

SNOW
CRASH

This edition contains the complete text
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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

SNOW CRASH

A Bantam Spectra Book

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The Deliverator belongs to an elite order, a hallowed sub-category. He's got esprit up to here. Right now, he is preparing to carry out his third mission of the night. His uniform is black as activated charcoal, filtering the very light out of the air. A bullet will bounce off its arachno-fiber weave like a wren hitting a patio door, but excess perspiration wafts through it like a breeze through a freshly napalmed forest. Where his body has bony extremities, the suit has sintered armorgel: feels like gritty jello, protects like a stack of telephone books.

When they gave him the job, they gave him a gun. The Deliverator never deals in cash, but someone might come after him anyway—might want his car, or his cargo. The gun is tiny, aero-styled, lightweight, the kind of a gun a fashion designer would carry; it fires teensy darts that fly at five times the velocity of an SR-71 spy plane, and when you get done using it, you have to plug it into the cigarette lighter, because it runs on electricity.

The Deliverator never pulled that gun in anger, or in fear. He pulled it once in Gila Highlands. Some punks in Gila Highlands, a fancy Burbclave, wanted themselves a delivery, and they didn't want to pay for it. Thought they would impress the Deliverator with a baseball bat. The Deliverator took out his gun, centered its laser doohickey on that poised Louisville Slugger, fired it. The recoil was immense, as though the weapon had blown up in his hand. The middle third of the baseball bat turned into a column of burning sawdust accelerating in all directions like a bursting star. Punk ended up holding this bat handle with milky smoke pouring out the end. Stupid look on his face. Didn't get nothing but trouble from the Deliverator.

Since then the Deliverator has kept the gun in the glove compartment and relied, instead, on a matched set of samurai swords, which have always been his weapon of choice anyhow. The punks in Gila Highlands weren't afraid of the gun, so the Deliverator was forced to use it. But swords need no demonstrations.

The Deliverator's car has enough potential energy packed into its batteries to fire a pound of bacon into the Asteroid Belt. Unlike a bimbo box or a Burb beater, the Deliverator's car unloads that power through gaping, gleaming, polished sphincters. When the Deliverator puts the hammer down, shit happens. You want to talk contact patches? Your car's tires have tiny contact patches, talk to the asphalt in four places the size of your tongue. The Deliverator's car has big sticky tires with contact patches the size of a fat lady's thighs. The Deliverator is in touch with the road, starts like a bad day, stops on a peseta.

Why is the Deliverator so equipped? Because people rely on him. He is a roll model. This is America. People do whatever the fuck they feel like doing, you got a problem with that? Because they have a right to. And because they have guns and no one can fucking stop them. As a result, this country has one of the worst economies in the world. When it gets down to it—talking trade balances here—once we've brain-drained all our technology into other countries, once things have evened out, they're making cars in Bolivia and microwave ovens in Tadzhikistan and selling them here—once our edge in natural resources has been made irrelevant by giant Hong Kong ships and dirigibles that can ship North Dakota all the way to New Zealand for a nickel—once the Invisible Hand has taken all those historical inequities and smeared them out into a broad global layer of what a Pakistani brickmaker would consider to be prosperity—y'know what? There's only four things we do better than anyone else:

music
movies
microcode (software)
high-speed pizza delivery

The Deliverator used to make software. Still does, sometimes. But if life were a mellow elementary school run by well-meaning education Ph.D.s, the Deliverator's report card would say: "Hiro is so bright and creative but needs to work harder on his cooperation skills."

So now he has this other job. No brightness or creativity involved—but no cooperation either. Just a single principle: The Deliverator stands tall, your pie in thirty minutes or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, file a class-action suit. The Deliverator has been working this job for six months, a rich and lengthy tenure by his standards, and has never delivered a pizza in more than twenty-one minutes.

Oh, they used to argue over times, many corporate driver-years lost to it: homeowners, red-faced and sweaty with their own lies, stinking of Old Spice and job-related stress, standing in their glowing yellow doorways brandishing their Seikos and waving at the clock over the kitchen sink, I swear, can't you guys tell time?

Didn't happen anymore. Pizza delivery is a major industry. A managed industry. People went to CosaNostra Pizza University four years just to learn it. Came in its doors unable to write an English sentence, from Abkhazia, Rwanda, Guanajuato, South Jersey, and came out knowing more about pizza than a Bedouin knows about sand. And they had studied this problem. Graphed the frequency of doorway delivery-time disputes. Wired the early Deliverators to record, then analyze, the debating tactics, the voice-stress histograms, the distinctive grammatical structures employed by white middle-class Type A Burbclave occupants who against all logic had decided that this was the place to take their personal Custerian stand against all that was stale and deadening in their lives: they were going to lie, or delude themselves, about the time of their phone call and get themselves a free pizza; no, they deserved a free pizza along with their life, liberty, and pursuit of whatever, it was fucking inalienable. Sent psychologists out to these people's houses, gave them a free TV set to submit to an anonymous interview, hooked them to polygraphs, studied their brain

waves as they showed them choppy, inexplicable movies of porn queens and late-night car crashes and Sammy Davis, Jr., put them in sweet-smelling, mauve-walled rooms and asked them questions about Ethics so perplexing that even a Jesuit couldn't respond without committing a venial sin.

The analysts at CosaNostra Pizza University concluded that it was just human nature and you couldn't fix it, and so they went for a quick cheap technical fix: smart boxes. The pizza box is a plastic carapace now, corrugated for stiffness, a little LED readout glowing on the side, telling the Deliverator how many trade imbalance-producing minutes have ticked away since the fateful phone call. There are chips and stuff in there. The pizzas rest, a short stack of them, in slots behind the Deliverator's head. Each pizza glides into a slot like a circuit board into a computer, clicks into place as the smart box interfaces with the onboard system of the Deliverator's car. The address of the caller has already been inferred from his phone number and poured into the smart box's built-in RAM. From there it is communicated to the car, which computes and projects the optimal route on a heads-up display, a glowing colored map traced out against the windshield so that the Deliverator does not even have to glance down.

If the thirty-minute deadline expires, news of the disaster is flashed to CosaNostra Pizza Headquarters and relayed from there to Uncle Enzo himself—the Sicilian Colonel Sanders, the Andy Griffith of Bensonhurst, the straight razor-swinging figment of many a Deliverator's nightmares, the Capo and prime figurehead of CosaNostra Pizza, Incorporated—who will be on the phone to the customer within five minutes, apologizing profusely. The next day, Uncle Enzo will land on the customer's yard in a jet helicopter and apologize some more and give him a free trip to Italy—all he has to do is sign a bunch of releases that make him a public figure and spokesperson for CosaNostra Pizza and basically end his private life as he knows it. He will come away from the whole thing feeling that, somehow, he owes the Mafia a favor.

The Deliverator does not know for sure what happens to the driver in such cases, but he has heard some rumors. Most pizza deliveries happen in the evening hours, which Uncle Enzo considers to be his private time. And how would you feel if you had to interrupt dinner with your family in order to call some obstreperous dork in a Burbclave and grovel for a late fucking pizza? Uncle Enzo has not put in fifty years serving his family and his country so that, at the age when most are playing golf and bobbling their granddaughters, he can get out of the bathtub dripping wet and lie down and kiss the feet of some sixteen-year-old skate punk whose pepperoni was thirty-one minutes in coming. Oh, God. It makes the Deliverator breathe a little shallower just to think of the idea.

But he wouldn't drive for CosaNostra Pizza any other way. You know why? Because there's something about having your life on the line. It's like being a kamikaze pilot. Your mind is clear. Other people—store clerks, burger flippers, software engineers, the whole vocabulary of meaningless jobs that make up Life in America—other people just rely on plain old competition. Better flip your burgers or debug your subroutines faster and better than your high school classmate two blocks down the strip is flipping or debugging, because we're in competition with those guys, and people notice these things.

What a fucking rat race that is. CosaNostra Pizza doesn't have any competition. Competition goes against the Mafia ethic. You don't work harder because you're competing against some identical operation down the street. You work harder because everything is on the line. Your name, your honor, your family, your life. Those burger flippers might have a better life expectancy—but what kind of life is it anyway, you have to ask yourself. That's why nobody, not even the Nipponeese, can move pizzas faster than CosaNostra. The Deliverator is proud to wear the uniform, proud to drive the car, proud to march up the front walks of innumerable Burbclave homes, a grim vision in ninja black, a pizza on his shoulder, red LED digits blazing proud numbers into the night: 12:32 or 15:15 or the occasional 20:43.

The Deliverator is assigned to CosaNostra Pizza #3569 in the Valley. Southern California doesn't know whether to bustle or just strangle itself on the spot. Not enough roads for the number of people. Fairlanes, Inc. is laying new ones all the time. Have to bulldoze lots of neighborhoods to do it, but those seventies and eighties developments exist to be bulldozed, right? No sidewalks, no schools, no nothing. Don't have their own police force—no immigration control—undesirables can walk right in without being frisked or even harassed. Now a ~~part~~clave, that's the place to live. A city-state with its own constitution, a border, laws, cops, everything.

The Deliverator was a corporal in the Farms of Merryvale State Security Force for a while once. Got himself fired for pulling a sword on an acknowledged perp. Slid it right through the fabric of the perp's shirt, gliding the flat of the blade along the base of his neck, and pinned him to a warped and bubbled expanse of vinyl siding on the wall of the house that the perp was trying to break into. Thought it was a pretty righteous bust. But they fired him anyway because the perp turned out to be the son of the vice-chancellor of the Farms of Merryvale. Oh, the weasels had an excuse: said that a thirty-six-inch samurai sword was not on their Weapons Protocol. Said that he had violated the SPAC, the Suspected Perpetrator Apprehension Code. Said that the perp had suffered psychological trauma. He was afraid of butter knives now; he had to spread his jelly with the back of a teaspoon. They said that he had exposed them to liability.

The Deliverator had to borrow some money to pay for it. Had to borrow it from the Mafia, in fact. So he's in their database now—retinal patterns, DNA, voice graph, fingerprints, footprints, palm prints, wrist prints, every fucking part of the body that had wrinkles on it—almost—those bastards rolled in ink and made a print and digitized it into their computer. But it's their money—sure they're careful about loaning it out. And when he applied for the Deliverator job they were happy to take him, because they knew him. When he got the loan, he had to deal personally with the assistant vice-capo of the

Valley, who later recommended him for the Deliverator job. So it was like being in a family. A really scary, twisted, abusive family.

CosaNostra Pizza #3569 is on Vista Road just down from Kings Park Mall. Vista Road used to belong to the State of California and now is called Fairlanes, Inc. Rte. CSV-5. Its main competition used to be a U.S. highway and is now called Cruiseways, Inc. Rte. Cal-12. Farther up the Valley, the two competing highways actually cross. Once there had been bitter disputes, the intersection closed by sporadic sniper fire. Finally, a big developer bought the entire intersection and turned it into a drive-through mall. Now the roads just feed into a parking system—not a lot, not a ramp, but a system—and lose their identity. Getting through the intersection involves tracing paths through the parking system, many braided filaments of direction like the Ho Chi Minh trail. CSV-5 has better throughput, but Cal-12 has better pavement. That is typical—Fairlanes roads emphasize getting you there, for Type A drivers, and Cruiseways emphasize the enjoyment of the ride, for Type B drivers.

The Deliverator is a Type A driver with rabies. He is zeroing in on his home base, CosaNostra Pizza #3569, cranking up the left lane of CSV-5 at a hundred and twenty kilometers. His car is an invisible black lozenge, just a dark place that reflects the tunnel of franchise signs—the loglo. A row of orange lights bubbles and churns across the front, where the grille would be if this were an air-breathing car. The orange light looks like a gasoline fire. It comes in through people's rear windows, bounces off their rearview mirrors, projects a fiery mask across their eyes, reaches into their subconscious, and unearths terrible fears of being pinned, fully conscious, under a detonating gas tank, makes them want to pull over and let the Deliverator overtake them in his black chariot of pepperoni fire.

The loglo, overhead, marking out CSV-5 in twin contrails, is a body of electrical light made of innumerable cells, each cell designed in Manhattan by imageers who make more for designing a single logo than a Deliverator

will make in his entire lifetime. Despite their efforts to stand out, they all smear together, especially at a hundred and twenty kilometers per hour. Still, it is easy to see CosaNostra Pizza #3569 because of the billboard, which is wide and tall even by current inflated standards. In fact, the squat franchise itself looks like nothing more than a low-slung base for the great aramid fiber pillars that thrust the billboard up into the trademark firmament. Marca Registrada, baby.

The billboard is a classic, a chestnut, not a figment of some fleeting Mafia promotional campaign. It is a statement, a monument built to endure. Simple and dignified. It shows Uncle Enzo in one of his spiffy Italian suits. The pinstripes glint and flex like sinews. The pocket square is luminous. His hair is perfect, slicked back with something that never comes off, each strand cut off straight and square at the end by Uncle Enzo's cousin, Art the Barber, who runs the second-largest chain of low-end haircutting establishments in the world. Uncle Enzo is standing there, not exactly smiling, an avuncular glint in his eye for sure, not posing like a mod but standing there like your uncle would, and it says

The Mafia
you've got a friend in The Family!
paid for by the Our Thing Foundation

The billboard serves as the Deliverator's polestar. He knows that when he gets to the place on CSV-5 where the bottom corner of the billboard is obscured by the pseudo-Gothic stained-glass arches of the local Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates franchise, it's time for him to get over into the right lanes where the retards and the bimbo boxes poke along, random, indecisive, looking at each passing franchise's driveway like they don't know if it's a promise or a threat.

He cuts off a bimbo box—a family minivan—veers past the Buy 'n' Fly that is next door, and pulls into CosaNostra Pizza #3569. Those big fat contact patches complain, squeal a little bit, but they hold on to the pat-

ented Fairlanes, Inc. high-traction pavement and guide him into the chute. No other Deliverators are waiting in the chute. That is good, that means high turnover for him, fast action, keep moving that 'za. As he scrunches to a stop, the electromechanical hatch on the flank of his car is already opening to reveal his empty pizza slots, the door clicking and folding back in on itself like the wing of a beetle. The slots are waiting. Waiting for hot pizza.

And waiting. The Deliverator honks his horn. This is not a nominal outcome.

Window slides open. That should never happen. You can look at the three-ring binder from CosaNostra Pizza University, cross-reference the citation for *window, chute, dispatcher's*, and it will give you all the procedures for that window—and it should never be opened. Unless something has gone wrong.

The window slides open and—you sitting down?—smoke comes out of it. The Deliverator hears a discordant beetling over the metal hurricane of his sound system and realizes that it is a smoke alarm, coming from inside the franchise.

Mute button on the stereo. Oppressive silence—his eardrums uncringe—the window is buzzing with the cry of the smoke alarm. The car idles, waiting. The hatch has been open too long, atmospheric pollutants are congealing on the electrical contacts in the back of the pizza slots, he'll have to clean them ahead of schedule, everything is going exactly the way it shouldn't go in the three-ring binder that spells out all the rhythms of the pizza universe.

Inside, a football-shaped Abkhazian man is running to and fro, holding a three-ring binder open, using his spare tire as a ledge to keep it from collapsing shut; he runs with the gait of a man carrying an egg on a spoon. He is shouting in the Abkhazian dialect; all the people who run CosaNostra pizza franchises in this part of the Valley are Abkhazian immigrants.

It does not look like a serious fire. The Deliverator saw a real fire once, at the Farms of Merryvale, and you couldn't see anything for the smoke. That's all it was:

smoke, burbling out of nowhere, occasional flashes of orange light down at the bottom, like heat lightning in tall clouds. This is not that kind of fire. It is the kind of fire that just barely puts out enough smoke to detonate the smoke alarms. And he is losing time for this shit.

The Deliverator holds the horn button down. The Abkhazian manager comes to the window. He is supposed to use the intercom to talk to drivers, he could say anything he wanted and it would be piped straight into the Deliverator's car, but no, he has to talk face to face, like the Deliverator is some kind of fucking ox cart driver. He is red-faced, sweating, his eyes roll as he tries to think of the English words.

"A fire, a little one," he says.

The Deliverator says nothing. Because he knows that all of this is going onto videotape. The tape is being pipelined, as it happens, to *Cosa Nostra Pizza University*, where it will be analyzed in a pizza management science laboratory. It will be shown to *Pizza University* students, perhaps to the very students who will replace this man when he gets fired, as a textbook example of how to screw up your life.

"New employee—put his dinner in the microwave—had foil in it—boom!" the manager says.

Abkhazia had been part of the Soviet fucking Union. A new immigrant from Abkhazia trying to operate a microwave was like a deep-sea tube worm doing brain surgery. Where did they get these guys? Weren't there any Americans who could bake a fucking pizza?

"Just give me one pie," the Deliverator says.

Talking about pies snaps the guy into the current century. He gets a grip. He slams the window shut, strangling the relentless keening of the smoke alarm.

A Nipponese robot arm shoves the pizza out and into the top slot. The hatch folds shut to protect it.

As the Deliverator is pulling out of the chute, building up speed, checking the address that is flashed across his windshield, deciding whether to turn right or left, it happens. His stereo cuts out again—on command of the onboard system. The cockpit lights go red. Red. A repet-

itive buzzer begins to sound. The LED readout on his windshield, which echoes the one on the pizza box, flashes up: 20:00.

They have just given the Deliverator a twenty-minute-old pizza. He checks the address; it is twelve miles away.

2

The Deliverator lets out an involuntary roar and puts the hammer down. His emotions tell him to go back and kill that manager, get his swords out of the trunk, dive in through the little sliding window like a ninja, track him down through the moiling chaos of the microwaved franchise and confront him in a climactic thick-crust apocalypse. But he thinks the same thing when someone cuts him off on the freeway, and he's never done it—yet.

He can handle this. This is doable. He cranks up the orange warning lights to maximum brilliance, puts his headlights on autoflash. He overrides the warning buzzer, jams the stereo over to *Taxiscan*, which cruises all the taxi-driver frequencies listening for interesting traffic. Can't understand a fucking word. You could buy tapes, learn-while-you-drive, and learn to speak *Taxilinga*. It was essential, to get a job in that business. They said it was based on English but not one word in a hundred was recognizable. Still, you could get an idea. If there was trouble on this road, they'd be babbling about it in *Taxilinga*, give him some warning, let him take an alternate route so he wouldn't get

he grips the wheel
stuck in traffic
his eyes get big, he can feel the pressure driving
them back
into his skull
or caught behind a mobile home
his bladder is very full
and deliver the pizza
Oh, God oh, God
late

22:06 hangs on the windshield; all he can see, all he can think about is 30:01.

The taxi drivers are buzzing about something. Taxilinga is mellifluous babble with a few harsh foreign sounds, like butter spiced with broken glass. He keeps hearing "fare." They are always jabbering about their fucking fares. Big deal. What happens if you deliver your fare

late

you don't get as much of a tip? Big deal.

Big slowdown at the intersection of CSV-5 and Oahu Road, per usual, only way to avoid it is to cut through The Mews at Windsor Heights.

TMAWHs all have the same layout. When creating a new Burbclave, TMAWH Development Corporation will chop down any mountain ranges and divert the course of any mighty rivers that threaten to interrupt this street plan—ergonomically designed to encourage driving safety. A Deliverator can go into a Mews at Windsor Heights anywhere from Fairbanks to Yaroslavl to the Shenzhen special economic zone and find his way around.

But once you've delivered a pie to every single house in a TMAWH a few times, you get to know its little secrets. The Deliverator is such a man. He knows that in a standard TMAWH there is only one yard—one yard—that prevents you from driving straight in one entrance, across the Burbclave, and out the other. If you are squeamish about driving on grass, it might take you ten minutes to meander through TMAWH. But if you have the balls to lay tracks across that one yard, you have a straight shot through the center.

The Deliverator knows that yard. He has delivered pizzas there. He has looked at it, scoped it out, memorized the location of the shed and the picnic table, can find them even in the dark—knows that if it ever came to this, a twenty-three-minute pizza, miles to go, and a slowdown at CSV-5 and Oahu—he could enter The Mews at Windsor Heights (his electronic delivery-man's visa would raise the gate automatically), scream down

Heritage Boulevard, rip the turn onto Strawbridge Place (ignoring the DEAD END sign and the speed limit and the CHILDREN PLAYING ideograms that are strung so liberally throughout TMAWH), thrash the speed bumps with his mighty radials, blast up the driveway of Number 15 Strawbridge Circle, cut a hard left around the backyard shed, careen into the backyard of Number 84 Mayapple Place, avoid its picnic table (tricky), get into their driveway and out onto Mayapple, which takes him to Bellewood Valley Road, which runs straight to the exit of the Burbclave. TMAWH security police might be waiting for him at the exit, but their STDs, Severe Tire Damage devices, only point one way—they can keep people out, but not keep them in.

