention. Golapis reminded himself of MicroTech, who failed to notice this when they banked everything on a new line of 'nites that impinged on what a few considered to be unethical, though there was no law against their function at the time. when it was brought before a judge it was ruled that they would be illegal, and MicroTech fell hard. It suited tree at the time of course, but served as a lesson.

Katz stepped in through the door, "So, what's so urgent?"

"Ah, Anthony," Golapis was pleased to have his mind taken off one of his more stressful obligations, "please take a seat."

The two men made their way to a side of the office that was a semi-circle shape standing out from the room with great class walls giving a view of the bay (higher up than the view in Katz' office), with a small round coffee table in the center surrounded by a few old, large leather chairs.

Sitting down, Golapis poured Katz and himself a drink of whiskey from the bottle he always kept on the table. The two took a moment to appreciate the taste and the night view before Golapis broke the silence.

"It's these hacker kids..." Golapis said, the long day visible on his tired face.

"freeState again?"

"Their ideas prove harder and harder to get past. the Judge just now," Golapis gestured to the door "had it in his head we shouldn't be allowed to collect information from our nanite's host's bodies. No DNA, no white blood cell count, no nothing."

"And this is a problem because...?"

Golapis smiled, his old friend was talented no doubt, but he had no head for business.

"Because without that stuff, we are limited on what we can advertise to people," He punctuated his sentences with swigs of his drink, "If we know who has what going inside their body, we can market more stuff to them and since it's tailored to their body, if we say they should get it, they will."

"And you can't get the judge to see things your way?"

"I think I can get us there, but it'll be a long time before I can convince him that we should be allowed to sell that information on to other companies."

Katz processed this for a while, "So where do I come in? talking to judges is not exactly something I have much experience with."

“You,” Golapis said, crossing his legs and leaning back in his chair, “Are the kind of traditional bohemian tech genius this company has built it’s image on. I figured you might be able to give me some insight into these freeState kids I haven’t considered.”

Katz did a little more pondering and smiled, “I hate to break it to you Andy, but our problem here isn’t a new one, hell it might even be the oldest one.” Katz leaned back in his own chair too. “Tree is all about the money. sure we can paint it however we like, and you *do* paint a pretty good picture. but that is the source of everything. Any new product exists to generate income, and you and me, we work to get paid. This *freeState* it’s motivations aren’t just money.”

“So how do I get them on our side? how do we sell tree to them? just what *does* drive them?”

“Everything else I guess. besides money I mean.”

Golapis bore a puzzled face and took a swig of his whiskey before looking out the window, taking in his old friend’s perspective.

“We’re getting to be old men now,” Katz continued, “out of touch, set in our ways. there are new ideas coming along that want a shot in the light, and the way we work is in the way.” He leant forward and began to pour himself another glass, “like I say, it’s an old problem. Tradition and age verses experimentation and youth.”

Golapis thought he saw a thread hanging in Katz’ words, and reached for it. “Well, tree has been around for a long time now, but have retained our youthful image the whole time. Are we not the perfect example of a blend of experience and innovation?” Golapis leaned forward, keen to hear his friend’s response “so why not just change the style again, appeal to the younger tech-passionate once again?”

Katz smiled again, a sympathetic smile for an old friend, “kids are smart now, all the tech and nets that we have contributed to, they have all the information in the world to learn from, and all the people in the world to discuss and brainstorm with. A style change alone will have almost no effect, because they will still be able to see us for what we are. So long as we make money, they will know exactly why we do what we do.”

Golapis leaned back in his chair, looking more tired than ever and gazed out the window “So, it’s just as I thought then.”

“It’s not like they are too much of a problem,” Katz tried to cheer up his friend “surely they can’t have much of an effect. we just keep selling to the millions of people who still want to buy from us right?”

“That’s just the problem,” Golapis responded, staring at the city lights in the distance this freeState, it looks like they are our competitor now, and their price is always zero.”

“what do you mean?”

“They keep releasing tech for free, systems that perform the same functions ours do, but available on the net to anyone who cares to get them.”

“Well surely a bunch of kids disjointed across the net can’t-”

“How are you coming along with the current ‘nite?” Golapis interrupted his friend, whilst grabbing a pad and tapping it a few times.

“Oh, well it turns out I solved a major problem with the power supply, I should have a release candidate ready in a couple of wee-”

“Here.” Golapis handed Katz the pad, who’s jaw dropped the moment he saw the screen.

Golapis had searched online for a nanite that did the exact function as the one Katz had been working on, not only was there a schematic online but it was far more elegant than Katz’ design and could be fabricated using the most simple nanite building machines. Something Katz was developing to be sold to high end medical companies had been released for free, and could be used by doctors in even the poorest third world countries.

“See the date? That was open-sourced a week ago. How the hell are we supposed to compete with that?”

“I don’t understand, this design, it’s far too advanced. it looks like what we could have come up with after developing a similar nanite for a couple of years. how does a bunch of kids online design something like this?”

“Fucked if I know, but it’s not just their nanites and their ideological stance that is a problem, they are doing this shit to a bunch of other industries as far as I can tell. Stuff that people have built their careers on, this freeState is making it free or as low cost as possible.” Golapis put his glass down, uncomfortable from gripping it tightly.

Katz put the pad on the table and leaned back in his chair, not sure what to make of all this. “I’m sorry Andy, I really can’t help you.”

Golapis sighed, “It’s alright Anthony, it was a long shot asking you.” He smiled at his friend. “Don’t worry, I do have a few tricks up my sleeve to look out for the company.”

“Such as?”

“Oh the usual, politicians, judges - most of whom are still on the side of businesses with a lot of employees, marketing and the like.”

“Sounds like you’re on top of it then.” Katz made an uneasy smile, appreciative his old friend would be looking out for the company that put money in his account, but still shaken from discovering his great progress of the evening was obsolete before he had even found his elegant solution.

“I always am Anthony, I always am.”

Chapter 15

Denver woke up suddenly and felt an immediate craving for a 'nite high, but it passed within a couple of seconds. He took a couple of deep breaths and put his hands to his face, finding a nice dark place to rest a bit before he let the daylight into his head proper.

After a moment he got out of bed and told the windows to scatter, they frosted up, letting light in but diffusing it to such a degree that nobody outside would be able to see him getting dressed. As he pulled on his pants he thought how his withdrawals weren't anywhere near as bad as he was expecting them to be, the tech-tonics must be working better these days he thought.

There was a knock at the door, and Denver made his way over to it, pulling his shirt on as he did so. Opening the door he saw a tall man in the corridor.

"Mister Jamie Denver yes, mind if I come in?"

'Doesn't look like a client' Denver thought, "As soon as you tell me who you are and why you're here." His words were direct, but his tone was kept unassuming. neither aggressive or welcoming, so that he could switch tones to one of those depending on the response.

"Oh, I'm a detective myself, not private like you of course. Government signs my checks." The man chuckled and smiled, anyone these days would find the phrase about 'signing checks' quaint and charming. Denver tried not to be swayed by such things but his instincts did tell him this guy seemed nice enough. "I promise you're not in trouble or anything, I'd just like to chat with you."

"Fair enough." was denver's response, and he opened the door wide enough to let the detective in.

"Thank you kindly" The detective bowed a little as he crossed the threshold into Denver's front room/office. A gesture Denver didn't catch as he was walking over to fill the kettle, but it made the detective feel good to be well-mannered, even if it wasn't noticed.

"Didn't catch your name..."

"Hutton, Kyle Hutton." Hutton made his way over to Denver's desk and marveled at all the old books and paper files stacked on it against the wall, and the old keyboard hooked up to his screen.

"Tea? Coffee?"

"You don't have any milk by any chance do you?"

"Uh... sure."

"Thanks, a glass of that would be grand." Hutton prodded a couple of keys on the yellowed keyboard, he hadn't seen a machine like this since he was a young child, it brought back memories of awful quality internet games, interfaces crowded with too many search boxes and adverts, and his mother's burnt dinners. He smiled "Fascinating design, the old tech."

"You like stuff like that?" Denver handed Hutton his glass and gestured toward the sofa, a friendly indication he was to stop poking around his stuff.

“Well I don’t use anything like that myself. but like I say, fascinating the kind of things people used for input before modern systems. Did you know a while before they invented those,” Hutton gestured to the keyboard as he sat down. “They used to input information using little cards with holes punched in them? can you imagine having to do your banking like *that* today!?” Hutton flashed a jovial smile before taking a swig of milk and exhaling loudly to express satisfaction with the cool drink.

“You must excuse me Detective Hutton,” Denver sat down and nursed his freshly made mug of coffee, “But I’m not particularly accustomed to strangers visiting just to talk about vintage technology like this.”

“Ah yes, of course, of course,” Hutton nodded and sat forward on the seat. “I came here to talk about you mister Denver. how are things with *you* lately? any interesting cases you’re working on?”

Denver took a sip of his coffee, he often felt it was best to find some such way to postpone a response to an inquiry he found so offensive. “That would be confidential information, just between me and my clients.”

“Oh certainly.” Hutton nodded in agreement, “I totally understand. great professionalism there. I kind of envy you, you know?” Hutton energetically animatedly adjusted his seating to get more comfortable as he continued “Choose your own cases, nobody breathing down your back, no miserable reports or statements to fill out. makes me think I picked the wrong employer, private sector is much more appealing, much more indeed.” He took another swig of milk.

“But you’re the one with the guaranteed income.” Denver pointed out, and took a swig of his drink too.

“yes yes, there is that. probably why I couldn’t do what you do, I like my flat a lot. rent is a little above the average but I always know I can pay it, whatever threats the boss likes to make at me.” Hutton grinned and looked out of the window.

there was a silence for a few moments.

“Well, if that is all the-”

“Must be tricky though,” Hutton cheerfully interrupted, “staying focussed on a case when you have to deal with a drug addiction too.”

there was another silence, this one more uncomfortable than the last, though hutton continued looking out the window, allowing the moment to pass.

“I’m not a drug addict, Mr Hutton.” Denver had suddenly realised Hutton’s friendly demeanor was more disarming than he had given credit for at the door.

“Drugs, Nanites, it’s all the same thing really.” Hutton turned from the window, took another sip of his drink and smiled, “Not that I’m judging mind, I have a cousin who used to be addicted to the ‘nites, she cleaned herself up just fine. runs a flower shop in Chicago now.”

Denver studied Hutton, trying to divine the true purpose of his visit. Was it something to do with the kid’s death? perhaps a neighbour had complained about his behaviour during a

'nite high and the detective was following up? Somehow Hutton wore a face that seemed oblivious of purpose, for all Denver knew he just happened to drop round for a glass of milk and conversation.

"Anyway, I can see you're a pretty together guy Mister Denver. but if you *should* need any assistance with any cases you have, please feel free to come to me. Obviously I have resources available to me that you may not have and besides-

"You want a taste of working in the private sector."

"a-ha, am I so easy to read?" Hutton chuckled and climbed to his feet, "It is more exciting though don't you think? the life of a private detective?" He finished off his drink and put the glass by the sink.

"It seems that way until you try to live it." Denver replied, sensing the Detective was ready to leave and opened the door for him.

"Yes, yes I imagine so." Hutton smiled and stepped out. "Thanks for your hospitality Mr Denver, don't forget my offer; if you need assistance, just come to me."

"I'll keep it in mind, thank you" Denver said, and closed the door.

He made his way back to the seat by his workstation in a bit of a daze, *'just what the fuck was that about!?' he thought.*

Hutton's appearance had been so unexpected, his conversation so disjointed yet charming, and his stay so short, that Denver's early-morning mind could simply not process it. All he knew for sure at this point was that for some reason or another, a detective had taken an interest in him.

Chapter 16

The woman tucked her blade and her mask into the trunk by the hotel bed and left her room, heading to the bar. Today was a good day, she had not seen anyone die and according to the feed on her pad there was going to be a big move shortly.

She entered the bar, took a seat and got the barman's attention, a single glass of wine. She pulled out her pad and took a small sip, whilst today looked to be a day worth celebrating, she had to watch her intake or her 'nites could be effected, and that wouldn't do for whatever the next assignment may be.

"KRKL? you're here! just in time, check what DiZ is doing!"

"I heard, should be neat but are we sure now is the time? is the state ready for this kind of exposure?"

"Hey KRKL, don't worry, I've done the forecasts."

"Am? well, if you say so I'll not object. Just be careful OK?"

“You know me, I always am.”

“Enjoy the show OK? ;)”

The woman logged out of the chat and brought a TV stream up on her pad, taking another sip of wine.

Chapter 17

“-But Doctor Anderson, do you think people are ready for technology like this?” The mediator gestured dramatically as he spoke before reclining contemplatively in anticipation of a controversial response. Anderson stroked his beard, taking a moment to process the question.

“I think so, if you-” he began, but was interrupted by a middle-aged woman sitting on the other couch.

“What an irresponsible opinion!” Her voice was that sharp, high pitched tone you could only really find in someone extremely practiced in being absolutely outraged, or at least pretending to be so. “Suppose such nanites got into the hands of *children!*? there are awful things on the net, are we to just expose their minds directly to the depravity of the darkest corners of our species!?”

The Host of the show held his hand up to his face much like ‘the thinker’, in an effort to appear even more contemplative of the issues being raised, but mostly to cover his smile; ‘nite controversy was always *excellent* for ratings.

“Well of course it’s the responsibility of parents to raise their children, a neural interface is still something that parents can monitor, apply whatever *censorship* the parent chooses. They won’t be looking at the things you consider so harmful unless their parents are allowing it anyway.” The doctor was beginning to get worked up “It’s not like-”

“The trouble with *you* people is you’re never thinking of the consequences! of course a parent should be responsible, but you can’t expect a parent to-”

“What do you mean ‘*you* people’!?” the doctor adjusted his glasses, which acted as a battery and processor for the old model of cybernetic eye implant. the outraged woman was immediately silent. She knew right away she crossed the line if this borgy was calling her out.

“Can we focus on the issue ple-”

“I think we *are* focussing on the issue, you have a problem with people with technological adjustments!” the man was furious, *of course* the only reason she objected to neural ‘nite interfaces was because she was a bigot. “We could probably be talking about prosthetic legs and you would be against it!”

“Now that is *just* ridiculous!” The woman did her best to continue her assault of outrage but she was visibly flustered, “of course people can have prosthetics!”

“And what if the prosthesis has cybernetic interfaces so the person can bend their knees? is that OK? what if it’s integrated to the nerves so the person can sense when they are touching something harmful? where do you draw the line?”

“well-”

“at what point between a prosthetic limb and nanites that can talk to the mind do you say things stop being morally acceptable madam? Do you have any id-”

“I’m sorry but we’ve run out of time” the host steps in, barely containing his grin. The producer of the show dimming the lights on the guest seats and muting their mics to allow him to wrap up the show “Both sides have given us a lot to think about indeed, thank you for watching and join us again next week for the latest on *hot topics!*”

The screen fades dark enough to quickly flash the show’s credits and changes to the animated channel logo.

“That was hot topics, next is the news where we learn what the true face of freeState really is. that will be right after these messages.”

Denver stood up and went over to the fridge to pick a snack from the sink. he could understand the need to discuss theoretical technology, the moment it stops being theory people need to know the correct way to deal with it, but there seemed to be little use getting so worked up.

He pulled out the last yogurt and resolved to pick up more food the next time he was out.

He licked the yogurt off the lid and sat back down, remembering that the reason people get so heated over stuff that doesn’t matter, is almost always for attention.

Denver was halfway through his yogurt when the ads were done and the news began.

“Tonight! All your favourite news and a shocking report about just how dangerous the freeState group really is, from undercover journalists we sent in!” the voice-over was as serious and dramatic as always as the news’ logos animated and the camera panned through the studio to the cheery young anchor. She beamed as wide as ever but before she could even voice a syllable the screen flashed and she was replaced by another young girl, but this one wearing a mask Denver now recognised as a part of what seemed to be freeState uniform.

“Sorry about that other bitch, I’ll be your host for the news today!” the new anchor had as cheery a disposition as the anchor she replaced. with had large purple pigtails to boot, that hung to each side of her mask and swayed as she spoke.

“The other guys didn’t really get very far undercover into freeState, which is kind of pathetic really since anyone can join!” The masked anchor raised her hands in a ‘*what will we do with these guys, they can’t get anything right!*’ gesture of faux-dissappointment. “So to make up for their lack of investigation, we figured we’d do our own undercover work. after all that’s what you were promised, and *anonymous delivers!*”

‘*That sounds familiar...*’ Denver thought to himself but the images on the screen didn’t wait for him to catch up.

“Here’s the view of their studio, we studied it pretty closely, and apart from these health and safety violations,” along the side of the screen scrolled a handful of descriptions of breaches of safety code, the regulation IDs so anyone curious could check that they were in fact illegal, and the names of builders, electricians and the like who looked like they had been paid off “We thought the studio was just too *boring!* what it needs is... water balloons filled with paint!” As the freeState anchor said the words a great number of colourful balloons fell from the ceiling and turned the studio into a rainbow of bright colours, including all the bewildered camera operators and anchors. “But that’s only *one* place that needed our artistic touch!” continued the cheery freeState woman, and the camera switched to a view of the producers box where there were people wrestling at the controls of various workstations, trying to reclaim the airwaves that had been taken from them, with a man who appeared to be the producer swearing furiously down the line. “The producer looks a little stressed don’t you think? let’s make the place a little less serious!” At that the producers room too, was flooded with colour and people trying to rub paint off themselves and their machines. The screen flashed back to wherever the freeState makeshift studio was and back to the pink-haired, masked anchor.

“Isn’t that fun? but why stop there? this is the CEO of channel nine’s office,” the camera switched to a view of an office with expensive antique desks and chairs, and a man in the center holding a phone but slack-jawed, red faced, and petrified to see himself on the screen. “and THIS is the CEO of channel nine’s office, flooded with foam!” various cabinets exploded as suds washed around the room, the CEO himself tried to react to it but only slipped and fell. Then camera flashed back to the masked girl.

“Why don’t we see what the other board members are up to? we go live now, to our street camera!”

The screen showed a scene in a dark alley in city somewhere and a handful of masked freeState people were standing around. one holding his hand up to his ear nodded, having been given the signal they were live. wordlessly the group walked towards a door in the side of the alley, five of the masked people going in first. the moment the doors were open some burly looking security types tried to block them but the first four freeState folk outnumbered and outpowered them. pushing them aside allowing the camera and some other masked people in. they went down some steps, and kicked in a door, on the other side of which were three naked men stood around a naked girl strapped to a chair. they tried to get out or cover their faces when they realised what was going on but having seen the camera, the camera had seen them. their faces clipped from the freeze-frame scrolled along the bottom of the screen, alongside their names, positions at channel nine, and their addresses.

The screen went back to displaying the freeState anchorwoman again, “That young girl is only 14, and did not consent to be raped by these board members.” she continued to speak in a cheery voice, clearly mocking the regular host. She then went on to list names of detectives, policemen and community leaders who had been paid off or failed to act to prevent the sex trafficking that the board members happened to be enjoying that night.

This continued for a few minutes, the freeState broadcast were effectively detonating a shit-bomb of everything to do with the channel, everyone that profited from it, the sponsors who supported it. when the anchor felt satisfied that enough incriminating information had been read out, she put down the pad she was reading from and looked at the camera with

intense eyes that betrayed her mocking voice, and said “You do not fuck with freeState, we are everywhere, we look after our own, and we know your secrets.”

The girl made a gesture to someone off-screen, and screen flashed and was quickly replaced with channel nine’s ‘technical difficulties’ image.

Denver was blown away. It was the most impressive stunt he had ever seen in his life, this was no mere trolling or takeover, it was a master work. The planning and research required to pull it off alone was crazy to think about, that some group of hackers could pull it off almost defied belief. He turned off his screen, and quickly went to the net to download a copy of the broadcast before anybody started to monitor who was sharing it.

Something about the hijack resonated with him, memories of young kids doing questionably legal things with tech, fighting the man for the common good, but usually just because it was *fun*. He remembered something Fiona mentioned during their IM conversation the day before, she was surprised he knew nothing about freeState, she must have expected him to continue to participate in *that* scene since when they were at college. if he had, there’s no doubt he would have bumped heads with someone from freeState, they were far too elegant to not become revealed in tech circles, and far too loud not to get noticed.

‘Anonymous delivers’ he thought, and he had a good idea of what freeState might be about, or at least where it grew from. He was eager to speak to Fiona the next day and was buzzing most of the night. it wasn’t for a few hours he even remembered why he was looking into freeState in the first place and had to sit down. just what *was* the connection between this kid and freeState?

Chapter 18

Andy Golapis watch the newTwelve report showing various pap shots of channel twelve staff and associates getting arrested. The screen illuminated his dim office and he drunk his whiskey in silence, the screen on mute. He didn’t need to hear the audio, the flashing police lights projected the warning to him loud and clear, there might as well have been a “Watch your back if you fuck with freeState” scrolling on the ticker.

It was too late to turn back now, the wheels had been set in motion since long before his chat with the head of design. *He was an enemy of freeState, though they didn’t know it yet.* He took another swig of whisky and leaned all the way into his seat, resting his head on the back and looking up at the ceiling. *‘no, they know it, they just don’t know I’ve made a move’* he thought.

he jostled his glass a little to confirm it was as empty as it felt, *‘But they won’t ever know, we aren’t some scummy channel trying to sponge sleazy ratings’* Golapis reasoned *‘we are bigger than that, smarter.’*

He sat forward and put his glass on the table, slouching a little and returning his gaze to the screen. He knew most of those that were caught up in the shit-storm would get off scott-free, popular opinion was still against freeState so they would have a certain sympathy from the system, but those caught up in the sex trafficking were totally fucked. Even if they had *tree*-levels of money to burn they wouldn’t be able to buy their way out of

a scandal like that. Golapis shut off the screen and headed for the door, it had been a long day, and he had to make sure his his own skeletons weren't hanging out of the closet, just in case.

