

Prologue

He lay in bed, scanning through his messages from the past week. Disconnecting was something he hated more than anything, but couldn't avoid in his line of work.

He used to try to catch up as soon as he reached the surface, but there was always too much to deal with without being able to just relax and focus on it. So now he managed to put it off until he could get home. The only problem was when something urgent came up and someone was contacting him just as he resurfaced.

That's what happened this time. Mark was waiting for him. He hadn't talked to Mark in months, but he was always bad at saying 'no'. Mark never seemed to have an appropriate sense of perspective. Everything was an emergency to him, and this one was apparently the worst ever.

So now it was two days later and he was still catching up on the backlog. It didn't seem as bad as Mark had said. Sure, the managers had no clue, but what did it matter. They got the reward they deserved, and the company was developing faster than ever.

But he had listened to Mark anyway. Set up the safeguards, made sure there was a way back in case anything went wrong. It meant going right back underground, but that was inconsequential compared to having to deal with Mark if he didn't follow through.

The part of his job that he *did* like was that it was physical. He couldn't stand it when he was a developer. There was no reason to get out of bed, for days at a time – at least if he placed snacks within reach. That was just a fast track to depression in his

mind. You had to be *doing* something to keep the blood flowing. Losing the net while he did physical labor sure as hell beat the slow decline into apathy that he had been dealing with before.

Besides, how many people actually knew how the grid worked? Sure, everyone *knew*, but it was meaningless until you interacted with it. In his mind, it was a perfect model of how the world should work, in his mind. Decentralized, problems fixed at the point of occurrence, and, most importantly, fixes evaluated and adjusted for different situations. Anytime he saw up front design he cringed. And the way laws were handled, he wondered what the goals of the lawmakers could possibly be. Was he the only rational person on the planet?

So he fixed it, for Mark. No one else could get him to do it. He circumvented that perfection to placate the only person he'd ever loved. And he couldn't remember how many times he kicked himself for that. He wasn't sure if Mark was even capable of love. That was part of the attraction. The guy eschewed the emotions that seemed to drag everyone else, including himself, down.

Now, on his bed, reading those messages, he saw one he didn't expect. One that he would have thought impossible if he wasn't staring at it. His heart raced, he cursed himself, and he thanked Mark for talking him into it.

the future

This future isn't that different from the 80s to an outside observer. There is the net, of course – nanotech has advanced to the point where everyone has clouds of mobile nodes recording everything that they see. There aren't many computers around – they're only owned by the paranoid and those who are part of the infrastructure if the net were to ever go down.

Terminals are implanted in everyone's head, connecting to various nerve clusters to overlay stuff on their visual field, auditory, etc. These are very well protected, but could be the gateway to horrible body control if they were ever subverted.

Cars are faster, but they still travel on the ground, showers are like Bucky's atomizer fog shower, housing hasn't progressed particularly interestingly.

Energy has improved – most things are solar or kinetically powered, with geothermal, hydro, etc. Picking up the slack where feasible. As a result, no one *pays* for energy, it's just provided. Still over wires, just like the old days, but a lot of the management is over the net. So there are issues (after the outage) like blackouts, surges, etc.

Social structures have changed a lot, due to the net. It's possible to touch someone without being in the same country as them (thanks to the nerve connections in the implants). All known senses can be simulated ... the basic five, plus the slow twitch touch nerves (comfort) and proprioception (sense of balance and awareness of body position).

So even the things that we usually think of needing proximity to trigger (comforting someone) can be done over the net.

So, physical proximity is almost completely eliminated as a desire. People procreate, but rarely, and live together to raise children (but most marriages collapse after a short time in such close proximity). Life expectancy has increased, but the overall population has decreased, as sex has dropped off so much. You have to really *want* a kid for it to happen.

People actually are kind of uncomfortable being physically around each other, despite the fact that there is constant “spying” (although it’s so ubiquitous that it’s not even seen as rude). Physical contact is a no no and speaking is awkward, as for most people the vocal cords have atrophied somewhat (although service people are practiced speakers, and trained to understand the speech of those who are less practiced – for dealing with technical issues).

One of the reasons no one speaks is because of the spying. Speech would not be private. However, the data sent from one terminal to another (or multicast or broadcast) is encrypted, and so private.

All interactions over the net are as private as you want, but real interactions are public, so people have transitioned. But you can often pick up stuff from the physical *reactions* to an interaction ... someone relaxing after a “hug”, or weeping after an upsetting conversation. So spies pay a lot of attention to that.

Sure, there are still dark corners, but they are illuminated by the net as soon as someone enters them. Everyone is watched, no exceptions. Some are watched out of infatuation, some out of concern for their well being, and others just to keep an eye on

someone who makes you nervous. Regardless of the reason, you never know *who* is watching you or why. You only are sure that *someone* is and that it has always been this way and always will.

Language has been simplified. Hangul (with various mutations) has taken over as the writing system, but there are still many different languages using that system.

Online translation makes communication possible between countries, but there is still.