This car can go so fucking fast that if a cop took a bite of a doughnut as the Deliverator was entering Heritage Boulevard, he probably wouldn't be able to swallow it until about the time the Deliverator was shrieking out onto Oahu.

Thunk. And more red lights come up on the windshield: the perimeter security of the Deliverator's vehicle has been breached.

No. It can't be.

Someone is shadowing him. Right off his left flank. A person on a skateboard, rolling down the highway right behind him, just as he is laying in his approach vectors to Heritage Boulevard.

The Deliverator, in his distracted state, has allowed himself to get pooned. As in harpooned. It is a big round padded electromagnet on the end of an arachnofiber cable. It has just thunked onto the back of the Deliverator's car, and stuck. Ten feet behind him, the owner of this cursed device is surfing, taking him for a ride, skateboarding along like a water skier behind a boat.

In the rearview, flashes of orange and blue. The parasite is not just a punk out having a good time. It is a businessman making money. The orange and blue coverall, bulging all over with sintered armorgel padding, is the uniform of a Kourier. A Kourier from RadiKS, Radikal Kourier Systems. Like a bicycle messenger, but a hun-

dred times more irritating because they don't pedal under their own power—they just latch on and slow you down.

Naturally. The Deliverator was in a hurry, flashing his lights, squealing his contact patches. The fastest thing on the road. Naturally, the Kourier would choose him to latch onto.

No need to get rattled. With the shortcut through TMAWH, he will have plenty of time. He passes a slower car in the middle lane, then cuts right in front of him. The Kourier will have to unspoon or else be slammed sideways into the slower vehicle.

Done. The Kourier isn't ten feet behind him anymore—he is right there, peering in the rear window. Anticipating the maneuver, the Kourier reeled in his cord, which is attached to a handle with a power reel in it, and is now right on top of the pizza mobile, the front wheel of his skateboard actually underneath the Deliverator's rear bumper.

An orange-and-blue-gloved hand reaches forward, a transparent sheet of plastic draped over it, and slaps his driver's side window. The Deliverator has just been stickered. The sticker is a foot across and reads, in big orange block letters, printed backward so that he can read it from the inside.

THAT WAS STALE

He almost misses the turnoff for The Mews at Windsor Heights. He has to jam the brakes, let traffic clear, cut across the curb lane to enter the Burbclave. The border post is well lighted, the customs agents ready to frisk all comers—cavity-search them if they are the wrong kind of people—but the gate flies open as if by magic as the security system senses that this is a CosaNostra Pizza vehicle, just making a delivery, sir. And as he goes through, the Kourier—that tick on his ass—waves to the border police! What a prick! Like he comes in here all the time!

He probably does come in here all the time. Picking up important shit for important TMAWH people, delivering it to other FOQNÉs, Franchise-Organized Quasi-

National Entities, getting it through customs. That's what Kouriers do. Still.

He's going too slow, lost all his momentum, his timing is off. Where's the Kourier? Ah, reeled out some line, is following behind again. The Deliverator knows that this jerk is in for a big surprise. Can he stay on his fucking skateboard while he's being hauled over the flattened remains of some kid's plastic tricycle at a hundred kilometers? We're going to find out.

The Kourier leans back—the Deliverator can't help watching in the rearview—leans back like a water skier, pushes off against his board, and swings around beside him, now traveling abreast with him up Heritage Boulevard and *slap* another sticker goes up, this one on the windshield! It says

SMOOTH MOVE, EX-LAX

The Deliverator has heard of these stickers. It takes hours to get them off. Have to take the car into a detailing place, pay trillions of dollars. The Deliverator has two things on his agenda now: He is going to shake this street scum, whatever it takes, and deliver the fucking pizza all in the space of

24:23

the next five minutes and thirty-seven seconds.

This is it—got to pay more attention to the road—he swings into the side street, no warning, hoping maybe to whipsaw the Kourier into the street sign on the corner. Doesn't work. The smart ones watch your front tires, they see when you're turning, can't surprise them. Down Strawbridge Place! It seems so long, longer than he remembered—natural when you're in a hurry. Sees the glint of cars up ahead, cars parked sideways to the road—these must be parked in the circle. And there's the house. Light blue vinyl clapboard two-story with one-story garage to the side. He makes that driveway the center of his universe, puts the Kourier out of his mind, tries not to

think about Uncle Enzo, what he's doing right now—in the bath, maybe, or taking a crap, or making love to some actress, or teaching Sicilian songs to one of his twenty-six granddaughters.

The slope of the driveway slams his front suspension halfway up into the engine compartment, but that's what suspensions are for. He evades the car in the driveway—must have visitors tonight, didn't remember that these people drove a Lexus—cuts through the hedge, into the side yard, looks for that shed, that shed he absolutely must not run into

it's not there, they took it down

next problem, the picnic table in the next yard
hang on, there's a fence, when did they put up a fence?

This is no time to put on the brakes. Got to build up some speed, knock it down without blowing all this momentum. It's just a four-foot wooden thing.

The fence goes down easy, he loses maybe ten percent of his speed. But strangely, it looked like an old fence, maybe he made a wrong turn somewhere—he realizes, as he catapults into an empty backyard swimming pool.

If it had been full of water, that wouldn't have been so bad, maybe the car would have been saved, he wouldn't owe CosaNostra Pizza a new car. But no, he does a Stuka into the far wall of the pool, it sounds more like an explosion than a crash. The airbag inflates, comes back down a second later like a curtain revealing the structure of his new life: he is stuck in a dead car in an empty pool in a TMAWH, the sirens of the Burbclave's security police are approaching, and there's a pizza behind his head, resting there like the blade of a guillotine, with 25:17 on it.

"Where's it going?" someone says. A woman.

He looks up through the distorted frame of the window, now rimmed with a fractal pattern of crystallized safety glass. It is the Kourier talking to him. The Kourier is not a man, it is a young woman. A fucking teenaged girl. She is pristine, unhurt. She has skated right down into the pool, she's now oscillating back and forth from

one side of the pool to the other, skating up one bank, almost to the lip, turning around, skating down and across and up the opposite side. She is holding her poon in her right hand, the electromagnet reeled up against the handle so it looks like some kind of a strange wide-angle intergalactic death ray. Her chest glitters like a general's with a hundred little ribbons and medals, except each rectangle is not a ribbon, it is a bar code. A bar code with an ID number that gets her into a different business, highway, or FOQNE.

"Yo!" she says. "Where's the pizza going?"

He's going to die and she's *gamboling*.

"White Columns. 5 Oglethorpe Circle," he says.

"I can do that. Open the hatch."

His heart expands to twice its normal size. Tears come to his eyes. He may live. He presses a button and the hatch opens.

On her next orbit across the bottom of the pool, the Kourier yanks the pizza out of its slot. The Deliverator winces, imagining the garlicky topping accordioning into the back wall of the box. Then she puts it sideways under her arm. It's more than a Deliverator can stand to watch.

But she'll get it there. Uncle Enzo doesn't have to apologize for ugly, ruined, cold pizzas, just late ones.

"Hey," he says, "take this."

The Deliverator sticks his black-clad arm out the shattered window. A white rectangle glows in the dim backyard light: a business card. The Kourier snatches it from him on her next orbit, reads it. It says

HIRO PROTAGONIST

*Last of the freelance hackers
Greatest sword fighter in the world
Stringer, Central Intelligence Corporation
Specializing in software-related intel
(music, movies & microcode)*

On the back is gibberish explaining how he may be reached: a telephone number. A universal voice phone locator code. A P.O. box. His address on half a dozen electronic communications nets. And an address in the Metaverse.

"Stupid name," she says, shoving the card into one of a hundred little pockets on her coverall.

"But you'll never forget it," Hiro says.

"If you're a hacker..."

"How come I'm delivering pizzas?"

"Right."

"Because I'm a freelance hacker. Look, whatever your name is—I owe you one."

"Name's Y.T.," she says, shoving at the pool a few times with one foot, building up more energy. She flies out of the pool as if catapulted, and she's gone. The smartwheels of her skateboard, many, many spokes extending and retracting to fit the shape of the ground, take her across the lawn like a pat of butter skidding across hot Teflon.

Hiro, who as of thirty seconds ago is no longer the Deliverator, gets out of the car and pulls his swords out of the trunk, straps them around his body, prepares for a breathtaking nighttime escape run across TMAWH territory. The border with Oakwood Estates is only minutes away, he has the layout memorized (sort of), and he knows how these Burbclave cops operate, because he used to be one. So he has a good chance of making it. But it's going to be interesting.

Above him, in the house that owns the pool, a light has come on, and children are looking down at him through their bedroom windows, all warm and fuzzy in their Li'l Crips and Ninja Raft Warrior pajamas, which can either be flameproof or noncarcinogenic but not both at the same time. Dad is emerging from the back door, pulling on a jacket. It is a nice family, a safe family in a house full of light, like the family he was a part of until thirty seconds ago.

Hiro Protagonist and Vitaly Chernobyl, roommates, are chilling out in their home, a spacious 20-by-30 in a U-Stor-It in Inglewood, California. The room has a concrete slab floor, corrugated steel walls separating it from the neighboring units, and—this is a mark of distinction and luxury—a roll-up steel door that faces northwest, giving them a few red rays at times like this, when the sun is setting over LAX. From time to time, a 777 or a Sukhoi/Kawasaki Hypersonic Transport will taxi in front of the sun and block the sunset with its rudder, or just mangle the red light with its jet exhaust, braiding the parallel rays into a dappled pattern on the wall.

But there are worse places to live. There are much worse places right here in this U-Stor-It. Only the big units like this one have their own doors. Most of them are accessed via a communal loading dock that leads to a maze of wide corrugated-steel hallways and freight elevators. These are slum housing, 5-by-10s and 10-by-10s where Yanoama tribespersons cook beans and parboil fistfuls of coca leaves over heaps of burning lottery tickets.

It is whispered that in the old days, when the U-Stor-It was actually used for its intended purpose (namely, providing cheap extra storage space to Californians with too many material goods), certain entrepreneurs came to the front office, rented out 10-by-10s using fake IDs, filled them up with steel drums full of toxic chemical waste, and then abandoned them, leaving the problem for the U-Stor-It Corporation to handle. According to these rumors, U-Stor-It just padlocked those units and wrote them off. Now, the immigrants claim, certain units remain haunted by this chemical specter. It is a story they tell their children, to keep them from trying to break into padlocked units.

No one has ever tried to break into Hiro and Vitaly's unit because there's nothing in there to steal, and at this point in their lives, neither one of them is important enough to kill, kidnap, or interrogate. Hiro owns a couple

of nice Nipponese swords, but he always wears them, and the whole idea of stealing fantastically dangerous weapons presents the would-be perp with inherent dangers and contradictions: When you are wrestling for possession of a sword, the man with the handle always wins. Hiro also has a pretty nice computer that he usually takes with him when he goes anywhere. Vitaly owns half a carton of Lucky Strikes, an electric guitar, and a hangover.

At the moment, Vitaly Chernobyl is stretched out on a futon, quiescent, and Hiro Protagonist is sitting cross-legged at a low table, Nipponese style, consisting of a cargo pallet set on cinderblocks.

As the sun sets, its red light is supplanted by the light of many neon logos emanating from the franchise ghetto that constitutes this U-Stor-It's natural habitat. This light, known as loglo, fills in the shadowy corners of the unit with ~~seedy~~ oversaturated colors.

Hiro has cappuccino skin and spiky, truncated dreadlocks. His hair does not cover as much of his head as it used to, but he is a young man, by no means bald or balding, and the slight retreat of his hairline only makes more of his high cheekbones. He is wearing shiny goggles that wrap halfway around his head; the bows of the goggles have little earphones that are plugged into his outer ears.

The earphones have some built-in noise cancellation features. This sort of thing works best on steady noise. When jumbo jets make their takeoff runs on the runway across the street, the sound is reduced to a low doodling hum. But when Vitaly Chernobyl thrashes out an experimental guitar solo, it still hurts Hiro's ears.

The goggles throw a light, smoky haze across his eyes and reflect a distorted wide-angle view of a brilliantly lit boulevard that stretches off into an infinite blackness. This boulevard does not really exist; it is a computer-rendered view of an imaginary place.

Beneath this image, it is possible to see Hiro's eyes, which look Asian. They are from his mother, who is Korean by way of Nippon. The rest of him looks more like his father, who was African by way of Texas by way of

the Army—back in the days before it got split up into a number of competing organizations such as General Jim's Defense System and Admiral Bob's National Security.

Four things are on the cargo pallet: a bottle of expensive beer from the Puget Sound area, which Hiro cannot really afford; a long sword known in Nippon as a *katana* and a short sword known as a *wakizashi*—Hiro's father looted these from Japan after World War II went atomic—and a computer.

The computer is a featureless black wedge. It does not have a power cord, but there is a narrow translucent plastic tube emerging from a hatch on the rear, spiraling across the cargo pallet and the floor, and plugged into a crudely installed fiber-optics socket above the head of the sleeping Vitaly Chernobyl. In the center of the plastic tube is a hair-thin fiber-optic cable. The cable is carrying a lot of information back and forth between Hiro's computer and the rest of the world. In order to transmit the same amount of information on paper, they would have to arrange for a 747 cargo freighter packed with telephone books and encyclopedias to power-dive into their unit every couple of minutes, forever.

Hiro can't really afford the computer either, but he has to have one. It is a tool of his trade. In the worldwide community of hackers, Hiro is a talented drifter. This is the kind of lifestyle that sounded romantic to him as recently as five years ago. But in the bleak light of full adulthood, which is to one's early twenties as Sunday morning is to Saturday night, he can clearly see what it really amounts to: He's broke and unemployed. And a few short weeks ago, his tenure as a pizza deliverer—the only pointless dead-end job he really enjoys—came to an end. Since then, he's been putting a lot more emphasis on his auxiliary emergency backup job: freelance stringer for the CIC, the Central Intelligence Corporation of Langley, Virginia.

The business is a simple one. Hiro gets information. It may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document. It can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster.

He uploads it to the CIC database—the Library, formerly the Library of Congress, but no one calls it that anymore. Most people are not entirely clear on what the word “congress” means. And even the word “library” is getting hazy. It used to be a place full of books, mostly old ones. Then they began to include videotapes, records, and magazines. Then all of the information got converted into machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes. And as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more and more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortunately, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked out a big fat stock offering.

Millions of other CIC stringers are uploading millions of other fragments at the same time. CIC's clients, mostly large corporations and Sovereigns, rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something that Hiro put into it, Hiro gets paid.

A year ago, he uploaded an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent's wastebasket in Burbank. Half a dozen studios wanted to see it. He ate and vacationed off of that one for six months.

Since then, times have been leaner. He has been learning the hard way that 99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all.

Case in point: After a certain Kourier tipped him off to the existence of Vitaly Chernobyl, he put a few intensive weeks into researching a new musical phenomenon—the rise of Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge collectives in L.A. He has planted exhaustive notes on this trend in the Library, including video and audio. Not one single record label, agent, or rock critic has bothered to access it.

The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this

lens emerges and clicks into place, its base flush with the surface of the computer. The neighborhood logo is curved and foreshortened on its surface.

Hiro finds it erotic. This is partly because he hasn't been properly laid in—several weeks. But there's more to it. Hiro's father, who was stationed in Japan for many years, was obsessed with cameras. He kept bringing them back from his stints in the Far East, encased in many protective layers, so that when he took them out to show Hiro, it was like watching an exquisite striptease as they emerged from all that black leather and nylon, zippers and straps. And once the lens was finally exposed, pure geometric equation made real, so powerful and vulnerable at once, Hiro could only think it was like nuzzling through skirts and lingerie and outer labia and inner labia. . . . It made him feel naked and weak and brave.

The lens can see half of the universe—the half that is above the computer, which includes most of Hiro. In this way, it can generally keep track of where Hiro is and what direction he's looking in.

Down inside the computer are three lasers—a red one, a green one, and a blue one. They are powerful enough to make a bright light but not powerful enough to burn through the back of your eyeball and broil your brain, fry your frontals, lase your lobes. As everyone learned in elementary school, these three colors of light can be combined, with different intensities, to produce any color that Hiro's eye is capable of seeing.

In this way, a narrow beam of any color can be shot out of the innards of the computer, up through that fish-eye lens, in any direction. Through the use of electronic mirrors inside the computer, this beam is made to sweep back and forth across the lenses of Hiro's goggles, in much the same way as the electron beam in a television paints the inner surface of the eponymous Tube. The resulting image hangs in space in front of Hiro's view of Reality.

By drawing a slightly different image in front of each eye, the image can be made three-dimensional. By changing the image seventy-two times a second, it can be made

to move. By drawing the moving three-dimensional image at a resolution of 2K pixels on a side, it can be as sharp as the eye can perceive, and by pumping stereo digital sound through the little earphones, the moving 3-D pictures can have a perfectly realistic soundtrack.

So Hiro's not actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse. Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It.

WT

Hiro is approaching the Street. It is the Broadway, the Champs Elysées of the Metaverse. It is the brilliantly lit boulevard that can be seen, miniaturized and backward, reflected in the lenses of his goggles. It does not really exist. But right now, millions of people are walking up and down it.

The dimensions of the Street are fixed by a protocol, hammered out by the computer-graphics ninja overlords of the Association for Computing Machinery's Global Multimedia Protocol Group. The Street seems to be a grand boulevard going all the way around the equator of a black sphere with a radius of a bit more than ten thousand kilometers. That makes it 65,536 kilometers around, which is considerably bigger than Earth.

The number 65,536 is an awkward figure to everyone except a hacker, who recognizes it more readily than his own mother's date of birth: It happens to be a power of $2 - 2^{16}$ power to be exact—and even the exponent 16 is equal to 2^4 , and 4 is equal to 2^2 . Along with 256; 32,768; and 2,147,483,648; 65,536 is one of the foundation stones of the hacker universe, in which 2 is the only really important number because that's how many digits a computer can recognize. One of those digits is 0, and the other is 1. Any number that can be created by fetishistically multiplying 2s by each other, and subtracting the occasional 1, will be instantly recognizable to a hacker.

Like any place in Reality, the Street is subject to de-

velopment. Developers can build their own small streets feeding off of the main one. They can build buildings, parks, signs, as well as things that do not exist in Reality, such as vast hovering overhead light shows, special neighborhoods where the rules of three-dimensional spacetime are ignored, and free-combat zones where people can go to hunt and kill each other.

The only difference is that since the Street does not really exist—it's just a computer-graphics protocol written down on a piece of paper somewhere—none of these things is being physically built. They are, rather, pieces of software, made available to the public over the worldwide fiber-optics network. When Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the Street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness, disappearing over the curve of the globe, he is actually staring at the graphic representations—the user interfaces—of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations. In order to place these things on the Street, they have had to get approval from the Global Multimedia Protocol Group, have had to buy frontage on the Street, get zoning approval, obtain permits, bribe inspectors, the whole bit. The money these corporations pay to build things on the Street all goes into a trust fund owned and operated by the GMPG, which pays for developing and expanding the machinery that enables the Street to exist.

Hiro has a house in a neighborhood just off the busiest part of the Street. It is a very old neighborhood by Street standards. About ten years ago, when the Street protocol was first written, Hiro and some of his buddies pooled their money and bought one of the first development licenses, created a little neighborhood of hackers. At the time, it was just a little patchwork of light amid a vast blackness. Back then, the Street was just a necklace of streetlights around a black ball in space.

Since then, the neighborhood hasn't changed much, but the Street has. By getting in on it early, Hiro's buddies got a head start on the whole business. Some of them even got very rich off of it.

Interv

That's why Hiro has a nice big house in the Metaverse but has to share a 20-by-30 in Reality. Real estate acumen does not always extend across universes.

The sky and the ground are black, like a computer screen that hasn't had anything drawn into it yet; it is always nighttime in the Metaverse, and the Street is always garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from constraints of physics and finance. But people in Hiro's neighborhood are very good programmers, so it's tasteful. The houses look like real houses. There are a couple of Frank Lloyd Wright reproductions and some fancy Victoriana.

So it's always a shock to step out onto the Street, where everything seems to be a mile high. This is Downtown, the most heavily developed area. If you go a couple of hundred kilometers in either direction, the development will taper down to almost nothing, just a thin chain of streetlights casting white pools on the black velvet ground. But Downtown is a dozen Manhattans, embroidered with neon and stacked on top of each other.