Chapter 19

With her music at full volume, Amaterasu danced through the labarynth of screens in her room, their lights spinning around her as she relished the moment. This was it, freeState was stepping into the open, *finally!* the invites would go live in the morning worldwide. She had put a lot of work in and had a lot left to contribute, but for the time being personal struggles were put aside; she danced, and across the net freeState danced with her.

On one of the many hundreds of screens a little 'new message' icon popped up, and made a quiet beep as Amaterasu danced by but her music was so loud she wasn't going to notice it for some time. She felt as though her age had been cut in half and she was a teenager once more, the world was new again.

"Could do with your input Amsy, there's a guy looking into BruceGlee's death. Meeting him soon."

Chapter 20

Denver fell through space, endlessly. flying past at the speed of a million miles an hour were mountains of people stood on each-other's shoulders all staring at Denver through freeState masks with cold eyes.

His face started to itch.

Looking up, he could see another person falling, a beautiful woman. She seemed to be reaching out to him, shouting something that the air rushing by drowned out.

He tried to scratch his nose but couldn't feel anything, his face felt like ice.

The woman screamed with all her energy, Denver thought she was beautiful, he cared deeply about her and wished whatever was upsetting her could stop.

he reached to his kneck and found a seam, he pulled on it. Denver's face came clean off and the woman vanished. He let go of his face and he started to fall away from it. As it slowly spun away from him he saw that his face was just another freeState mask.

He smashed into the ground faster than anything had ever done before and woke up suddenly, clinging tightly to the sheets.

He lay motionless apart for several deep breaths, and stared at the ceiling, cold sweat holding to him. It was a few seconds before he fully returned to himself and sat up. Denver took a moment to think of what caused such a dream, and figured that since he couldn't

get to sleep for a while the night before, constantly buzzing with thoughts of freeState, paired with 'nite cravings, he was bound to have some seriously fucked up dreams.

Then he saw the time, swore and made quickly for the shower. vowing to set an alarm next time he made an appointment, even if it was in the afternoon. Now he would have to hurry if he was to meet up with Fiona on time.

-

“Are you with me Denv?”

Denver snapped out of his daze, Fiona sat across from him, a large cup lifted near to the face which bore her trademark expression of curiosity.

“Sorry, didn’t get much sleep last night.” He leaned back in his seat, scratched the back of his head with one hand and reached for his coffee with the other. he tried to push out all the chatter and clinking noises of cuttlrey from the cafe but it insisted on imposing upon his aching head. He wished Fiona hadn’t insisted on this cafe.

“You’re not alone,” Fiona smiled and looked idly out across the sea of tables from their corner to the window, “That stunt with the tv show, and everything else. a lot of people will be kept busy.”

Denver took a sip of his coffee, still adjusting to his return to consciousness. “Huh? what’s everything else?”

Fiona looked back to Denver, amused that he was still the same guy she remembered. “Not checked your mail yet huh? or listened to any of the other conversations today?”

Denver looked around, most of the discussion did seem to be a little more excited than usual. He pulled out his pad and brought up the inbox, where there was a new mail highlighted as ‘important’, signed ‘freeState’, and glowing in a bright coloured font that he had never seen in his mail app before. He puzzled over how they had gotten it to do that, hacked his pad maybe? He stopped himself getting carried away, figuring this same email had gone out to everybody, somebody at the company that wrote the mail software, must have left a little feature in so any mail sent out from freeState would get special treatment. He opened up the mail.

“You are invited to join the Free State!” Read the title, in large text, taking up most of the screen. “The Free State is just like any other state, except anyone can become a citizen! want to become a citizen of freeState? CONGRATULATIONS! now you are a citizen!”

Denver smirked, realising how this was a similar rule to the old ‘game’, which he had just lost again.

“We are not a hacker group as some would have you believe... well, we are sometimes! the truth is we are whatever we need to be for our citizens! If someone is mistreating a freeState citizen and their home state is not taking care of them, freeState will step in! our citizens come from all walks of life; lawyers, police, farmers, hackers, french teachers, fast food employees, even a couple of traditinal presidents and monarchs! We have the tech, the resources and most importantly the will power to look out for our own. whereas most

governments and companies are ruled based on what is in their own interests (often money), freeState acts on the will of it's citizens!"

Denver scrolled the page up his pad and continued reading, Fiona signalled to a waiter for more coffee.

"So who governs freeState? everybody! well, kind of... we're a meritocracy, people who are trusted and have experience will often have a stronger voice, but voices are only ever as strong as other citizens make them. If you say people within freeState should do something, and other citizens agree with you your voice will grow, and the idea will become apart of us. or, just as importantly, another voice can shut you down if they can prove it wouldn't be good for the state!

"So feel free to join the free state if you want! just remember that everyone in the free state is anonymous, there are a lot of people who are against us so it might not be safe for you to go around telling random people you're a citizen. for now, just knowing that odds are there's another memmer nearby can be a great feeling, and even without local community, we are always close thanks to the net (which we control now btw!).

"If you have any questions, feel free to go online anonymously and ask! we've installed software everywhere so all anonymous actions are protected and our tech guys are pretty serious about that, so do come ask us anything you like!"

Denver put the pad down and looked around, a lot of people were sharing pads, going over them like a class full of children who all just found a subject they found super interesting. He reached for his coffee and took a sip.

"Well?" Fiona asked, a little anxiously, but with a slight grin in the corner of her mouth.

"It's like Anonymous then?"

"You're kind of onto it, but anonymous was barely a prototype in comparison," Fiona put her mug down and continued rather excitedly, "Anonymous was just a single persona, many people would don this persona and the traits that Anonymous displayed were based on the traits of those who were collectively wearing the persona at a single time. Sometimes Anonymous wanted to piss off some creepy cult, so it did. sometimes anonymous wanted to prevent internet blackouts by twisted dictators, so it did. sometimes anonymous just wanted to dick around and piss people off for fun, so it did. But that was a different age, as I'm sure you remember."

"Back when we got into that scene, it was starting to become tricky to remain anonymous, they were rounding up Anons who pissed off big companies or governments and put pressure on Anonymous. People were afraid to put on the persona, afraid the 'authorities' could see past it to them. There's no way any anons would have the balls to pull off something like last night, or even that." Denver gestured at the email displaying on his pad.

"Bingo, Anonymous 'members' started vanishing, eventually it seemed to have withered away. a wierd quirk in the history of the internet. but that's not really in Anonymous's nature, to fade away. In theory everyone who wanted to be Anonymous still was, it was just more risky, but since Anonymous was such a big thing, there were always going to be people who had mind to continue the thing. Anonymous itself, became Anonymous."

“Are you saying like, a ‘secret’ Anonymous? like the illuminati or something?”

Fiona chuckled, “Not quite, it was just Anonymous, doing what it had to to survive. a natural thing for any entity to do, especially one that was an amalgamation tech-savvy humans. If your anonymity was no longer secure online, then they would take steps to secure it. All it takes is a few thousand members of Anonymous back then, and you have at least a handful placed to adjust internet protocols software, tweak the wording of a few laws here and there, control just how packets are signed and sent across the internet. on the surface it looks like business as usual for the net, but anyone with the right know-how can access the net differently.”

“What, like a secret internet or something?” Denver asked skeptically.

“No nothing like that, it’s the regular, normal internet everyone knows and loves, except now there is the hidden option, of total anonymity.” Fiona paused for effect, very happy about this part, “and I mean *total* anonymity. no IP address, no way of tracking through trails of proxies, no record with your service provider. you can leave your mark and there will be nothing to tie you to it ever, short of you signing your name to it!” Fiona smiled, leaned back and enjoyed some coffee as Denver tried to process this.

He leaned forward with his elbows on the desk, “And you’re saying, Anonymous set this up in secret, and right now this is reality, if I want to go online anonymously right now I can? On this pad here?” Denver pointed to his device on the table.

“Yep.”

Denver exhaled heavily and leaned back again holding his hands to the back of his head. “Well fuck me.”

“I *knew* you’d think it was cool.” Fiona smiled devilishly, a grin that Denver recognised from there time together. it was a face of pride and accomplishment.

“Were you... you know...”

“In on it?” Fiona’s smile got a little wider, “Well... I’m sure a top hacker that frequently gets handed access to all sorts of government and corporate networks and infrastructure would be able to contribute some to such a... scheme. but of course I had *absolutely nothing* to do with it.”

Denver smiled, he too was proud of his old friend, this was some hardcore shit and it brought him back to their time at college, messing about on computers with the hopes of taking back the world.

“So, where does freeState come in?” Denver pulled the conversation back to it’s focus, “what you’ve said sounds like a survival plan for Anonymous and you say freeState is different.”

“Exactly, see as Anonymous was doing all this it continued to evolve. Members came from all over the globe, and so Anonymous was not unaffected by the no-borders problem.”

“You mean people having relationships online, then having their countries go into war?”

“Wars, financial crisis, all kinds of conflicts. these are things that weren’t in anybody’s best interests. not anybody in Anonymous. Members were killed and then the traits of freeState started to emerge. Anonymous looked after it’s own. There was a genocide occouring in some backwater country that none of the other states cared about, but there were members of anonymous in there afraid for their lives and the lives of their friends and family. And it dawned on Anons that together, they really were more powerful than the genocidal scum, they were more tech savvy, they had numbers, they were experienced in covert operations of a kind, and they had the will power.” Fiona took a sip of her drink to keep her throat from going dry. “This was around the time where nanites were starting to actually get useful, some anons happened to be knowledgable in their design and programming and made some ‘nites for enhanced stamina, speed, level thinking and so on. other anons were in positions to see weapons and armour find their way to the area. ultimately, a load of anons went out one nite and ended the genocide. It changed everything.”

Denver frowned a little, “But I always thought, Anonymous was kind of a peaceful thing, most of what we got into was never more than a digital sit-in.”

“Anonymous was always whatever it’s members made it. If it’s members wanted to kill a few mass-murderers, then Anonymous wanted to do that.” Fiona paused for a moment, but then continued, “It’s not like everyone was thrilled about Anonymous having blood on it’s hands. That’s part of why Anonymous and freeState are not the same. Anonymous is just anybody who chooses to be anonymous, freeState’s citizens are anonymous also, but as citizens they serve the state, which serves them. Anonymous is ultimately selfish, it would only ever look out for the interests that appealed to the majority of members at a time, freeState serves more like an ideal state, it’s primary goal is looking out for everyone else in freeState.”

Denver took a little while to let all of this settle in his mind “So, why so showy now?”

“Well for one thing, even in secret, freeState managed to gather *a lot* of citizens. ultimately it’s all snowballed from there. right now the state wants to grow. the more people in the state, the better a world we live in is the view of many.”

“A better world?”

“Well wouldn’t it be though?” Fiona leaned on the arm of her chair, “Think about it, take our government right now. who do they look out for? how much money do you need before your issues matter to them? and even if that wasn’t a problem how long does it take to change anything? or if there is a scandal how long does it take to replace a politician? In freeState none of these are problems, if someone does something awful they will lose their influence within the state immediately simply because the citizens will stop trusting them. and the state doesn’t care how rich a citizen is when they need help, there will always be another citizen or more who will want to help out. *‘Today you, tomorrow me’* after all.”

“So that’s why the sudden promotion, people want a bigger state?”

“well that’s how it started, and it’s the main driving force but the promotion before was much more gradual. We’d release open systems to help people out, sign them as from the freeState. We’d help out when there was a natural disaster and so on, and continue to protect our citizens. Sometimes a citizen would get in trouble for something they didn’t do,

and we would make sure the problem would go away. but doing even small things like this...”

“you make big enemies.”

“Exactly, I know you’ve seen all the smear hat has been posted against the freeState lately, ultimately what has happened in the last few days was an acceleration of freeState’s ‘coming out’. People forced freeStates hand some and this was the response. freeState bore it’s fangs to it’s enemies, and opened it’s arms to all it’s potential citizens.”

“Don’t you think it’s kind of rash?”

“It’s a little rash I’d say, but it’s not something the state wasn’t prepared for. We were playing it absurdly safe before, but the truth is we have greater numbers, skills and resources than anyone outside the state can or could ever know.”

“And even if they did, the state is a hydra, that will avenge any heads severed, with new ones sprouting all the time.”

“Bingo.”

The two sat in silence for a while, Denver processing everything and coming to terms with this new world he found himself in.

“Well, I came to you hoping for a little insight, I guess I got that and more. Thanks Fiona.”

“No trouble for an old friend like you.” Fiona smiled then made a half frown, “Well, actually it is a bit of a bother tbh, obviously I can’t be tied to freeState yet, not in my line of work.”

“My lips are sealed, this was just old friends catching up.”

“Super, you still using marzipan encryption on all your stuff?”

“Of course.”

“Cool, that should keep the data safe, but I’d also work in a DMS too, wire it to a wipe.”

“A dead man’s switch that erases all my data if I don’t check in periodically? is it really that important?”

“It’d make me more comfortable. I’m not expecting you are in danger of actually getting killed or anything, but if somebody decides they want to hold you overnight while they try and hack into your pc...”

“Gotcha, well consider it done. Nobody will hear it from me that you have anything to do with freeState.”

“You’re a darling, Denv!” Fiona beamed. “But we’re not done yet, I’ve been asked by certain citizens to pass some things along to you. this,” Fiona swiped a file from her pad to Denver’s, “is a pass to the freeState, you can use that to access the net with total anonymity. and this,” Fiona swapped a couple more files across “will help you get in touch with the people who were working with BruceGlee.”

“BruceGlee?”

“The handle of the kid who’s death you’re looking into, you didn’t get that much?”

Denver smiled, “I guess freeState’s anonymity protocols are a bit ahead of me. I’ve not kept up to speed it seems.”

Fiona wore a bit of a frown for a second and Denver knew she had looked up on him, she knew he was an addict.

moments passed in uncomfortable silence, each person unsure if they should bring the topic in mind, to voice.

“You know if you need anything, you can count on me right?” Fiona said, as casually as she could but hadn’t taken much care to hide the concern in her voice.

“Sure, that’s what freeState citizens do for others right?” Denver smiled and shrugged.

“Right, but we’re more than that. we’re friends aren’t we?” Fiona’s gaze was a little too penetrating and Denver felt he had to look away, but forced himself to look back for at least a second to nod.

“Of course we are.”

“Good.”

another uncomfortable moment.

“Anyway, I really should be going,” Fiona said as she began to stand up, “places to go, people to see, billion-dollar security systems to break into. you know the deal.”

“Sure, and then star in a movie later.”

“Hey don’t tease!” Fiona jokingly punched her old friend in the arm. “Anyhoo I really do have to go, it was great chatting with you again.”

The two continued their goodbyes and headed their separate ways.

Chapter 21

Having signed onto the net anonymously, Denver didn’t have trouble finding his way to places where freeState members *‘or was it really citizens?’* were congregating. It was like the largest meet and greet the world had ever known. Topics were flooded with people curious about freeState, and were overjoyed to be able to find citizens with similar interests and mindsets within the state. Almost nobody was using a real name today, which contrasted strongly with the social networks Denver had grown accustomed to where everyone had a real name, an address, an old school, family, favourite video streams, and a million other tags and bits of data flooding their profiles. It was suddenly so clear, all that stuff was just the illusion of expression, no longer were people expressing themselves by

what they bought into, what tags they felt fit them, they were just themselves, doing what interested them, discussing what they wanted, learning whatever they were curious about.

With an 'online identity' people had been constrained, but when they really let go of it, then they were truly free to be a person, not defined by things in their timeline or a metric of likes, dislikes and X-star reviews. They were who they were at this moment in the present. And together, they formed a community, not one designed by an amalgamation of marketing executives deciding what was 'hot', what people would be interested in or spend their time doing, it was pure and human. Human perhaps not in spite of being separated physically, but perhaps because of it. The community was immediately looking after itself, one minute a doctor would be curious and see what this freeState thing was about, the next they would have been exposed to a citizen in need nearby that wouldn't be able to afford help, but already there was a kinship and the final minute the doctor would be heading off. This happened in a million different areas, groups would come together discussing music and within an hour they would be playing their jams together full volume from rooftops downtown. The rest of the state watched the streams of this and joined in. It was organic, it was how Denver felt the internet used to be, before everything was branded and rationed, made to slot nicely in somebody's timeline next to some adverts.

Denver of course, found his way to people who shared interests with him, he held a conversation with a group of private detectives, and related professions and discussed various practices from where they were. It wasn't something that they couldn't have done before, but the anonymity made it different somehow, no-one was afraid of talking about the times where they were pressured or threatened. and then it was out in the state. and there was a camaraderie that might not have existed otherwise. Perhaps some of these other folks held views that Denver couldn't stand in other areas, perhaps some would have treated him differently for his race or attitude, but here there was no such problem. Here, everyone was just an anonymous person who only existed as an entity discussing a particular topic.

A particularly popular topic for discussion was the TV hijack from the night before, there was a lot of rumour about it, and there were attempts by various entities to keep the video off the net. most of the attempts to upload it were to highly monitored popular services that blocked it before the upload was even complete. Denver, almost without thinking, uploaded his copy of the video to a bunch of less vulnerable servers where they would last long enough for others to make copies and keep the video from getting blotted out. and wrote an explanation on how others could do it, should they want to upload a video to the net that couldn't be killed.

Chapter 22

Amaterasu poured over system schematics, concepts, equations and pseudocode, but also kept an eye on the net. She knew this would be a big day in the history of the state, and was happy to see a lot of interested people asking questions anonymously - always a good sign.

She was particularly concerned at some of the attempts at censorship that were happening in some of the more conventional sites to prevent discussion of freeState, especially viewing of the video. But citizens were responding to this without any need for Amaterasu to lend a hand, they were hacked and their dirty laundry was exposed pretty

quickly. And one citizen had even uploaded the video of the news hijack securely and left instructions for others if they wanted to do the same. She was impressed, it was clear new citizens were bringing in new skills that weren't to be underestimated. This DT in particular was some experienced hacker, with a bit of a flair for procedural cracking too.

She returned to her diagrams and redoubled her efforts.

Chapter 23

Denver spent most of the day exploring the state, getting a feel for it and even lending a hand or advice where he felt he was qualified. It was dark out by the time he got round to looking for BruceGlee/Daniel's friends, or at least the citizens who he worked with.

"Oh, you're the detective right?"

Denver quickly erased the record of the message, he didn't need his anonymous handle tied to him in reality.

"a little privacy plz? :P"

"wow man, you wiped what I said within seconds? are you a mod on this server?"
DesuNeil wasn't sure how impressed to be.

"Dumbass, my aunt runs this box." Kling_1 was more impressed at his friends' obliviousness.

"Oh right, well that's mad skills."

"Look, I've set up a concealed lobby, can we move the convo there?" Denver was keen to keep things covert, after all one kid was already dead. He left a link for DesuNeil and Kling_1 to follow, and closed it behind them. Denver sighed with relief, they couldn't be traced from here.

"So, you're looking into BL's death right?" asked Kling_1, "Do you think we are in danger?"

"I don't know yet, I was hoping you could tell me what you were working on?"

"Serenity didn't tell you?" -Kling_1

"Who is serenity?" -DT

"She's the one who introduced us to BruceGlee, she's told us you were looking to chat with us." - DesuNeil

"She didn't say, I figured she didn't know." -DT

"Really? I always figured they were an item or something, always seemed close online." -
Kling_1

"Didn't you know dude? they were siblings." -DesuNeil

“No way, that mean I could make a move on seren?” - Kling_1

“Could you maybe chat about this later?” Denver was starting to get tired of these kids, though he couldn't deny the main reason they irritated him so much was that they reminded him of how he acted online when he was younger, “What were you working on?”

“Bunches of stuff really” -DesuNeil

“Lots” - Kling_1, “mostly algorithms, processes. lightweight APIs and such.”

“Lightweight?” - DT

“So they could run on old tech easily, or even DNCs - Distributed Nanite Collectives.” - DesuNeil

“What are they?” - DT

“You don't know? here I was thinking you're some tech genius, hacking Kling's server and all. aren't you the guy who wrote the unkillable data instructional and uploaded the tv hack video?” -DesuNeil

“it is my AUNT's server!” -Kling_1, “mine would totally have been harder to wipe!”

“I have some tech experience, but I've been out of it for a few years so nanite stuff is a little alien to me.” - DT

“Right, well DNCs are collectives of nanites, that are distributed.” -DesuNeil

“Wow... thanks.” -DT

“They are spread out over a certain area, a body for example, or in a pool or building or whatever and they process stuff collectively. normally nanites have a cpu that processes everything in isolation of all the other nites around it, but in a DNC every nite plays a small part in the computation, like a neuron in a head or whatever.” -Kling_1

“so, a DNC is to a ninite, what the internet is to a computer then?” -DT

“sort of, very few computers run distributed processes outside local networks at universities and so on these days, but yeah, the whole is greater than the sum of it's parts, it's one of those things.” -DesuNeil

“And what was it for?” -DT

“Again, lots of things.” -DesuNeil

“Yeah, lightweight stuff like ours has a whole bunch of applications; network transmissions through restricted or poor locations (there are probably a few thousand people living in the third world who can get the net because of us), they can be used in smaller systems, like nanites, and in some cases even placed in SNDSs (Simple Non-Digital Systems) that can resist EMPs... no I need to tell you what EMP stands for?” -Kling_1

“No that’s alright, so this is the kind of thing you worked with BruceGlee on then? did you decided to do this stuff just because it’s what you’re into or was there a need within the state?” - DT

“It’s a bit of both really, sometimes people in the state need a technical problem solved, and we were always more than happy to have a go at the challenges.” - Kling_1

“We weren’t alone either, as I’m sure you can guess the state attracts a lot of tech-minded people so there would be other groups and individuals who would be trying to solve the same problems, the first to solve it gets the cred.” - DesuNeil

“So, what do you think it was that got BruceGlee killed? were you working on anything that you somebody would consider more valuable than a human life?” -DT

“Well nothing is that valuable, but I guess there are some pretty selfish people... still, all of the stuff we did was super abstract, it had a lot of uses sure, but it would make more sense to take out somebody else along the line.” -Kling_1

“like one of the people who made requests for your solutions?” -DT

“Yeah, they were probably the only ones who had any idea what they would use our stuff, even in isolation our systems don’t actually *do* anything, they have to be integrated into something else.” - DesuNeil

“Could you drop me the handles of people who were assigning your tasks?” -DT

“yeah, I’ll just have my secretary pull those files for you...” -Kling_1

“we dont keep info like that, but here’s a link to the site where we find our listings, it’s kind of a private freeState thing, but I guess serenity wouldn’t have told you where to find us if you couldn’t be trusted.”