Time has changed – local solar time is used everywhere, since time zones are not really useful with locality meaning nothing. Of course, there still needs to be some way to synchronize, and so GMT/UTC is still in existence, but is usually used behind the scenes, translating the time to each person’s local solar time in transmission. Clocks exist, but only as art objects, often extremely ornate, but mostly to show clever ways of representing time. Basics include “24 hour” analog clocks with midnight at the bottom, and sunrise/sunset, moonrise/moonset, and GMT offset from local solar. From here various things can be added on to show positions of the planets, tides, seasons, etc. It is not uncommon to see clocks for other planets, or imagined worlds, since they exist only as decoration. Most mechanical objects have become art objects, as very few have any practical function anymore. Antiques from when they *were* practical are prized possessions, often attached to stories (sometimes apocryphal) of why this or that feature was required.

Alan

Alan is alone.

He's absolutely certain he isn't, though. He's become conditioned over the years to believe that it's impossible to be alone. However, at this moment, each and every person is suddenly alone, and none of them are aware of it yet.

The shower stops and Alan steps out. The heat lamp in the wall dries him before he can step past it. He walks naked past the full height [what's this really called?] windows without even a thought, sits down on his well broken in leather couch, and blinks twice to bring back the heads up display. He blinks again. Nothing. Third time's the charm. He shakes his head a bit, and blinks again.

"Shit," he says as he smacks the side of his head in one last attempt to fix the connection. Giving up, he heads up the stairs to find his diagnostics system. It's been about five years since he's had to use it, and he's just hoping it's still working. It's not that the net has gotten more reliable in the past few years, but rather than Alan has moved past that stage where he fiddles with the setup constantly.

When you first start using your system, you change every little useless setting, big

font, small font, different alert sounds, visual effects, etc. Then you get bored. A few years later you start wondering if you can really tweak it – get better performance than the engineers who built it, eliminate some options so it runs faster, add new features that no one else will care about. These sometimes get you into trouble. You restart the system and realize it no longer works. Then you need to plug in your diagnostics and get things working again. At some point you get bored with this, too, and wait for others to suss out all the new features. Well, either that or you get heavy into development. If you're good you can make a career out of it, but for most developers, it's just a hobby. [Describe path people take – kids play with superficial settings, mid teens through twenties often get deeper into the system, where they can screw things up bad enough to need a restore. Eventually you either get into dev or stop messing with it.]

Digging through the closet, he sees the layers [what are these called? Strata?] of the past five years as he uncovers various abandoned hobbies. The baseball glove that he wore for the two times he was talked into joining a pick up game, the running shoes that have almost a week's wear from his "training" for the only 5k he would ever attempt. Even a pair of knitting needles, with an uneven square of some unfinished project still attached, sat there as if to stymie some future anthropologist trying to discover what Alan's life could have been like. And underneath it all, the diagnostics device.

After a few button presses, he's sure it works. He plugs the cable into the small port behind his ear, and starts it up. He both sees and hears the diagnostics as it walks through its process.

"Central neural connection ... ok"

A few flashes of light cause him to blink and his pupils to contract.

“Visual connection ... ok”

Beeps from various apparent locations cause slight involuntary changes in his head position.

“Auditory connection ... ok”

“Proprioceptive [better word] connection ... ok”

A mix of somewhat unpleasant smells cause him to wrinkle his nose.

“Olfactory connection ... ok”

“Networking subsystem ... ok”

Well, at least this means the doctor doesn't have to repair anything. Any other issues would be in software. At worst he'd have to visit a programmer.

It's always disarming to set up these appointments, though. With no way to communicate directly, even announcing “I need an appointment with a programmer” won't do any good. Sure, they'd hear him, but there's no way he would know when the appointment was. And it's not like he has the money for them to make a “house call”¹. He'd actually have to go to an office and talk to someone. And talking, well, those muscles don't exactly get a lot of use.

“System software ... ok”

Great, just a configurator [better word], then.

“Network configuration ... ok”

Hrmmmm.

“Connecting to test nodes ... timeout”

“Second attempt ... timeout”

“Third attempt ... timeout”

“Fourth attempt ...”

“Crap.” Alan yanks the connector from his ear and slumps down in a chair. Who is he supposed to contact about this? Everything in his head works. All the software is apparently right. It’s not like he can just go to the guy who runs the net and ask him if something’s wrong. It’s ad hoc, peers talking to peers, no one central office making sure everything is running smoothly.

Maybe there’s some hardware issue with the nodes. That happened before, once. A smaller company had a divide by zero error in a common subsystem and every node of theirs – every nanobot, every receiver, every everything – just stopped dead suddenly. For most people it was merely an annoyance; you know better than to have a homogenous cloud. The more diversified it is, the less you’re bothered by a failure in any particular component. A few, though – those sucked in by bulk discounts who couldn’t afford much of a net anyway – they were isolated for days before new nodes could be brought in. Just thinking about it made Alan shudder a little. The company, Alan couldn’t even remember its name anymore, went bankrupt replacing the dead nodes.