In the real world—planet Earth, Reality—there are somewhere between six and ten billion people. At any given time, most of them are making mud bricks or field-stripping their AK-47s. Perhaps a billion of them have enough money to own a computer; these people have more money than all of the others put together. Of these billion potential computer owners, maybe a quarter of them actually bother to own computers, and a quarter of these have machines that are powerful enough to handle the Street protocol. That makes for about sixty million people who can be on the Street at any given time. Add in another sixty million or so who can't really afford it but go there anyway, by using public machines, or machines owned by their school or their employer, and at any given time the Street is occupied by twice the population of New York City.

That's why the damn place is so overdeveloped. Put in a sign or a building on the Street and the hundred million richest, hippest, best-connected people on earth will see it every day of their lives.

It is a hundred meters wide, with a narrow monorail

track running down the middle. The monorail is a free piece of public utility software that enables users to change their location on the Street rapidly and smoothly. A lot of people just ride back and forth on it, looking at the sights. When Hiro first saw this place, ten years ago, the monorail hadn't been written yet; he and his buddies had to write car and motorcycle software in order to get around. They would take their software out and race it in the black desert of the electronic night.

4

Y.T. has been privileged to watch many a young Clint plant his sweet face in an empty Burbclave pool during an unauthorized night run, but always on a skateboard, never ever in a car. The landscape of the suburban night has much weird beauty if you just look.

Back on the paddle again. It rolls across the yard on a set of RadiKS Mark IV Smartwheels. She upgraded to said magical sprockets after the following ad appeared in *Thrasher* magazine.

CHISELED SPAM

is what you will see in the mirror if you surf on a weak plank with dumb, fixed wheels and interface with a muffler, retread, snow turd, road kill, driveshaft, railroad tie, or unconscious pedestrian.

If you think this is unlikely, you've been surfing too many ghost malls. All of these obstacles and more were recently observed on a one-mile stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike. Any surfer who tried to groove that 'vard on a stock plank would have been sneezing brains.

Don't listen to so-called purists who claim any obstacle can be jumped. Professional Kouriers know: If you have pooned a vehicle moving fast enough for fun and profit, your reaction time is

cut to tenths of a second—even less if you are way spooled.

Buy a set of RadiKS Mark II Smartwheels—it's cheaper than a total face retread and a lot more fun. Smartwheels use sonar, laser rangefinding, and millimeter-wave radar to identify mufflers and other debris before you even get honed about them.

Don't get Midasized—upgrade today!

These were words of wisdom. Y.T. bought the wheels. Each one consists of a hub with many stout spokes. Each spoke telescopes in five sections. On the end is a squat foot, rubber tread on the bottom, swiveling on a ball joint. As the wheels roll, the feet plant themselves one at a time, almost glomming into one continuous tire. If you surf over a bump, the spokes retract to pass over it. If you surf over a chuckhole, the robo-prongs plumb its asphaltic depths. Either way, the shock is thereby absorbed, no thuds, smacks, vibrations, or clunks will make their way into the plank or the Converse high-tops with which you tread it. The ad was right—you cannot be a professional road surfer without smartwheels.

Prompt delivery of the pizza will be a trivial matter. She glides from the dewy turf over the lip of the driveway without a bump, picks up speed on the 'crete, surfs down its slope into the street. A twitch of the butt reorients the plank, now she is cruising down Homedale Mews looking for a victim. A black car, alive with nasty lights, whines past her the other way, closing in on the hapless Hiro Protagonist. Her RadiKS Knight Vision goggles darken strategically to cut the noxious glaring of same, her pupils feel safe to remain wide open, scanning the road for signs of movement. The swimming pool was at the crest of this Burbclave, it's downhill from here, but not downhill enough.

Half a block away, on a side street, a bimbo box, a minivan, grinds its four pathetic cylinders into action. She sees it catercorner from her present coordinates. The white backup lights flash instantly as the driver shifts into

D by way of R and N. Y.T. aims herself at the curb, hits it at a fast running velocity, the spokes of the smartwheels see it coming and retract in the right way so that she glides from street to lawn without a hitch. Across the lawn, the feet leave a trail of hexagonal padmarks. A stray dog turd, red with meaty undigestible food coloring, is embossed with the RadiKS logo, a mirror image of which is printed on the tread of each spoke.

The bimbo box is pulling away from the curb, across the street. Squirrely scrubbing noises squirm from its sidewalls as they grind against the curb; we are in the Burbs, where it is better to take a thousand clicks off the lifespan of your Goodyears by invariably grinding them up against curbs than to risk social ostracism and outbreaks of mass hysteria by parking several inches away, out in the middle of the street (*That's okay, Mom, I can walk to the curb from here*), a menace to traffic, a deadly obstacle to uncertain young bicyclists. Y.T. has pressed the release button on her poon's reel/handle unit, allowing a meter of cord to unwind. She whips it up and around her head like a bolo on the austral range. She is about to lambada this trite conveyance. The head of the poon, salad-bowl size, whistles as it orbits around; this is unnecessary but sounds cool.

Pooning a bimbo box takes more skill than a ped would ever imagine, because of their very road-unworthiness, their congenital lack of steel or other ferrous matter for the MagnaPoon to bite down on. Now they have superconducting poons that stick to aluminum bodywork by inducing eddy currents in the actual flesh of the car, turning it into an unwilling electromagnet, but Y.T. does not have one of these. They are the trademark of the hardcore Burbclave surfer, which, despite this evening's entertainment, she is not. Her poon will only stick to steel, iron, or (slightly) to nickel. The only steel in a bimbo box of this make is in the frame.

She makes a low-slung approach. Her poon's orbital plane is nearly vertical, it almost grinds on the twinkly suburban macadam on the forward limb of each orbit. When she pounds the release button, it takes off from an

altitude of about one centimeter, angling slightly upward, across the street, under the floor of the bimbo box, and sucks steel. It's a solid hit, as solid as you can get on this nebula of air, upholstery, paint, and marketing known as the family minivan.

The reaction is instantaneous, quick-witted by Burb standards. This person wants Y.T. gone. The van takes off like a hormone-pumped bull who has just been nailed in the ass by the barbed probe of a picador. It's not Mom at the wheel. It's young Studley, the teenaged boy, who like every other boy in this Burbclave has been taking intravenous shots of horse testosterone every afternoon in the high school locker room since he was fourteen years old. Now he's bulky, stupid, thoroughly predictable.

He steers erratically, artificially pumped muscles not fully under his control. The molded, leather-grained, maroon-colored steering wheel smells like his mother's hand lotion; this drives him into a rage. The bimbo box surges and slows, surges and slows, because he is pumping the gas pedal, because holding it to the floor doesn't seem to have any effect. He wants this car to be like his muscles: more power than he knows what to do with. Instead, it hampers him. As a compromise, he hits the button that says POWER. Another button that says ECONOMY pops out and goes dead, reminding him, like an educational demonstration, that the two are mutually exclusive. The van's tiny engine downshifts, which makes it feel more powerful. He holds his foot steady on the gas and, making the run down Cottage Heights Road, the minivan's speed approaches one hundred kilometers.

Approaching the terminus of Cottage Heights Road, where it tees into Bellewoode Valley Road, he espies a fire hydrant. TMAWH fire hydrants are numerous, for safety, and highly designed, for property values, not the squat iron things imprinted with the name of some godforsaken Industrial Revolution foundry and furry from a hundred variously flaked layers of cheap city paint. They are brass, robot-polished every Thursday morning, dignified pipes rising straight up from the perfect, chemically induced turf of the Burbclave lawns, flaring out to pre-

sent potential firefighters with a menu of three possible hose connections. They were designed on a computer screen by the same aesthetes who designed the Dyna-Victorian houses and the tasteful mailboxes and the immense marble street signs that sit at each intersection like headstones. Designed on a computer screen, but with an eye toward the elegance of things past and forgotten about. Fire hydrants that tasteful people are proud to have on their front lawns. Fire hydrants that the real estate people don't feel the need to airbrush out of pictures.

This fucking Kourier is about to die, knotted around one of those fire hydrants. Studley the Testosterone Boy will see to it. It is a maneuver he has witnessed on television—which tells no lies—a trick he has practiced many times in his head. Building up maximum speed on Cottage Heights, he will yank the hand brake while swinging the wheel. The ass end of the minivan will snap around. The pesky Kourier will be cracked like a whip at the end of her unbreakable cable. Into the fire hydrant she will go. Studley the Teenager will be victorious, free to cruise in triumph down Bellewoode Valley and out into the greater world of adult men in cool cars, free to go return his overdue videotape, *Raft Warriors IV: The Final Battle*.

Y.T. does not know any of this for a fact, but she suspects it. None of this is real. It is her reconstruction of the psychological environment inside of that bimbo box. She sees the hydrant coming a mile away, sees Studley reaching down to rest one hand on the parking brake. It is all so obvious. She feels sorry for Studley and his ilk. She reels out, gives herself lots of slack. He whips the wheel, jerks the brake. The minivan goes sideways, overshooting its mark, and doesn't quite snap her around the way he wanted; she has to help it. As its ass is rotating around, she reels in hard, converting that gift of angular momentum into forward velocity, and ends up shooting right past the van going well over a mile a minute. She is headed for a marble gravestone that says BELLE-WOODE VALLEY ROAD. She leans away from it, leans into a vicious turn, her spokes grip the pavement and push her away from that gravestone, she can touch the

pavement with one hand she is heeled over so hard, the spokes push her onto the desired street. Meanwhile, she has clicked off the electromagnetic force that held her pooned to the van. The poon head comes loose, caroms off the pavement behind her as it is automatically reeled in to reunite with the handle. She is headed straight for the exit of the Burbclave at fantastic speed.

Behind her, an explosive crash sounds, resonating in her gut, as the minivan slides sideways into the gravestone.

She ducks under the security gate and plunges into traffic on Oahu. She cuts between two veering, blaring, and screeching BMWs. BMW drivers take evasive action at the drop of a hat, emulating the drivers in the BMW advertisements—this is how they convince themselves they didn't get ripped off. She drops into a fetal position to pass underneath a semi, headed for the Jersey barrier in the median strip like she's going to die, but Jersey barriers are easy for the smartwheels. That lower limb of the barrier has such a nice bank to it, like they designed it for road surfers. She rides halfway up the barrier, angles gently back down to the lane for a smooth landing, and she's in traffic. There's a car right there and she doesn't even have to throw the poon, just reaches out and plants it right on the lid of the trunk.

This driver's resigned to his fate, doesn't care, doesn't hassle her. He takes her as far as the entrance to the next Burbclave, which is a White Columns. Very southern, traditional, one of the Apartheid Burbclaves. Big ornate sign above the main gate: WHITE PEOPLE ONLY. NON-CAUCASIANS MUST BE PROCESSED.

She's got a White Columns visa. Y.T. has a visa to everywhere. It's right there on her chest, a little bar code. A laser scans it as she careens toward the entrance and the immigration gate swings open for her. It's an ornate iron-work number, but harried White Columns residents don't have time to sit idling at the Burbclave entrance watching the gate slowly roll aside in Old South majestic turpitude, so it's mounted on some kind of electromagnetic railgun.

She is gliding down the antebellum tree-lined lanes of

White Columns, one microplantation after another, still coasting on the residual kinetic energy boost that originated in the fuel in Studley the Teenager's gas tank.

The world is full of power and energy and a person can go far by just skimming off a tiny bit of it.

The LEDs on the pizza box say: 29:32, and the guy who ordered it—Mr. Pudgely and his neighbors, the Pinkhearts and the Roundass clan—are all gathered on the front lawn of their microplantation, prematurely celebrating. Like they had just bought the winning lottery ticket. From their front door they have a clear view all the way down to Oahu Road, and they can see that nothing is on its way that looks like a CosaNostra delivery car. Oh, there is curiosity—sniffing interest—at this Courier with the big square thing under her arm—maybe a portfolio, a new ad layout for some Caucasian supremacist marketing honcho in the next plat over, but—

The Pudgelys and the Pinkhearts and the Roundasses are all staring at her, slackjawed. She has just enough residual energy to swing into their driveway. Her momentum carries her to the top. She stops next to Mr. Pudgely's Acura and Mrs. Pudgely's bimbo box and steps off her plank. The spokes, noting her departure, even themselves out, plant themselves on the top of the driveway, refuse to roll backward.

A blinding light from the heavens shines down upon them. Her Knight Visions keep her from being blinded, but the customers bend their knees and hunch their shoulders as though the light were heavy. The men hold their hairy forearms up against their brows, swivel their great tubular bodies to and fro, trying to find the source of the illumination, muttering clipped notations to each other, brief theories about its source, fully in control of the unknown phenomenon. The women coo and flutter. Because of the magical influence of the Knight Visions, Y.T. can still see the LEDs: 29:54, and that's what it says when she drops the pizza on Mr. Pudgely's wing tips.

The mystery light goes off.

The others are still blinded, but Y.T. sees into the night with her Knight Visions, sees all the way into near infrared, and she sees the source of it, a double-bladed stealth helicopter thirty feet above the neighbor's house. It is tastefully black and unadorned, not a news crew—though another helicopter, an old-fashioned audible one, brightly festooned with up-to-the-minute logos, is thumping and whacking its way across White Columns airspace at this very moment, goosing the plantations with its own spotlight, hoping to be the first to obtain this major scoop: a pizza was delivered late tonight, film at eleven. Later, our personality journalist speculates on where Uncle Enzo will stay when he makes his compulsory trip to our Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. But the black chopper is running dark, would be nearly invisible if not for the infrared trail coming out of its twin turbojets.

It is a Mafia chopper, and all they wanted to do was to record the event on videotape so that Mr. Pudgely would not have a leg to hop around on in court, should he decide to take his case down to Judge Bob's Judicial System and argue for a free pizza.

One more thing. There's a lot of shit in the air tonight, a few megatons of topsoil blowing down from Fresno, and so when the laser beam comes on it is startlingly visible, a tiny geometric line, a million blazing red grains strung on a fiber-optic thread, snapping into life instantly between the chopper and Y.T.'s chest. It appears to widen into a narrow fan, an acute triangle of red light whose base encompasses all of Y.T.'s torso.

It takes half a second. They are scanning the many bar codes mounted on her chest. They are finding out who she is. The Mafia now knows everything about Y.T.—where she lives, what she does, her eye color, credit record, ancestry, and blood type.

That done, the chopper tilts and vanishes into the night like a hockey puck sliding into a bowl of India ink. Mr. Pudgely is saying something, making a joke about how close they came, the others eke out a laugh, but Y.T. cannot hear them because they are buried under the

thunderwhack of the news chopper, then flash-frozen and crystallized under its spotlight. The night air is full of bugs, and now Y.T. can see all of them, swirling in mysterious formations, hitching rides on people and on currents of air. There is one on her wrist, but she doesn't slap at it.

The spotlight lingers for a minute. The broad square of the pizza box, bearing the CosaNostra logo, is mute testimony. They hover, shoot a little tape just in case.

Y.T. is bored. She gets on her plank. The wheels blossom and become circular. She guides a tight wobbly course around the cars, coasts down into the street. The spotlight follows her for a moment, maybe picking up some stock footage. Videotape is cheap. You never know when something will be useful, so you might as well videotape it.

People make their living that way—people in the intel business. People like Hiro Protagonist. They just know stuff, or they just go around and videotape stuff. They put it in the Library. When people want to know the particular things that they know or watch their videotapes, they pay them money and check it out of the Library, or just buy it outright. This is a weird racket, but Y.T. likes the idea of it. Usually, the CIC won't pay any attention to a Courier. But apparently Hiro has a deal with them. Maybe she can make a deal with Hiro. Because Y.T. knows a lot of interesting little things.

One little thing she knows is that the Mafia owes her a favor.

5

As Hiro approaches the Street, he sees two young couples, probably using their parents' computers for a double date in the Metaverse, climbing down out of Port Zero, which is the local port of entry and monorail stop.

He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars.

They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. Hiro's avatar is now on the Street, too, and if the couples coming off the monorail look over in his direction, they can see him, just as he's seeing them. They could strike up a conversation: Hiro in the U-Stor-It in L.A. and the four teenagers probably on a couch in a suburb of Chicago, each with their own laptop. But they probably won't talk to each other, any more than they would in Reality. These are nice kids, and they don't want to talk to a solitary crossbreed with a slick custom avatar who's packing a couple of swords.

Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down the Street and you will see all of these.

Hiro's avatar just looks like Hiro, with the difference that no matter what Hiro is wearing in Reality, his avatar always wears a black leather kimono. Most hacker types don't go in for garish avatars, because they know that it takes a lot more sophistication to render a realistic human face than a talking penis. Kind of the way people who really know clothing can appreciate the fine details that separate a cheap gray wool suit from an expensive hand-tailored gray wool suit.

You can't just materialize anywhere in the Metaverse, like Captain Kirk beaming down from on high. This would be confusing and irritating to the people around you. It would break the metaphor. Materializing out of nowhere (or vanishing back into Reality) is considered to be a private function best done in the confines of your own House. Most avatars nowadays are anatomically correct, and naked as a babe when they are first created, so in any case, you have to make yourself decent before you emerge onto the Street. Unless you're something intrinsically indecent and you don't care.

If you are some peon who does not own a House, for example, a person who is coming in from a public terminal, then you materialize in a Port. There are 256 Express Ports on the street, evenly spaced around its circumference at intervals of 256 kilometers. Each of these intervals is further subdivided 256 times with Local Ports, spaced exactly one kilometer apart (astute students of hacker semiotics will note the obsessive repetition of the number 256, which is 2^8 power—and even that 8 looks pretty juicy, dripping with 2^2 additional 2s). The Ports serve a function analogous to airports: This is where you drop into the Metaverse from somewhere else. Once you have materialized in a Port, you can walk down the Street or hop on the monorail or whatever.

The couples coming off the monorail can't afford to have custom avatars made and don't know how to write their own. They have to buy off-the-shelf avatars. One of the girls has a pretty nice one. It would be considered quite the fashion statement among the K-Tel set. Looks like she has bought the Avatar Construction Set™ and put together her own, customized model out of miscellaneous parts. It might even look something like its owner. Her date doesn't look half bad himself.

The other girl is a Brandy. Her date is a Clint. Brandy and Clint are both popular, off-the-shelf models. When white-trash high school girls are going on a date in the Metaverse, they invariably run down to the computer-games section of the local Wal-Mart and buy a copy of Brandy. The user can select three breast sizes: improbable, impossible, and ludicrous. Brandy has a limited repertoire of facial expressions: cute and pouty; cute and sultry; perky and interested; smiling and receptive; cute and spacy. Her eyelashes are half an inch long, and the software is so cheap that they are rendered as solid ebony chips. When a Brandy flutters her eyelashes, you can almost feel the breeze.

Clint is just the male counterpart of Brandy. He is craggy and handsome and has an extremely limited range of facial expressions.

Hiro wonders, idly, how these two couples got to-

gether. They are clearly from disparate social classes. Perhaps older and younger siblings. But then they come down the escalator and disappear into the crowd and become part of the Street, where there are enough Clints and Brandys to found a new ethnic group.

The Street is fairly busy. Most of the people here are Americans and Asians—it's early morning in Europe right now. Because of the preponderance of Americans, the crowd has a garish and surreal look about it. For the Asians, it's the middle of the day, and they are in their dark blue suits. For the Americans, it's party time, and they are looking like just about anything a computer can render.

The moment Hiro steps across the line separating his neighborhood from the Street, colored shapes begin to swoop down on him from all directions, like buzzards on fresh road kill. Animercials are not allowed in Hiro's neighborhood. But almost anything is allowed in the Street.

A passing fighter plane bursts into flames, falls out of its trajectory, and zooms directly toward him at twice the speed of sound. It plows into the Street fifty feet in front of him, disintegrates, and explodes, blooming into a tangled cloud of wreckage and flame that skids across the pavement toward him, growing to envelop him so that all he can see is turbulent flame, perfectly simulated and rendered.

Then the display freezes, and a man materializes in front of Hiro. He is a classic bearded, pale, skinny hacker, trying to beef himself up by wearing a bulky silk wind-breaker blazoned with the logo of one of the big Metaverse amusement parks. Hiro knows the guy; they used to run into each other at trade conventions all the time. He's been trying to hire Hiro for the last two months.

"Hiro, I can't understand why you're holding out on me. We're making bucks here—Kongbucks and yen—and we can be flexible on pay and bennies. We're putting together a swords-and-sorcery thing, and we can use a

hacker with your skills. Come on down and talk to me, okay?"

Hiro walks straight through the display, and it vanishes. Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of interactive three-dimensional movies. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings.