“thanks, this will help a lot. will you guys mind if i come asking if I have any more questions?” -DT

“no worries, we help you today, you can help us tomorrow if we’re in a bind.” -DesuNeil

“plus, we spent a lot of time with BruceGlee, we want to know what happened too. plus, if we’re also in danger it’d be nice to know.” -Kling_1

“sure thing, thanks.” -DT

Denver closed the lobby and double-checked the only records were behind his dead-man’s switch, and then headed for bed.

Chapter 24

“Does this effect our plans?”

“Why would it?”

“More freeState means more enemies.”

“Our plan has room for events like this, we expected the state to have an explosion of recruitment before everything gets settled.”

“But in most of those forecasts we had the means to combat it before it got too bad, we are falling behind schedule. Perhaps it’s time to change to a plan that doesn’t leave so much to chance. the circumstances we have engineered are ridiculous.”

“It is only because they are so unlikely that they have a chance at all. If we made a more robust move, it would be noticed before it could have the desired effect.”

“I’m not entirely confident we’ve hired the right person to pull this off.”

“I’m the *only* person who can pull this off. Have you lost faith in me perhaps? would you like another demonstration, maybe the other members of our little group would care to hear what you were doing thursday night?”

“Enough of this. We stick with the plan, it’s in everyone’s interest. In case you have forgotten it was this woman’s services who alerted us to the growth of freeState and the threat it posed in the first place.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t want thanks, I want results.”

Chapter 25

Chairman Mundrich pulled away from the interface, still not confident in the council’s choice of *savior*. He stewed in his chair for a time, and eventually decided that he would take matters into his own hands. screw the council, they clearly didn’t recognise that the threat of freeState was getting out of hand, it was only a matter of time before their corps and investments clashed with freeState. They were in the business of making money and had all done some pretty dirty things to get it, and had all done some pretty dirty things to take their minds off that too.

As Mundrich saw it, his options were either back out now, take his money and lay low. or put an end to freeState before they decide to start looking into him and his company. Mundrich himself had invested in a wide array of businesses, any one of which a contingent of freeState would be happy to see go under, but he was also the guy in the middle of an energy distribution network. ultimately it was Mundrich that was responsible for the deaths of thousands of people during the winter in many countries. Sure he could afford to let them have their heaters on without paying, but if they didn’t pay his high prices, then who would? He could get away with it because he lived in a wealthy country, where people only cared about what happened within their own borders, but he’d seen enough of freeState now to know that some citizen must have lost family because of him, that there were no borders dividing people in this new state and that the moment there was a whiff of villany, the state would swamp him.

From where he sat, this was more likely to happen than their pet hacker's plan was to be successful.

Chairman Mundrich grabbed the phone and called his man. There would be a few extra lives on his conscience, but he had grown to like his office, and the building. He would get over it.

Chapter 26

"Hey, is it really you? I'm new to freeState but I'm a big fan!"

"Uh, thanks I guess." Denver was starting to notice this kind of thing as he crossed the net using his anonymous handle. somehow he had made a reputation for himself just by uploading a video and posting a tutorial, however he suspected that a few rumours had gotten out too, DesuNeil probably mouthed a little about his hack the day before and 'DT the super hacker of freeState' became something of a meme bouncing around the net.

It was almost a joke to Denver since he had barely just started participating in the state, he wasn't entirely sure if he was a citizen or not yet. All he knew for sure was that he was at least getting some kind of insight into BruceGlee's life.

And browsing the posting list where the kid's group picked up their 'jobs' was one such insight, but even here Denver bumped into the occasional fan.

"How did you learn to be so good with tech?"

"Learned alongside a couple of masters I guess, I'm not a spot on them though these days. If you're looking to learn I'm sure there are plenty of places you can check out but I'm kind of busy right now sorry."

"Ah I get it, I don't meant to be a bother, just keep being awesome! oh! and post more instructionals if you can, if I could learn right from you some more it'd be rad!"

"I'll consider it, but you'd really be better off learning from a bunch of sources, and experimenting yourself and stuff."

"sounds like really great advice, thanks so much!"

"np"

Denver sighed, leaned back in his chair and grabbed his coffee. he resolved to create an alt handle for times when he didn't want the attention his retutation brought him. it was really quite a distraction. He took a sip of his coffee but immediately spat it back into the mug, it was freezing, how long had he left it for?

As he refilled the kettle and perused the fridge he wondered how Fiona dealt with all her fans, she had several orders of magnitude more than DT did no doubt. Thoughts of fiona and learning tech brought back memories of the third member of the trio, just what had happened to Jason?

Denver went over to the workstation to run a little search as the kettle boiled to look up his old friend, he felt he could do with the break anyway since the listings he was searching were mostly unrelated, but it was still time consuming to search the archives.

What Denver found of his old friend on the net was surprising, he had expected great things of him, he was no less talented or charismatic than Fiona, but there was no indication he had ever even existed. A few records here and there about the kid in his youth, but from there on nothing, someone had wiped him from the face of the net entirely. Denver assumed that it must have been Jason himself, perhaps he was still part of Anonymous when it was underground, just like Fiona, but had opted to have no public face at all? He decided to ask Fiona about it sometime, surely she must know something.

Denver went back to scouring the listings, they were largely beginners asking for help on how to do a certain thing, help with the idiosyncronities of framework or whatever, sometimes science questions about how various chemicals reacted in a vacuum (Denver later discovered that the board was a favourite spot for people who wanted to build theoretically functional star-ships, he wondered if someday freeState might even build such a thing). For the most part though there wasn't anyone making requests for bespoke systems.

After a few more hours, Denver had a list of about four or five postings that he believed BruceGlee and his group had worked on, some listed the purposes of the system requests (as Kling_1 and DesuNeil had said, it was largely lightweight work for simple networks and nanites), none of it was worth killing for. Tracking down the handles of the postings that left the purposes out, he found one was just a hobby project to make a nanoscopic model railway and the other was for someone to have lightweight enemy AI for a videogame (something about 'a billion bees thinking on their own'). He had reached a dead end. If it was some tech BruceGlee was working on that got him killed, it had no record around here. perhaps he was making some systems on his own or getting work orders from elsewhere?

Denver was contemplating this when there was a knock at the door. He shut down his interfaces and got up to answer it.

"Good afternoon Detective!" Detective Anderson beamed at Denver.

"I could say the same to you."

"Haha, true. it is rather bizarre when people in our profession address each other, how about we just skip the title?"

"Alright then Anderson," Began Denver, using the surname in an attempt to somehow prevent his visitor's constant informal nature. "What is your visit in aid of today?"

"Ah well, I was wondering if you wanted to go out for a drink with me? There's a bar not far from here I'm rather fond of."

Denver blinked, how do you respond to something like that? he wanted to think on just what the detective's game was, but he had expertly been placed in a situation where it would be rude to spend time thinking on such matters without giving an answer that committing yourself to something.

“Why?” He stalled as best he could.

“Do we need a reason?” Detective Anderson acted as though he was surprised there would ever be cause for *not* going out for a drink when somebody offered. “Well, if you do need a reason, there is something I’d like to chat with you about, if you don’t mind. But I’d rather do it with alcohol within reach.”

“Ok,” the vague promise of information was enough for Denver, he knew his stations were safe in his absence and his investigation could wait a little while. plus he figured there were worse ways to spend an afternoon.

Denver grabbed his coat and left the building with the other detective.

-

“Moggleflies.” Pronounced dedective anderson from his stool, drink in hand.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Moggleflies, I have a story about Moggleflies for you.” The cheerful detective took a swig of his beer and began, “There was a case a while back, before I made detective. I was part of a team of investigators looking into Meercat Molly, she- ... have you heard of Meercat Molly Denver?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

“Ah, well Meerkat Molly was one of the early illicit nanite tech traders. if there was some freaky-deaky software or bugs moving about the city you could bet that at some point they passed through her hands, and she got paid for them. Some of it was particularly dangerous too. Took months of work looking into her before we had a picture of the operation which looked like she was the one calling shots for most of the city’s trade. but the laws on ‘nites at the time were still catching up to the reality, so the only way to get her... and it was really her we wanted, not some goon who took a cut,” Anderson took a gulp, “was to catch her in the act, handing over some dodgy nites to somebody for money. for that, we had to perform a raid and catch her red-handed.”

Anderson downed the last of his drink and indicated to the bartender he wanted a second.

“And planning that alone, took another couple of months. you wouldn’t believe the red-tape involved, especially in keeping such an operation hush. but eventually we were all set, we had it all planned, we waited outside the place, SWAT and everything. then who comes along but Garry Malkin, the other big name in addictive ‘nites. He walks right in the front door!” Anderson beamed wide and raised arms and his voice to try and express how surprising this turn of events was. Denver hadn’t heard of anybody in the story but stayed quiet and drinking, letting the other detective tell it how he wants. “We couldn’t believe our luck, if we caught a deal between the two of them then the biggest ‘nite offenders of the city would be behind bars by the time the sun set. There were a few frantic calls to the precencnt to make sure everything was kosher, but we got the go-ahead and made our move.” Anderson took another sip of his drink and gasped with pleasure at having his throat hydrated again, “So we rush the door, call ‘*police! we’re coming in!*’ bash that door right in. and do you know what we found on the other side?”

"I have no idea."

"Tiny little kid. must have been about four or five, though I'm not exactly sure, I'm not good when it comes to kids. anyway the kid looks like the most nervous person around, and he had every right to be- there were a bunch of armed officers twice his size that had just barged into the hallway. Little kid is shaking there and do you know what he did?"

"Still no idea."

"The kid holds up a piece of paper, and starts reading from it;

"If men come round tell them... um, sorry but my mummy is out right now, please come back later, and when the men have gone away you can let mummy out of the hiding place by taking the book off the bookshelf called "Studies of Moggleflies""

"The kid had a script!" Anderson was ecstatic "little boy was so damn petrified he read out the instructions his mummy had given him, as well his line! Of course we checked the bookcase, found this book on Moggleflies and what do you know?"

"A hidden room?"

"A hidden room! and inside was Meercat Molly, Garry Malkin, and boxes piled to the ceiling. Half the boxes were full of 'nites and disks of software, the other half was full of money. Total jackpot it was!" Anderson finished his second drink, "A lot easier to make detective with something like that on your record I can tell you. anyway, what do you think?"

"It's a good story I guess... are you telling it to me beca-"

"Where do you think Molly went wrong?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Well, assuming the kid didn't bungle the script, there's no way would ever have found that secret room and the raid would have been a bust. we could say it was the kid's fault, but that's not fair on a little kid. So where did Molly go wrong do you think?"

Denver wondered just what Anderson was getting at, unsure he took a guess. "She relied on the kid? she should have known better I guess?"

"Bingo! she relied on the kid. it wouldn't have been a problem if she relied on the kid having taught him the value of *discretion*. it was her own fault for not making sure the kid was clued in on that important little nugget." Anderson burped, his drinks getting to him, "*Discretion* Mister Denver, that's all it can take to make the difference between another day out in the open and losing most of your years to a prison cell. anyway, I need to take a leak, terribly sorry but drink just passes right through me."

At that Detective Anderson got off his stool and made his way carefully to the lavatories by the bar, walking slowly and deliberately as if the surprise of a sudden trip would result in him being unable to contain his relief. Denver took another swig of his beer and looked back to the bar but something caught his eye. On Anderson's stool was a folder with a

bunch of papers in. On the cover he saw BruceGlee's IRL name. Finally Anderson clicked in his head and Denver smiled as he tucked the folder away in his jacket.

Chapter 27

"-idn't really get very far undercover into freeState, which is kind of pathetic really since anyone ca-"

Annabelle Morris scrubbed the playhead back a couple of seconds and made a recording of the whole sentence.

"The other guys didn't really get very far undercover into freeState, which is kind of pathetic really since anyone can join!"

Annabelle hit pause and the masked ponytail girl froze in place on her screen, she lit her cigarette and opened up the audio she had captured for a closer look.

'*fuck*' was her first thought, the voice sounded human enough but in fact had had a bunch of spikes and noise filled around it and odd distortions that played across the sound. To a human ear it sounded just like whatever the girl's voice really sounded like. but to a computer, it was a total mess, voice identification would prove to be particularly tricky.

But Annabelle had been paid to kill the girl known as 'DiZ', she couldn't be traced through the state as Annabelle had no hope of cracking whatever systems kept freeState people anonymous. but DiZ had tied her living breathing self to the video, and so Annabelle would be able to stop her from all the living and breathing.

Annabelle started up her processes for converting the audio into something a computer could recognise, and compare it to one of the top-secret voice banks that governments and corps liked to have these days.

She took a drag of her cigarette and thought on Diz, '*poor girl, she wasn't to know what she was getting into, that a mask alone won't keep a girl hidden.*' She checked her gun and silencer were functioning properly, and loaded.

Her computer made a ping noise and printed a name to the screen.

'easy, all it took was a high-end assassin, state of the art software and access to top secret databases. if only all hits were so simple to get at.'

Annabelle packed the gun into her backpack left her apartment and hopped on the bike through town. DiZ would be leaving school for the bus shortly.

-

Annabelle got off her bike a short distance from the school, pulled out her gun and a freeState mask from her bag and made for the front gates. The schoolbell rang and students started to trickle out of the place. Annabelle put on the mask and stood in the center of the gate and waited for a girl with pink hair to walk out the front. she kept her gun hidden for now, the plan was to cause a ruckus that would get noticed. It would send the

message that her employer wanted, and double as an escape opportunity. Annabelle had already looked over satellite shots of the area and had memorised a few escape routes. As brazen as a killing like this was, she had the experience to pull it off and get out unconnected to the thing. There was a reason she was being paid so much.

Anabelle drew some attention from the departing students as they left, she stood there in the middle of the gate to the grounds, mask on, staring at the building's exit some 20 meters away.

Pink hair, pigtails, and a second later Anabelle confirmed it, this was what DiZ's mugshot looked like, this was the girl that was going to die today.

DiZ saw the woman in the freeState mask, anybody like that stood out, she wasn't worried though, she just walked toward the gate as usual, and the woman in the mask started walking forward too.

Anabelle looked at the girl's face, this was always her favourite part, she drew her gun and pointed it at DiZ.

it happened in a split second, Anabelle knew something wasn't right because she didn't get her thrill; DiZ wasn't horrified, she was smiling.

In her surprise, Anabelle lost her chance, her hand fell from her wrist and hit the floor, still gripping the gun. A boy in a freeState mask had moved exceptionally fast and now held a long blade to Anabelle's throat. DiZ pulled out her pad from her pocket and continued walking to the gate, she made sure to tilt her pad towards anabelle as she passed, so the assassin could see her photo and that of her employer amongst a bunch of files, just before DiZ tapped 'send'.

DiZ put her pad back in her pocket and walked out of the front gate, past a mess of astonished students staring at the assassin, the freeState man holding her, and her hand on the floor, in a pool of blood.

-

Denver watched the stream with relief, he had himself been leaving a few tripwires across the net to signal if anyone was snooping on the freeState citizens from the video, he had warped the audio a bit before uploading, but had made sure he had clean evidence himself so he could track down the masked kids from the video. he suspected if one freeState kid was dead, more might follow.

Having found out who DiZ and a few others were a couple of nights ago, Denver made sure to keep an eye out for anybody accessing their data, and when this assassin annabelle tripped one of his silent alarms, he didn't know if he could warn the girl in time. But fortunately word travels fast around freeState. *"DT knows of a plot to kill DiZ!", "Soldiers to DiZ asap!", "Dig up dirt on the killer, find out who called the hit! we need fast information response!"* and similar calls rang out across the net in minutes.

Denver's best hopes were that DiZ would hear the warning and get someplace safe, that police or somebody would apprehend the assassin, but that freeState member with the sword, he moved so fast, inhumanly fast. did the state's 'nite enhancements really work that well?

Within a few minutes the media was flooded, a plot to assassinate a freeState member was big news, especially a foiled one. The press had all the dirt on hand too, no executives had time to control their journalists, the message delivered was the one provided by freeState. Everyone knew who called the hit and all the evidence. The Melbourne police arrested the head of Mundrich energy within ten minutes. Even if someone usually had the power to stall the police with something like this, they simply didn't have the speed. freeState made sure everybody knew what was going on, there wasn't even a chance for damage control.

Somehow Denver had found himself a respected player within freeState again. There was an image macro bouncing around several forums about 'the holy trinity' of freeState, DT, DiZ and somebody called amaterasu. it was a poster of some artists stylised version of the three citizens with the text "DON'T FUCK WITH FREE STATE".

Denver stepped away from his workstation, still tingling. if he had gotten back from the bar five minutes later then that girl would be dead. He walked over to the fridge and looked into it. he stood there for about ten minutes, just staring into the thing as it cast light past him and around the room. He didn't want anything from the fridge, but he was on autopilot for the time-being. Eventually he became aware of his existence again, closed the fridge door and sat down on his sofa, trying to process everything that had happened.

It was clear from Mundrich's personal records his motives were simple fear of exposure, there was nothing to link him, or the assassin to BruceGlee's death. Denver felt there had to be some connection, some hint to push him forwards but everything turned up blank. freeState didn't have quite the spotlight it now had when the kid died, nobody knew who BruceGlee was so he didn't make sense as a target.

Denver rubbed his temples, occasionally even thinking that maybe the kid did shoot himself. '*was a handwritten suicide not that unusual for a tech loving kid?*' Denver then recalled his conversation with the sister and he was assured again that the kid didn't kill himself. but he was, as before. without any leads. Denver slouched back into the sofa, looking at the monitors idling lights on his desk, and noticed the folder Anderson had given him earlier today before the assassination took his attention.

Chapter 28

"Well, that went rather well I think."

"What do you mean? one of us was arrested!"

"Sure, sure, but the *results* came out well is what I mean, all you have to do is look at the state's reaction. we're bound to have contact soon, if not for the original reason then for this one."

"The results? what if Mundrich blabs? we'll be fucked."

"Mundrich isn't a problem, I've already been assured he will get into a disagreement with another prisoner over the practice of sending killers after children, he'll not survive the encounter."

“Wow, I’m impressed. You guys really do like tying up loose ends huh? Almost makes me wonder what will happen to me if my plan did go south like Mundrich expected, or maybe even after it works when you have no use for me...”

“You don’t need to be of use, just don’t be a liability and we won’t have to protect ourselves.”

“Haha, I’m hearing you loud and clear! To that end, I did a little jiggery-pokery and pulled some decent sums of money out of some of Mundrich’s hidden accounts. hope you guys don’t mind, he won’t be using them now anyway and it would be a shame to let that stuff go to waste.”

“Yes we saw that there was some activity there. the funny thing was it happened a little after our last meeting...”

“... Well, what can I say? I don’t wait for the bodies to go cold before I check the pockets.”

“Yes I do see you as that kind of person. Let me tell you what else I see; you seemed to deliberately give Mundrich the impression that this group and this plan were not in his interests. you manipulate various postings so that a certain assassin, who happens to live near the school of Mundrich’s most likely target, is within his reach. And out of all of this you are much more wealthy, your plan is furthered and someone who questioned you is out of the way.”

“Wow, you see a lot huh! well I can’t deny that *some* of that went through my head, but you’re giving me too much credit.”

“I think I’m giving you plenty of credit, but remember this; Mundrich was a buffoon. The rest of the members of this council will not take kindly to such manipulations.”

“I thought you guys were all about manipulating people, can give it but not take it huh?”

“...”

“Bad joke sorry, but I get it. You have my word that I won’t throw any of you under the bus. Cross my heart!”

Chapter 30

Having spent a few hours meticulously going over everything in the folder related to BruceGlee’s death, Denver examined one line in one document that stood out in particular. A list of items found on the body.

“Handgun XYZ model, 4 bullets, blank mask, knecklace, flash drive, pen, jacket, t-shirt, underwear, trainers.”

He double checked the corresponding document on his pad from the files given to the mother;

“Handgun XYZ model, 4 bullets, blank mask, knecklace, pen, jacket, t-shirt, underwear, trainers.”

There was no mistaking it, the kid had a flash drive in his back pocket when he was found, but it was removed from the released report, so somebody at the police was involved. There must have been pressure on Anderson to not pursue the case himself, so he passed it on to Denver.

Denver stepped back from his desk to check the time, it had gotten late. He put his work aside and went online to check how things were going and found he had a new message from ‘amaterasu’;

“Hey DT, been keeping my eye on you for a while, you’ve really done well by the state, I think we should meet. We can probably help each other (and the state) out maybe?”

Denver had heard the handle before, apparently this amaterasu was a big deal, she had provided a lot of support during the TV hack, and had been quite prolific in other areas that advanced the state too, for quite a while. He got the impression she may even have been around during the days when Anonymous members were operating in secret. Denver was pretty skeptical though, he wasn’t sure he wanted to be somebody dedicated to the state like this amaterasu. Sure he would help out when he felt he saw a need he could satisfy but mostly he was playing a part to get to know what was going on with BruceGlee and he hadn’t seen anything linking him to amaterasu.