When Hiro learned how to do this, way back fifteen years ago, a hacker could sit down and write an entire piece of software by himself. Now, that's no longer possible. Software comes out of factories, and hackers are, to a greater or lesser extent, assembly-line workers. Worse yet, they may become managers who never get to write any code themselves.

The prospect of becoming an assembly-line worker gives Hiro some incentive to go out and find some really good intel tonight. He tries to get himself psyched up, tries to break out of the lethargy of the long-term under-employed. This intel thing can be a great racket, once you get yourself jacked into the grid. And with his connections, it shouldn't be any problem. He just has to get serious about it. Get serious. Get serious. But it's so hard to get serious about anything.

He owes the Mafia the cost of a new car. That's a good reason to get serious.

He cuts straight across the Street and under the monorail line, headed for a large, low-slung black building. It is extraordinarily somber for the Street, like a parcel that someone forgot to develop. It's a squat black pyramid with the top cut off. It has one single door—since this is all imaginary, there are no regulations dictating the number of emergency exits. There are no guards, no signs, nothing to bar people from going in, yet thousands of avatars mill around, peering inside, looking for a glimpse

of something. These people can't pass through the door because they haven't been invited.

Above the door is a matte black hemisphere about a meter in diameter, set into the front wall of the building. It is the closest thing the place has to decoration. Underneath it, in letters carved into the wall's black substance, is the name of the place: THE BLACK SUN.

So it's not an architectural masterpiece. When Da5id and Hiro and the other hackers wrote The Black Sun, they didn't have enough money to hire architects or designers, so they just went in for simple geometric shapes. The avatars milling around the entrance don't seem to care.

If these avatars were real people in a real street, Hiro wouldn't be able to reach the entrance. It's way too crowded. But the computer system that operates the Street has better things to do than to monitor every single one of the millions of people there, trying to prevent them from running into each other. It doesn't bother trying to solve this incredibly difficult problem. On the Street, avatars just walk right through each other.

So when Hiro cuts through the crowd, headed for the entrance, he really is cutting through the crowd. When things get this jammed together, the computer simplifies things by drawing all of the avatars ghostly and translucent so you can see where you're going. Hiro appears solid to himself, but everyone else looks like a ghost. He walks through the crowd as if it's a fogbank, clearly seeing The Black Sun in front of him.

He steps over the property line, and he's in the doorway. And in that instant he becomes solid and visible to all the avatars milling outside. As one, they all begin screaming. Not that they have any idea who the hell he is—Hiro is just a starving CIC stringer who lives in a U-Stor-It by the airport. But in the entire world there are only a couple of thousand people who can step over the line into The Black Sun.

He turns and looks back at ten thousand shrieking groupies. Now that he's all by himself in the entryway, no longer immersed in a flood of avatars, he can see all

of the people in the front row of the crowd with perfect clarity. They are all done up in their wildest and fanciest avatars, hoping that Da5id—The Black Sun's owner and hacker-in-chief—will invite them inside. They flicker and merge together into a hysterical wall. Stunningly beautiful women, computer-airbrushed and retouched at seventy-two frames a second, like *Playboy* pinups turned three-dimensional—these are would-be actresses hoping to be discovered. Wild-looking abstracts, tornadoes of gyrating light—hackers who are hoping that Da5id will notice their talent, invite them inside, give them a job. A liberal sprinkling of black-and-white people—persons who are accessing the Metaverse through cheap public terminals, and who are rendered in jerky, grainy black and white. A lot of these are run-of-the-mill psycho fans, devoted to the fantasy of stabbing some particular actress to death; they can't even get close in Reality, so they goggle into the Metaverse to stalk their prey. There are would-be rock stars done up in laser light, as though they just stepped off the concert stage, and the avatars of Nipponese businessmen, exquisitely rendered by their fancy equipment, but utterly reserved and boring in their suits.

There's one black-and-white who stands out because he's taller than the rest. The Street protocol states that your avatar can't be any taller than you are. This is to prevent people from walking around a mile high. Besides, if this guy's using a pay terminal—which he must be, to judge from the image quality—it can't jazz up his avatar. It just shows him the way he is, except not as well. Talking to a black-and-white on the Street is like talking to a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine, repeatedly pounding the copy button, while you stand by the output tray pulling the sheets out one at a time and looking at them.

He has long hair, parted in the middle like a curtain to reveal a tattoo on his forehead. Given the shitty resolution, there's no way to see the tattoo clearly, but it appears to consist of words. He has a wispy Fu Manchu mustache.

Hiro realizes that the guy has noticed him and is

staring back, looking him up and down, paying particular attention to the swords.

A grin spreads across the black-and-white guy's face. It is a satisfied grin. A grin of recognition. The grin of a man who knows something Hiro doesn't. The black-and-white guy has been standing with his arms folded across his chest, like a man who is bored, who's been waiting for something, and now his arms drop to his sides, swing loosely at the shoulders, like an athlete limbering up. He steps as close as he can and leans forward; he's so tall that the only thing behind him is empty black sky, torn with the glowing vapor trails of passing animercials.

"Hey, Hiro," the black-and-white guy says, "you want to try some Snow Crash?"

A lot of people hang around in front of The Black Sun saying weird things. You ignore them. But this gets Hiro's attention.

Oddity the first: The guy knows Hiro's name. But people have ways of getting that information. It's probably nothing.

The second: This sounds like an offer from a drug pusher. Which would be normal in front of a Reality bar. But this is the Metaverse. And you can't sell drugs in the Metaverse, because you can't get high by looking at something.

The third: The name of the drug. Hiro's never heard of a drug called Snow Crash before. That's not unusual—a thousand new drugs get invented each year, and each of them sells under half a dozen brand names.

But "snow crash" is computer lingo. It means a system crash—a bug—at such a fundamental level that it frags the part of the computer that controls the electron beam in the monitor, making it spray wildly across the screen, turning the perfect gridwork of pixels into a gyrating blizzard. Hiro has seen it happen a million times. But it's a very peculiar name for a drug.

The thing that really gets Hiro's attention is his confidence. He has an utterly calm, stolid presence. It's like

talking to an asteroid. Which would be okay if he were doing something that made the tiniest little bit of sense. Hiro's trying to read some clues in the guy's face, but the closer he looks, the more his shitty black-and-white avatar seems to break up into jittering, hard-edged pixels. It's like putting his nose against the glass of a busted TV. It makes his teeth hurt.

"Excuse me," Hiro says. "What did you say?"

"You want to try some Snow Crash?"

He has a crisp accent that Hiro can't quite place. His audio is as bad as his video. Hiro can hear cars going past the guy in the background. He must be goggled in from a public terminal alongside some freeway.

"I don't get this," Hiro says. "What is Snow Crash?"

"It's a drug, asshole," the guy says. "What do you think?"

"Wait a minute. This is a new one on me," Hiro says. "You honestly think I'm going to give you some money here? And then what do I do, wait for you to mail me the stuff?"

"I said try, not buy," the guy says. "You don't have to give me any money. Free sample. And you don't have to wait for no mail. You can have it now."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hypercard.

It looks like a business card. The hypercard is an avatar of sorts. It is used in the Metaverse to represent a chunk of data. It might be text, audio, video, a still image, or any other information that can be represented digitally.

Think of a baseball card, which carries a picture, some text, and some numerical data. A baseball hypercard could contain a highlight film of the player in action, shown in perfect high-def television; a complete biography, read by the player himself, in stereo digital sound; and a complete statistical database along with specialized software to help you look up the numbers you want.

A hypercard can carry a virtually infinite amount of information. For all Hiro knows, this hypercard might contain all the books in the Library of Congress, or every episode of *Hawaii Five-O* that was ever filmed, or the complete recordings of Jimi Hendrix, or the 1950 Census.

Or—more likely—a wide variety of nasty computer viruses. If Hiro reaches out and takes the hypercard, then the data it represents will be transferred from this guy's system into Hiro's computer. Hiro, naturally, wouldn't touch it under any circumstances, any more than you would take a free syringe from a stranger in Times Square and jab it into your neck.

And it doesn't make sense anyway. "That's a hypercard. I thought you said Snow Crash was a drug," Hiro says, now totally nonplussed.

"It is," the guy says. "Try it."

"Does it fuck up your brain?" Hiro says. "Or your computer?"

"Both. Neither. What's the difference?"

Hiro finally realizes that he has just wasted sixty seconds of his life having a meaningless conversation with a paranoid schizophrenic. He turns around and goes into The Black Sun.

6

At the exit of White Columns sits a black car, curled up like a panther, a burnished steel lens reflecting the logo of Oahu Road. It is a Unit. It is a Mobile Unit of MetaCops Unlimited. A silvery badge is embossed on its door, a chrome-plated cop badge the size of a dinner plate, bearing the name of said private peace organization and emblazoned

DIAL 1-800-THE COPS
All Major Credit Cards

MetaCops Unlimited is the official peacekeeping force of White Columns, and also of The Mews at Windsor Heights, The Heights at Bear Run, Cinnamon Grove, and The Farms of Cloverdelle. They also enforce traffic regulations on all highways and byways operated by Fairlanes, Inc. A few different FOQNEs also use them: Caymans Plus and The Alps, for example. But franchise nations prefer to have their own security force. You can

bet that Metazania and New South Africa handle their own security; that's the only reason people become citizens, so they can get drafted. Obviously, Nova Sicilia has its own security, too. Narcolombia doesn't need security because people are scared just to drive past the franchise at less than a hundred miles an hour (Y.T. always snags a nifty power boost in neighborhoods thick with Narcolombia consulates), and Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, the grandaddy of all FOQNEs, handles it in a typically Hong Kong way, with robots.

MetaCops' main competitor, WorldBeat Security, handles all roads belonging to Cruiseways, plus has worldwide contracts with Dixie Traditionals, Pickett's Plantation, Rainbow Heights (check it out—two apartheid Burbclaves and one for black suits), Meadowvale on the [insert name of river] and Brickyard Station. WorldBeat is smaller than MetaCops, handles more upscale contracts, supposedly has a bigger espionage arm—though if that's what people want, they just talk to an account rep at the Central Intelligence Corporation.

And then there's The Enforcers—but they cost a lot and don't take well to supervision. It is rumored that, under their uniforms, they wear T-shirts bearing the unofficial Enforcer coat of arms: a fist holding a nightstick, emblazoned with the words SUE ME.

So Y.T. is coasting down a gradual slope toward the heavy iron gate of White Columns, waiting for it to roll aside, waiting, waiting—but the gate does not seem to be opening. No laser pulse has shot out of the guard shack to find out who Y.T. is. The system has been overridden. If Y.T. was a stupid ped she would go up to the MetaCop and ask him why. The MetaCop would say, "The security of the city-state," and nothing more. These Burbclaves! These city-states! So small, so insecure, that just about everything, like not mowing your lawn, or playing your stereo too loud, becomes a national security issue.

No way to skate around the fence; White Columns has eight-foot iron, robo-wrought, all the way around. She rolls up to the gate, grabs the bars, rattles it, but it's too big and solid to rattle.

MetaCops aren't allowed to lean against their Unit—makes them look lazy and weak. They can almost lean, look like they're leaning, they can even brandish a big leaning-against-the-car 'tude like this particular individual, but they can't lean. Besides, with the complete, glinting majesty of their Personal Portable Equipment Suite hanging on their Personal Modular Equipment Harness, they would scratch the finish of the Unit.

"Jack this barrier to commerce, man, I got deliveries to make," Y.T. announces to the MetaCop.

A wet, smacking burst, not loud enough to be an explosion, sounds from the back of the Mobile Unit. It is the soft thup of a thick wrestler's loogie being propelled through a rolled-up tongue. It is the distant, muffled splurt of a baby having a big one. Y.T.'s hand, still gripping the bars of the gate, stings for a moment, then feels cold and hot at the same time. She can barely move it. She smells vinyl.

The MetaCop's partner climbs out of the back seat of the Mobile Unit. The window of the back door is open, but everything on the Mobile Unit is so black and shiny you can't tell that until the door moves. Both MetaCops, under their glossy black helmets and night-vision goggles, are grinning. The one getting out of the Mobile Unit is carrying a Short-Range Chemical Restraint Projector—a loogie gun. Their little plan has worked. Y.T. didn't think to aim her Knight Visions into the back seat to check for a goo-firing sniper.

The loogie, when expanded into the air like this, is about the size of a football. Miles and miles of eensy but strong fibers, like spaghetti. The sauce on the spaghetti is sticky, goopy stuff that stays fluid for an instant, when the loogie gun is fired, then sets quickly.

MetaCops have to tote this kind of gear because when each franchulate is so small, you can't be chasing people around. The perp—almost always an innocent thrasher—is always a three-second skateboard ride away from asylum in the neighboring franchulate. Also, the incredible bulk of the Personal Modular Equipment Harness—the chandelier o' gear—and all that is clipped onto

it slows them down so bad that whenever they try to run, people just start laughing at them. So instead of losing some pounds, they just clip more stuff onto their harnesses, like the loogie gun.

The snotty, fibrous drop of stuff has wrapped all the way around her hand and forearm and lashed them onto the bar of the gate. Excess goo has sagged and run down the bar a short ways, but is setting now, turning into rubber. A few loose strands have also whipped forward and gained footholds on her shoulder, chest, and lower face. She backs away and the adhesive separates from the fibers, stretching out into long, infinitely thin strands, like hot mozzarella. These set instantly, become solid, and then break, curling away like smoke. It is not quite so grotendous, now that the loogie is off her face, but her hand is still perfectly immobilized.

"You are hereby warned that any movement on your part not explicitly endorsed by verbal authorization on my part may pose a direct physical risk to you, as well as consequential psychological and possibly, depending on your personal belief system, spiritual risks ensuing from your personal reaction to said physical risk. Any movement on your part constitutes an implicit and irrevocable acceptance of such risk," the first MetaCop says. There is a little speaker on his belt, simultaneously translating all of this into Spanish and Japanese.

"Or as we used to say," the other MetaCop says, "freeze, sucker!"

The untranslatable word resonates from the little speaker, pronounced "esucker" and "saka" respectively.

"We are authorized Deputies of MetaCops Unlimited. Under Section 24.5.2 of the White Columns Code, we are authorized to carry out the actions of a police force on this territory."

"Such as hassling innocent thrashers," Y.T. says.

The MetaCop turns off the translator. "By speaking English you implicitly and irrevocably agree for all our future conversation to take place in the English language," he says.

"You can't even rez what Y.T. says," Y.T. says.

"You have been identified as an Investigatory Focus of a Registered Criminal Event that is alleged to have taken place on another territory, namely, The Mews at Windsor Heights."

"That's another country, man. This is White Columns!"

"Under provisions of The Mews at Windsor Heights Code, we are authorized to enforce law, national security concerns, and societal harmony on said territory also. A treaty between The Mews at Windsor Heights and White Columns authorizes us to place you in temporary custody until your status as an Investigatory Focus has been resolved."

"Your ass is busted," the second MetaCop says.

"As your demeanor has been nonaggressive and you carry no visible weapons, we are not authorized to employ heroic measures to ensure your cooperation," the first MetaCop says.

"You stay cool and we'll stay cool," the second MetaCop says.

"However, we are equipped with devices, including but not limited to projectile weapons, which, if used, may pose an extreme and immediate threat to your health and well-being."

"Make one funny move and we'll blow your head off," the second MetaCop says.

"Just unglom my fuckin' hand," Y.T. says. She has heard all this a million times before.

White Columns, like most Burbclaves, has no jail, no police station. So unsightly. Property values. Think of the liability exposure. MetaCops has a franchise just down the road that serves as headquarters. As for a jail, some place to habeas the occasional stray corpus, any half-decent franchise strip has one.

They are cruising in the Mobile Unit. Y.T.'s hands are cuffed together in front of her. One hand is still half-encased in rubbery goo, smelling so intensely of vinyl fumes that both MetaCops have rolled down their win-

dows. Six feet of loose fibers trail into her lap, across the floor of the Unit, out the door, and drag on the pavement. The MetaCops are taking it easy, cruising down the middle lane, not above issuing a speeding ticket here and there as long as they're in their jurisdiction. Motorists around them drive slowly and sanely, appalled by the thought of having to pull over and listen to half an hour of disclaimers, advisements, and tangled justifications from the likes of these. The occasional CosaNostra delivery boy whips past them in the left lane, orange lights aflame, and they pretend not to notice.

"What's it gonna be, the Hoosegow or The Clink?" the first MetaCop says. From the way he is talking, he must be talking to the other MetaCop.

"The Hoosegow, please," Y.T. says.

"The Clink!" the other MetaCop says, turning around, sneering at her through the antiballistic glass, wallowing in power.

The whole interior of the car lights up as they drive past a Buy 'n' Fly. Loiter in the parking lot of a Buy 'n' Fly and you'd get a suntan. Then WorldBeat Security would come and arrest you. All that security-inducing light makes the Visa and MasterCard stickers on the driver's-side window glow for a moment.

"Y.T. is card-carrying," Y.T. says. "What does it cost to get off?"

"How come you keep calling yourself ~~Whitey~~?" the second MetaCop says. Like many people of color, he has misconstrued her name.

"Not whitey. Y.T.," the first MetaCop says.

"That's what Y.T. is called," Y.T. says.

"That's what I said," the second MetaCop says. "Whitey."

"Y.T.," the first one says, accenting the T so brutally that he throws a glittering burst of saliva against the windshield. "Let me guess—Yolanda Truman?"

"No."

"Yvonne Thomas?"

"No."

"Whatsit stand for?"

"Nothing."

Actually, it stands for Yours Truly, but if they can't figure that out, fuck 'em.

"You can't afford it," the first MetaCop says. "You're going up against TMAWH here."

"I don't have to officially get off. I could just escape."

"This is a class Unit. We don't support escapes," the first MetaCop says.

"Tell you what," the second one says. "You pay us a trillion bucks and we'll take you to a Hoosegow. Then you can bargain with them."

"Half a trillion," Y.T. says.

"Seven hundred and fifty billion," the MetaCop says. "Final. Shit, you're wearing cuffs, you can't be bargaining with us."

Y.T. unzips a pocket on the thigh of her coverall, pulls out the card with her clean hand, runs it through a slot on the back of the front seat, puts it back in her pocket.

The Hoosegow looks like a nice new one. Y.T. has seen hotels that were worse places to sleep. Its logo sign, a saguaro cactus with a black cowboy hat resting on top of it at a jaunty angle, is brand-new and clean.

THE HOOSEGOW

Premium incarceration and restraint services
We welcome busloads!

There are a couple of other MetaCop cars in the lot, and an Enforcer paddybus parked across the back, taking up ten consecutive spaces. This draws much attention from the MetaCops. The Enforcers are to the MetaCops what the Delta Force is to the Peace Corps.

"One to check in," says the second MetaCop. They are standing in the reception area. The walls are lined with illuminated signs, each one bearing the image of some Old West desperado. Annie Oakley stares down

blankly at Y.T., providing a role model. The check-in counter is faux rustic; the employees all wear cowboy hats and five-pointed stars with their names embossed on them. In back is a door made of hokey, old-fashioned iron bars. Once you got through there, it would look like an operating room. A whole line of little cells, curvy and white like prefab shower stalls—in fact, they double as shower stalls, you bathe in the middle of the room. Bright lights that turn themselves off at eleven o'clock. Coin-operated TV. Private phone line. Y.T. can hardly wait.

The cowboy behind the desk aims a scanner at Y.T., zaps her bar code. Hundreds of pages about Y.T.'s personal life zoom up on a graphics screen.

"Huh," he says. "Female."

The two MetaCops look at each other like, what a genius—this guy could never be a MetaCop.

"Sorry, boys, we're full up. No space for females tonight."

"Aw, c'mon."

"See that bus in back? There was a riot at Snooze 'n' Cruise. Some Narcolumbians were selling a bad batch of Vertigo. Place went nuts. Enforcers sent in a half dozen squads, brought in about thirty. So we're full up. Try The Clink, down the street."

Y.T. does not like the looks of this.

They put her back in the car, turn on the noise cancellation in the back seat, so she can't hear anything except squirts and gurgles coming from her own empty tummy, and the glistening crackle whenever she moves her gloomed-up hand. She was really looking forward to a Hoosegow meal—Campfire Chili or Bandit Burgers.

In the front seat, the two MetaCops are talking to each other. They pull out into traffic. Up in front of them is a square illuminated logo, a giant Universal Product Code in black-on-white with BUY 'N' FLY underneath it.

Stuck onto the same signpost, beneath the Buy 'n' Fly sign, is a smaller one, a narrow strip in generic lettering: THE CLINK.

They are taking her to The Clink. The bastards. She

pounds on the glass with cuffed-together hands, leaving sticky handprints. Let these bastards try to wash the stuff off. They turn around and look right through her, the guilty scum, like they heard something but they can't imagine what.

They enter the Buy 'n' Fly's nimbus of radioactive blue security light. Second MetaCop goes in, talks to the guy behind the counter. There's a fat white boy purchasing a monster trucks magazine, wearing a New South Africa baseball cap with a Confederate flag, and overhearing them he peers out the window, wanting to lay his eyes on a real perp. A second man comes out from back, same ethnicity as the guy behind the counter, another dark man with burning eyes and a bony neck. This one is carrying a three-ring binder with the Buy 'n' Fly logo. To find the manager of a franchise, don't strain to read his title off the name tag, just look for the one with the binder.

The manager talks to the MetaCop, nods his head, pulls a keychain out of a drawer.

Second MetaCop comes out, saunters to the car, suddenly whips open the back door.

"Shut up," he says, "or next time I fire the loogie gun into your mouth."

"Good thing you like The Clink," Y.T. says, "cause that is where you will be tomorrow night, loogie-man."

"Zat right?"

"Yeah. For credit card fraud."

"Me cop, you thrasher. How you gonna make a case at Judge Bob's Judicial System?"

"I work for RadiKS. We protect our own."

"Not tonight you don't. Tonight you took a pizza from the scene of a car wreck. Left the scene of an accident. RadiKS tell you to deliver that pizza?"

Y.T. does not return fire. The MetaCop is right; RadiKS did not tell her to deliver that pizza. She was doing it on a whim.

"So RadiKS ain't gonna help you. So shut up."

He jerks her arm, and the rest of her follows. The three-ringer gives her a quick look, just long enough to

make sure she is really a person, not a sack of flour or an engine block or a tree stump. He leads them around to the fetid rump of the Buy 'n' Fly, dark realm of wretched refuse in teeming dumpsters. He unlocks the back door, a boring steel number with jimmy marks around the edges like steel-clawed beasts have been trying to get in.

Y.T. is taken downstairs into the basement. First MetaCop follows, carrying her plank, banging it heedlessly against doorways and stained polycarbonate bottle racks.

"Better take her uniform—all that gear," the second MetaCop suggests, not unlewdly.

The manager looks at Y.T., trying not to let his gaze travel sinfully up and down her body. For thousands of years his people have survived on alertness: waiting for Mongols to come galloping over the horizon, waiting for repeat offenders to swing sawed-off shotguns across their check-out counters. His alertness right now is palpable and painful; he's like a goblet of hot nitroglycerin. The added question of sexual misconduct makes it even worse. To him it's no joke.

Y.T. shrugs, trying to think of something unnerving and wacky. At this point, she is supposed to squeal and shrink, wriggle and whine, swoon and beg. They are threatening to take her clothes. How awful. But she does not get upset because she knows that they are expecting her to.

A Courier has to establish space on the pavement. Predictable law-abiding behavior lulls drivers. They mentally assign you to a little box in the lane, assume you will stay there, can't handle it when you leave that little box.

Y.T. is not fond of boxes. Y.T. establishes her space on the pavement by zagging mightily from lane to lane, establishing a precedent of scary randomness. Keeps people on their toes, makes them react to her, instead of the other way round. Now these men are trying to put her in a box, make her follow rules.

She unzips her coverall all the way down below her navel. Underneath is naught but billowing pale flesh.

The MetaCops raise their eyebrows.

The manager jumps back, raises both hands up to form a visual shield, protecting himself from the damaging input. "No, no, no!" he says.

Y.T. shrugs, zips herself back up.

She's not afraid; she's wearing a ~~dentata~~.

The manager handcuffs her to a cold-water pipe. Second MetaCop removes his newer, more cybernetic brand of handcuffs, snaps them back onto his harness. First MetaCop leans her plank against the wall, just out of her reach. Manager kicks a rusty coffee can across the floor, caroming it expertly off her skin, so she can go to the bathroom.

"Where you from?" Y.T. asks.

"Tadzhikistan," he says.

A jeek. She should have known.

"Well, shitcan soccer must be your national pastime."

The manager doesn't get it. The MetaCops emit rote, shallow laughter.

Papers are signed. Everyone else goes upstairs. On his way out the door, the manager turns off the lights; in Tadzhikistan, electricity is quite the big deal.

Y.T. is in The Clink.

7

The Black Sun is as big as a couple of football fields laid side by side. The decor consists of black, square tabletops hovering in the air (it would be pointless to draw in legs), evenly spaced across the floor in a grid. Like pixels. The only exception is in the middle, where the bar's four quadrants come together ($4 = 2^2$). This part is occupied by a circular bar sixteen meters across. Everything is matte black, which makes it a lot easier for the computer system to draw things in on top of it—no worries about filling in a complicated background. And that way all attention can be focused on the avatars, which is the way people like it.

It doesn't pay to have a nice avatar on the Street, where it's so crowded and all the avatars merge and flow

into one another. But The Black Sun is a much classier piece of software. In The Black Sun, avatars are not allowed to collide. Only so many people can be here at once, and they can't walk through each other. Everything is solid and opaque and realistic. And the clientele has a lot more class—no talking penises in here. The avatars look like real people. For the most part, so do the daemons.

"Daemon" is an old piece of jargon from the UNIX operating system, where it referred to a piece of low-level utility software, a fundamental part of the operating system. In The Black Sun, a daemon is like an avatar, but it does not represent a human being. It's a robot that lives in the Metaverse. A piece of software, a kind of spirit that inhabits the machine, usually with some particular role to carry out. The Black Sun has a number of daemons that serve imaginary drinks to the patrons and run little errands for people.

It even has bouncer daemons that get rid of undesirables—grab their avatars and throw them out the door, applying certain basic principles of avatar physics. Da5id has even enhanced the physics of The Black Sun to make it a little cartoonish, so that particularly obnoxious people can be hit over the head with giant mallets or crushed under plummeting safes before they are ejected. This happens to people who are being disruptive, to anyone who is pestering or taping a celebrity, and to anyone who seems contagious. That is, if your personal computer is infected with viruses, and attempts to spread them via The Black Sun, you had better keep one eye on the ceiling.

Hiro mumbles the word "Bigboard." This is the name of a piece of software he wrote, a power tool for a CIC stringer. It digs into The Black Sun's operating system, rifles it for information, and then throws up a flat square map in front of his face, giving him a quick overview of who's here and whom they're talking to. It's all unauthorized data that Hiro is not supposed to have. But Hiro is not some bimbo actor coming here to network. He is a hacker. If he wants some information, he steals it right out of the guts of the system—gossip ex machina.

Bigboard shows him that Da5id is ensconced in his usual place, a table in the Hacker Quadrant near the bar. The Movie Star Quadrant has the usual scattering of Sovereigns and wannabes. The Rock Star Quadrant is very busy tonight; Hiro can see that a Nipponese rap star named Sushi K has stopped in for a visit. And there are a lot of record-industry types hanging around in the Nipponese Quadrant—which looks like the other quadrants except that it's quieter, the tables are closer to the floor, and it's full of bowing and fluttering geisha daemons. Many of these people probably belong to Sushi K's retinue of managers, flacks, and lawyers.

Hiro cuts across the Hacker Quadrant, headed for Da5id's table. He recognizes many of the people in here, but as usual, he's surprised and disturbed by the number he doesn't recognize—all those sharp, perceptive twenty-one-year-old faces. Software development, like professional sports, has a way of making thirty-year-old men feel decrepit.

Looking up the aisle toward Da5id's table, he sees Da5id talking to a black-and-white person. Despite her lack of color and shitty resolution, Hiro recognizes her by the way she folds her arms when she's talking, the way she tosses her hair when she's listening to Da5id. Hiro's avatar stops moving and stares at her, adopting just the same facial expression with which he used to stare at this woman years ago. In Reality, he reaches out with one hand, picks up his beer, takes a pull on the bottle, and lets it roll around in his mouth, a bundle of waves clashing inside a small space.

Her name is Juanita Marquez. Hiro has known her ever since they were freshmen together at Berkeley, and they were in the same lab section in a freshman physics class. The first time he saw her, he formed an impression that did not change for many years: She was a dour, bookish, geeky type who dressed like she was interviewing for a job as an accountant at a funeral parlor. At the same time, she had a flamethrower tongue that she would turn on

people at the oddest times, usually in some grandiose, earth-scorching retaliation for a slight or breach of etiquette that none of the other freshmen had even perceived.

It wasn't until a number of years later, when they both wound up working at Black Sun Systems, Inc., that he put the other half of the equation together. At the time, both of them were working on avatars. He was working on bodies, she was working on faces. She was the face department, because nobody thought that faces were all that important—they were just flesh-toned busts on top of the avatars. She was just in the process of proving them all desperately wrong. But at this phase, the all-male society of bitheads that made up the power structure of Black Sun Systems said that the face problem was trivial and superficial. It was, of course, nothing more than sexism, the especially virulent type espoused by male techies who sincerely believe that they are too smart to be sexists.

That first impression, back at the age of seventeen, was nothing more than that—the gut reaction of a post-adolescent Army brat who had been on his own for about three weeks. His mind was good, but he only understood one or two things in the whole world—samurai movies and the Macintosh—and he understood them far, far too well. It was a worldview with no room for someone like Juanita.

There is a certain kind of small town that grows like a boil on the ass of every Army base in the world. In a long series of such places, Hiro Protagonist was speed-raised like a mutant hothouse orchid flourishing under the glow of a thousand Buy 'n' Fly security spotlights. Hiro's father had joined the army in 1944, at the age of sixteen, and spent a year in the Pacific, most of it as a prisoner of war. Hiro was born when his father was in his late middle age. By that time, Dad could long since have quit and taken his pension, but he wouldn't have known what to do with himself outside of the service, and so he stayed in until they finally kicked him out in the late eighties. By the time Hiro made it out to Berkeley, he had lived in Wrightstown, New Jersey; Tacoma, Wash-

ton; Fayetteville, North Carolina; Hinesville, Georgia; Killeen, Texas; Grafenwehr, Germany; Seoul, Korea; Ogden, Kansas; and Watertown, New York. All of these places were basically the same, with the same franchise ghettos, the same strip joints, and even the same people—he kept running into school chums he'd known years before, other Army brats who happened to wind up at the same base at the same time.

Their skins were different colors but they all belonged to the same ethnic group: Military. Black kids didn't talk like black kids. Asian kids didn't bust their asses to excel in school. White kids, by and large, didn't have any problem getting along with the black and Asian kids. And girls knew their place. They all had the same moms with the same generous buttocks in stretchy slacks and the same frosted-and-curling-ironed hairdos, and they were all basically sweet and endearing and conforming and, if they happened to be smart, they went out of their way to hide it.

So the first time Hiro saw Juanita, or any other girl like her, his perspectives were bent all out of shape. She had long, glossy black hair that had never been subjected to any chemical process other than regular shampooing. She didn't wear blue stuff on her eyelids. Her clothing was dark, tailored, restrained. And she didn't take shit from anyone, not even her professors, which seemed shrewish and threatening to him at the time.

When he saw her again after an absence of several years—a period spent mostly in Japan, working among real grown-ups from a higher social class than he was used to, people of substance who wore real clothes and did real things with their lives—he was startled to realize that Juanita was an elegant, stylish knockout. He thought at first that she had undergone some kind of radical changes since their first year in college.

But then he went back to visit his father in one of those Army towns and ran into the high school prom queen. She had grown up shockingly fast into an overweight dame with loud hair and loud clothes who speed-read the tabloids at the check-out line in the commissary

because she didn't have the spare money to buy them, who popped her gum and had two kids that she didn't have the energy or the foresight to discipline.

Seeing this woman at the commissary, he finally went through a belated, dim-witted epiphany, not a brilliant light shining down from heaven, more like the brown glimmer of a half-dead flashlight from the top of a stepladder: Juanita hadn't really changed much at all since those days, just grown into herself. It was he who had changed. Radically.

He came into her office once, strictly on a business matter. Until this point, they had seen each other around the office a lot but acted like they had never met before. But when he came into her office that day, she told him to close the door behind him, and she blacked out the screen on her computer and started twiddling a pencil between her hands and eyed him like a plate of day-old sushi. Behind her on the wall was an amateurish painting of an old lady, set in an ornate antique frame. It was the only decoration in Juanita's office. All the other hackers had color photographs of the space shuttle lifting off, or posters of the starship *Enterprise*.

"It's my late grandmother, may God have mercy on her soul," she said, watching him look at the painting. "My role model."

"Why? Was she a programmer?"

She just looked at him over the rotating pencil like, how slow can a mammal be and still have respiratory functions? But instead of lowering the boom on him, she just gave a simple answer: "No." Then she gave a more complicated answer. "When I was fifteen years old, I missed a period. My boyfriend and I were using a diaphragm, but I knew it was fallible. I was good at math, I had the failure rate memorized, burnt into my subconscious. Or maybe it was my conscious, I can never keep them straight. Anyway, I was terrified. Our family dog started treating me differently—supposedly, they can smell a pregnant woman. Or a pregnant bitch, for that matter."

By this point, Hiro's face was frozen in a wary, aston-

ished position that Juanita later made extensive use of in her work. Because, as she was talking to him, she was watching his face, analyzing the way the little muscles in his forehead pulled his brows up and made his eyes change shape.

"My mother was clueless. My boyfriend was worse than clueless—in fact, I ditched him on the spot, because it made me realize what an alien the guy was—like many members of your species." By this, she was referring to males.

"Anyway, my grandmother came to visit," she continued, glancing back over her shoulder at the painting. "I avoided her until we all sat down for dinner. And then she figured out the whole situation in, maybe, ten minutes, just by watching my face across the dinner table. I didn't say more than ten words—'Pass the tortillas.' I don't know how my face conveyed that information, or what kind of internal wiring in my grandmother's mind enabled her to accomplish this incredible feat. To condense fact from the vapor of nuance."

Condense fact from the vapor of nuance. Hiro has never forgotten the sound of her speaking those words, the feeling that came over him as he realized for the first time how smart Juanita was.

She continued. "I didn't even really appreciate all of this until about ten years later, as a grad student, trying to build a user interface that would convey a lot of data very quickly, for one of these baby-killer grants." This was her term for anything related to the Defense Department. "I was coming up with all kinds of elaborate technical fixes like trying to implant electrodes directly into the brain. Then I remembered my grandmother and realized, my God, the human mind can absorb and process an incredible amount of information—if it comes in the right format. The right interface. If you put the right face on it. Want some coffee?"

Then he had an alarming thought: What had he been like back in college? How much of an asshole had he been? Had he left Juanita with a bad impression?

Another young man would have worried about it in

silence, but Hiro has never been restrained by thinking about things too hard, and so he asked her out for dinner and, after having a couple of drinks (she drank club sodas), just popped the question: Do you think I'm an asshole?

She laughed. He smiled, believing that he had come up with a good, endearing, flirtatious bit of patter.

He did not realize until a couple of years later that this question was, in effect, the cornerstone of their relationship. Did Juanita think that Hiro was an asshole? He always had some reason to think that the answer was yes, but nine times out of ten she insisted the answer was no. It made for some great arguments and some great sex, some dramatic fallings out and some passionate reconciliations, but in the end the wildness was just too much for them—they were exhausted by work—and they backed away from each other. He was emotionally worn out from wondering what she really thought of him, and confused by the fact that he cared so deeply about her opinion. And she, maybe, was beginning to think that if Hiro was so convinced in his own mind that he was unworthy of her, maybe he knew something she didn't.

Hiro would have chalked it all up to class differences, except that her parents lived in a house in Mexicali with a dirt floor, and his father made more money than many college professors. But the class idea still held sway in his mind, because *Class* is more than income—it has to do with knowing where you stand in a web of social relationships. Juanita and her folks knew where they stood with a certitude that bordered on dementia: Hiro never knew. His father was a sergeant major, his mother was a Korean woman whose people had been mine slaves in Nippon, and Hiro didn't know whether he was black or Asian or just plain Army, whether he was rich or poor, educated or ignorant, talented or lucky. He didn't even have a part of the country to call home until he moved to California, which is about as specific as saying that you live in the Northern Hemisphere. In the end, it was probably his general disorientation that did them in.

After the breakup, Hiro went out with a long succession of essentially bimbos who (unlike Juanita) were

impressed that he worked for a high-tech Silicon Valley firm. More recently, he has had to go searching for women who are even easier to impress.

Juanita went celibate for a while and then started going out with Da5id and eventually got married to him. Da5id had no doubts whatsoever about his standing in the world. His folks were Russian Jews from Brooklyn and had lived in the same brownstone for seventy years after coming from a village in Latvia where they had lived for five hundred years; with a Torah on his lap, he could trace his bloodlines all the way back to Adam and Eve. He was an only child who had always been first in his class in everything, and when he got his master's in computer science from Stanford, he went out and started his own company with about as much fuss as Hiro's dad used to exhibit in renting out a new P.O. box when they moved. Then he got rich, and now he runs The Black Sun. Da5id has always been certain of everything.

Even when he's totally wrong. Which is why Hiro quit his job at Black Sun Systems, despite the promise of future riches, and why Juanita divorced Da5id two years after she married him.

Hiro did not attend Juanita and Da5id's wedding; he was languishing in jail, into which he had been thrown a few hours before the rehearsal. He had been found in Golden Gate Park, lovesick, wearing nothing but a thong, taking long pulls from a jumbo bottle of Courvoisier and practicing *kendo* attacks with a genuine samurai sword, floating across the grass on powerfully muscled thighs to slice other picnickers' hurtling Frisbees and baseballs in twain. Catching a long fly ball with the edge of your blade, neatly halving it like a grapefruit, is not an insignificant feat. The only drawback is that the owners of the baseball may misinterpret your intentions and summon the police.

He got out of it by paying for all the baseballs and Frisbees, but since that episode, he has never even bothered to ask Juanita whether or not she thinks he's an ass-hole. Even Hiro knows the answer now.

Since then, they've gone very different ways. In the

early years of The Black Sun project, the only way the hackers ever got paid was by issuing stock to themselves. Hiro tended to sell his off almost as quickly as he got it. Juanita didn't. Now she's rich, and he isn't. It would be easy to say that Hiro is a stupid investor and Juanita a smart one, but the facts are a little more complicated than that: Juanita put her eggs in one basket, keeping all her money in Black Sun stock; as it turns out, she made a lot of money that way, but she could have gone broke, too. And Hiro didn't have a lot of choice in some ways. When his father got sick, the Army and the V.A. took care of most of his medical bills, but they ran into a lot of expenses anyway, and Hiro's mother—who could barely speak English—wasn't equipped to make or handle money on her own. When Hiro's father died, he cashed in all of his Black Sun stock to put Mom in a nice community in Korea. She loves it there. Goes golfing every day. He could have kept his money in The Black Sun and made ten million dollars about a year later when it went public, but his mother would have been a street person. So when his mother visits him in the Metaverse, looking tan and happy in her golfing duds, Hiro views that as his personal fortune. It won't pay the rent, but that's okay—when you live in a shithole, there's always the Metaverse, and in the Metaverse, Hiro Protagonist is a warrior prince

8

His tongue is stinging; he realizes that, back in Reality, he has forgotten to swallow his beer.

It's ironic that Juanita has come into this place in a low-tech, black-and-white avatar. She was the one who figured out a way to make avatars show something close to real emotion. That is a fact Hiro has never forgotten, because she did most of her work when they were together, and whenever an avatar looks surprised or angry or passionate in the Metaverse, he sees an echo of himself or Juanita—the Adam and Eve of the Metaverse. Makes it hard to forget.

Shortly after Juanita and Da5id got divorced, The

Black Sun really took off. And once they got done counting their money, marketing the spinoffs, soaking up the adulation of others in the hacker community, they all came to the realization that what made this place a success was not the collision-avoidance algorithms or the bouncer daemons or any of that other stuff. It was Juanita's faces.

Just ask the businessmen in the Nipponese Quadrant. They come here to talk turkey with suits from around the world, and they consider it just as good as a face-to-face. They more or less ignore what is being said—a lot gets lost in translation, after all. They pay attention to the facial expressions and body language of the people they are talking to. And that's how they know what's going on inside a person's head—by condensing fact from the vapor of nuance.

Juanita refused to analyze this process, insisted that it was something ineffable, something you couldn't explain with words. A radical, rosary-toting Catholic, she has no problem with that kind of thing. But the bitheads didn't like it. Said it was irrational mysticism. So she quit and took a job with some Nipponese company. They don't have any problem with irrational mysticism as long as it makes money.

But Juanita never comes to The Black Sun anymore. Partly, she's pissed at Da5id and the other hackers who never appreciated her work. But she has also decided that the whole thing is bogus. That no matter how good it is, the Metaverse is distorting the way people talk to each other, and she wants no such distortion in her relationships.