About to decline the offer of a meeting, denver felt a sudden urge to reconsider come from within and reread the message. “*keeping an eye on you*” and “*can probably help each other*” stood out, ‘*does she know something that could help?*’.

“Where and when?” -DT

Chapter 31

“Seriously though, doesn’t it feel like there are actual super heroes in the state with us?”

“lol, wtf are you talking about!?”

“Well like, there are millions of freeState citizens right?”

“I bet there are billions tbh”

“whatever, a shitload anyway, and a handful of people seem to stand out in big events. like DiZ or Amaterasu or snowflake, and now this DT guy?”

“Well DiZ was only really noticed for the TV thing, and that’s why she was targetted wasn’t it? it’s not like she did anything amazing. She’s no superhero”

“but didn’t you see the stream? she knew that chick had a gun and was seconds from being gibbed and she was totally cool. how is that anything other than super-hero level badassery?”

“That just means she is pretty stupid and has no sense of self preservation. pretty sure there’s some mental illness that makes you super reckless and take unnecessary risk, I bet she has that.”

“You saying my future girlfriend is a headcase? bitch I’ll fight you!”

“It’s not my fault you get a boner for suicidal chicks with pink hair.”

“Guys you’re totally missing the point! the state found out about the assassination within minutes and put a stop to it, how is that not like something from a super-hero story? I bet DT is like oracle or something!”

“DiZ’s super power is super hotness, did you see her in that uniform? totally found my new wall paper!”

“Dude, she’s underage! anyway, if we’re talking about super-heroes what about that katana guy? he moved crazy fast, like some mega-ninja or something. plus he was wearing the mask too.”

“yeah that was totally rad, I think somebody went over the stream and checked his speed, he was twice as fast as the olympic record! that’s totally inhuman! did anybody get his handle?”

“I think he’s staying anonymous, wouldn’t blame him tbh. in the olympics they ban ‘nite enhancements so he probably had something illegal in his system. plus he chopped off a chick’s hand, I hear the police get pissed if you do shit like that.”

“Sure he could have been on some booster ‘nites or something, but could they really have that much of an effect? a quick search and it looks to me like even if the guy with the olympic record was juiced up with the most effective stuff he still wouldn’t be able to catch the katana guy.”

“ugh, was lurking but I can’t stand this. IT WAS NOT A KATANA, the blade was too short, I’m kind of a sword expert and that looks like some custom blade of some kind.”

“~~Sword expert~~ kung-fu movie geek’ FTFY :P”

“Ugh, we’re going off topic again! don’t you think DT did something amazing? I really think she’s a super hero!”

“she? I thought DT was a dude! man if not I’m totally picturing some yuri scenes between amaterasu and DT... uh, brb, fapping to do.”

“gross, anyway I’m pretty sure DT’s a guy. if you check comments on his tutorial you’ll see a few people use male pronouns and he doesn’t correct them or anything.”

“Maybe DTs one of them trans chicks?”

“Ugh, guys you’re not taking me seriously (and you’re being gross!) don’t you think there is something extraordinary about DT, amaterasu and DiZ?”

“Sure, if a chick with a dick is extraordinary. :P”

“oh man, I came just as I read that! You’ve done me wrong, anon! T.T”

“What I’m wondering is just how DT knew there would be an assassination, don’t you think it’s a bit suspicious?”

“Didn’t he say in his announcement he was monitoring searches for DiZ? is that suspicious?”

“maybe he thought somebody might target her? it’s not unusual is it? a lot of big-money types hate freeState right?”

“I was thinking maybe he had something to do with it?”

“ooh, this sounds like a conspiracy story! hang on a second, I’ll go get some popcorn!”

“FU, don’t you think the outcome is suspicious? DT is once again the super-hero of freeState. he only started acting when freeState went public. what if he’s a mole, and he helped organising the assassination, setting it up to fail so he would look like a hero.”

“OMFG, literally LOL’d. ur tin foil hat is slipping anon :P”

“if that’s true, DT must be a super hero, dude convinced a chick to get her hand cut off and go to prison just to look cool to some people on the internet.”

“haha, and just how would he convince her of that? genuinely curious how conspiracy-anon thinks it happened.”

“with dick, his magic dick”

“LMFAO I JUST SNARTED!”

“guys, this thread isn’t what I wanted it to be about at all!”

“just what IS this thread about?”

“tl;dr thread summary: DiZ is a suicidal chick, DT is a shemale lesbian in love with amaterasu and anon is a guy with a fetish for that, is a conspiracy nut, and for some reason really cares what is and isn’t a katana.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s it exactly. why did I waste my time reading the whole thread?”

“on the original topic, I think OP has a point though, the techniques amaterasu and DT use are crazy fancy. hacking is a hobby to me and they totally blow me away, a few other freeState people too. there’s a handful of people in the state that are like super heroes compared to us in the sense that it borders on them doing the impossible.”

“HACK THE PLANET!”

“Haha, I got that reference!”

“ITT, really, really old people. :P”

"I think calling them super heroes is really a bit much, but it does make you wonder... at least about the nites the sword guy used, are they some secret freeState tech? makes you wonder if there are aspects of the state that are hidden from everyone else. not sure how that makes me feel."

"You don't want secrets in freeState? you going to give us your name then? :P the state needs secrets IMO"

"but don't we expose the secrets of big companies and stuff? isn't there a problem with that?"

"meh, those guys are assholes, they had it coming."

"But what if freeState is just as bad? if things are secret we'll never know."

"... anon actually has a point for once."

"so what, we should start keeping tabs on amaterasu, DT and the like?"

"lol, good luck with that. they are hacker super-heroes after all :P"

"Well the assassin was able to track down DiZ right? it can't be that hard."

"yeah, and look what happened to her, she'll be doing everything one-handed from now on."

"I'm typing one handed right now."

"gross anon, gross."

"I'm typing one handed too... does this mean we've lost our virginity together?"

"ROFLMAO XD"

"Guys, have you just checked the news? that Mundrich guy just got killed in a fight in jail."

"Awesome!"

"sweet! scum deserved it!"

"I'd rather have seen him rot, but whatever. he had it coming."

"I think it's kind of a shame, dude like that must have had some more dirt, if some prosecutor offered him a deal he'd have offloaded so much incriminating stuff. still, rad that he's a goner anyway."

"maybe it was a hit? somebody killed him so he wouldn't spill dirt on them? wouldn't be surprising if he was connected to some other assholes."

"conspiracy-anon returns!"

“conspiracy-anon sounds like a REAL freeState super-hero! XD”

“His power is guessing who else has power, badly!”

“FU”

“So there you go, fuck with freeState, the results are somewhere between losing a hand and your life. man we are BADASS.”

“you have a bad ass! :P”

“OK that’s it, locking this thread. it’s not breaking any rules or anything, it’s just kind of shit. <3”

Chapter 32

Fiona Silvor entered the meetingroom, carrying her bag and coat in her hands. the agent who showed her in left her in the room, which had a large oval-shaped conference table and a few other people around it. one of them she recognised as Andy Golapis.

As Fiona found her seat another man, tall, beared and suited strided into the room and to the head of the desk, “Everyone here then? right, let’s begin.”

He started passing around some files and papers, a few people cringed at the sight. Silvor and Golapis particularly, they had heard the government did some things in an old-fashioned way but this really felt like victorian stuff to them.

“There is to be no sugar-coating in these meetings if we are to address whatever this freeState thing is, so I’ll begin,” the bearded man cleared his throat, “The government has underestimated freeState until now, in face we had even thought they were a small movement, just some tech-kids that liked freedom of information, nothing new in this day and age but it’s clear now that we were wrong. That’s why you have been brought in, we need to know *precicely* what this freeState is about, what dangers it presents and how to deal with it and it’s members. You are all experts in your respective fields and have been vetted by our agents, so feel free to speak candidly here.”

The bearded man sat down and everyone started going over the files they were given, fiona breathed a sigh of relief that she had made it here, as always freeState had a loyal citizen in the right place and was undetected.

“My main concern,” Golapis interuppted the silence, “Is of course for the company I’m responsible for,” he paused, allowing everyone an opportunity to remember his famous face in case they forgot it since the last time a tree advert was on, “I can understand the kids wanting to spread tech for free, but what happens to the jobs of the people who make it for a living? and if it’s released openly without any governement oversight then who is making sure the tech is safe?”

“Are they really that much of a danger to commerce though? how much damage can a bunch of kids do?” an older woman sitting across from Fiona asked the table.

“They are more than just kids,” Fiona responded, “It’s people from all ages, especially the ones who grew up with the internet when it was young. a lot of us have fond memories of trolling back when it was possible to be anonymous, and now it’s possible to be anonymous again. Not everyone has matured since then is all.”

“So it’s kids and immature adults. I still fail to see the problem.” The woman would clearly much rather be elsewhere.

“I don’t think the problem is with the majority of the membership, sure there are a really large amount of people now, but it’s just people chatting. the real danger is that a small number of elite hackers are hiding amongst them. I think they are the ones pushing the state in various ways, and are the real danger to Mister Golapis business, and who knows what else.”

“Well you’re a world-renown hacker yourself, aren’t you Ms Silvor? can’t you put a stop to it?” A thin, elderly gentleman sat by the bearded government man asked

“Oh I’m an amazing hacker, but frankly I’m not a match for some of these hackers... yet. the best I’ve managed to do is identify some of the handles they use, the most significant ones seem to be ‘amaterasu’, ‘snowflake’, ‘WenEver’, ‘DT’” Fiona smiled inwardly, *‘way to go Denvs!’* “Sha_lo’ and ‘9love’. There are a few others but I think these make up a core of the part of freeState we should focus on, but...” Fiona trailed off.

“But what Miss Silvor?” The bearded G-man pressed.

“Well, I’m sure we are all familiar of the Mundrich assassination attempt? any move against freeState is responded to very quickly, if we *were* to try and shut down these hackers, we would be provoking the whole wrath of the state.”

“And what prey tell,” the older woman probed, “would that be?”

“A bunch of hackers able to dig up any information, and a membership of millions to push that information to the entire world.” Golapis said, leaning forward, “there would be no convincing media to keep it hush or slanting the news slightly. this... group can put out the info faster and to more people.”

“So what?” a younger man at the far end of the table asked, “I’ve not called a hit on anybody, what do I have to be afraid of?”

Golapis looked a little bemused, *‘ahhh to be young, give it time you’ll be as dirty as the rest of us.’* He cleared his throat and responded, “Well I’m sure we can assume everyone around this table has done nothing so horrible as Mundrich, but we are talking about expert hackers here, they could easily fabricate evidence. isn’t that right Ms Silvor?”

“Well,” Fiona hadn’t expected they would consider this, “I suppose it’s possible, given their skill. whether they would do it or not depends on how strongly they cling to their ideals.”

“And just what are their ideals?” The older woman asked.

“Well as far as I can tell, freedom and truth.” Fiona scratched the back of her neck a little nervously, she smiled knowing it sounded a little lame “I know it sounds cheesy, but that’s

how it is. The freeState ideology is whatever most of the members want at any given time, and since most people want freedom and truth anyway..."

"Well if that was all there was to it, of course we could call an end to this meeting and cancel the rest." The government man leaned back in his swivel-chair and crossed his arms. "But they seem to have a disregard for the law, and as admirable as stopping an assassination is, they cut off a woman's hand in the process. and there wouldn't even have been an assassination attempt if they weren't hijacking TV shows in the first place." The man stood up and began to collect his things. "I expect you to continue getting up to speed on the freeState, and we will reconvene here tomorrow at the same time. I expect a preliminary brief based on the things I have listed in your handouts at that time, and I would also like to thank you for your time and service to the country." He walked out of the room.

Fiona studied the fact sheet and gathered her things, leaving with a few others whilst some stayed behind and discussed the freeState. She would have to research the other people on this investigative board, but was confident it didn't pose any serious threat to the state, based on the factSheet alone they didn't know even a tiny fraction of what was coming.

Chapter 33

Denver double checked with the data on his pad and looked around, this was definitely the right ally. it had turned a corner so the place he was wasn't visible from the street, but it was a dead end. He wondered if he was early, or if Amaterasu had been held up somewhere. he leant against a wall, waiting for her to turn up for a time but was surprised when somebody tapped on his shoulder.

Spinning around he saw a young man who had seemingly come from nowhere, but then Denver noticed a manhole was open.

"DT?" the man asked. Denver hesitated a little, but nodded in confirmation. the man then pulled out a syringe with a long needle attached and before Denver had time to object the man had made his way behind denver and jabbed the needle into his spine. Denver immediately felt ill, he wanted to throw up but his stomach didn't have the will. his sight became hazy, his eyelids heavy and his legs weak. Denver fell to the floor and passed out as the needle man returned to the manhole.

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It was night when Denver woke up, he was still in the allyway. the winter chill of the city quickly returned him to his most focussed consciousness and jumped to his feet and examined himself, suspecting he had been doped with 'nites, but he had none of the signs of having been through a high. for one thing, he was still in the same place.

'What the fuck do I do now?' he thought to himself, that injection could have anything in it. his mind was spinning with possibilities, was it poison? some kind of tracker 'nites? maybe even something experimental? was the person who contacted him even the real amaterasu? Denver didn't like his position one bit, he decided his best bet would be to make for the hospital, perhaps convince a nurse to let him use one of the emergency EMPs and an anonymous blood test. He took almost two steps toward the street before he stopped.

He couldn't think of a good reason, but he really, *really* wanted to turn back towards the dead end. *'what the fuck?'* he turned around to see if there was something there, maybe he had left his pad on the floor and his unconscious was trying to remind him? but no such circumstance existed for Denver. there was just him, a dead end with a few overflowing garbage containers and the manhole that his attacker had come from.

For some reason Denver felt drawn to it, *'just what is down there? where did that guy come from?'* He decided he would just take a quick look and then make for the nearest emergency room. He reasoned that if he could get a similar syringe of whatever he had been given it would help the doctors.

He walked over towards the manhole, it looked particularly heavy and he didn't have any means of lifting the cover. but as he surveyed it, he saw one part of it protruded just a little more than the rest, Denver touched it and the Manhole slid upwards and to the side, inviting him down into the dark underground beneath. He found some rungs fixed firmly into the side of the opening that led down, denver used them to slowly step into the hole and climb down. they were very cold, the kind of cold you can only really feel from old metal that is left outside to fare for itself in the winter. Denver gripped them tightly as he made his way down, and when his feet found solid ground again his hands were numb.

Denver put his hands in his pockets trying to find heat, and turned around to survey whatever it was he had climbed into and found himself on a shelf overlooking a large cavernous space. He couldn't see much in the dim light at first but as his eyes adjusted, it became apparent he found himself in a huge room that must have been part of the sewer system, more than a room in fact, he couldn't see two of the walls as they were too far away and there was nothing for his eyes to catch but the darkness, it was massive a tunnel. He found some concrete steps leading down from his platform and he followed them for some fifteen meters or so. Close to the bottom he almost tripped and fell over a pipe that jutted out from the wall and crossed the steps at an unusual angle as if whoever put it there had no consideration for keeping it out of people's way. As denver walked along the floor of the tunnel he was struck by just how *dry* this sewer was. Many pipes similar to the one he had almost tripped on criss-crossed along the floor and several passed through the air too, often shooting in and out of the walls, floor or ceiling. These newer, smaller pipes were all that the city required for taking care of it's sewage and distributing water. The rise of nanite technologies had done wonders for the waste and water infrastructure and Denver suspected a handful of people was all it took to keep the entirety of the city's new system running. It was also clear to Denver that not only had the new system been built with no regard for people travelling through the sewers (since, why would people need to do it anymore?) but they had also been built with a complete disregard for the structure of the sewer system itself, based on how pipes just passed through the sewer walls in some distribution that was no doubt the most efficient, but in the dim light and to denver's eyes, it all looked like a bizzare circuit-board blown up in size that gave off the slight whirr of fluid moving rapidly through it's pathways.

When Denver took a moment to stop examining the pipes, he found himself completely lost. the steps leading up to his entrance had vanished. Somehow he had idly walked through the cavernous tunnels beneath the city for some distance, and could not recall just which way he had come from or for how long he had been walking. Looking around at the tunnel walls and the spaghetti of pipes that surrounded him, he searched for something that looked familiar but it was all as alien as the first time he saw it.

Flustered, Denver reasoned that there was nothing that could be done for the time being, he picked a direction that felt good to him and started walking. There simply wasn't any better solution that came to mind.

Using his pad for light he carefully navigated the many pipes on the floor and the few that obstructed at head or waist height. Denver pressed on in this manner for some time, whenever there would be a branch in his cavernous labyrinth of tunnels, he'd let his gut decide which way was best and move forward from there. Time passed unusually, and it wasn't for a while that Denver realised he was keeping track of neither time, not which route he had taken. He was concerned that he had been walking for much longer than he had before he got lost in the first place. He should have turned back and tried a different route, but it was too late for that now. His poor process had done the equivalent of completely shuffling the tunnels in his mind, and he immediately had no sense of where he had just come from. Did he come from that tunnel, that one or that one?

Overwhelmed, Denver moved to a side of the tunnel where there was a shelf that followed the wall. He sat there hoping to collect his thoughts, but the moment he had put his weight on the shelf, it gave way and he fell backwards into space, down past the wall and the floor of the tunnel he was just in, into some bright corridor with a metal grating floor. The floor, he hit hard with his back. After a moment of laying stunned on the floor, he pulled himself to his feet using a railing nearby and looked up, he had fallen through some trapdoor that was built into the tunnel's shelf. There was a ladder set into the wall he could have used if he had a mind to avoid the fall through the trapdoor, which closed itself after a few seconds. Looking around Denver saw no other such trapdoors anywhere, *'Just what were the odds I'd find my way to that!?'*

Surveying his surroundings further, Denver found that the grating and railing were part of a walkway that lined the floor of a series of much smaller tunnels, about two and a half meters in circumference, and well lit by tube lights set into the ceiling.

"Ah, there you are mister, you took your sweet time huh?"

Denver turned around to see a young girl standing at the intersection between the tunnel and one of many others, she had bright pink hair.

"Super glad I got to meet you, I guess I owe you my life or something, so I'm grateful and stuff." She scratched her head a little unsure what the correct way to treat somebody who you owe so much to was. She was clearly not the type of person who usually worried about the proper social conventions, but that she even concerned herself with it this time was an indication that she felt no small amount of appreciation towards Denver.

"You're DiZ? What are you..." Denver looked up to the trapdoor and back to the young girl.

"What am I doing here?" She beamed, happy to fill Denver in, "This is a secret freeState hideout. We figured if we dropped it in the sewers it would be a good spot, it's a total deserted maze up there. Nobody can find this spots unless they have 'nites that have been auth'd to show the way."

Denver thought back to his confrontation in the ally, "The syringe before..."

“You got it. So, want to grab a bite or whatever? just got the fridge stocked.” DiZ turned and headed down the tunnel, Denver was still a little off-footed but followed his welcome party.

“Are you Amaterasu also? I thought I was going to be meeting her.”

“Haha, a double identity? sorry, as cool a twist as that would be I’m nowhere near good enough with tech to pass myself off as her.” DiZ chuckled as the two turned a corner in the tunnel, “Though I must admit, normally at least I can get the gist of what she is saying, but when she explained how you ID’d me and left some alerts out I was totally clueless. I think you’ll be better company for her than me.”

Denver understood at least that much, Amaterasu had a strong reputation for being a high-level hacker and she had been linked to a bunch of advanced freeState tech. whereas DiZ wasn’t linked to almost anything, as far as Denver could tell she acted as more of a sort of freeState cheerleader/project manager, keeping people within the state motivated and helping to direct attention to causes that needed some focus.

“To tell the truth I wouldn’t have expected the two of you to hang out together, that would surprise quite a few people in the state.”

“Haha, it’s always a smaller world than people think. Ah! here we are,” The two had reached a door in the side of the tunnel, DiZ pushed down on the handle and leaned on the door, swinging it open. She proudly gestured to the room for Denver and proclaimed “The snackery!”

The room was fairly small, no more than a few meters squared, with four steps from the tunnel leading down into it. there was a counter with a chopping board, sink, kettle, toaster and other related things along one wall, beside a large double-door fridge. the center of the room was mostly a collation mix-match of sofas, beanbags, large cushions, a coffee table and a rocking chair tucked into a corner. there was also a large wall-screen opposite the counter that had a few news channels playing, a few live feeds of various online streams and topics, but the largest part of the screen was dedicated to what seemed to be an old-school tag-cloud to Denver, which was constantly making small adjustments to itself. words would grow and shrink, some would vanish or appear and occasionally they would shuffle their positions or change colours slightly. it seemed a little mesmerising to Denver.

“Oh, that’s the state.” DiZ said, waving at the screen as she walked over to the fridge, stopped halfway around the room and corrected herself, “well, sort-of. It’s a live update of the kinds of things that people are talking about anonymously on the net.” she studied the wall with a mix of admiration and apprehension, “Basically, with a glance you can get a feel for the mood of the state as a collective at any given time.” she looked back to Denver, “It’s not perfect of course, for a real picture you need to dive in yourself and talk to people. but it is useful to have something as a quick reference, it lets us know if something is changing suddenly or if there is something going on. that way we can react if the state needs help.” DiZ brought back her smile, “For example, if a lot of people on the net suddenly start talking about an assassin coming to get somebody. this wall turns into a hell of a light show, or so I hear.”

Denver put his hands in his pockets and looked back to the screen, he wasn’t quite sure how to respond in this situation. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“So, you hungry? the introduction of those pathfinder ‘nites tends to knock people out for a few hours and burns a fair bit of energy.”

Denver hadn’t realised it until DiZ brought it up but he found he was exceptionally hungry. DiZ pulled a couple of pizzas out of the fridge and threw them into an oven that was concealed neatly in a cupboard beneath the worktop. “Grab a seat, you want anything to drink?”

“Something with a lot of sugar please.”