Da5id notices Hiro, indicates with a flick of his eyes that this is not a good time. Normally, such subtle gestures are lost in the system's noise, but Da5id has a very good personal computer, and Juanita helped design his avatar—so the message comes through like a shot fired into the ceiling.

Hiro turns away, saunters around the big circular bar in a slow orbit. Most of the sixty-four bar stools are filled with lower-level Industry people, getting together in twos and threes, doing what they do best: gossip and intrigue.

"So I get together with the director for a story conference. He's got this beach house—"

"Incredible?"

"Don't get me started."

"I heard. Debi was there for a party when Frank and Mitzi owned it."

"Anyway, there's this scene, early, where the main character wakes up in a dumpster. The idea is to show how, you know, despondent he is—"

"That crazy energy—"

"Exactly."

"Fabulous."

"I like it. Well, he wants to replace it with a scene where the guy is out in the desert with a bazooka, blowing up old cars in an abandoned junkyard."

"You're kidding!"

"So we're sitting there on his fucking patio over the beach and he's going, like, *whoom! whom!* imitating this goddamn bazooka. He's thrilled by the idea. I mean, this is a man who wants to put a bazooka in a movie. So I think I talked him out of it."

"Nice scene. But you're right. A bazooka doesn't do the same thing as a dumpster."

Hiro pauses long enough to get this down, then keeps walking. He mumbles "Bigboard" again, recalls the magic map, pinpoints his own location, and then reads off the name of this nearby screenwriter. Later on, he can do a search of industry publications to find out what script this guy is working on, hence the name of this mystery director with a fetish for bazookas. Since this whole conversation has come to him via his computer, he's just taken an audio tape of the whole thing. Later, he can process it to disguise the voices, then upload it to the Library, cross-referenced under the director's name. A hundred struggling screenwriters will call this conversation up, listen to it over and over until they've got it memorized, paying Hiro for the privilege, and within a few weeks, bazooka scripts will flood the director's office. *Whoom!*

The Rock Star Quadrant is almost too bright to look

at. Rock star avatars have the hairdos that rock stars can only wear in their dreams. Hiro scans it briefly to see if any of his friends are in there, but it's mostly parasites and has-beens. Most of the people Hiro knows are will-bes or wannabes.

The Movie Star Quadrant is easier to look at. Actors love to come here because in The Black Sun, they always look as good as they do in the movies. And unlike a bar or club in Reality, they can get into this place without physically having to leave their mansion, hotel suite, ski lodge, private airline cabin, or whatever. They can strut their stuff and visit with their friends without any exposure to kidnappers, paparazzi, script-flingers, assassins, ex-spouses, autograph brokers, process servers, psycho fans, marriage proposals, or gossip columnists.

He gets up off the bar stool and resumes his slow orbit, scanning the Nipponese Quadrant. It's a lot of guys in suits, as usual. Some of them are talking to gringos from the Industry. And a large part of the quadrant, in the back corner, has been screened off by a temporary partition.

Bigboard again. Hiro figures out which tables are behind the partition, starts reading off the names. The only one he recognizes immediately is an American: L. Bob Rife, the cable-television monopolist. A very big name to the Industry, though he's rarely seen. He seems to be meeting with a whole raft of big Nipponese honchos. Hiro has his computer memorize their names so that, later, he can check them against the CIC database and find out who they are. It has the look of a big and important meeting.

"Secret Agent Hiro! How are you doing?"

Hiro turns around. Juanita is right behind him, standing out in her black-and-white avatar, looking good anyway. "How are you?" she asks.

"Fine. How are you?"

"Great. I hope you don't mind talking to me in this ugly fax-of-life avatar."

"Juanita, I would rather look at a fax of you than most other women in the flesh."

"Thanks, you sly bastard. It's been a long time since we've talked!" she observes, as though there's something remarkable about this.

Something's going on.

"I hope you're not going to mess around with Snow Crash," she says. "Da5id won't listen to me."

"What am I, a model of self-restraint? I'm exactly the kind of guy who would mess around with it."

"I know you better than that. You're impulsive. But you're very clever. You have those sword-fighting reflexes."

"What does that have to do with drug abuse?"

"It means you can see bad things coming and deflect them. It's an instinct, not a learned thing. As soon as you turned around and saw me, that look came over your face, like, what's going on? What the hell is Juanita up to?"

"I didn't think you talked to people in the Metaverse."

"I do if I want to get through to someone in a hurry," she says. "And I'll always talk to you."

"Why me?"

"You know. Because of us. Remember? Because of our relationship—when I was writing this thing—you and I are the only two people who can ever have an honest conversation in the Metaverse."

"You're just the same mystical crank you always were," he says, smiling so as to make this a charming statement.

"You can't imagine how mystical and cranky I am now, Hiro."

"How mystical and cranky are you?"

She eyes him warily. Exactly the same way she did when he came into her office years ago.

It comes into his mind to wonder why she is always so alert in his presence. In college, he used to think that she was afraid of his intellect, but he's known for years that this is the last of her worries. At Black Sun Systems, he figured that it was just typical female guardedness—Juanita was afraid he was trying to get her into the sack. But this, too, is pretty much out of the question.

At this late date in his romantic career, he is just canny enough to come up with a new theory: She's being careful because she likes him. She likes him in spite of herself. He is exactly the kind of tempting but utterly wrong romantic choice that a smart girl like Juanita must learn to avoid.

That's definitely it. There's something to be said for getting older.

By way of answering his question, she says, "I have an associate I'd like you to meet. A gentleman and a scholar named Lagos. He's a fascinating guy to talk to."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

She thinks this one over rather than lashing out instantaneously. "My behavior at The Black Sun to the contrary, I don't fuck every male I work with. And even if I did, Lagos is out of the question."

"Not your type?"

"Not by a long shot."

"What is your type, anyway?"

"Old, rich, unimaginative blonds with steady careers."

This one almost slips by him. Then he catches it. "Well, I could dye my hair. And I'll get old eventually."

She actually laughs. It's a tension-releasing kind of outburst. "Believe me, Hiro, I'm the last person you want to be involved with at this point."

"Is this part of your church thing?" he asks. Juanita has been using her excess money to start her own branch of the Catholic church—she considers herself a missionary to the intelligent atheists of the world.

"Don't be condescending," she says. "That's exactly the attitude I'm fighting. Religion is not for simpletons."

"Sorry. This is unfair, you know—you can read every expression on my face, and I'm looking at you through a fucking blizzard."

"It's definitely related to religion," she says. "But this is so complex, and your background in that area is so deficient, I don't know where to begin."

"Hey, I went to church every week in high school. I sang in the choir."

"I know. That's exactly the problem. Ninety-nine percent of everything that goes on in most Christian churches has nothing whatsoever to do with the actual religion. Intelligent people all notice this sooner or later, and they conclude that the entire one hundred percent is bullshit, which is why atheism is connected with being intelligent in people's minds."

"So none of that stuff I learned in church has anything to do with what you're talking about?"

Juanita thinks for a while, eyeing him. Then she pulls a hypercard out of her pocket. "Here. Take this."

As Hiro pulls it from her hand, the hypercard changes from a jittery two-dimensional figment into a realistic, cream-colored, finely textured piece of stationery. Printed across its face in glossy black ink is a pair of words

B A B E L
(I n f o c a l y p s e)

9

The world freezes and grows dim for a second. The Black Sun loses its smooth animation and begins to move in fuzzy stop-action. Clearly, his computer has just taken a major hit; all of its circuits are busy processing a huge bolus of data—the contents of the hypercard—and don't have time to redraw the image of The Black Sun in its full, breathtaking fidelity.

"Holy shit!" he says, when The Black Sun pops back into full animation again. "What the hell is in this card? You must have half of the Library in here!"

"And a librarian to boot," Juanita says, "to help you

sort through it. And lots of videotapes of L. Bob Rife—which accounts for most of the bytes."

"Well, I'll try to have a look at it," he says dubiously.

"Do. Unlike Da5id, you're just smart enough to benefit from this. And in the meantime, stay away from Raven. And stay away from Snow Crash. Okay?"

"Who's Raven?" he asks. But Juanita is already on her way out the door. The fancy avatars all turn around to watch her as she goes past them; the movie stars give her drop-dead looks, and the hackers purse their lips and stare reverently.

Hiro orbits back around to the Hacker Quadrant. Da5id's shuffling hypercards around on his table—business stats on The Black Sun, film and video clips, hunks of software, scrawled telephone numbers.

"There's a little blip in the operating system that hits me right in the gut every time you come in the door," Da5id says. "I always have this premonition that The Black Sun is headed for a crash."

"Must be Bigboard," Hiro says. "It has one routine that patches some of the traps in low memory, for a moment."

"Ah, that's it. Please, please throw that thing away," Da5id says.

"What, Bigboard?"

"Yeah. It was totally rad at one point, but now it's like trying to work on a fusion reactor with a stone ax."

"Thanks."

"I'll give you all the headers you need if you want to update it to something a little less dangerous," Da5id says. "I wasn't impugning your abilities. I'm just saying you need to keep up with the times."

"It's fucking hard," Hiro says. "There's no place for a freelance hacker anymore. You have to have a big corporation behind you."

"I'm aware of that. And I'm aware that you can't stand to work for a big corporation. That's why I'm saying, I'll give you the stuff you need. You're always a part

of The Black Sun to me, Hiro, even since we parted ways."

It is classic Da5id. He's talking with his heart again, bypassing his head. If Da5id weren't a hacker, Hiro would despair of his ever having enough brains to do anything.

"Let's talk about something else," Hiro says. "Was I just hallucinating, or are you and Juanita on speaking terms again?"

Da5id gives him an indulgent smile. He has been very kind to Hiro ever since *The Conversation*, several years back. It was a conversation that started out as a friendly chat over beer and oysters between a couple of longtime comrades-in-arms. It was not until three-quarters of the way through *The Conversation* that it dawned on Hiro that he was, in fact, being fired, at this very moment. Since *The Conversation*, Da5id has been known to feed Hiro useful bits of intel and gossip from time to time.

"Fishing for something useful?" Da5id asks knowingly. Like many bitheads, Da5id is utterly guileless, but at times like this, he thinks he's the reincarnation of Machiavelli.

"I got news for you, man," Hiro says. "Most of the stuff you give me, I never put into the Library."

"Why not? Hell, I give you all my best gossip. I thought you were making money off that stuff."

"I just can't stand it," Hiro says, "taking parts of my private conversations and whoring them out. Why do you think I'm broke?"

There's another thing he doesn't mention, which is that he's always considered himself to be Da5id's equal, and he can't stand the idea of feeding off Da5id's little crumbs and tidbits, like a dog curled up under his table.

"I was glad to see Juanita come in here—even as a black-and-white," Da5id says. "For her not to use The Black Sun—it's like Alexander Graham Bell refusing to use the telephone."

"Why did she come in tonight?"

"Something's bugging her," Da5id says. "She wanted to know if I'd seen certain people on the Street."

"Anyone in particular?"

"She's worried about a really large guy with long black hair," Da5id says. "Peddling something called—get this—Snow Crash."

"Has she tried the Library?"

"Yeah. I assume so, anyway."

"Have you seen this guy?"

"Oh, yeah. It's not hard to find him," Da5id says. "He's right outside the door. I got this from him."

Da5id scans the table, picks up one of the hypercards, and shows it to Hiro.

SNOW CRASH

tear this card in half to
release your free sample

"Da5id," Hiro says, "I can't believe you took a hypercard from a black-and-white person."

Da5id laughs. "This is not the old days, my friend. I've got so much antiviral medicine in my system that nothing could get through. I get so much contaminated shit from all the hackers who come through here, it's like working in a plague ward. So I'm not afraid of whatever's in this hypercard."

"Well, in that case, I'm curious," Hiro says.

"Yeah. Me, too." Da5id laughs.

"It's probably something very disappointing."

"Probably an animercial," Da5id agrees. "Think I should do it?"

"Yeah. Go for it. It's not every day you get to try out a new drug," Hiro says.

"Well, you can try one every day if you want to," Da5id says, "but it's not every day you find one that can't hurt you." He picks up the hypercard and tears it in half.

For a second, nothing happens. "I'm waiting," Da5id says.

An avatar materializes on the table in front of Da5id,

starting out ghostly and transparent, gradually becoming solid and three-dimensional. It's a really trite effect; Hiro and Da5id are already laughing.

The avatar is a stark naked Brandy. It doesn't even look like the standard Brandy; this looks like one of the cheap Taiwanese Brandy knockoffs. Clearly, it's just a daemon. She is holding a pair of tubes in her hands, about the size of paper-towel rolls.

Da5id is leaning back in his chair, enjoying this. There is something hilariously tawdry about the entire scene.

The Brandy leans forward, beckoning Da5id toward her. Da5id leans into her face, grinning broadly. She puts her crude, ruby-red lips up by his ear and mumbles something that Hiro can't hear.

When she leans back away from Da5id, his face has changed. He looks dazed and expressionless. Maybe Da5id really looks that way; maybe Snow Crash has messed up his avatar somehow so that it's no longer tracking Da5id's true facial expressions. But he's staring straight ahead, eyes frozen in their sockets.

The Brandy holds the pair of tubes up in front of Da5id's immobilized face and spreads them apart. It's actually a scroll. She's unrolling it right in front of Da5id's face, spreading it apart like a flat two-dimensional screen in front of his eyes. Da5id's paralyzed face has taken on a bluish tinge as it reflects light coming out of the scroll.

Hiro walks around the table to look. He gets a brief glimpse of the scroll before the Brandy snaps it shut again. It is a living wall of light, like a flexible, flat-screened television set, and it's not showing anything at all. Just static. White noise. Snow.

Then she's gone, leaving no trace behind. Desultory, sarcastic applause sounds from a few tables in the Hacker Quadrant.

Da5id's back to normal, wearing a grin that's part snide and part embarrassed.

"What was it?" Hiro says. "I just glimpsed some snow at the very end."

"You saw the whole thing," Da5id says. "A fixed-

pattern of black-and-white pixels, fairly high-resolution. Just a few hundred thousand ones and zeroes for me to look at."

"So in other words, someone just exposed your optic nerve to, what, maybe a hundred thousand bytes of information," Hiro says.

"Noise, is more like it."

"Well, all information looks like noise until you break the code," Hiro says.

"Why would anyone show me information in binary code? I'm not a computer. I can't read a bitmap."

"Relax, Da5id, I'm just shitting you," Hiro says.

"You know what it was? You know how hackers are always trying to show me samples of their work?"

"Yeah."

"Some hacker came up with this scheme to show me his stuff. And everything worked fine until the moment the Brandy opened the scroll—but his code was buggy, and it snow-crashed at the wrong moment, so instead of seeing his output, all I saw was snow."

"Then why did he *call* the thing Snow Crash?"

"Gallows humor. He knew it was buggy."

"What did the Brandy whisper in your ear?"

"Some language I didn't recognize," Da5id says. "Just a bunch of babble."

Babble. Babel.

"Afterward, you looked sort of stunned."

Da5id looks resentful. "I wasn't stunned. I just found the whole experience so weird, I guess I just was taken aback for a second."

Hiro is giving him an extremely dubious look. Da5id notices it and stands up. "Want to go see what your competitors in Nippon are up to?"

"What competitors?"

"You used to design avatars for rock stars, right?"

"Still do."

"Well, Sushi K is here tonight."

"Oh, yeah. The hairdo the size of a galaxy."

"You can see the rays from here," Da5id says, waving toward the next quadrant, "but I want to see the whole getup."

It does look as though the sun is rising somewhere in the middle of the Rock Star Quadrant. Above the heads of the milling avatars, Hiro can see a fan of orange beams radiating outward from some point in the middle of the crowd. It keeps moving, turning around, shaking from side to side, and the whole universe seems to move with it. On the Street, the full radiance of Sushi K's Rising Sun hairdo is suppressed by the height and width regulations. But Da5id allows free expression inside The Black Sun, so the orange rays extend all the way to the property lines.

"I wonder if anyone's told him yet that Americans won't buy rap music from a Japanese person," Hiro says as they stroll over there.

"Maybe you should tell him," Da5id suggests, "charge him for the service. He's in L.A. right now, you know."

"Probably staying in a hotel full of bootlickers telling him what a big star he's going to be. He needs to be exposed to some actual biomass."

They inject themselves into a stream of traffic, winding a narrow channel through a rift in the crowd.

"Biomass?" Da5id says.

"A body of living stuff. It's an ecology term. If you take an acre of rain forest or a cubic mile of ocean or a square block of Compton and strain out all the on living stuff—dirt and water—you get the biomass."

Da5id, ever the bithead, says, "I do not understand." His voice sounds funny; there's a lot of white noise creeping into his audio.

"Industry expression," Hiro says. "The Industry feeds off the human biomass of America. Like a whale straining krill from the sea."

Hiro wedges himself between a couple of Nipponese businessmen. One is wearing a uniform blue, but the other is a neo-traditional, wearing a dark kimono. And, like Hiro, he's wearing two swords—the long katana on his left hip and the one-handed wakizashi stuck diagonally in his waistband. He and Hiro glance cursorily at each other's armaments. Then Hiro looks away and pretends

not to notice, while the neo-traditional is freezing solid, except for the corners of his mouth, which are curling downward. Hiro has seen this kind of thing before. He knows he's about to get into a fight.

People are moving out of the way; something big and inexorable is plunging through the crowd, shoving avatars this way and that. Only one thing has the ability to shove people around like that inside The Black Sun, and that's a bouncer daemon.

As they get closer, Hiro sees that it's a whole flying wedge of them, gorillas in tuxedos. Real gorillas. And they seem to be headed toward Hiro.

He tries to back away, but he quickly runs into something. Looks like Bigboard finally got him in trouble; he's on his way out of the bar.

"Da5id," Hiro says. "Call them off, man, I'll stop using it."

All of the people in his vicinity are staring over Hiro's shoulder, their faces illuminated by a stew of brilliant colored lights.

Hiro turns around to look at Da5id. But Da5id's not there anymore.

Instead of Da5id, there is just a jittering cloud of bad digital karma. It's so bright and fast and meaningless that it hurts to look at. It flashes back and forth from color to black and white, and when it's in color, it rolls wildly around the color wheel as though being strafed with high-powered disco lights. And it's not staying within its own body space; hair-thin pixel lines keep shooting off to one side, passing all the way across The Black Sun and out through the wall. It is not so much an organized body as it is a centrifugal cloud of lines and polygons whose center cannot hold, throwing bright bits of body shrapnel all over the room, interfering with people's avatars, flickering and disappearing.

The gorillas don't mind. They shove their long furry fingers into the midst of the disintegrating cloud and latch onto it somehow and carry it past Hiro, toward the exit. Hiro looks down as it goes past him and sees what looks very much like Da5id's face as viewed through a

pile of shattered glass. It's just a momentary glimpse. Then the avatar is gone, expertly drop-kicked out the front door, soaring out over the Street in a long flat arc that takes it over the horizon. Hiro looks up the aisle to see Da5id's table, empty, surrounded by stunned hackers. Some of them are shocked, some are trying to stifle grins.

Da5id Meier, supreme hacker overload, founding father of the Metaverse protocol, creator and proprietor of the world-famous Black Sun, has just suffered a system crash. He's been thrown out of his own bar by his own daemons.

1 □

About the second or third thing they learned how to do when studying to become Kouriers was how to shiv open a pair of handcuffs. Handcuffs are not intended as long-term restraint devices, millions of Clink franchisees to the contrary. And the longtime status of skateboarders as an oppressed ethnic group means that by now all of them are escape artists of some degree.

First things first. Y.T. has many a thing hanging off her uniform. The uniform has a hundred pockets, big flat pockets for deliveries and eensy narrow pockets for gear, pockets sewn into sleeves, thighs, shins. The equipment stuck into these multifarious pockets tends to be small, tricky, lightweight: pens, markers, penlights, penknives, lock picks, bar-code scanners, flares, screwdrivers, Liquid Knuckles, bundy stunners, and lightsticks. A calculator is stuck upside-down to her right thigh, doubling as a taxi meter and a stopwatch.

On the other thigh is a personal phone. As the manager is locking the door upstairs, it begins to ring. Y.T. offhooks it with her free hand. It is her mother.

"Hi, Mom. Fine, how are you? I'm at Tracy's house. Yeah, we went to the Metaverse. We were just fooling around at this arcade on the Street. Pretty bumpin'. Yes, I used a nice avatar. Nah, Tracy's mom said she'd give me a ride home later. But we might stop off at the Joyride on Victory for a while, okay? Okay, well, sleep tight, Mom. I will. I love you, too. See you later."