“NP.” DiZ pulled a bottle of cola out of the fridge and threw it to Denver who had just situated himself on the sofa.

“So, freeState has a secret hideout huh?”

“Well of course.” DiZ threw herself onto a large cushion and opened her own cola, “and plenty of others around the world too.”

“Oh, it’s something that’s supposed to be obvious is it?” Denver smiled, “I didn’t notice any mention of them on the net.”

“well they wouldn’t be *secret* hideouts if people talked about them would they?” DiZ stuck out her tongue and then took a swig of her pop, “Thing is, as much as the state is a virtual thing, just a bunch of links between people who may or may not know each other IRL... the state still needs solid spaces for some aspects of itself.”

“Such as?”

“You see that fridge there? the left door if for food and drink, the right one we use for construction ‘nites that need to run cool, you know the high energy reaction stuff? that’s just one example of something somebody could scan and read a heat signature of if we were out in the open above ground. down here we can do our thing in private. and of course we expected resistance to the state, so this kind of place really does act as a hideout now.”

Denver realised very suddenly that DiZ was here because she feared for her life, that this was not an unreasonable fear for her to have. The girl drinking pop opposite him had a gun pointed at her the day before, he felt equal amounts discomfort for not being sensitive to this until now, and also respect that DiZ was still so together.

“So what are you fabbing with the construction nanites then? something illegal I’m guessing.” Denver tried to pull the subject back to something further away from contract killers.

“Right now? no idea, you should ask Ammy later. she’s often the one experimenting, but sometimes WenEver is working on something. Ammy tends to work on a whole bunch of stuff, but I know WenEver is mostly focussing on ‘nites that can be anything that is needed, one minute they are clothes, the next they are a chair or a baseball bat or something. you just preprogram forms and they take the shape you want at any given time.”

“Wow, does that really work?”

“Haha, no way. I’m not sure he’ll ever get it working but everybody needs a hobby I guess.”

The oven made a ping noise to indicate the pizzas were done, DiZ tepped a few buttons on her pad and said into it “Grubs ready, guys” before proceeding to pull the pizzas out of the oven and started cutting them. As she was laying out the pizzas on the table a large man in a T-shirt and jeans came into the room followed by a tall skinny guy. The large guy saw Denver and immediately smiled, “Are you DT!?” He held out his hand, “DiZ why didn’t you tell me he was here?”

“Dude just stumbled through the sewers in a daze, figured he could do with a breather.” DiZ reached for a pizza as the large man vigorously shook Denver’s hand.

“I’m Eric, but everyone just calls me Gonzalez, like the mouse.” Gonzalez beamed as he moved to sit down, “I’m super psyched to meet you, the manouvers you’ve pulled were crazing impressive, I even saw amaterasu whistle when she was going over your work and not many people can have that effect on her.”

“Where is she by the way?” The tall guy asked, reaching for a slice of the peperoni.

“In her lab I expect, you know it’s impossible to get her attention when she’s in the middle of a project.” DiZ said, some of her words muffled by pizza.

“Really, the tool you wrote to disseminate a datastream to multiple sources simultaneously and anonymously is a work of art. where did you pick up a trick like that?”

“Oh err, me and a couple of buddies worked it out at college. something similar to it.”

“Fiona Silvor and Jason Hillson.” the skinny guy announced.

“what are you talking about Wen?” Gonzalez probed,

“You did your research before I got here then.” Denver confirmed WenEver’s intel.

“No way! you hung out with Fiona Silvor? She’s like... the most famous hacker in history.” Gonzalez continued finding things that impressed him, but DiZ wore a look of total amusement, and then broke out into loud laughter.

“Hey, what’s so funny?” Gonzalez turned to her and after taking a minute to try and keep herself from laughing DiZ responded “You didn’t know? *snowflake* is Silvor’s freeState handle!”

The colour drained from Gonzalez’ face “You’re kidding, right?”

“Didn’t I tell you a while back?” Wen pondered ,“or maybe it was 9love I told.”

“Nobody told me! I can’t believe it, I got in this massive argument with her and the whole time she was Fiona fucking Silvor?” Gonzales deflated into his seat, “OK, just kill me now. I’ve made a mortal enemy with one of my heroes.”

DiZ exploded with laughter again, and Denver couldn't help but smile. he tried to cheer Gonzales up, "To tell the truth, she's normally a pretty forgiving person. what were you arguing with her about?"

"I said her fractal encryption process was inefficient." Gonzales looked hopefully at Denver, wishful for a light at the end of his tunnel but Denver couldn't hold back his own laughter. "I'm sorry Gonzalez, you're dead to her now."

DiZ, Wen and Denver simultaneously began a new wave of loud laughter, but reeled it in when Gonzales seemed to get his colour back.

"Seriously though," Denver said, wiping his eyes "if you want to get in her good graces again you do have options, either prove you were right by making a better encryption process, apologise and admit she is a better tech than you, or..."

"or?"

"commit harikiri" Denver smiled, and Gonzalez chuckled, then reached for a pizza, not wanting to be left with the cold stuff.

The four continued to chat as they had their meal, and shortly after a woman's voice rang out from DiZ's pad, it seemed somehow haunting to Denver, the woman's syllables haninging in his ears just moments longer than he was used to. "Is he here yet DiZ?"

"He's been here at least half an hour, you need to pay more attention to your messages, you missed the meal too." Somehow denver felt captivated by the voice.

"Crap, I was a little possessed by the process, you know how it is. Where are you?"

"Snackery"

"Could you bring him here, and show him where his room is on the way? I can't really move right now."

The audio from the pad cut out and DiZ looked up to Denver, "Well, ready to move?"

"Uh, ye- ah... what was that about a room?" he asked, clearing a haze from his head.

"Oh, you totally earned yourself a bed here," DiZ smiled as she stood up, "and my guess is you can do more for the state from here than someplace else." She winked as she started walking to the door leading back to the tunnels.

Denver stood, but hesitated "I'm not sure we're on the same page here," Denver felt awkward saying it, but he felt he had to be clear, "I'm not really here for the state or anything.... I just, I just wanted to help out those times that I did."

Moments of silence passed, Wen looked to Gonzalez who looked back and the two shared a look of surprise. DiZ broke the tension with a cheerful proclamation "That's OK, you're allowed to do non-freeState stuff here too," she smiled, diffusing Denvers worries somewhat, "Gonzalez for example, he uses the high speed net here to collect weird porn!"

“Hey!” Gonzalez shouted, but DiZ was already turning for the exit, waving away his objections.

“Nothing wrong with that at all!” she said, pulling open the door and allowing Denver through it.

Closing the door behind him, Denver found the tunnels were noticeably colder than in the snackery. Though it made sense to him that they don’t waste energy heating them too much. Tucking his hands in his coat pockets, he followed DiZ through the tunnels, doing his best to memorise the route in case he did decide to stay for a while.

He didn’t have to memorise much however, it wasn’t long before they reached the living quarters, a bunch of tunnels branched off from one that was just off the path from the snackery, each one had four to six doors. each one presumably a room for somebody, Denver estimated there were at least a hundred and fifty rooms here, and he had a suspicion there may be more elsewhere.

“No shortage of rooms then?”

“Not for now anyway, but who knows how things will be in the future. We made the rooms so they can be converted into doubles if we ever get a flood of people.”

“You think that’s ever likely to happen?”

“Why, you not like the idea of sharing your room?” DiZ turned around and smiled, to make it clear she was joking.

“I’m just curious, you expect you’ll need to keep this many people in secret?”

“Who knows, it’s up to the state how we move forwards so there’s a million different outcomes for what help we’ll need to provide.”

Denver tried to think of circumstances where secret underground hideouts for hundreds of people would be required throughout the world, but drew nothing but blanks.

DiZ stopped and pointed down a short tunnel “That’s yours down there, number 17.”

“Ok,” Denver was ready to check it out, but DiZ was already moving again. ‘*time to see amaterasu*’ he guessed.

The two made their way through a few more tunnels and came to what seemed like a storage cupboard, but when DiZ opened the door, it led to some stairs down to a lower level. Denver couldn’t see the bottom too clearly but there was an orange light bleeding up the stairs to them. He Felt as though it led to the core of the earth.

“Well, this is it.” DiZ said, stepping aside, gesturing down the stairs for Denver, “Catch you later.” She started back down a tunnel.

“Uh,” Denver was expecting to be led all the way, perhaps introduced, “Thanks.” He set off down the stairs, closing the door behind him and the light from the tunnels with it. all he had to see by was the orange light bleeding up the steps to his feet.

As he made his way carefully down the steps, they made a slight metallic rattle, like all the walkways through the rest of the tunnels in the hideout the stairs were made of a sturdy, if not a little noisy, metal grating, with hand railings made of what seemed to Denver to be old scaffolding. The orange light flickered slightly, inviting him on, and Denver heard the faint static and clicking sounds that one picks up from headphones that have been left on at full volume across a room.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs and turning a corner, Denver found himself in a large circular room that was filled with bright screens, all different colours suspended from the ceiling, fixed to the walls, lying around on the floor and some on the occasional workstation. The orange light had simply come from a prominent screen nearest to the screens, to Denver the room itself seemed to be coloured much like a rainbow at christmas.

The screens everywhere obstructed the view around the room, so Denver couldn't see anybody else, there was just the headphone noise and flickering displays.

"Hello?" He called out, "It's DT." Denver made his way between screens, careful not to knock any or step on any either. "Anybody here?"

After a minute of negotiating the various displays he saw a woman hunched over a desk, long hair flowing over her back almost to her seat, the headphone noise was coming from her.

Denver hesitated, something about the woman seemed important to him somehow. perhaps he was daunted by her reputation, or perhaps it was that he had a higher respect for her than he expected, having seen some of her work first hand. Either way he had to think twice about disturbing her, not wanting to get on her bad side. Ultimately he decided she had invited him, so he walked over, and tried to get her attention verbally again. When that failed he figured her music was just too loud, he tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around in her seat, taking off her headphones as she did so.

"Oh hi, DT right?" The woman smiled a little and Denver was enchanted.

He couldn't place why, this woman wasn't usually his type, she was certainly much older than him and far from perfect. but somehow all of her imperfections, hair a little unkempt, stain on her sweater, beaten up shoes, a couple of small scars on her face... somehow to Denver all of these imperfections were perfect. He took all of her in within an instant, becoming so familiar with her visage that he felt as if he could have known her for years. *'Is love at first sight real?'* he thought.

"Are you OK? you're kind of spacing out there." Amaterasu leaned forward in her chair a little, an expression of mild concern on her face as her eyebrows scrunched up a little.

'how are you so beautiful!?' thought Denver, "Uh... yeah I'm fine." He turned away, a little embarrassed for staring, and not wanting to appear like a creep "Was a little surprised by your set-up here is all." He gestured to all the screens that surrounded them, *'what a fucking lame excuse!'*

"Ah yeah, I feel more comfortable like this," Amaterasu got up from her seat and walked past Denver and a few of her screens, "Surrounded by screens I mean, feels like home to me."

Denver could smell her hair in the air she displaced as she passed him, it killed him.

“Anyway, that’s not what I wanted to show you.” She called as she disappeared behind a workstation with a wall of screens hovering over it. “Come check this out.”

Denver followed the sound of her voice, wondering what had happened to him, he had never felt this way before. He did his best to focus on why he was here. A kid was dead and this woman might have a clue why. Denver turned a corner again and saw Amaterasu bringing up some documents on a large table-screen and immediately forgot about BruceGlee again. He focused his gaze on the screen and walked over.

“What does this look like to you?” Amaterasu performed a few gestures over the screen and pulled up a technical schematic for Denver to look at, then stood back, arms folded, keen to see what Denver made of the thing.

Denver explored the blueprints for a minute, using them to focus on something that wasn’t the most captivating woman he had ever met. “It’s not my area of expertise, but it looks like... some kind of distributed nanite collective system? but the ‘nite nodes seem more complicated than usual, the processing power of a system like this must be phenomenal, if the scale is correct.”

Amaterasu let out a slight grin, impressed with the guy “Not bad at all, you know your stuff.”

“Well DNCs became relevant to a case I’m working on, so I read up on them.”

“That’s quite some reading, what else do you see?”

Denver realised he had been staring at amaterasu and quickly pulled his gaze back to the screen, he pulled the view closer so he could get a better look at the system’s finer components. He spoke aloud as things occurred to him, “Looks like wi-fi communication between nodes, mag-surge protection too... I’m guessing that’s what the chemo-comm units are for? These ‘nites can still function as a DNC even if there’s an electro-magnetic pulse, if a little slower.”

“Good, good.”

Denver continued to study the ‘nites in even finer detail and he saw something that wasn’t familiar to him, he zoomed in on it so that a relatively tiny part of the nanite schematic filled the entire screen. Unseen by Denver, amaterasu’s small grin turned into an outright smile.

“This thing... it’s clearly important and has some kind of I/O function. it seems like the wi-fi and core processor are bound to it for minimal latency. Looks like it’s meant to grip on to something and send varying electrical signals to it?”

“That’s it.” Amaterasu started pacing around the screen, partly in an attempt to hide her smile from the younger man who impressed her so much. “Care to hazard a guess what the system is for?”

Denver puzzled over the nanite’s grip, almost every ‘nite in the DNC had a similar one. whatever the system was for it was built around this part. Pulling up the scale he saw that

the grip could only grab onto something very fine indeed, and other parts of the 'nite seemed designed to prevent any extra force from being applied to whatever it held onto, probably to keep from damaging it. A nite that was meant to hold onto something delicate, pass signals onto it, and had massive processing power.

"It really is a guess, but does it interfaces with a nervous system somehow?" Denver looked up to Amaterasu, who was smiling broadly. He saw her teeth, they dazzled him, even in the dim light given off by the screen.

"You got it."

"Looks like there's a data transfer bottleneck though..." Denver brought his attention back to the screen and directed amaterasu to the links between the networking components and the storage point who looked on with curiosity, "I don't know if it's required, but if you do a Portha trio split between the storage, network and the processor you could boost performance a lot, especially if you are dealing with a lot of data."

"A Potha split huh? I've not seen one of those in years," She leaned in closer to the screen and brushed some hair out of her face, "It would totally do the trick though. Was looking to solve the bottleneck later but it seems you've saved me a bunch of trouble. ingenious solution DT." She straightened herself up, looked at DT and smiled, "You have much experience with 'nites?"

Denver looked away from amaterasu's face, he had *a lot* of experience, but he wasn't proud of it. "Only with using them."

"Doesn't everybody these days," Amaterasu shrugged, "there's 'nites in everything these days, most people don't have any idea what's swimming around their houses or even their bodies." Amaterasu zoomed out on the screen to display the whole system's blueprint. "Bugs like these for example, I bet there are thousands of people playing host to bugs like these and don't even know it."

Denver looked back to amaterasu surprised, "Surely a sytem like this hasn't been exposed to people yet? the tech here is way ahead of consumer stuff right now."

"Sure," replied amaterasu, turning and heading back to her seat, "but we don't just work with consumer tech, and neither do the people we often have to deal with. take that *tree*, I'm pretty sure they have developed tech very similar to this themselves. They will always keep it hush though mind, at least until they can confirm it doesn't kill anybody in their test-groups."

"That sounds about right I guess." Denver turned away from the screen and followed amaterasu's voice like a siren song through the labyrinth of screens.

"Maybe, but what you don't know is that tree's test groups never actually *know* they are part of a trial run."

Denver found amaterasu sat at her desk again, this time gesturing to a seat opposite her. "You have that kind of dirt on tree?"

Amaterasu smiled knowingly "We have that kind dirt on everybody, but that's not why you're here of course, not right now anyway."

Denver sat and paused for a moment, *that* was why he was here. “BruceGlee.”

“I said I’d help you out with your investigation, but I expect something for it,” Amaterasu scratched behind her ear a little awkwardly “You have already helped out with that schematic I guess, but I need you for something else really.”

Denver knew he would do anything that amaterasu asked of him, but he at least tried to play the part of a man who had a cool head. “How do I know you can help me?”

“I have a complete download of the precinct database, complete with CCTV recordings, and self-scans that the building routinely makes, from two months ago to this afternoon.”

Denver was impressed, but a little skeptical, “Isn’t that a tailor made network? even I couldn’t pull that much data from the police without somebody noticing.”

“Ah, well that system we were looking at just, even with it’s data bottleneck, wouldn’t you say if I were to visit the the police station to report my mother’s wedding ring as stolen, I might have a chance to install a virus into their network that did a complete data dump to the DNC?”

“You have that DNC in your body right now?”

“And I also have,” Amaterasu pulled a flash disk off her desk, “A complete download of all that data right here. You believe me?”

Denver leaned back in his seat, he was impressed. “I have no reason not to.”

“Excellent,” amaterasu said, tucking the flash disk into her pocket, “What I need from you, is Jason Hillson.”

Envy.

“Why?” Denver asked, ‘*what would you want with him!?*’

“He helped out a little during freeState’s early days, and I have a problem he is uniquely suited to solve but he has been off the grid for a long time now. I’ve tried to get snowflake to track him down but she’s had no luck. since you started doing things that took attention around the state lately, I took an interest in you and found you were friends with him too. ultimately you’re my only hope of getting in touch with him.”

Denver paused, trying to process things, “I’m not saying I can find him, but I haven’t tried everything at my disposal to do that so it’s not impossible... but just what do you need him for? If it’s that important why not let someone else have a look?” Denver wanted to be of use to amaterasu, but not as some proxy to get her in touch with his old friend.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you that.”

“A secret?”

“This is freeState after all, secrets are necessary for the time-being.” Amaterasu frowned a little, “I am sorry, if you want to turn this down I will understand.”

“No,” Denver said quickly, then after a slight pause continued, “I’ll do what I can, but I’m not making any promises.”

“Excellent!” Amaterasu pulled the flash drive out of her pocket and threw it across the room to Denver, “Of course, I would have given you that whatever... I want to find out what happened with the kid too, he was freeState after all.”

Amaterasu turned back to her workstation, put her headphones on again and started tapping the screens. Denver knew that was his queue to leave and he made his way back through the sea of screens to the stairs, climbed them and then followed the tunnels back to his room.

It was fairly small; a bed, a desk which doubled as a cupboard for clothes and a screen. Totally wiped out, he put the flash drive on the desk, lay down heavily on the bed and fell asleep within a minute.

Chapter 34

“So what do you think, was it a mistake bringing him here?” The lights in the snackery were dim, it had gone way past being late at night and beyond even early morning and Amaterasu didn’t need the glare in her tired eyes as she took a bite from some left-over pizza.

“I don’t think so,” DiZ responded, buttering her toast, still used to getting up early for school even though she would be ditching today. “He’s primary concern isn’t the state, but that’s OK. I think if he was put on the spot, he’d back the state before anything else. Doesn’t hurt he’s an independent detective, he doesn’t owe the government much. But then I’ve got a bias when it comes to him.”

“well I think you’re right, he had no hesitation about offering help to me with some tech I was working on, for all he knew it could have been something dangerous. I get the feeling he has a healthy level of trust for the state.”

“Where do you think that comes from? He’s not been with the state for long.”

“My guess is it’s because he used to hang with Anonymous. It wasn’t the state by any means but people who were a part of that built up somewhat of a connection with each other, it doesn’t just go away.” Amaterasu sighed, “And there is probably other reasons too.”

“Like what?”

“Well, snowflake knows more than I do, but apparently a family member died and he went off the rails. I think he even had a ‘nite addiction. right now he’s trying to recover, my guess is he’s holding on to anything that resembles family, something that is stable that he can hold on to. right now, the state provides that for him I think.”

“He was a ‘nite addict? I didn’t know that.” DiZ was a little surprised, having only seen her saviour in a positive light before.

“Everyone loses themselves sometimes. I wouldn’t hold it against him, especially since he seems to be managing to stay sober, that can’t be easy.” Amaterasu took another bite of pizza and looked at some system specs on her pad, then before she had finished chewing quickly added, “Oh, but don’t tell anyone about it. I think he’s keeping it to himself for now.”

DiZ nodded, “That’s fair enough.” She bit down on her toast, resisting a ‘nite addiction, *‘he’s more admirable than I thought’* was what passed through her head. “So, did you find anything weird?”

“I’m not sure, there are a few things I don’t recognise swimming around in there, and one looks an awful lot like a part of a DNC similar to mine. No idea what it does yet, but I’m not too worried for now.” Amaterasu looked over to DiZ and joked, “Don’t worry, we don’t have to kill him.”

“Oh ha ha, very funny.” DiZ stuck her tongue out between mouthfuls of toast.

Chapter 35

Fiona climbed up the steps toward the fifth floor, her bag over one shoulder and her coat under the arm of the other. She could have taken the elevator but lately she hadn’t trusted them too much, she played it off as a regular phobia like people often had, but in reality she had seen a vulnerability exposed by someone in the state that seemed to exist in almost every modern elevator. If a hacker wanted they could cause a malfunction and kill anybody in any elevator they targetted. The state was still collecting evidence in private and Fiona expected it would cause quite a stir when it was released. It wasn’t hard to patch at least, but until she felt safe in an elevator again she would be taking the stairs. At least the thinktank for dealing with freeState that she found herself on only meted on the fifth floor, it could have been the fiftieth.

Catching her breath, she pushed through the door of the stairwell and immediately walked into Andy Golapis in the corridor.

“Oh, Good morning Ms. Silvor, are you alright?”

“I’m fine thanks,” Fiona said, getting a better grip on her things before she dropped them, “Sorry about that, are you headed to the meeting?”

“Yes, I’m a little early so I thought I’d take a stroll. Care to join me?” He gestured down the corridor and smiled, “I always find a stroll can fix all kinds of problems.”

“Sure” Fiona smiled back, and walked in step with Golapis.

“I have to say, I probably owe you some debt of gratitude” Golapis chanted, “On account of your profficiency.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand.”

“Whenever there is news of a master hacker, tree makes more money!” He chuckled.

“Really? I would have thought it would be the other way.” Fiona wondered, “Wouldn’t people shy away from buying tech stuff for a while?”

“On the contrary, we just have to put the words ‘most secure’ or ‘new state-of-the-art security’ in our adverts and we get a healthy bump in sales for a few weeks.”

“Ah, well in that case,” Fiona smiled, “Perhaps you could consider hiring me, I could break into somewhere whenever you fancy the extra cash!”

“Ha, don’t tempt me, I may just try and do that!” Golapis laughed, louder than Fiona would have expected, it was one of those occasions where you bump into someone you think you know from TV or the net, but find their personality markedly different. “Still, I hear the rates for the world’s number one hacker are pretty high, tree probably couldn’t afford you.”

Fiona was unsure if this was a clever joke she didn’t understand or just a very poor joke. Of the few organisations that could afford her attention, tree was in the top bracket. She opted to play along, “Well, if you wanted me bad enough I’m sure you could ask SakuraTech for a loan.”

“Ahhh, you wound me!” Golapis joked, “Still, I’m of the opinion they aren’t my company’s main rival anymore...”

“Oh?” Fiona sensed they had passed the casual get-to-know-you part of the stroll.

“Well it’s this freeState of course, somehow they have managed to come out of nowhere and become the biggest threat for us.” Golapis paused, Fiona felt as though anyone else would have taken the moment to sigh but he didn’t and just continued, “They release competing tech for free, and let me tell you,” Golapis leaned over towards Fiona a little, “it is not *easy* trying to compete with free.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Fiona nodded in understanding, “I can see it’s a unique problem you face.”

“Thank you, I suppose the entirety of freeState is a unique problem, but perhaps not. Those who have prospered always find some problem that flummoxes them. happens all through history and the solution is never any different than it was for the generation before, they just never see it before it’s too late.”

“So you don’t think the problem is unique?”

“Honestly I’m not sure, on the one hand,” Golapis held out his left hand, “I have that historical perspective, I know there’s a solution someplace. but on the other hand,” he raised his right hand, “I’m trapped in the present. if there *is* a workable solution in the past, I’m blind to it.” He chuckled lightly, amused by his conundrum. “Your mind has quite the reputation for finding solutions, perhaps you can suggest a strategy for me?”

“Well, normally I charge for a consultation, but I suppose I can let you off this time.” She smiled, then puzzled it over and spoke as she thought, “I suppose, if there is a situation in history that matches our own for us to learn from, it would probably be... Robin Hood.”

“Robin Hood?” Golapis was taken aback slightly, surprised at such a comparison, “I’ve not really considered it before, how would you argue your point?”

“Well,” Fiona began, “Of course Robin Hood isn’t exactly a historical act for us to look at, but there is certainly enough truth in the telling that I think it’s applicable. As I see it, freeState is basically Robin Hood and his merry men. and corporations, governments and so-on would be the corrupt king, sherrif nottingham, and the nights and so on that support their rule.”

“So I’m sherrif Nottingham? I can’t say I’m enjoying this example of yours.” He smiled, having registered both his complaint and his appreciation for the fresh perspective, willing Fiona to continue.

“Well it’s arguable wether the character traits match up or not, but the *problem* itself is pretty similar I think. Both freeState, and Robin Hood’s gang take from the wealthy and give away their takings. Both you, and Nottingham *rely* on a system where this doesn’t happen. and the more prolific freeState or Robin Hood becomes, the more of a problem you have.”

Golapis stroked his chin, thinking this over and nodded. “Yes yes, I can see this is indeed a good example of the problem we face, even if I disagree with the charecterisation the framing is pretty solid.” He turned to Fiona and asked, “So, do you think there is a solution to be found in this story? of course things didn’t end very well for Nottingham in the story.”

“Well that’s where I don’t think it’s so useful I’m sorry. The story of Robin Hood is fictional, he will always be the victor because in a good story, the good guy always wins. So if I were to give you advice based on this, it would be that you ought to be the good guy.” Fiona smiled.

“Ha ha, are you saying I’m the bad guy in the story we find ourselves in?”

“Not at all,” Fiona shook her head, “Of course you are looking out for the economy, your customers, your empyoees, and so on... but,” Fiona turned to Golapis and tilted her head a little, “If it’s a matter of who is the good guy, don’t you think freeState is also doing good in a way also?” Fiona shrugged and faced forward as they made their way towards the meeting room. “My advice, in this scenario I guess, is that you not only have to be the good guy, you have to be the better guy.” Fiona sighed a little, “I’m sorry, that’s the best advice I have for you right now.”

“It’s OK,” Golapis said, a little higher than he was speaking before, convincing Fiona this was how he disguised his sighs, “but it does leave me with the same problem, how do I be the better guy than the one giving things away for free?” Golapis shrugged as they reached the meeting room door, “Oh well, perhaps this meeting will hold the key.” He smiled and pushed open the door for Fiona, then made his way in behind her.

Chapter 36

Denver sat at the desk in his new room, watching two progress bars slowly tick along the screen. One was decompiling all of the data amaterasu had pulled from the police database (much of which had been jumbled into some esoteric format by the DNC ‘nites). the other progress bar, which had just recently begun, was combing the net for some of Jason’s signatures. Denver knew Jason had the occasional quirk, as many hackers did, in their work and would leave them lying around. He assumed Fiona hadn’t thought to search

for these in her search for Jason, but since his search didn't immediately turn up a result Denver expected perhaps Jason had been especially thorough clearing all record of himself when he went off the grid, but the net was a big place. 'There must be a trace of him *somewhere*' was Denver's thinking.

He leaned back in his chair, the progress bars had barely moved. Making an educated guess, neither process would yield any results until much later in the day, maybe even the next. he decided he didn't want to spend all that time sat staring at the screen, so set up some forwarding alerts directed at his pad and left his room to go explore his new underground home.

Denver hadn't gone far before he turned a corner and found himself face to face with the man who had stabbed him with a needle just the day before. To say he felt awkward would be understating things significantly, but the man smiled in surprise at seeing Denver and said "Hi" In such a cheery manner it defused and apprehension that Denver had. "Sorry about yesterday by the way, just how things are done sometime's I'm afraid. I'm Ninety by the way."

Ninety was taller than denver and almost had to duck to avoid banging his head on the light fittings in the tunnel. "Going exploring?"

"Uh, yeah." Denver scratched behind his ear, "Nothing to do until some processes finish."

"I could show you around if you like? I just have to grab something from the store room and I'll give you the tour."

Denver felt a little unsure, but he had no good reason not to accept the offer, "Sure," He nodded "why not?"

"Right then, follow me!" Ninety walked past Denver down a corridor and took a turn, he pointed out a few things along the way "That's a toilet, though there's a few around that one is closest to the dorms. That one right there is the snackery, though it's mostly used by the techy types, everyone else eats in the common room, the canteen, the gym or sometimes in the office."

"There's that many things around here?"

"Sure, and more to boot, Need plenty of spots for people if you ask me, especially if you're underground, not much space and people will bump into each other, tempers flare easy you know?"

"I can imagine." Denver nodded.

"Here we are," Ninety pulled open a door and stepped through, Denver waited outside but looked in, the storeroom was pretty large, it seemed to hold a large amount of boxes, presumably holding food, spare light bulbs, and nanite fab materials. Denver guessed the hideout probably built whatever it needed from scratch using nanites, a good way to stay of the grid and not get noticed.

"Got it," Ninety said, emerging from the storeroom holding a dustpan and brush, "Dropped my mug so I have to clear up the mess, I'm quite a clutz to be honest." He smiled a smile that on anyone else might have looked like embarrassment, but to Denver it seemed Ninety

was quite unashamed to drop things from time to time, a person accepting of his own faults. Denver thought of how such an attribute could help himself as they made their way back down the tunnels and past the snackery. Thinking of what his biggest problems were, namely a nanite addiction, he realised he wouldn't improve much by just *accepting* that particular problem and not worrying about it. He envied Ninety a little, Denver suspected he himself had gone too far the wrong way in his own life to ever be so zen.

Ninety proceeded to show Denver around the place, it was all on one level, except for some of the rooms like the canteen, the gym and the common room which were around two storeys in height but descended down from the tunnel level similar to how amaterasu's room did. Denver suspected that the trapdoor he fell through was probably the tallest point in the whole place. When being shown the gym, Ninety and Denver found it was in use by about eight other people, including DiZ who greeted them energetically.

"So how come you're with Ninety?"

"Oh, I'm just showing him around."

"You should have asked me DT, I'd gladly show you round," DiZ suddenly became aware that she had been working up quite a sweat in the gym and said "Well, not now of course, I'm kind of busy." She smiled, taking as discrete a step back as she could.

"Maybe next time." Denver smiled.

"Haha, sure." DiZ said, waving them off as she went back to her workout.

On their way down the tunnels, one of the places that Ninety pointed out took Denver by surprise.

"And that there is the armoury."

"What?"

"Well, sometimes the state needs weapons." Ninety shrugged a little, "Does that seem unusual?"

Denver wondered why he hadn't expected it, they were an organisation that operated in secret, had fought against dictators and even an assassin with his help. Weapons were probably a necessity when it came to being prepared for the future. "I guess I would have expected weapons, but a whole armoury seems like a big deal somehow."

Ninety nodded in what seemed to be understanding and just moved on, making Denver feel this guy really had reached some crazy level of zen-ness.

When they got to the office, which was much like any other office with lots of desks, some cubicles and even an old-style water cooler, Ninety used the dustpan and brush to clear up a mess at his desk. He offered Denver a coffee from the office machine, but Denver got a ping on his pad. Checking it, he had seen an alert on one of his processes. He apologised to Ninety and made his way back to his room, declining the offer of an office desk for the time being as he preferred to work alone.

Chapter 37

Jason lay on the sand in the shade beneath the palm trees, even there it was hotter than he liked. Used to much colder climates, sweat poured from him and gripped to the sand whenever it was in reach. Music played from a radio a few meters away, just a little louder than the waves that lethargically dropped onto the shore before sliding away again. It was a stream from a concert in Sweden, bounced from its source on the net across a few private satellites that Jason had covertly hacked before they were launched. The entire net was at his fingertips and nobody would find him. Jason sucked on an orange, tapping his toes to the heart of the music, gently so as not to work up more of a sweat than the heat on his private atoll provided. Though the heat did bother him, it wasn't nearly as unpleasant as when he had first moved to the little island. He opened his eyes a little to look out across the sea, '*another year of this*', he thought, '*and maybe I'll even be comfortable here.*'

Jason closed his eyes again, the bright light still offensive to him even from the shade, and discarded the remains of his orange. He enjoyed a moment where the beat of the song and the rhythm of the waves synchronised, but he was rudely jolted from the zone when the music stopped and was replaced by a shrill beep noise that was interrupted by a voice saying "alert" every three seconds.

Jason sat up and looked at the radio, balanced on a leaf in the sand. Every time this happened he wished he had just streamed music from his pad instead, at least then he would be able to see a readout of what the alert was (which was almost always a break in satellite signal as some satellite moved out of range and made a secure signal impossible). He leaned over and shut off the radio's sound, then leant back into his groove in the sand. If he had brought a pad to listen to the stream of course, he wouldn't be able to help himself from using it to working on some project or another.

He listened to the waves for a few moments, but it wasn't the same, he was restless again and figured he should at least check what the alert *actually was*. Even if it had been a connection error the last thirty-six times, a problem that would correct itself after a while anyway, he knew he wouldn't be comfortable until the mystery was solved. He put his weight forward, stood up and wobbled slightly.

"Stupid heat." He sighed, and started off down the beach towards the other end of the atoll where his workstation was.

He strolled down the beach, double checking his hydro and solar generators as he passed them, just in case power was the problem. They all seemed to be working fine though, as expected. He made extra sure to keep them disguised so that they couldn't be spotted from the air or space, something that always presented a problem in a climate like this.

He pulled another couple of oranges from his garden on the way past and sucked on them as he went, during the days he always felt better if he had something juicy as he was walking. It was probably just his imagination but he felt this way he was combatting dehydration better, and somehow keeping cooler.

As he approached the more forested part of the island, he heard the faint beeping and "alert!" sounds coming from his workstation, sheltered beneath the trees there. The sounds

got louder as he made his way closer, brushing aside some bushes and batting at insects as he stepped.

“yeah yeah, I’m alert.” He moaned, “Shut up already.” Jason tapped the bits of his screen to make the thing mute itself a little more forcefully than was necessary. He regretted choosing such an annoying alert sound.

Scanning his system for what triggered the alert, he quickly found it wasn’t the signal. He could view a video feed of the stream without any stutter or hassle. He waved his gaze across the screen several times before he realised what the problem was, there was a small number ‘1’ blinking over his mail application’s icon.

“Fuck.”

This wasn’t supposed to happen, he was off the grid for a reason, and had gone to great lengths to keep it that way. To Jason’s mind, there were only a handful of people that could even be capable of finding him. Not wasting any time, he opened up his mail client for the first time since he reached the island and read the message left for him.

“WANT A BIGGER SCHLONG? IMPROVEMENS IN NANITE RESEARCHS REALLY COULD GIVE YOU THE MONSTER TO MAKE ALL A GIRL’S SHRIEK!

“Tired off not making an impacts in the sex? reply back and we then will we then and will show you how! Look at example these imagings:” There were a few attached pictures showing penises in a ‘before and after’ fashion, with the before and after images looking like they belonged to entirely different people.

Jason couldn’t help but laugh out loud, he normally hated to waste energy in the heat of the day like this but he couldn’t help it. Of all the ways for his old friend to track him down and get in touch, this was the best he could possibly think of. Memories of sending encrypted messages back and forth that looked just like spam mail flooded back to the young man and he was at college with his friends again, young and careless. He pulled out the images from the mail, opened up one of his old decryption systems and ran the pics through them, it barely took seconds since the messages were embedded in a way Jason would recognise.

“Hey, I can see you’re off the grid and all (nice job on that, I wouldn’t have found you if NASA didn’t push out their standards docs, how you squeezed your code in there in the first place is crazy, but you forgot to clean it out. still I’m the only one to notice it seems) but someone has asked me to get in touch with you. She calls herself amaterasu and says she knew you or something? Would have left you be but I needed something from her in exchange but if you’re OK with it I’ll put you two in touch, what do you say?”

Jason smiled, pulled an unopened pack of cigarettes from his bag then took one out and lit it. He was tired of the heat anyway.

Chapter 38

“Hello and welcome to today’s episode of freeNews! there’s a lot happening in the state every day and it can be a lot to keep track of, so we bring you the headlines.

“Will freeState be destroying poverty? a collective within the state has organised to look out for citizens in the poorer areas across the world. Already we have talked on how Anons have taken to acting as police in particularly dangerous areas, acting as a stabilising influence in impoverished regions. but this new freeState subunit aims to bring such remote places into the global market, they have instituted a freeTax, an optional tax for freeState members (totally untraceable should you wish to contribute anonymously) which goes towards the cause. Will it work? you know if anyone can do it it’s our state!

“Imposters or Traitors? criminals are taking to wearing freeState masks when robbing homes. If you look at any of the regular news outlets this won’t be news to you at all, but are they really citizens of the state? Regardless, the freeState law collective is currently discussing ways to deal with citizens or people presenting as such who commit crimes (and discussing just what is considered a crime). Whilst many within the state object to it having a formalised law there is strong support for at least some measures for crimes where there are victims. Be sure to follow our links to take part in the discussion.

“Is freeState in the crosshairs? It’s no surprise to anyone that there are continued campaigns to smear the state by various organisations (despite the state’s demonstrations of what happens to those who sacrifice their journalistic integrity), but are we being targeted in a much more sinister way? In the wake of the attempted assassination of recognised citizen DiZ, many are wondering if this is just the first of a more aggressive wave of attacks against us. Our sources have been keeping an eye on the military production lines and have seen no spike in activity, but for materials used in fabricating weapons there has been a massive increase in trading. Is the general public just printing more weapons part of a trend or is it an attempt to conceal a move against the state? Anons at these links discuss the evidence.

“President Ha outlaws membership of freeState in the wake of open criticism of his government, something that became a crime eight years ago and has been enforced through a practice of threats of execution. As of five O’clock local time, membership of freeState is just as serious a threat and Ha’s office declared that it had eighteen freeState members in custody awaiting trial. If found guilty they will be executed under the new laws. Citizenship rates in the region are estimated to be as high as seventy percent, many joining because our promise to allow free speech has long been denied to them. The state has come to a consensus that it will not tolerate the execution of it’s citizens, though just what the response to such an act would be is still a subject of much discussion, as is if any action should be taken against Ha’s regime. With such a large amount of the population on the side of freeState, a revolution is not impossible.

“Will the UN recognise freeState as a state? a bid has been registered with the United Nations to be recognised as a virtual state. the process which normally takes some time will likely be extended due to the lack of a precedence of a distributed state like ours, however if successful, it would give freeState several legal protections and rights, as well as recognition. at present a majority of the state is for this move, however it remains a controversial topic as many in the state don’t wish to recognise the UN as a legitimate organisation, some even suggesting that the freeState should itself adopt the role of the UN.

“Are celebrities really believers in freeState, or is it just a fad? With the announcement from the hollywood actor Jerry Ghilsby that he was a wholehearted supporter of freeState, several other celebrities have come out of the woodwork in agreement. This has created

some controversy among the state, some claim the celebrities are just trying to attach themselves to something that is popular, whilst others argue that with the state's rapid intake of citizens, so many celebrities coming in is a statistical certainty. To contribute to this discussion or any other, be sure to follow our links, thanks for checking!"

Chapter 39

Denver browsed the database looking for the thing that was edited out of the report; BruceGlee's flash drive. The search was not made easy due to the atrocious formatting that the police system was built on, to Denver's eyes it looked like a frankenstein's monster of systems that had then been put through a blender and glued back together again. fragmentation so severe that reports from years past were mixed in with frames from last week's CCTV recordings, and vice versa. it was five hours of combing before he found a part of the thing, and he wouldn't have even known where to look if he hadn't happened to chance upon a CCTV recording of someone making a record of the flash drive (he found *that* by searching the erased data. It amazed him that so few people took the time to scoble blank space after erasing a file, but it suited him anyway).

The flash drive data itself was encrypted, it seemed that the police hadn't touched it so from this point on it was Denver against whatever protection BruceGlee had put in place, and BruceGlee was no chump.

Denver was a half hour into trying to break into the thing when his screen gave a message alert.

"I got your email and I'm interested in improving my penis size, do you ship your nanites for free or is there a postage charge too? If there is a postage charge I would rather come and collect."

Denver lay back in his seat and put his hands behind his head, Jason had got the message, replied positively, and even indicated he was coming to see amaterasu himself.

-

Denver was making his way down the tunnels towards Amaterasu's room when he bumped into DiZ.

"Hey DT, what's up?" she beamed at him in her usual way, it was plain to Denver that this girl had developed a crush on him.

"Just going to pass on some info to amaterasu, she asked me to do something for her, you?"

"Oh, I was just going to hang with serenity in the snackery."

Denver felt as though someone had thrown a brick through one of the windows of his mind "Serenity?" He asked, "Not the same serenity that was BruceGlee's sister?"

DiZ nodded, "You didn't know she hung here?"

Denver scratched the back of his head and shrugged “had no idea, but I guess that’s how snowflake and you guys heard about my investigation huh...”

“bingo. anyway, you’d best not keep ammy waiting, if you have time when you’re done come by the snackery, I’ll make you my *Antarctic Satan!*”

“Aren’t you a little young to be drinking?”

“Aren’t you a little young to be saying things like ‘*aren’t you a little young*’” DiZ stuck her tongue out playfully and walked past Denver towards the snackery “Ciao!”

Denver shook his head, he wasn’t exactly the right person to say who should be taking what. He continued on his way towards amaterasu’s room, for some reason he got hotter the closer he came, and started to feel his own pulse. Even though he had noticed this effect whenever he thought of amaterasu, he hadn’t gotten used to it. Could you get used to an aching longing? Denver felt very inexperienced, it didn’t help that amaterasu was a little older than him.

-

As Denver descended the steps towards the flickering light, he heard voices coming from amaterasu’s room.

“-t’s the will of the state as far as I can tell, you’ll need to be prepared to make a move within hours I expect.

...

“I understand, but the ‘nites will take care of that. That’s not to say don’t be careful, the trick is just to tell everyone to keep a cool head.

...

“No, the way the state is organised in a way that they can do that, but it’s important to make an offer to the physical citizens first. if it’s to happen it must be a choice.

...

“Yes, either way it will set that kind of precedent, it will put a lot of things in motion but we can’t allow dictators to do as they please. Our state has always stood against that.

...

“Same to you, message me again if you need anything OK? bye.”

Denver made his way through the screens, announcing his arrival with a loud “Hello?” perhaps a little too late, but he couldn’t help but listen, amaterasu’s voice was like music to him.

“Oh, DT hey. how are things going?”

“Jason is coming here.”

“You found him?” amaterasu jumped out of her chair and pumped her fist into the air with excitement “That’s excellent news! thank you!”

Denver truly appreciated her smile, but he couldn’t help but wish she wasn’t so happy that some other guy would be paying a visit. he wondered what he would have to do to become that important to her.

“And how about your thing, any luck?”

“I found BruceGlee’s flash drive in the mix of bits, trying to crack his encryption now...” Denver recalled his interaction with DiZ a couple of minutes earlier, perhaps serenity would know how to crack her brother’s encryption?

“Is it anything I can help with?”

Denver’s heart skipped a beat ‘*she offered to help*’, he answered before it became awkward for him “I think I have a few things left to try yet, thanks though.” Denver prepared to leave again before he thought and added, “Is there anything else you want *me* to help with?”

“Oh? so we aren’t playing tit for tat anymore?” amaterasu winked, drying Denver’s throat in an instant.