She punches the flash button, killing the chat with Mom and giving her a fresh dial tone in the space of about half a second. "Roadkill," she says.

The telephone remembers and dials Roadkill's number.

Roaring sounds. This is the sound of air peeling over the microphone of Roadkill's personal phone at some terrifying velocity. Also the competing whooshes of many vehicles' tires on pavement, broken by chuckhole percussion; sounds like the crumbling Ventura.

"Yo, Y.T.," Roadkill says, "'sup?"

"'Sup with you?"

"Surfing the Tura. 'Sup with you?"

"Maxing The Clink."

"Whoa! Who popped you?"

"MetaCops. Affixed me to the gate of White Columns with a loogie gun."

"Whoa, how very! When you leaving?"

"Soon. Can you swing by and give me a hand?"

"What do you mean?"

Men. "You know, *give me a hand*. You're my boyfriend," she says, speaking very simply and plainly. "If I get popped, you're supposed to come around and help bust me out." Isn't everyone supposed to know this stuff? Don't parents teach their kids anything anymore?

"Well, uh, where are you?"

"Buy 'n' Fly number 501,762."

"I'm on my way to Bernie with a super-ultra."

As in San Bernardino. As in super-ultra-high-priority delivery. As in, you're out of luck.

"Okay, thanks for nothing."

"Sorry."

"Surfing safety," Y.T. says, in the traditional sarcastic sign off.

"Keep breathing," Roadkill says. The roaring noise snaps off.

What a jerk. Next date, he's really going to have to grovel. But in the meantime, there's one other person who owes her one. The only problem is that he might be a spaz. But it's worth a try.

"Hello?" he says into his personal phone. He's breathing hard and a couple of sirens are dueling in the background.

"Hiro Protagonist?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"Y.T. Where are you?"

"In the parking lot of a Safeway on Oahu," he says. And he's telling the truth; in the background she can hear the shopping carts performing their clashy, anal copulations.

"I'm kind of busy now, Whitey—but what can I do for you?"

"It's Y.T.," she says, "and you can help bust me out of The Clink." She gives him the details.

"How long ago did he put you there?"

"Ten minutes."

"Okay, the three-ring binder for Clink franchises states that the manager is supposed to check on the detainee half an hour after admission."

"How do you know this stuff?" she says accusingly.

"Use your imagination. As soon as the manager pulls his half-hour check, wait for another five minutes, and then make your move. I'll try to give you a hand. Okay?"

"Got it."

OH

At half an hour on the dot, she hears the back door being unlocked. The lights come on. Her Knight Visions save her from wracking eyeball pains. The manager thunks down a couple of steps, glares at her, glares at her for rather a long time. The manager, clearly, is tempted. That momentary glimpse of flesh has been ricocheting around in his brain for half an hour. He is wracking his mind with vast cosmological dilemmas. Y.T. hopes that he does not try anything, because the dentata's effects can be unpredictable.

"Make up your fucking mind," she says.

It works. This fresh burst of culture shock rattles the geek out of his ethical conundrum. He gives Y.T. a disapproving glower—she, after all, forced him to be at-

tracted to her, forced him to get horny, made his head swim—she didn't have to get arrested, did she?—and so on top of everything else he's angry with her. As if he has a right to be.

“This is the gender that invented the polio vaccine?

He turns, goes back up the steps, kills the light, locks the door.

She notes the time, sets her alarm watch for five minutes from now—the only North American who actually knows how to set the alarm on her digital wristwatch—pulls her shiv kit from one of the narrow pockets on her sleeve. She also hauls out a lightstick and snaps it so she can see 'sup. She finds one piece of narrow, flat spring steel, slides it up into the manacle's innards, depresses the spring-loaded pawl. The cuff, formerly a one-way ratchet that could only get tighter, springs loose from the cold-water pipe.

She could take it off her wrist, but she has decided she likes the look of it. She cuffs the loose manacle onto her wrist, right next to the other one, forming a double bracelet. The kind of thing her mom used to do, back when she was a punk.

The steel door is locked, but Buy 'n' Fly safety regs mandate an emergency exit from the basement in case of fire. Here, it's a basement window with mondo bars and a big red multilingual fire alarm bolted onto it. The red looks black in the green glow of the lightstick. She reads the instructions that are in English, runs through it once or twice in her mind, then waits for the alarm to go off. She whiles away the time by reading the instructions in all the other languages, wondering which is which. It all looks like Taxilinga to Y.T.

The window is almost too grungy to see through, but she sees something black walking past it. Hiro.

About ten seconds later, her wristwatch goes off. She punches the emergency exit. The bell rings. The bars are trickier than she thought—good thing it's not a real fire—but eventually she gets them open. She throws her plank outside onto the parking lot, drags her body through just as she hears the rear door being unlocked. By the time

the three-ringer has found that all-important light switch, she is banking a sharp turn into the front lot—which has turned into a jeek festival!

Every jeek in Southern Cal is here, it seems, driving their giant, wrecked taxicabs with alien livestock in the back seat, reeking of incense and sloshing neon-hued Air-wicks! They have set up a giant eight-tubed hookah on the trunk of one of the cabs and are slurping up great mountain-man lungfuls of choking smoke.

And they're all staring at Hiro Protagonist, who is just staring back at them. Everyone in the parking lot looks completely astounded.

He must have made his approach from the rear—didn't realize that the front lot was full of jeeks. Whatever he was planning isn't going to work. The plan is screwed.

The manager comes running around from the back of the Buy 'n' Fly, sounding a bloodcurdling Taxilinga tocsin. He's got missile lock on Y.T.'s ass.

But the jeeks around the hookah don't care about Y.T. They've got missile lock on Hiro. They carefully hang the ornate silver nozzles on a rack built into the neck of the mega-bong. Then they start moving toward him, reaching into the folds of their robes, the inner pockets of their windbreakers.

Y.T. is distracted by a sharp hissing noise. Her eyes glance back at Hiro, and she sees that he has withdrawn a three-foot, curved sword from a scabbard, which she did not notice before. He has dropped into a squat. The blade of the sword glitters painfully under the killer security lights of the Buy 'n' Fly.

How sweet!

It would be an understatement to say that the hookah boys are taken aback. But they are not scared so much as they are confused. Almost undoubtedly, most of them have guns. So why is this guy trying to bother them with a sword?

She remembers that one of the multiple professions on Hiro's business card is *Greatest sword fighter in the world*. Can he really take out a whole clan of armed jeeks?

The manager's hand clenches her upper arm—like

this is really going to stop her. She reaches across her body with the other hand and lets him have it with a brief squirt of Liquid Knuckles. He makes a muffled, distant grunt, his head snaps back, he lets go of her arm and staggers back wildly until he sprawls against another taxi, jamming the heels of both hands into his eye sockets.

Wait a sec. There's nobody in that particular taxi. But she can see a two-foot-long macramé keychain dangling from the ignition.

She tosses her plank through the window of the taxi, dives in after it (she's small, opening the door is optional), climbs in behind the driver's seat, sinking into a deep nest of wooden beads and air fresheners, grinds the motor, and takes off. Backward. Headed for the rear parking lot. The car was pointed outward, in taxicab style, ready for a quick getaway, which would be fine if she were by herself—but there is Hiro to think of. The radio is screaming, alive with hollered bursts of Taxilinga. She backs all the way around behind the Buy 'n' Fly. The back lot is strangely quiet and empty.

She shifts into drive and blasts back the way she came. The jeeks haven't quite had time to react, were expecting her to come out the other way. She screams it to a halt right next to Hiro, who has already had the presence of mind to put his sword back in its scabbard. He dives in the passenger-side window. Then she stops paying attention to him. She's got other stuff to look at, such as whether she's going to get broadsided as she pulls out onto the road.

She doesn't get broadsided, though a car has to squeal around her. She guns it out onto the highway. It responds as only an ancient taxicab will.

The only problem being that half a dozen other ancient taxicabs are now following them.

Something is pressing against Y.T.'s left thigh. She looks down. It is a remarkably huge revolver in a net bag hanging on the door panel.

She has to find someplace to pull into. If she could find a Nova Sicilia franchulate, that would do it—the Mafia owes her one. Or a New South Africa, which she hates. But the New South Africans hate jeeks even more.

Scratch that; Hiro is black, or at least part black. Can't take him into New South Africa. And because Y.T. is a Cauc, they can't go to Metazania.

"Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong," Hiro says. "Half mile ahead on the right."

"Nice thinking—but they won't let you in with your swords, will they?"

"Yes," he says, "because I'm a citizen."

Then she sees it. The sign stands out because it is a rare one. Don't see many of these. It is a green-and-blue sign, soothing and calm in a glare-torn franchise ghetto. It says:

MR. LEE'S GREATER HONG KONG

Explosive noise from in back. Her head smacks into the whiplash arrestor. Another taxi rear-ended them.

And she screams into the parking lot of Mr. Lee's doing seventy-five. The security system doesn't even have time to rez her visa and drop the STD, so it's Severe Tire Damage all the way, those bald radials are left behind on the spikes. Sparking along on four naked rims, she shrieks to a stop on the lawngird, which doubles as carbon dioxide-eating turf and impervious parking lot.

She and Hiro climb out of the car.

Hiro is grinning wildly, pinioned in the crossfire of a dozen red laser beams scanning him from every direction at once. The Hong Kong robot security system is checking him out. Her, too; she looks down to see the lasers scribbling across her chest.

"Welcome to Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong, Mr. Protagonist," the security system says through a P.A. speaker. "And welcome to your guest, Ms. Y.T."

The other taxis have stopped in formation along the curb. Several of them overshot the Hong Kong franchise and had to back up a block or so. A barrage of doors thunking shut. Some of them don't bother, just leave the engines running and the doors wide open. Three jeeks linger on the sidewalk, eyeing the tire shreds impaled on spikes: long streaks of neoprene sprouting steel

and fiberglass hairs, like ruined toupees. One of them has a revolver in his hand, pointed straight down at the sidewalk.

Four more jeeks run up to join them. Y.T. counts two more revolvers and a pump shotgun. Any more of these guys and they'll be able to form a government.

They step carefully over the spikes and onto the lush Hong Kong lawngird. As they do, the lasers appear once more. The jeeks turn all red and grainy for a second.

Then something different happens. Lights come on. The security system wants better illumination on these people.

Hong Kong franchulutes are famous for their lawngirds—whoever heard of a lawn you could park on?—and for their antennas. They all look like NASA research facilities with their antennas. Some of them are satellite uplinks, pointed at the sky. But some of them, tiny little antennas, are pointed at the ground, at the lawngird.

Y.T. does not really get this, but these small antennas are millimeter-wave radar transceivers. Like any other radar, they are good at picking up metallic objects. Unlike the radar in an air traffic control center, they can rez fine details. The rez of a system is only as fine as its wavelength; since the wavelength of this radar is about a millimeter, it can see the fillings in your teeth, the grommets in your Converse high-tops, the rivets in your Levi's. It can calculate the value of your pocket change.

Seeing guns is not a problem. This thing can even tell if the guns are loaded, and with what sort of ammunition. That is an important function, because guns are illegal in Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong.

11

It doesn't seem polite to hang around and gawk over the fact that Da5id's computer crashed. A lot of the younger hackers are doing just that, as a way of showing all the other hackers how knowledgeable they are. Hiro shrugs it

off and turns back in the direction of the Rock Star Quadrant. He still wants to see Sushi K's hairdo.

But his path is being blocked by the Nipponese man—the neo-traditional. The guy with the swords. He's facing off against Hiro, about two sword-lengths apart, and it doesn't look like he intends to move.

Hiro does the polite thing. He bows at the waist, straightens up.

The businessman does the much less polite thing. He looks Hiro rather carefully up and down, then returns the bow. Sort of.

"These—" the businessman says. "Very nice."

"Thank you, sir. Please feel free to converse in Nipponese if you prefer."

"This is what your avatar wears. You do not carry such weapons in Reality," the businessman says. In English.

"I'm sorry to be difficult, but in fact, I do carry such weapons in Reality," Hiro says.

"Exactly like these?"

"Exactly."

"These are ancient weapons, then," the businessman says.

"Yes, I believe they are."

"How did you come to be in possession of such important family heirlooms from Nippon?" the businessman says.

Hiro knows the subtext here: *What do you use those swords for, boy, slicing watermelon?*

"They are now my family heirlooms," Hiro says. "My father won them."

"Won them? Gambling?"

"Single combat. It was a struggle between my father and a Nipponese officer. The story is quite complicated."

"Please excuse me if I have misinterpreted your story," the businessman says, "but I was under the impression that men of your race were not allowed to fight during that war."

"Your impression is correct," Hiro says. "My father was a truck driver."

"Then how did he come to be in hand-to-hand combat with a Nipponese officer?"

"The incident took place outside a prisoner-of-war camp," Hiro says. "My father and another prisoner tried to escape. They were pursued by a number of Nipponese soldiers and the officer who owned these swords."

"Your story is very difficult to believe," the businessman says, "because your father could not have survived such an escape long enough to pass the swords on to his son. Nippon is an island nation. There is nowhere he could have escaped to."

"This happened very late in the war," Hiro says, "and this camp was just outside of Nagasaki."

The businessman chokes, reddens, nearly loses it. His left hand reaches up to grip the scabbard of his sword. Hiro looks around; suddenly they are in the center of an open circle of people some ten yards across.

"Do you think that the manner in which you came to possess these swords was honorable?" the businessman says.

"If I did not, I would long since have returned them," Hiro says.

"Then you will not object to losing them in the same fashion," the businessman says.

"Nor will you object to losing yours," Hiro says.

The businessman reaches across his body with his right hand, grips the handle of his sword just below the guard, draws it out, snaps it forward so it's pointing at Hiro, then places his left hand on the grip just below the right.

Hiro does the same.

Both of them bend their knees, dropping into a low squat while keeping the torso bolt upright, then stand up again and shuffle their feet into the proper stance—feet parallel, both pointed straight ahead, right foot in front of the left foot.

The businessman turns out to have a lot of *zanshin*. Translating this concept into English is like translating "fuckface" into Nipponese, but it might translate into "emotional intensity" in football lingo. He charges directly at Hiro, hollering at the top of his lungs. The movement actually consists of a very rapid shuffling motion of the feet, so that he stays balanced at all times. At the last

moment, he draws the sword up over his head and snaps it down toward Hiro. Hiro brings his own sword up, rotating it around sideways so that the handle is up high, above and to the left of his face, and the blade slopes down and to the right, providing a roof above him. The businessman's blow bounces off this roof like rain, and then Hiro sidesteps to let him go by and snaps the sword down toward his unprotected shoulder. But the businessman is moving too fast, and Hiro's timing is off. The blade cuts behind and to the side of the businessman.

Both men wheel to face each other, back up, get back into the stance.

"Emotional intensity" doesn't convey the half of it, of course. It is the kind of coarse and disappointing translation that makes the dismembered bodies of samurai warriors spin in their graves. The word "zanshin" is larded down with a lot of other folderol that you have to be Nipponese to understand.

And Hiro thinks, frankly, that most of it is pseudomystical crap, on the same level as his old high school football coach exhorting his men to play at 110 percent.

The businessman makes another attack. This one is pretty straightforward: a quick shuffling approach and then a snapping cut in the direction of Hiro's ribcage. Hiro parries it.

Now Hiro knows something about this businessman, namely, that like most Nipponese sword fighters, all he knows is *kendo*.

Kendo is to real samurai sword fighting what fencing is to real swashbuckling: an attempt to take a highly disorganized, chaotic, violent, and brutal conflict and turn it into a cute game. As in fencing, you're only supposed to attack certain parts of the body—the parts that are protected by armor. As in fencing, you're not allowed to kick your opponent in the kneecaps or break a chair over his head. And the judging is totally subjective. In *kendo*, you can get a good solid hit on your opponent and still not get credit for it, because the judges feel you didn't possess the right amount of *zanshin*.

Hiro doesn't have any *zanshin* at all. He just wants

this over with. The next time the businessman sets up his ear-splitting screech and shuffles toward Hiro, cutting and snapping his blade, Hiro parries the attack, turns around, and cuts both of his legs off just above the knees.

The businessman collapses to the floor.

It takes a lot of practice to make your avatar move through the Metaverse like a real person. When your avatar has just lost its legs, all that skill goes out the window.

"Well, land sakes!" Hiro says. "Lookee here!" He whips his blade sideways, cutting off both of the businessman's forearms, causing the sword to clatter onto the floor.

"Better fire up the ol' barbecue, Jemima!" Hiro continues, whipping the sword around sideways, cutting the businessman's body in half just above the navel. Then he leans down so he's looking right into the businessman's face. "Didn't anyone tell you," he says, losing the dialect, "that I was a hacker?"

Then he hacks the guy's head off. It falls to the floor, does a half-roll, and comes to rest staring straight up at the ceiling. So Hiro steps back a couple of paces and mumbles, "Safe."

A largish safe, about a meter on a side, materializes just below the ceiling, plummets, and lands directly on the businessman's head. The impact drives both the safe and the head straight down through the floor of The Black Sun, leaving a square hole in the floor, exposing the tunnel system underneath. The rest of the dismembered body is still strewn around the floor.

At this moment, a Nipponese businessman somewhere, in a nice hotel in London or an office in Tokyo or even in the first-class lounge of the LATH, the Los Angeles/Tokyo Hypersonic, is sitting in front of his computer, red-faced and sweating, looking at The Black Sun Hall of Fame. He has been cut off from contact with The Black Sun itself, disconnected as it were from the Metaverse, and is just seeing a two-dimensional display. The top ten swordsmen of all time are shown along with their photographs. Beneath is a scrolling list of numbers and

names, starting with #11. He can scroll down the list if he wants to find his own ranking. The screen helpfully informs him that he is currently ranked number 863 out of 890 people who have ever participated in a sword fight in The Black Sun.

Number One, the name and the photograph on the top of the list, belongs to Hiroaki Protagonist.

Rat Thiry

12

Ng Security Industries Semi-Autonomous Guard Unit #A-367 lives in a pleasant black-and-white Metaverse where porterhouse steaks grow on trees, dangling at head level from low branches, and blood-drenched Frisbees fly through the crisp, cool air for no reason at all, until you catch them.

He has a little yard all to himself. It has a fence around it. He knows he can't jump over the fence. He's never actually tried to jump it, because he knows he can't. He doesn't go into the yard unless he has to. It's hot out there.

He has an important job: Protect the yard. Sometimes people come in and out of the yard. Most of the time, they are good people, and he doesn't bother them. He doesn't know why they are good people. He just knows it. Sometimes they are bad people, and he has to do bad things to them to make them go away. This is fitting and proper.

Out in the world beyond his yard, there are other yards with other doggies just like him. These aren't nasty dogs. They are all his friends.

The closest neighbor doggie is far away, farther than he can see. But he can hear this doggie bark sometimes, when a bad person approaches his yard. He can hear other neighbor doggies, too, a whole pack of them stretching off into the distance, in all directions. He belongs to a big pack of nice doggies.

He and the other nice doggies bark whenever a stranger comes into their yard, or even near it. The stranger doesn't hear him, but all the other doggies in the

pack do. If they live nearby, they get excited. They wake up and get ready to do bad things to that stranger if he should try to come into their yard.

When a neighbor doggie barks at a stranger, pictures and sounds and smells come into his mind along with the bark. He suddenly knows what that stranger looks like. What he smells like. How he sounds. Then, if that stranger should come anywhere near his yard, he will recognize him. He will help spread the bark along to other nice doggies so that the entire pack can all be prepared to fight the stranger.

Tonight, Semi-Autonomous Guard Unit #A-367 is barking. He is not just passing some other doggie's bark to the pack. He is barking because he feels very excited about things that are happening in his yard.

First, two people come in. This made him excited because they came in very fast. Their hearts are beating quickly and they are sweating and they smell scared. He looked at these two people to see if they were carrying bad things.

The little one is carrying things that are a little naughty, but not really bad. The big one is carrying some pretty bad things. But he knows, somehow, that the big one is okay. He belongs in this yard. He is not a stranger; he lives here. And the little one is his guest.

Still, he senses there is something exciting happening. He starts to bark. The people in the yard don't hear him barking. But all the other nice doggies in the pack, far away, hear him, and when they do, they see these two scared, nice people, smell them, and hear them.

Then more people come into his yard. They are also excited; he can hear their hearts beating. Saliva floods his mouth as he smells the hot salty blood pumping through their arteries. These people are excited and angry and just a little bit scared. They don't live here; they are strangers. He doesn't like strangers very much.