“well, since I’m handy... I just thought it would be good to help you out after all.”

“ah, we’ll make a statesman of you yet, DT!” she proclaimed, “hmm, I suppose there might be something... how soon can you get to Kama?”

“Kama? you mean the country that just decided being a freeState member was punishable by death!?”

“That’s the one.” amaterasu smiled, and somehow denver was nintey percent sure he would accept the mission. “You see most of it’s electronic infrastructure is forty years old or more, the country is running a seperate network, most people’s screens are still the old radio-wave type. we need a wizard to go in, and get at least ninety-nine percent of the population hooked up to the net, and capable of voicing themselves without their president Ha or whoever getting in the way.”

“you want me to hook up radio TVs and other old tech to the modern net in a way that won’t be blockable. and you want me to do it for ninety nine percent of the population of Kama.” Denver was a little overwhelmed. “Timeframe?”

“hours.” amaterasu paused then asked, “can you do it?”

Denver thought for a moment, to say it would be tricky would be an understatement, but he had an idea. “What is their ‘nite fabrication capability as a nation?”

Amaterasu smiled, “they rival tree frankly, you have to be these days if you want to keep a country running in isolation.”

“I can do it, can you get me to a physical access point on Kama’s seperate net?”

“Haven’t you heard the reports? 70% of people in the area are with the state, I could get you anywhere short of Ha’s bedroom if you give me enough time.”

Denver smiled, he was charmed, and hopefully if he could pull off things how he wanted, amaterasu might see him positively too.

Chapter 40

“Looks like our little mole is back on the radar.”

“Are we to assume that he made contact with the target during the time we lost contact?”

“That is what the plan predicts isn’t it?”

“So we proceed with the next stage of the plan, capture the mole and download the data collected?”

“Good luck with that, haven’t you seen the his movements? check this.”

“What on earth, why would he...?”

“It’s interesting though isn’t it, I wonder what’s going to happen.”

“Don’t you think the situation is too volatile to let him do as he pleases? what with the current political climate? and the committees evaluating things?”

“Well what do you think is going to happen, perhaps it would be in our benefit to make sure things go smoothly for the mole.”

“What do you mean?”

“Say *something* does happen, don’t you think the committees are more likely to decide a favourable course of action?”

“This is clearly outside the bounds of the plan.”

“Always better to have a fluid plan I say!”

“I really don’t-”

“Enough, this isn’t what we planned, but we never foresaw this particular political situation, either we do nothing or we adapt and turn things to our advantage. Are we in a position to step in if we have to?”

“I have a satellite trained on the mole at all times now, short of entering an EM-shielded area again, we’ll have full control. And I seriously doubt there are any such areas where he is going.”

“Very well, don’t fuck this up.”

“I never do, leave it to me.”

Chapter 41

Fiona left the meeting, fairly optimistic. The way the committee seemed to be moving was not ideal but they didn't perceive freeState as a dangerous threat, just an economic one. A serious economic threat and she would have to push hard if she didn't want simply being a member of freeState to become a criminal offense comparable to insurance fraud or drug use. but she could safely let loose a sigh of relief that nobody would be sending swat teams in to hunt down freeState citizens. There wasn't going to be any bloodshed, at least in this country, at least for now.

Pushing her hair back behind her ear so she could rummage through her bag unobstructed, Fiona pulled out her pad and turned the wireless back on. She flicked over to the weather app, -3 degrees celsius in Glasgow. three freeState messages waiting for snowflake, she would check them once she was clear of the government building for the day.

Fiona stood back up, put her coat on and slung her bag over her shoulder. She had taken a couple of steps toward the stairwell before a man's voice called out to her.

“Ms Silvor, a word before you leave if you don't mind?”

It was the bearded government man, Fiona gulped, had she been outed? Quickly she recollected herself, the odds on that were miniscule. The government simply didn't have agents with good enough tech skills to catch her. “Certainly, what is it Mister Nilworth?”

“In my office,” He turned and started down the hallway past the meeting room, clearly expecting Fiona to follow. She double-checked she had all her things and made after Nilworth.

-

“Do you have any idea why I might want to speak to you?” Nilworth asked, seated behind his large mahogany desk, twisting the lid around an old ball-point pen.

'could he suspect me?' Fiona's fear, constantly jumping into her mind no matter how many times she could reason it out again, “I have no idea.”

Nilworth put down his pen, leaned back, and exhaled in a manner such as to suggest it pained him to explain his motivations for inviting Fiona. “The first meeting I said everyone present had been vetted as having no involvement with freeState,” He then paused, the next words he had to say clearly troubled him.

'fuck fuck fuck.' was Fiona's mind.

“That's not entirely true. Ultimately we have limited resources, and it has become clear in the meetings so far that the freeState's technical expertise may outstrip even my own office.”

'fuck fuck fuckity fuck'

"And that's where you come into all this."

'flying fuckity magic fuck-beans'

"We need someone with your skills to double-check those in the meetings."

'...' Fiona was a little stunned, "You want me to spy on everyone else on the committee?"

"That's right, you're the ideal person for the job. you have the skills to check for blemishes, and your record of service for our government and even for this department speaks for itself." Nilworth leaned on the arm of his chair, "You're clearly the woman for the job." *'such a sucker!'* Fiona gave it a moment's thought, keen not to look too pleased with this turn, "I'll do what I can, when do you want a report?"

"Tomorrow if possible, sooner if you find something serious."

"I will expect to be compensated for this work."

"I'll talk it over with my boss, I understand you have a usual fee for contracts with the government will that be OK?"

"Yes, that will do. though I wouldn't make any moves on that front until the report is complete."

"That won't be a problem, may I ask why?"

"Well no offence Mister Nilworth, but I don't trust your office to manage it without giving me away."

"Ahh, in case one of the committee members is freeState and is monitoring you."

"Exactly." Fiona smiled "Well, will that be all?"

"No, that's everything I think, thank you Ms Silvor."

Chapter 42

Denver was falling again, past mountains of people wearing freeState masks watching him plummet. He looked up, searching for the beautiful woman who was screaming at him from before, this time he recognised her as amaterasu. She still looked worried and he tried to call out to her, *'what's wrong?'* but he couldn't move his lips. He wondered why for a moment, and reached up to his face to touch them. It became clear in an instant, of course his face was nothing but a freeState mask, the moment he touched it, it crumbled away, specks falling up away from him as he fell down.

The woman who appeared to be amaterasu had stopped screaming, she stared down at him, falling a few meters above him, silent. Denver felt heartbroken, was she looking at him... with pity?

'why does she pity me?' he thought, wondering just how hideous his unmasked face must be to her, he felt something crawl over his nose. He tried to touch it, but it felt strange. as he withdrew his hand he saw thousands of small spiders crawling across it, they started to fall off him, up into the air away from him and towards the woman. Pouring first from his hands and face, then every part of him, he felt himself fade away and watched as the spiders fell up to the woman, her look of pity turned into a look of horror.

Falling at a horrendous speed now, what was left of Denver smashed through a plane that was passing by below and ricoched out of a seat.

"Woa, you OK there DT?"

Denver found himself on a plane, the one he had boarded just before, ninety sat beside him, looking concerned.

"You have a nightmare or something?"

Denver looked out of the window, it was much darker than when he boarded, the stars starting to shine through the remnants of the winter's twilight sky.

"Yeah, something like that, sorry." Denver settled himself back into his seat, shaken by the dream which he suspected to have recurred as another symptom of 'nite withdrawal, he resolved to make sure to stop at an EMP clinic the moment he got back from Kama, assuming he even made it out alive.

"What you need is a good drink, always works for me." Ninety smiled assuringly, "Hang on a minute, I'll go grab one."

"Thanks." Denver nodded, still a little out of sorts. *'what I need, is a little less stress'* he thought. It struck Denver that he was behaving very out of character, when did he start doing stuff like this? Denver had always aimed to do what's right, but a little at a time, his actions now were more along the lines of some revolutionary. *'Just why am I going into a place on the verge of civil war!?'* ran through his mind a few times before the image of amaterasu smiling flashed in. He would change so much for one woman? He found it hard to believe, he could count the number of times they had met on one hand. He felt that right now it wouldn't be incorrect to say he was risking his life, just to help her. Was she that important to him, how did she creep so far into his being that she was more important to him than anyone else? The last person he revered so much died and it sent him into the biggest downward spiral of his life, was he really OK letting it happen again?

But try to reason against it as he did, the more he thought about amaterasu the more his worries quietened. He was going to go through with it. He pulled out his pad and started planning a new system, a system to help free a country.

-

Turbulence shook ninety and he awoke with a snort. taking a couple of moments to collect himself, he saw that it was now morning outside the plane, and that his travelling buddy

was still working on his pad, putting together a concept for something that looked particularly complicated. Ninety wasn't at all oblivious to tech, he even fancied himself quite the hobbyist hacker at times, but what DT was working on seemed completely alien to him. He recognised what looked like some fabrication 'nites, layed out in such a way as to create a DNC, he spotted various chemical symbols hooked up to different parts of the system, hundreds of potential electrical and wireless inputs, EMP protection nodes with jumpstarters so even if parts of this system, however it worked, were knocked out, they could be repaired and put back on task within seconds. ninety had an idea of what it was all for based on his breif of course, DT was building an unstoppable factory that would grow itself across an entire country in under an hour. But just as Ninety could barely comprehend just how such a thing might be done, when presented with the schematics DT was working on, he felt he couldn't comprehend even if he was given a guided tour. He understood clearly enough though, why amaterasu left this job for DT, but didn't understand if this job was so important, why Ninety had to keep an eye on the guy, when so much of the work flew right over his head.

"10 minutes to arrival, please prepare for landing." Came a woman's voice over the cabin's speakers.

Ninety collected the rubbish and cutlery from around his and his friend's space and handed them to the passing attendant, DT not even looking away from his work. *'has he been like that all night?'* thought DT, and touched the man lightly on his shoulder, "You catch that?"

"hmm?" Denver didn't even blink, his gaze fixed on his pad.

"We're landing soon."

"Oh." Denver continued, then after a second completed processing what Ninety had said, "Oh, oh right." He looked over to his neighbour and smiled. "Thanks."

Denver skimmed the screen of his pad for a moment, made a couple of small adjustments. Happy enough that this was a decent point to take a break, he shut down his pad and tidied it away. Looking out of the window, he saw the clouds over Kama, punctured by the country's signature forested mountain peaks. He could tell with a single glance it wasn't much warmer than where he left, but closer to the equator, he could at least hope not to be quite so gripped by the cold during his stay, which he optimistically felt would only be a day or so.

-

As denver collected his things he looked out through the window onto the runway, the airport was crawling with soldiers and police, checking passengers as they pooled off the plane, anyone who looked like they weren't local, elderly or married was given extra attention.

"Ah, I think you guys left something in the bathroom during the flight? could you follow me and check if it is yours?" An attendant spoke to Denver and Ninety from the aisle, to which Denver responded, "Really? I was just thinking I had lost my father's watch, thank you."

The flight attendant nodded and led the way down the aisle, Denver and ninety following close behind. Once they were obscured from the other passengers and airline staff, the

attendant pulled out a couple of uniforms and handed them to Denver and Ninety, they were going to enter disguised as airline staff. As Denver pulled on his new outfit, he saw the attendant preparing a couple of needles, which he then handed to the two men. Denver quizzed Ninety with a look and Ninety explained, "ID 'nites, when they scan us, they'll be checking if our 'nites match our outfits."

Denver nodded and then followed Ninety's lead, plunging the needle into his neck quickly and withdrawing it before he noticed the pinch of pain. The men put their things into airline-branded luggage carriers, and made their way to the plane's exit, following just behind the last trickle of passengers. As they descended the steps towards the runway, Denver saw a handful of men sat in a line, hands tied behind their backs. He expected the police had put them aside so they could *study* them more thoroughly later without missing any of the other passengers. Which didn't seem to be a problem for the three apparent airline staff, one young officer gave them a quick scan and shooed them on their way. The attendant who had provided their disguises led them a different way from the other passengers, presumably to some staff-only part of the airport where they could find discrete exit from the airport and into Kama proper.

As they approached a building by a hangar off the runway, the three heard a loud bang noise echo across the tarmac. The police and soldiers dotted around the runway started to all head towards the building where all the passengers had entered, drawing their weapons.

"Fuck it's already starting." The attendant said and rushed for the door of the building they were headed towards, Denver and Ninety following close behind. The attendant pulled open the door and the three rushed inside. They found themselves in a break-room, which had a few screens, one displaying images of protestors, some of whom wore freeState masks, clashing with police in Kama's iconic capital square, the other showing a feed of the Kama's state TV stream warning that unpatriotic traitors will not be tolerated, and that a nationwide curfew was now in effect. The entire country was to return to their homes, anybody found travelling would be arrested.

The attendant opened a side-door and pulled Ninety and Denver through it, it led to a stairwell leading down into the building's basement. waiting for them there was a woman wearing a freeState mask with a sword similar to the one Denver saw used to disarm DiZ's assassin. She put away a small pad and addressed the attendant.

"Thanks flyboy, it's about time. Looks like everything is kicking off." turning to Denver and Ninety she asked, "You guys know the plan?"

"Not particularly, I wasn't expecting things to be so... volatile." Denver mentioned, "Assuming we can do what we came here for, I need to reach a power station, ideally the one in Gamik."

"Are you KRKL?" Ninety asked, the woman nodded. Ninety turned to Denver and explained "She's our escort, she'll get us where we need to be."

Denver nodded and pulled out his pad, checking his plans. "How far is the station? I'll need at least a couple of hours more to finalize this before we can use it."

The woman turned and headed down what appeared to be a service tunnel that ran beneath the airport. "We'll be at the station in an hour and a half, you'll have an hour to

work on that thing as we drive,” Denver and Ninety followed, “Put it away for now, I don’t want to be herding distracted people, don’t care how much of a super hacker you are.”

Denver put his pad back in his pack as he followed Ninety and KRKL, the sound of the attendant shutting the door on the three of them echoed down the tunnel before fading away, leaving no noise but the small tapping of their feet and, to Denver’s ear, the faint muffled sound of shouting from above the thick concrete above them.

The three freeState citizens walked briskly down the tunnel, KRKL occasionally consulting a map on her pad and leading them down the various junctions and forks that was laid out beneath the airport facilities.

Denver looked on as KRKL strode, she commanded a certain aura of authority and experience that he had never seen before, her composure indicated to him someone who was quite at home in a situation like this, potentially minutes from being gunned down. Somehow as Denver thought this, he realised that whilst he was mentally a little unnerved he was managing to remain calm, and his hands weren’t shaking at all. He wondered if the fake ID ‘nites had been dosed with something to help him keep his cool, but he thought it unlikely. What else then? He wondered as they pushed on, thinking maybe he was just the kind of person who wasn’t so shaken up by being in the middle of a revolution, it wasn’t like he had ever done it before so how was he to know if this was normal or not.

KRKL stopped, consulted her pad and confirmed the label on a door. “This is it” She announced firmly, reminding Denver that no matter how cool he was right now, KRKL was the one who really knew what she was doing. “This door opens into the parking lot, we will not be taking a car here since the place has a checkpoint. Instead we will hold to the left along this wall,” KRKL gestured and tapped on the wall, “and we will dive out of the window there to the floor below. It’s grass but I recommend you try to land in a roll, I also recommend you don’t waste time travelling through lot, we don’t know if there are police there. Do you both understand?” The two men nodded, “Right, on three.” KRKL grabbed the door’s handle, “One, two,” She pushed on the handle and the door flew open, she rushed into the lot and along the wall, closely followed by Denver and Ninety.

Denver heard loud voices echoing around the lot as he rushed along the wall. He didn’t look to see if they were nearby, instead focussing on KRKL in front who was almost at the window. They didn’t sound near at least, but that didn’t mean Denver, KRKL and Ninety weren’t within their view. He pushed himself harder towards the window, KRKL had already dived out of it, Denver put his hand on the railing and swung his legs over.

He felt like he was in his falling dream again for a split second, before hitting the ground and tripping over. His foot was sore but nothing felt broken or sprained. KRKL pulled him to his feet as Ninety landed and rolled, as if he did such things for fun on his days off.

“Are you good to go?” KRKL asked Denver, who nodded in confirmation and KRKL immediately set off running down a nearby grass embankment and slid under a fence. As Denver and Ninety approached, she held her hand up with a ‘slow down’ gesture, “Careful, it’s electrified and gives a signal to the airport security.” She looked over towards the main airport building “They probably have their hands full right now, but let’s try and avoid getting noticed shall we?”

As Denver and Ninety carefully crawled in the dry dirt beneath the fence KRKL pulled out her pad again, tapped it a few times and brought it up to the side of her face, “Hey, I could do with a taxi”

with that, there was the sound of a loud engine coming from nearby, and a van pulled out of a nearby shed that looked like it hadn't been in use for a few years. it pulled to a stop just by KRKL, who turned to face Denver and Ninety, now clear of the fence. “Gentlemen, your ride is here.”

-

In the back of the van it was pretty dark and shook from time to time, less than ideal conditions for Denver to put the finishing touches on his system. given the time constraints he was having to multitask a lot, running simulations of several of the self-replicating systems checking for defects, adjusting for local temperature in a few other systems and combing everything he thought might be a trouble-spot, looking for bugs.

Ninety looked from Denver, working on his glowing pad over to KRKL, she held her blade on her lap, and surveyed various news feeds and freeState discussion on her pad, probably connected to some covert satellite since most of Kama had no outside internet access at this point.

“You do this often?” He smiled, trying to spark a conversation. He had nothing to do during this part of the trip and even though the driver seemed capable enough, a military checkpoint or even assault was not impossible and Ninety preferred a distraction to thinking about such things.

Without looking from her pad's screen, KRKL responded “sometimes.”

Surprised, Ninety was unsure what to say next other than, “oh?”

“two revolutions, five hostage situations, eight gang raids and fifteen domestic assaults.” KRKL swiped the screen of her pad, advancing the feed a step.

“Wow,” Ninety whistled, “I was in the forces a little while, barely saw anything interesting at all.”

“You got lucky.” KRKL responded, tapping her pad a couple of times.

Ninety frowned, his chosen partner was not making it easy to hold a conversation but he wasn't done trying. “What do you make of all this then?”

“All of what?”

“What Ha's doing, freeState intervening, the rioting,” Ninety shrugged, “the police, the weather maybe?”

KRKL paused for a moment, locked her pad and looked at Ninety. “I think right now some kid is getting beaten to a pulp by a bunch of Ha apologists, I think police officers have been paid extra to disguise themselves as civilians and infiltrate protestors, starting fights and being aggressive towards the police and soldiers to give them a bad image and justify the coming retaliation, I think Ha feels for the first time that maybe he isn't entirely secure,

even with his entire army on his side and a hundred guns between him and the hundreds of thousands of people who suffer under his rule, I think he is going to step things up and innocent people will be hurt.”

Ninety thought on this a moment, “How do you think he will step things up?”

KRKL unlocked her pad and held it up so Ninety could see the screen. the people accused of being freeState and a handful of protestors had been declared guilty and were due to be executed that evening. “That’s way too fast, there hasn’t been time for a trial!”

“Ha doesn’t care, all he sees is an opportunity to set an example, to try and scare a country into submission.”

“So what do we do? the plan was to get the whole country connected so they could all be heard and to free the prisoners. what now?”

“The plan? the plan hasn’t changed.” KRKL tapped her pad a few times and handed it over to Ninety.

After a minute reviewing some documents on there Ninety whistled and looked over to Denver, still working feverishly on his systems, he wasn’t aware of anything outside his schematics and simulations. “So the plan was this all along? Makes sense to me why it was so important to bring him along now... I suppose it was obvious Ha would react to the rioting this way.” He passed the pad back to KRKL, “Still though, this is some major league stuff. you think Kama will go for it?”

“Kama will do what is right for Kama.”

Ninety nodded, the next few hours would be eventful.

“Ten minutes.” The driver called back to the three.

Chapter 43

Fiona sat at her workstation flicked on her systems and drank from a large mug of coffee. She regretably had to at least check if some of the other committee members *were* part of freeState, because if any were outed at any point and she had failed to report it, she would look suspicious. Of course she wouldn’t report anyone for being freeState, but she could at least ask the relevant committee members to keep a low profile.

She set off a few pre-made search systems off to go snooping and then checked her inbox, the three messages waiting for her had become nine. All updates from amaterasu on the situation in Kama and the direction the state was going with it. Fiona went carefully over the information and was overcome by a strange combination of excitement and dread. She knew the state was about to make history in a big way, but she knew tomorrow’s meeting would not bode well for the state.

She double checked the information, took a swig of coffee and prepared a response for Amaterasu, the state would need to prepare for a rough time. There would no longer be any question about what threat they posed to those in power if things panned out as

amaterasu and the other Anonymous predicted, and their predictions tended to be remarkably accurate.

A couple of her searches beeped in alert to let Fiona know they had found something unusual, and a third beeped as she was turning to check, and within a few seconds two more had found something similar. At a glance, all of the people on the committee worth over a hundred billion had some unusual encrypted connections to the net, at more or less the same times. It didn't look anything like a freeState connection, and Fiona knew based on how a few of them were strongly in favour of outlawing anonymous posting to the net during the meetings, that this group of super billionaires was not with the state.

another beep, this time from Fiona's mail client, also from Amaterasu;

"Thanks for the tips, I suspected as much. Don't worry we have it covered, for now just watch the news. - Amsy"

Fiona pulled the news stream from the corner of a screen into the largest one, scaled it up and unmuted it. Light from helicopter shots of the streets of Kama filled her darkening room.

Chapter 44

The van came to a stop and KRKL slid open the door in the side as she climbed out through it and into the rain. Ninety followed and Denver distractedly tried to exit the van and perform some action on his pad at the same time, stumbling.