He looks at them and sees that they are carrying three revolvers, a .38 and two .357 magnums; that the .38 is loaded with hollow-points, one of the .357s is loaded with Teflon bullets and has also been cocked; and that

the pump shotgun is loaded with buckshot and already has a shell chambered, plus four more shells in its magazine.

The things that the strangers are carrying are bad. Scary things. He gets excited. He gets angry. He gets a little bit scared, but he likes being scared, to him it is the same thing as being excited. Really, he has only two emotions: sleeping and adrenaline overdrive.

The bad stranger with the shotgun is raising his weapon!

It is an utterly terrible thing. A lot of bad, excited strangers are invading his yard with evil things, come to hurt the nice visitors.

He barely has time to bark out a warning to the other nice doggies before he launches himself from his doghouse, propelled on a white-hot jet of pure, feral emotion.

In Y.T.'s peripheral vision she sees a brief flash, hears a clunking noise. She looks over in that direction to see that the source of the light is a sort of doggie door built into the side of the Hong Kong franchise. The doggie door has in the very recent past been slammed open by something coming from the inside, headed for the lawngrid with the speed and determination of a howitzer shell.

As all of this registers on Y.T.'s mind, she begins to hear the shouting of the jeeks. This shouting is not angry and not scared either. No one has had time to get scared yet. It is the shouting of someone who has just had a bucket of ice water dumped over his head.

This shouting is still getting underway, she is still turning her head to look at the jeeks, when the doggie door emits another burst of light. Her eyes flick that-away; she thinks that she saw something, a long round shadow cross-sectioned in the light for a blurry instant as the door was being slammed inward. But when her eyes focus on it, she sees nothing except the oscillating door, same as before. These are the only impressions left on her mind, except for one more detail: a train of sparks that danced across the lawngrid from the doggie door to

the jeeks and back again during this one-second event, like a skyrocket glancing across the lot.

People say that the Rat Thing runs on four legs. Perhaps the claws on its robot legs made those sparks as they were digging into the lawngird for traction.

The jeeks are all in motion. Some of them have just been body-slammed into the lawngird and are still bouncing and rolling. Others are still in mid-collapse. They are unarmed. They are reaching to grip their gun hands with the opposite hands, still hollering, though now their voices are tinged with a certain amount of fear. One of them has had his trousers torn from the waistband all the way down to the ankle, and a strip of fabric is trailing out across the lot, as though he had his pocket picked by something that was in too much of a hurry to let go of the actual pocket before it left. Maybe this guy had a knife in his pocket.

There is no blood anywhere. The Rat Thing is precise. Still they hold their hands and holler. Maybe it's true what they say, that the Rat Thing gives you an electrical shock when it wants you to let go of something.

"Look out," she hears herself saying, "they got guns."

Hiro turns and grins at her. His teeth are very white and straight; he has a sharp grin, a carnivore's grin. "No, they don't. Guns are illegal in Hong Kong, remember?"

"They had guns just a second ago," Y.T. says, bulging her eyes and shaking her head.

"The Rat Thing has them now," Hiro says.

The jeeks all decide they better leave. They run out and get into their taxis and take off, tires asqueal.

Y.T. backs the taxi on its rims out over the STD and into the street, where she grindingly parallel parks it. She goes back into the Hong Kong franchise, a nebula of aromatic freshness trailing behind her like the tail of a comet. She is thinking, oddly enough, about what it would be like to climb into the back of the car with Hiro Protagonist for a while. ~~Pretty nice~~, probably. But she'd have to take out the ~~dentata~~, and this isn't the place. Besides, anyone decent enough to come help her escape

from The Clink probably has some kind of scruples about boffing fifteen-year-old girls.

"That was nice of you," he says, nodding at the parked taxi. "Are you going to pay for his tires, too?"

"No. Are you?"

"I'm having some cash flow problems."

She stands there in the middle of the Hong Kong lawngird. They look each other up and down, carefully.

"I called my boyfriend. But he flaked out on me," she says.

"Another thrasher?"

"The same."

"You made the same mistake I made once," he says. "What's that?"

"Mixing business with pleasure. Going out with a colleague. It gets very confusing."

"Yeah. I see what you mean." She's not exactly sure what a colleague is.

"I was thinking that we should be partners," she says.

She's expecting him to laugh at her. But instead he grins and nods his head slightly. "The same thing occurred to me. But I'd have to think about how it would work."

She is astounded that he would actually be thinking this. Then she gets the sap factor under control and realizes: He's waffling. Which means he's probably lying. This is probably going to end with him trying to get her into bed.

"I gotta go," she says. "Gotta get home."

Now we'll see how fast he loses interest in the partnership concept. She turns her back on him.

Suddenly, they are impaled on Hong Kong robot spotlights one more time.

Y.T. feels a sharp bruising pain in her ribs, as though someone punched her. But it wasn't Hiro. He is an unpredictable freak who carries swords, but she can smell chick-punchers a mile off.

"Ow!" she says, twisting away from the impact. She looks down to see a small heavy object bouncing on the

ground at their feet. Out in the street, an ancient taxi squeals its tires, getting the hell out of there. A jeek is hanging out the rear window, shaking his fist at them. He must have thrown a rock at her.

Except it's not a rock. The heavy thing at her feet, the thing that just bounced off of Y.T.'s ribcage, is a hand grenade. She stares for a second, recognizing it, a well-known cartoon icon made real.

Then her feet get knocked out from under her, too fast really to hurt. And just when she's getting reoriented to that, there is a painfully loud bang from another part of the parking lot.

And then everything finally stops long enough to be seen and understood.

The Rat Thing has stopped. Which they never do. It's part of their mystery that you never get to see them, they move so fast. No one knows what they look like.

No one except for Y.T. and Hiro, now.

It's bigger than she imagined. The body is Rottweiler-sized, segmented into overlapping hard plates like those of a rhinoceros. The legs are long, curled way up to deliver power, like a cheetah's. It must be the tail that makes people refer to it as a Rat Thing, because that's the only ratlike part—incredibly long and flexible. But it looks like a rat's tail with the flesh eaten away by acid, because it just consists of segments, hundreds of them neatly plugged together, like vertebrae.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Hiro says. And she knows, from that, that he's never seen one either.

Right now, the tail is coiled and piled around on top of the Rat Thing's body like a rope that has fallen out of a tree. Parts of it are trying to move, other parts of it look dead and inert. The legs are moving one by one, spasmodically, not acting in concert. The whole thing just looks terribly wrong, like footage of an airplane that has had its tail blown off, trying to maneuver for a landing. Even someone who is not an engineer can see that it has gone all perverse and twisted.

The tail writhes and lashes like a snake, uncoils itself, rises up off the Rat Thing's body, gets out of the way

of its legs. But still the legs have problems; it can't get itself up.

"Y.T.," Hiro is saying, "don't."

She does. One footstep at a time, she approaches the Rat Thing.

"It's dangerous, in case you hadn't noticed," Hiro says, following her a few paces behind. "They say it has biological components."

"Biological components?"

"Animal parts. So it might be unpredictable."

She likes animals. She keeps walking.

She's seeing it better now. It's not all armor and muscle. A lot of it actually looks kind of flimsy. It has short stubby winglike things projecting from its body: A big one from each shoulder and a row of smaller ones down the length of its spine, like on a stegosaurus. Her Knight Visions tell her that these things are hot enough to bake pizzas on. As she approaches, they seem to unfold and grow.

They are blooming like flowers in an educational film, spreading and unfolding to reveal a fine complicated internal structure that has been all collapsed together inside. Each stubby wing splits off into little miniature copies of itself, and each of those in turn splits off into more smaller copies and so on forever. The smallest ones are just tiny bits of foil, so small that, from a distance, the edges look fuzzy.

It is continuing to get hotter. The little wings are almost red hot now. Y.T. slides her goggles up onto her forehead and cups her hands around her face to block out the surrounding lights, and sure enough she can see them, beginning to make a dull brownish glow, like an electric stove element that has just been turned on. The grass underneath the Rat Thing is beginning to smoke.

"Careful. Supposedly they have really nasty isotopes inside," Hiro says behind her. He has come up a little closer now, but he's still hanging way back.

"What's an isotope?"

"A radioactive substance that makes heat. That's its energy source."

"How do you turn it off?"

"You don't. It keeps making heat until it melts."

Y.T. is only a few feet away from the Rat Thing now, and she can feel the heat on her cheeks. The wings have unfolded as far as they can go. At their roots they are a bright yellow-orange, fading out through red and brown to their delicate edges, which are still dark. The acrid smoke of the burning grass obscures some of the details.

She thinks: The edges of the wings look like something I've seen before. They look like the thin metal vanes that run up the outside of a window air conditioner, the ones that you can write your name in by mashing them down with your finger.

Or like the radiator on a car. The fan blows air over the radiator to cool off the engine.

"It's got radiators," she says. "The Rat Thing has got radiators to cool off." She's gathering intel right at this very moment.

But it's not cooling off. It's just getting hotter.

Y.T. surfs through traffic jams for a living. That's her economic niche: beating the traffic. And she knows that a car doesn't boil over when it is speeding down an open freeway. It boils over when it is stopped in traffic. Because when it sits still, not enough air is being blown over the radiator.

That's what's happening to the Rat Thing right now. It has to keep moving, keep forcing air over its radiators, or else it overheats and melts down.

"Cool," she says. "I wonder if it's going to blow up or what."

The body converges to a sharp nose. In the front it bends down sharply, and there is a black glass canopy, raked sharply like the windshield of a fighter plane. If the Rat Thing has eyes, this is where it looks out.

Under that, where the jaw should be are the remains of some kind of mechanical stuff that has been mostly blown off by the explosion of the grenade.

The black glass windshield—or facemask, or whatever you call it—has a hole blown through it. Big enough that Y.T. could put her hand through. On the other side

of that hole, it's dark and she can't see much, especially so close to the bright orange glare coming from the radiators. But she can see that red stuff is coming out from inside. And it ain't no Dexron II. The Rat Thing is hurt and it's bleeding.

"This thing is real," she says. "It's got blood in its veins." She's thinking: This is intel. *This is intel.* I can make money off this with my pardner—my pod—Hiro.

Then she thinks: The poor thing is burning itself alive.

"Don't do it. Don't touch it, Y.T.," Hiro says.

She steps right up to it, flips her goggles down to protect her face from the heat. The Rat Thing's legs stop their spasmodic movements, as though waiting for her.

She bends down and grabs its front legs. They react, tightening their pushrod muscles against the pull of her hands. It's exactly like grabbing a dog by the front legs and asking it to dance. This thing is alive. It reacts to her. She knows.

She looks up at Hiro, just to make sure he's taking this all in. He is.

"Jerk!" she says. "I stick my neck out and say I want to be your partner, and you say you want to think about it? What's your problem, I'm not good enough to work with you?"

She leans back and begins dragging the Rat Thing backward across the lawngrid. It's incredibly light. No wonder it can run so fast. She could pick it up, if she felt like burning herself alive.

As she drags it backward toward the doggie door, it brands a blackened, smoking trail into the lawngrid. She can see steam rising up out of her coverall, old sweat and stuff boiling out of the fabric. She's small enough to fit through the doggie door—another thing she can do and Hiro can't. Usually these things are locked, she's tried to mess with them. But this one is opened.

Inside, the franchise is bright, white, robot-polished floors. A few feet from the doggie door is what looks like a black washing machine. This is the Rat Thing's hutch, where it lurks in darkness and privacy, waiting for a job

to do. It is wired into the franchise by a thick cable coming out of the wall. Right now, the hutch's door is hanging open, which is another thing she's never seen before. And steam is rolling out from inside of it.

Not steam. Cold stuff. Like when you open your freezer door on a humid day.

She pushes the Rat Thing into its hutch. Some kind of cold liquid sprays out of all the walls and bursts into steam before it even reaches the Rat Thing's body, and the steam comes blasting out the front of the hutch so powerfully that it knocks her on her ass.

The long tail is strung out the front of the hutch, across the floor, and out through the doggie door. She picks up part of it, the sharp machine-tooled edges of its vertebrae pinching her gloves.

Suddenly it tenses, comes alive, vibrates for a second. She jerks her hands back. The tail shoots back inside the hutch like a rubber band snapping. She can't even see it move. Then the hutch door slams shut. A janitor robot, a Hoover with a brain, hums out of another doorway to clean the long streaks of blood off the floor.

Above her, hanging on the foyer wall facing the main entrance, is a framed poster with a garland of well-browned jasmine blossoms hung around it. It consists of a photo of the wildly grinning Mr. Lee, with the usual statement underneath:

WELCOME!

It is my pleasure to welcome all quality folks to visiting of Hong Kong. Whether seriously in business or on a fun-loving hijink, make yourself totally homely in this meager environment. If any aspect is not utterly harmonious, gratefully bring it to my notice and I shall strive to earn your satisfaction.

We of Greater Hong Kong take many prides in our tiny nation's extravagant growth. The ones who saw our isle as a morsel of Red China's pleasure have struck their faces in keen aston-

ishment to see many great so-called powers of the olden guard reel in dismay before our leaping strides and charged-up hustling, freewheeling idiom of high-tech personal accomplishment and betterment of all peoples. The potentials of all ethnic races and anthropologies to merge under a banner of the Three Principles to follow

1. Information, information, information!
2. Totally fair marketeering!
3. Strict ecology!

have been peerless in the history of economic strife.

Who would disdain to subscribe under this flowing banner? If you have not attained your Hong Kong citizenship, apply for a passport now! In this month, the usual fee of HK\$100 will be kindly neglected. Fill out a coupon (below) now. If coupons are lacking, dial 1-800-HONG KONG instantly to apply from the help of our wizened operators.

Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong is a private, wholly extraterritorial, sovereign, quasi-national entity not recognized by any other nationalities and in no way affiliated with the former Crown Colony of Hong Kong, which is part of the People's Republic of China. The People's Republic of China admits or accepts no responsibility for Mr. Lee, the Government of Greater Hong Kong, or any of the citizens thereof, or for any violations of local law, personal injury, or property damage occurring in territories, buildings, municipalities, institutions, or real estate owned, occupied, or claimed by Mr. Lee's Greater Hong Kong.

Join us instantly!

Your enterprising partner,

Mr. Lee

Back in his cool little house, Semi-Autonomous Guard Unit #A-367 is howling.

Outside in the yard, it was very hot and he felt bad. Whenever he is out in the yard, he gets hot unless he keeps running. When he got hurt and had to lie down for a long time, he felt hotter than he had ever been before.

Now he doesn't feel hot anymore. But he is still hurt. He is howling his injured howl. He is telling all the neighbor doggies that he needs help. They feel sad and upset and repeat his howl and pass it along to all the rest of the doggies.

Soon he hears the vet's car approaching. The nice vet will come and make him feel better.

He starts barking again. He is telling all the other doggies about how the bad strangers came and hurt him. And how hot it was out in the yard when he had to lie down. And how the nice girl helped him and took him back to his cool house.

Right in front of the Hong Kong franchise, Y.T. notices a black Town Car that has been sitting there for a while. She doesn't have to see the plates to know it's Mafia. Only the Mafia drives cars like that. The windows are blackened, but she knows someone's in there keeping an eye on her. How do they do it? You see these Town Cars everywhere, but you never see them move, never see them get anyplace. She's not even sure they have engines in them.

"Okay. Sorry," Hiro says. "I keep my own thing going, but we have a partnership for any intel you can dig up. Fifty-fifty split."

"Deal," she says, climbing onto her plank.

"Call me anytime. You have my card."

"Hey, that reminds me. Your card said you're into the three Ms of software."

"Yeah. Music, movies, and microcode."

"You heard of Vitaly Chernobyl and the Meltdowns?"

"No. Is that a band?"

"Yeah. It's the greatest band. You should check it out, homeboy, it's going to be the next big thing."

She coasts out onto the road and poons an Audi with Blooming Greens license plates. It ought to take her home. Mom's probably in bed, pretending to sleep, being worried.

Half a block from the entrance to Blooming Greens, she unpoons the Audi and coasts into a McDonald's. She goes into the ladies'. It has a hung ceiling. She stands on the seat of the third toilet, pushes up one of the ceiling tiles, moves it aside. A cotton sleeve tumbles out, bearing a delicate floral print. She pulls on it and hauls down the whole ensemble, the blouse, the pleated skirt, underwear from Vicky's, the leather shoes, the necklace and earrings, even a fucking purse. She takes off her RadiKS coverall, wads it up, sticks it into the ceiling, replaces the loose tile. Then she puts on the ensemble.

Now she looks just like she did when she had breakfast with Mom this morning.

She carries her plank down the street to Blooming Greens, where it's legal to carry them but not to put them on the crete. She flashes her passport at the border post, walks a quarter of a mile down crisp new sidewalks, and up to the house where the porch light is on.

Mom's sitting in the den, in front of her computer, as usual. Mom works for the Feds. Feds don't make much money, but they have to work hard, to show their loyalty.

Y.T. goes in and looks at her mother, who has slumped down in her chair, put her hands around her face almost like she's voguing, put bare stocking feet up. She wears these awful cheap Fed stockings that are like scouring cloth, and when she walks, her thighs rub together underneath her skirt and make a rasping noise. There is a heavy-duty Ziploc bag on the table, full of water that used to be ice a couple of hours ago. Y.T. looks at Mom's left arm. She has rolled up her sleeve to expose the fresh bruise, just above her elbow, where they put the blood-pressure cuff. Weekly Fed polygraph test.

"Is that you?" Mom shouts, not realizing that Y.T.'s in the room.

Y.T. retreats into the kitchen so she won't surprise her mother. "Yeah, Mom," she shouts back. "How was your day?"

"I'm tired," Mom says. It's what she always says.

Y.T. pinches a beer from the fridge and starts running a hot bath. It makes a roaring sound that relaxes her, like the white-noise generator on Mom's nightstand.

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The Nipponese businessman lies cut in segments on The Black Sun's floor. Surprisingly (he looks so real when he's in one piece), no flesh, blood, or organs are visible through the new crossections that Hiro's sword made through his body. He is nothing more than a thin shell of epidermis, an incredibly complex inflatable doll. But the air does not rush out of him, he fails to collapse, and you can look into the aperture of a sword cut and see, instead of bones and meat, the back of the skin on the other side.

It breaks the metaphor. The avatar is not acting like a real body. It reminds all The Black Sun's patrons that they are living in a fantasy world. People hate to be reminded of this.

When Hiro wrote The Black Sun's sword-fighting algorithms—code that was later picked up and adopted by the entire Metaverse—he discovered that there was no good way to handle the aftermath. Avatars are not supposed to die. Not supposed to fall apart. The creators of the Metaverse had not been morbid enough to foresee a demand for this kind of thing. But the whole point of a sword fight is to cut someone up and kill them. So Hiro had to kludge something together, in order that the Metaverse would not, over time, become littered with inert, dismembered avatars that never decayed.

So the first thing that happens, when someone loses a sword fight, is that his computer gets disconnected from the global network that is the Metaverse. He gets chucked right out of the system. It is the closest simulation of death that the Metaverse can offer, but all it really does is cause the user a lot of annoyance.

Furthermore, the user finds that he can't get back into the Metaverse for a few minutes. He can't log back on. This is because his avatar, dismembered, is still in the Metaverse, and it's a rule that your avatar can't exist in two places at once. So the user can't get back in until his avatar has been disposed of.

Disposal of hacked-up avatars is taken care of by Graveyard Daemons, a new Metaverse feature that Hiro had to invent. They are small lithe persons swathed in black, like ninjas, not even their eyes showing. They are quiet and efficient. Even as Hiro is stepping back from the hacked-up body of his former opponent, they are emerging from invisible trapdoors in The Black Sun's floor, climbing up out of the netherworld, converging on the fallen businessman. Within seconds, they have stashed the body parts into black bags. Then they climb back down through their secret trapdoors and vanish into hidden tunnels beneath The Black Sun's floor. A couple of curious patrons try to follow them, try to pry open the trapdoors, but their avatars' fingers find nothing but smooth matte black. The tunnel system is accessible only to the Graveyard Daemons.

And, incidentally, to Hiro. But he rarely uses it.

The Graveyard Daemons will take the avatar to the Pyre, an eternal, underground bonfire beneath the center of The Black Sun, and burn it. As soon as the flames consume the avatar, it will vanish from the Metaverse, and then its owner will be able to sign on as usual, creating a new avatar to run around in. But, hopefully, he will be more cautious and polite the next time around.

Hiro looks up into the circle of applauding, whistling, and cheering avatars and notes that they are fading out. The entire Black Sun now looks like it is being projected on gauze. On the other side of that gauze, bright lights shine through, overwhelming the image. Then it disappears entirely.

He peels off his goggles and finds himself standing in the parking lot of the U-Stor-It, holding a naked katana.