"Are you not done yet?" KRKL asked impatiently, she checked her pad, they didn't have much time.

"I expected we'd have more time."

"Well we don't, how long is it going to take before your system is complete?"

"Well theoretically it's already complete it just needs-"

"Good enough, we're moving in. Put your pad away. You need to reach the control room right? if we get there ahead of time I'll let you have a minute extra to work on it before you go." KRKL closed the van door, unsheathed her blade and made her way towards a fence as the van pulled away.

Denver looked around as he pocketed his pad, there was thick cloud cover and it was starting to rain. It looked like a serious storm was about to erupt and sunlight was in short supply. They were on a rather barren, flat stretch of land, the only things visible were a mass of electrical pylons carrying wires to all the corners of the horizon, and a large group of buildings nearby surrounded by a long, tall, chainlink fence.

KRKL swung quickly at the fence and fashioned a doorway with her blade, "Hurry up!" she called and ran through towards one of the larger buildings with lit windows. Denver and Ninety followed at the same increased pace as the rain started to fall more heavily, and loudly. The sound of water hammering the old concrete surface all around them became

deafening, but Denver reasoned at least it was shielding the sound of their approach, and probably helped with visibility too.

As they ran, Denver started to appreciate just how large the largest of the buildings were. Even as some of the nearer buildings grew in perspective, the largest barely shifted. He estimated they must be at least 20 floors tall, and four times as wide. Though it was clear they were falling into disrepair, as was the case with most Kama infrastructure it hadn't been serviced in many years, and probably hadn't been touched since as far back as the 1990's.

"Down, now!" KRKL shouted over the rain, and dropped to a prone position on the sodden concrete, rain water splashing around her. Denver and Ninety quickly followed suit and crawled forward to meet her. Her gaze seemed to be fixed on a building some fifty meters away.

"What is it?" Denver asked, trying to wipe the rain from his eyes so he could get a better look.

"Security cam," KRKL said, not looking away, "It's on a recognisable patter but you can't move fast enough to get by." Denver saw her eyes make short sharp darting motions as she evaluated the building before her. "I'm going to take out the camera, count to nineteen and then run to that corner of the building there, the window that isn't lit. I'll let you in through there."

"Count to nineteen? are you su-"

"Start counting now." At that KRKL got up and ran towards the building at a speed Denver hadn't ever seen a person move before, except the person who had rescued DiZ from the assassin. within a second she was nothing but a small speck and then she was beyond a distance where Denver could focus in such heavy rain.

Denver was stunned, but was brought back to the present by ninety, "That's nineteen seconds, let's go." The two got up and ran towards the window KRKL had specified, slipping a little on the way as the ground had already soaked up all the water it could manage and was becoming more and more slick. Denver was even more impressed that KRKL had crossed it so effortlessly. Just as they reached the window there was a flash of lightning and the almost immediate roar of thunder. The storm was getting serious.

KRKL pulled open the window from the inside and gave Ninety and Denver a hand into the building. "Security is out cold, same with the station monitors. we have maybe fifteen minutes before another unit gets suspicious and walks in on us."

Denver nodded, brushed his saturated hair back and wiped the water from his face, "Where is the control room?"

"Top floor, follow me."

-

The three entered the control room on the top floor, it was a wide room with tall windows that gave a clear view of the larger buildings from the control workstation in the center of the room, as Denver had suspected the interface was largely out of date, fortunately he

was used to working with keyboards, mice and non tact-screens, and he had a pocketful of appropriate adaptors just in case.

As he got set up there was a bright flash of lightning and a deafening clap as a bolt violently struck the building in front of the control room.

“Holy fuck,” Ninety gasped, and then thought, “Can’t that storm knock out the power? won’t that screw things up?”

Denver continued unflustered, speaking as he did so “The building is designed with taking lightning strikes in mind, it’s kind of inevitable whenever you have something sticking up like that with nothing else around. everything for greater than the size of this storm is essentially lightning-proof. A storm won’t stop Kama from going online tonight.”

KRKL consulted her pad and then turned on a screen in the corner of the room, denver saw fires and crowds of people in Kama’s capital square reflected off the control room’s window, rain running down the background of the image.

“How long will it take for your process to completely execute?” KRKL asked, turning to Denver.

Denver consulted the readout on the system, monitoring the nationwide power flow of this and the other stations, then took an educated guess. “About half an hour if all goes well, I think?”

KRKL consulted the time on her pad tapped a few buttons and spoke sharply. “You have five minutes to get started.”

Denver nodded and got back to his checks, everything seemed to be in order but a couple of adjustments could be made to optimise some the generation based on the networks current conditions. He just had to tweak things so it suited the grid’s mood better he thought.

KRKL and Ninety kept one eye on the news screen, and one on Denver, furiously working. But it wasn’t long before the screen blanked and switched to a test image.

“Looks like the station was taken down.” KRKL said.

“Isn’t that a government channel, why would the state surpress it?”

“Different state.” KRKL nodded towards the screen as the image changed again to a man wearing a freeState mask, standing in a crowd in the capital’s square. He proceeded to lead the camera around, pointing out clashes with soldiers and zooming in on a scene where a young woman was having her clothes ripped off her by police as her friends tried to pull her back into the crowd.

“Fuck.”

“It’s going to get worse.” KRKL sighed, she freezed the stream and pointed at a silhouette on a roof by the square, “Snipers.”

Ninety sighed, a little shaken. “How long till things we move in?”

“We already are, but we only have a handful of alphas in the capital. People are going to get really hurt before we can stop them.”

The freeState reporter directed the camera to a large display on the side of a building that had just come on, it showed a room full of around forty people, bags over their heads and hands tied behind their backs.

“They are going to start the execution *now!*?” Ninety asked, KRKL checked her pad and looked back to the screen. “I don’t think so, seems they are going to give it about fifteen minutes, give everyone a chance to be watching. Not a good demonstration of power if nobody is looking.”

“I think,” Denver turned to KRKL and Ninety, wiping some sweat from his forehead, “I’m good to go.”

“Do it.” KRKL said, “Now.”

Denver tapped the corner of his pad, typed something into the station’s console and hit return. The building’s lights started to flicker slightly and Denver knew his program was spreading, though he wondered if it was too late, internet to everyone in Kama or not, it wasn’t going to stop an execution, it wasn’t going to stop the soldiers from massacring the people protesting in the streets.

But inconsiderate of it’s creator’s concerns, Denver’s program rushed across the nation of Kama, a series of specific electrical pulses that reached other power stations, infecting their controlling computers with a virus identical to the program he had just created, tricking it’s way in through the monitoring subsystems. From the power stations the signal pulsed down the power lines to every nanite fabrication unit, DNC and factory along the grid, which due to the needs of such an isolationist country, were within a couple of miles of wherever there were people. A hundred different types of nanite were fabricated, and then ‘nite fab vats across the country exploded, sending Denver’s tailor made system up into the air, winds carried the nites around, and some of the nites themselves maneuvered those around them for ideal distribution. Within minutes, powerlines along the country were crawling with nanites, and the country of Kama itself was bit by bit becoming the largest Distributed Nanite Collective entity in the world. The ‘nites themselves now formed a system with huge processing power and could draw power directly from the lines.

The ‘nites followed power wherever it was drawn, and at high speed, quickly replicating using redundant systems that Kama had from even older infrastructure, systems Denver had specifically designated as ‘food’. The number of nites grew, they seeped into every home drawing power, and reached every TV and radio in the country that was connected to the grid. The ‘nites then fabbed an interface onto the TV screens, and to the side of the radios, and various other equipment too.

Denver looked at the reports on his pad as this happened, in another ten minutes, everyone in the country would have a touchscreen TV connected to the outside world’s internet. Ha’s blackout would be over, and nobody would suspect a thing until his freshly ‘fabbed ‘nite-screens lit up alerting the populace they were online.

He turned to the screen to see the first of the prisoners being led away from the others and onto a stage with the Kama flag behind them.

Chapter 45

“Are you seeing this?”

“Of course, we’re all seeing everything the mole is seeing.”

“I mean, what should we do? can’t we intervene at all?”

“Why should we, what does it matter if they network goes up?”

“A win for freeState is a loss for us.”

“I concur also, what are our options at this point?”

“haha, what do you want me to do, have the whole thing blow up?”

“Well, *could* we do that?”

“ well with the mole’s ‘nites we could... hmm, how about we let the mole sabotage freeState? I suspect he’s in a position to paint them in a pretty bad light at this moment.”

“That sounds promising.”

“It wasn’t part of the plan though, and it’s a little unpredictable.”

“Do it, intervention to make plays that fall in our favour is a part of the revised plan.”

“You all sure about this? I’m not going to do it unless there is a consensus, I don’t want any of you blaming be if this shit goes tit’s up.”

“Are there any objections?”

“...right then, I’ll get on it. hold onto your pants.”

Chapter 46

Anil’s knee’s wrists, shoulders and eyes eached. The stage was hard and solid, his cuffs were sharp and cold and pulled his arms back uncomfortably, and his tears stung.

Someone pulled the bag off his head and the studio light in his face was blinding. There were two things running through his head, rapidly and relentlessly. the first was fear, he was going to be Killed. Anil had never tried to face his own mortality before and regretted it, he wasn’t going to live long enough to think about it when he reached old age. ‘*old age*’ was a concept that was about to be stolen from him along with everything else. But even worse than the fear, the other thing screaming around his mind was sadness. His wife and young daughter were going to see him get killed. Maybe not live, but sooner or later the

image of his blood and life leaving his body would find its way to their eyes, and this was where his true despair came from.

He didn't care about Ha, Kama or any of that, he didn't care about freedom, his people, his neighbours, friends or any of his extended family. All he wanted was for his wife and daughter to be spared the image of his death, he tried to plead with whoever stood beyond the glare of the studio spotlight, but he was gagged too tightly and only a faint muffled moan came. He began to weep again, tortured by his helplessness.

A woman strode forward in front of the spotlight towards Anil, she pulled out a revolver and loaded it, clearly animating herself doing so for the sake of the camera. She then announced that for the good of Kama, and in service of her President Ha and her country, all traitors would be put to death. She raised her revolver hand toward Anil's temple, proud of this, her defining moment in front of the camera. Anil shut his eyes tightly and thought of his daughter.

But no gunshot came, Anil pushed his eyes tightly, afraid to even hope that maybe the gunshot would never come.

What did come was the sound of a thud as something landed on the stage, and a slight woosh of air as the woman seemed to fall, Anil dared to open his eyes a little, and saw the woman's head and body, separated, on the stage beside him. He found he was surrounded by a handful of people holding blades, bearing freeState masks. They proclaimed that from this moment on, anyone supporting Ha's mistreatment of the people of Kama would be treated similarly, and that the revolution had begun.

One of the masked people turned to Anil, cutting him free from his bindings and untying his gag. The masked man hugged Anil, who wept again, the most painful, most relieved cries he had ever had.

Chapter 47

Denver breathed a sigh of relief, he wouldn't have to watch a man shot in the head for now at least.

"So freeState is stepping in then?" He asked, "If that's the case, why was my system's implementation so time-sensitive?"

KRKL didn't turn from the screen, "Keep watching".

Ninety looked at Denver, he seemed to be doing OK, and then looked at Denver's pad. The process was complete.

The stream flickered again, to a different set of bladed, freeState masked people, moving through the extravagant hallways of a large building.

"That's the presidential palace." KRKL nodded.

When a couple of soldiers pushed out a door and aimed at the masked group with assault rifles, a couple of the bladed figures dashed forward from the camera, at the remarkable

speed Denver recalled KRKL manouevering at earlier, and incapacitated them. This happened a couple more times before all further soldiers were just awaiting the masked force with their rifles on the floor and their hands in the air. The presidential office was stormed and the camera got a clear picture of Ha in soiled trousers.

Beyond his relief, Denver started to feel a little shaken and unnerved.

within minutes the group had escorted Ha to the front of the palace, where a crowd of thousands had gathered outside. along the front of the palace a giant screen display was beamed, Denver recognised it's contents immediately. It was an aggregate display of the entirety of the freeState, much like the one in the snackery back at amaterasu's hideout. the message on the display shuffled a bit, but within a short time one message grew out of all the others;

"Kama, this is a gift to you from freeState. do with it as you please."

Given this cue, the masked group threw their prisoner down the steps of the palace towards the crowd below. What the mob did to Ha was ugly, but Denver couldn't think of a good argument for why it wasn't exactly what Ha deserved.

He felt more shaken and grabbed his head.

"Are you OK?" Ninety asked him, even with the events on the screen, he knew his job was still to keep an eye on Denver.

"I'll be OK, it's just a headache." Denver gripped his head tighter, his hands shaking slightly, "It's probably... just a lack of sleep."

The pain stopped and Denver smiled at Ninety "Actually, it seems the pain has gone away. nothing to worry about." Denver calmly turned to his pad. "Just going to do a few checks, make sure everything was set up alright."

Ninety was concerned, was *this* the odd behaviour he was told to look out for, he reached into his pocket and looked over Denver's shoulder to the pad screen. *'that can't be right, can it!?'* Ninety may not have been a genius, but he could recognise a system so clearly designed to overload. Denver was planning to detonate every single thing in the country his 'nites were connected to. Ninety pulled the needle from his pocket, uncapped it, and drove it into Denver's neck. denver collapsed to the floor and ninety pulled denver's pad from the system, flashing it with a hand EMP gun.

"Problem?" KRKL asked

"Nothing amaterasu didn't suspect, we're OK for now though."

Chapter 48

Amaterasu was glued to the screen, now was the time. She pulled up her software on her pad, made a couple of final tweaks and hit send. Her program flew down the net, the display on the front of the Kama presidential palace changed and every device on Denver's lit up with the message.

“Kama, the freeState welcomes you. Join?/Decline?”

People across Kama didn't hesitate, the crowds outside screamed their choice and everywhere across the nation people were voting on their TVs, radios and whatever else had popped to live through Denver's 'nite net.

a bar chart filled the screen with a few statistics around the borders, within a minute the vast majority of the population had voted, and 97% had voted join. A clear majority.

The screen on the presidential palace walls flipped back to the aggregate of freeState, it was flooded with cheers welcoming the people of Kama to the state, and newly liberated citizens saying how excited they were to be free of Ha.

Amaterasu leaned back in her chair, her input wasn't needed any more for this situation, the state could take care of the rest itself. The plan had worked out almost perfectly. Amaterasu messaged the alphas, congratulating them on a job well done.

There was a beep from one of her many screens and Amaterasu knew had a new message on her personal channel from ninety.

“Fuck.”

Chapter 49

Nilworth leaned forward over the conference table and paused somberly. He scratched his beard a little and began, “As I'm sure you're aware, the actions of freeState yesterday...” He paused, took a heavy breath and continued, “Have changed the game somewhat.”

Nilworth sighed, leaned back and looked out of the window at the grey day beyond it. “Whether freeState is a threat or not, is a decision that was made by the government last night, with the aid of the news feeds and some supplementary material this committee had already prepared. Of course, it is clear that this freeState organisation does pose a national danger. Overnight they effectively took over a single country and there was nothing that could be done to stop it. They are now recognised by our government as a terrorist organisation.”

Nilworth turned back to the table and formed a pyramid with his fingers, “Ultimately, as a national security threat, addressing the freeState is no longer the responsibility of this committee and I shall be hereby dismissing you today. The government thanks you wholeheartedly for your service. Some of you will be called upon to perform further duties, if you don't object, but I'm afraid we can't allow civilians to continue to inform government action on this issue.”

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As the committee slowly filtered out Golapis approached Fiona, “Looks like things are getting more serious huh?”

“It seems that way.” She nodded in agreement,

“Look, I had hoped to have more time to approach you about this, but my proposal of a job offer still stands.”

“You want to pay me to hack into other companies’ systems?”

Golapis smiled and chuckled a little, “No no, nothing so underhanded. My head designer is quite gifted and he’s working on new stuff all the time, but because it’s so new it’s often difficult to see where the security flaws lie. We could do with a real expert to try and break into the things.”

“Ahh, QA work? it’s not my forté, but I could do it. However-”

“Your services don’t come cheap!” Golapis chuckled again, “Trust me, *tree* can afford you. Do think about it OK?”

“I will.” Fiona nodded as Golapis turned away, bumping into Nilworth as he did so.

“Ah, Dan. I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more service to you. shame this has to be goodbye.” Golapis grabbed Nilworth’s hand and shook it firmly

“That is much appreciated Mr. Golapis” Nilworth responded, withdrawing his hand. Fiona was glad to see Nilworth wasn’t as happy to be talking to Golapis as Golapis seemed to be talking to nilworth.

“You will do your best to stop those terrorists won’t you? I’m rooting for you.”

“We will always do what is best for the country Mr. Golapis, of that you can be sure.”

“Excellent.” Golapis beamed with his signature tree CEO grin, “Well then, I’d best be off, goodbye.” At that he paced down the hall, and Nilworth turned back towards Fiona. “Do you have anything you’d like to say before you depart Ms Silvor?”

Fiona watched the back of Golapis as he turned into an elevator, and the other super billionaires were either busy conversing or also leaving. “I do have a few papers to hand over actually.”

“Very well, in my office then please.” Nilworth turned and headed down the corridor again, Fiona following closely.

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“Well?”

“As far as I can tell, nobody on the committee is a member of freeState.”

Nilworth rounded his desk and sat in his chair, “I see, so...” he scratched his beard a little and frowned, “I take it you have *something else* to report instead?”

“Five members of the committee, all worth over a hundred billion individually, have made frequent encrypted connections to somewhere on the net. And all at overlapping times.

The signature is nothing like freeState either. My guess is they are having some kind of conference call, probably with others, perhaps many others outside the committee.”

“I see,” Nilworth nodded, “and you are absolutely certain it is not a part of some freestate activity?”

Fiona had to be careful to avoid saying ‘*sure, I could recognise a freeState connection a mile off, I wrote half of them!*’ “Yes, the connections are totally unique. FreeState traffic seems to be indistinguishable from the normal connections you see, otherwise we’d have noticed it by now. This was different.”

“What would you assume the purpose of these... conference calls, are exactly Ms Silvor?”

“Honestly I don’t know, the activity *does* seem to correlate with freeState activity and has been occurring for a few months now. If I had to guess, I’d say the committee you just disbanded wasn’t the only one concerned with freeState.”

“It does sound likely, the private sector wouldn’t rely on a single government to deal with a global threat, especially one that was already eating into their profits. The Mundrich case is an example of this I suppose, but it makes sense not every commercial interest would act so rashly.” Mundrich looked up at Fiona and smiled, “I suppose if you want to become so exceptionally wealthy it helps to stay pretty shrewd.”

Nilworth nodded and stood up, “Thank you Ms Silvor, I’ll keep this in mind and your input shall of course remain anonymous.”

“Thank you Mr Nilworth, I appreciate that.” Fiona shook Nilworth’s hand, he didn’t recoil as he had with Golapis, a good sign, “Is there anything else I could do for you?”

Nilworth scratched his head, “Hmm, well to tell the truth we’ll be a while getting things organised around here for the freeState thing. Not sure if we have any use for you right now.” He smiled again, “Didn’t Golapis offer you a job? perhaps you could do that to make some money for the time being?”

Fiona nodded and smiled, no way he would suggest that after *that* report unless he was curious, and Fiona was curious too. “I’ll consider it, thanks for the tip.”

Chapter 50

Everything was bright white light and bit by bit, Denver faded into existence, and before long he was falling again, with amaterasu falling behind him again. This time she wasn’t alone though, there was a man falling with her, about Denver’s age. The man reminded denver of an old college friend. Denver knew his face was nothing but a mask, he wondered if he even cared if it was on or off, since beneath it he was the same.

He had a flash memory of spiders falling out of him.

Was he dangerous?

The white faded back, and he heard a man's voice, familiar. "Geez Denv, how'd you get into so much trouble?"

He woke up in his own bed, back in his room. He tried to remember how he got there, how much had been a dream? freeState, a revolution, him making a system that spread across an entire country? that didn't sound like anything he could have been a part of. The whole thing must have been another 'nite trip. He must have fallen off the wagon some time after the Kid's mother came to him.

He turned over in bed.

He imagined he probably just blew the money that night on some shady software and the whole thing was part of some high. His head and body ached a lot, lending weight to his theory.

The bed was still cold, at least this high hadn't lasted too long. This time for sure he would get to an EMP clinic to wipe any offending 'nites, and if all the local ones were closed again, he would keep traveling till he found one that was open for business.

Denver's temples throbbed, had he even tried to wipe the 'nites before? just where did reality separate from his memories. was freeState real at all? Did he even get a client? Did he ever even decide not to take the illicit 'nites anymore?

He started recent and worked his way back, he had tried to kill millions of people, including himself. There was no way that was real, even if the other things seemed possible, that was just beyond anything Denver could accept.

He sat up and after giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the daylight, he looked around.

His room was clean.

Well that confirmed his memories up to a point, he had definitely tidied his apartment. He decided to get up and take a shower, he'd resolve his memories as he went about his day.

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Denver booted up his workstation and immediately found files relating to Daniel's death. Another memory confirmed. Denver breathed a sigh of relief after looking around his workstation data drives and finding nothing relating directly to freeState.

Then he remembered that he also maintained some private servers distributed across the net. Checking them, he found all his various hacks and systems he had worked on in college and they had seen a lot of activity recently. The last modified document was one that he had been working on a month ago, a program tailored to connect the country of Kama to the net.

Denver was already seated, but still managed to fall back into his chair. There was no denying it, he was a revolutionary.

But still questions remained, why did he remember nothing from the past month? and why was his last memory an attempt at mass murder?

Denver had often been a proponent of coolly thinking things out before making a move, but on this occasion, his cool reasoning told him that what he really needed to do was to get a drink.

Denver finished getting dressed, grabbed his coat and headed out to the nearest bar locking the door behind him.

On his desk his pad lit up, one new message waiting to be read.