But that didn’t seem possible. Alan’s cloud was a hodgepodge of every manufacturer he had heard of. Most people didn’t take it that far, but he liked to play with them, compare them, really see what each system did better than the others. For the most part, that was nothing. Every once in a while, however, it paid off, and there was some interesting difference, some quirk, that gave a node a personality. Alan always felt a little more attached to these – at least, that is, until the next quirk came off someone’s conveyor belt.

When you have over a million nodes, none can really take much of your attention for long. But now, Alan gives each of them attention for a tiny fraction of a second, long enough to see if one's there. Even just walking through a quick connection to each will take a while, and Alan lays down to wait – and to gather his energy to actually have to talk to someone about an appointment.

#

Alan sits up, still naked, and stares out the window. The blank heads up display shocks him again until he remembers. He checks the connection status; only 2% complete, and nothing found yet. This will take longer than he thought. At least his personal sensors still work. He's been asleep for six hours. It's almost two in the afternoon. The prospect of going to a technician doesn't sound any more palatable than it did earlier.

Never the less, he gets ready to go. The crisp air makes him pull his long wool coat a bit tighter, and he walks the three blocks to the nearest technician. As he grabs the handle, he notices the sign. "It's not you; the net is down. Wait at home until it's brought back up."

The net is *down*? How is that even possible? Maybe there's some new interference blocking the signals. But what's the range of the interference? If Alan walked a few miles to the next town, would he be beyond it, and able to connect to his nodes that are outside? How about the next state? The sign didn't really answer a lot of questions.

Alan tries the door anyway. It's locked, but the light is on. Alan knocks on the door, politely at first, but then more insistently. Eventually a skinny figure approaches.

"What?" it says.

“Kai ass ya somme quessons?” Alan struggles to enunciate with his stiff jaw and tongue.

“Can’t you read the sign? It says to wait at home.” It was always a bit humiliating to talk to technicians. They were used to dealing with people who were having trouble with their systems, and so speech was something they were quite good at. And it made you feel a bit dumb for not being quite as facile with words as them.

“Bu wha goo well da doo?” Thankfully, they were quite good at interpreting the slurred speech of the general populace as well.

“It’ll keep all of you out of trouble until we can get it back online.”

“Ca eh peas tak to ya fo a beh?”

The technician sighs, but relents. “Come in so you don’t draw a crowd, and for chrissakes, plug this in.”

“Ah, thanks, that’s much better.” His new voice wasn’t exactly his, but at least it wasn’t exhausting to use. Basically a speaker connected to his data jack. Alan dove right in, “so is there a timeframe for when they think the net’s going to be back up? Is the problem interference or what? How many people are affected by this? And who exactly is working to solve this problem, anyway?”

Another sigh, “I don’t know. Apparently at least the entire state is out. All the repair stations have hard wired connections to each other – an old fashioned network. Fallback in case there was ever a problem with the net connections. Of course, the fallback doesn’t even work in most places. Haven’t been tested in forever. Those of us with a working connection have been getting word over the wire, and passing it around as well as we can.

“Either no one knows what the problem is, or they don’t think the public is important enough to know about it. They just want people to stay off the streets while they fix it.”

Alan shakes his head, “*they?* Who is even working on this problem?”

“I don’t really know that, either. I mean, I’m sure there are government workers who have training in this sort of thing, and they’re probably working with some consortium from the industry. You know, people who have a vested interest in keeping the net going.”

Charlotte

Charlotte wakes up at 8:30. But she's practiced this every day, and she knows better than to hop out of bed. She rolls from side to side a little, eyes still closed, and gives some little kicks that push the sheets off her shoulders. Her head falls to one side, and she lets out a little sigh. For the next five minutes she lays perfectly still. Well, not quite perfectly – her slow deep breaths cause her chest to rise and fall in a hypnotic rhythm. At 8:36 she can see everyone's interest is starting to plateau, so she stretches her arms above her head and gives a yawn, and there's a spike in the signal, as expected.

The sheets still cover everything important, and she knows that she's right – so many people think nudity is worthless. It's just how you're dressed when the weather doesn't demand otherwise. But Charlotte would never think of wandering around nude. She knows that even though her body isn't a secret, and everyone who watches can see it replayed however often they like, the fact that its actual reveal is a rarity makes it exciting.

And so, this morning she is feeling especially demure. She gives a few tentative blinks, and another stretch. Charlotte reaches over the edge of the bed to where her nightgown dropped, and gives a peek of shoulder blade, and perhaps a bit more. But in a few seconds, she has the nightgown pulled over her head, and it drops almost as quickly as the sheet falls from her body. She can measure the transmission lag by where the signal spikes fall relative to how much of her body is covered by the gown.

She turns to put her left foot on the floor, and the signal dies.

Her persona is so well practiced that even if there were still someone watching, they wouldn't have noticed her shock. Her foot reaches the floor, and the right follows it reflexively. As she stands up, the gown finally dropping its full length, she wonders how long the outage will last, but she knows she can predict the signal curve regardless.

Charlotte continues through her morning routine without missing a beat, her muscles remember every step in this dance. She keeps checking the blank readout, hoping that it'll pop back up and she'll once again be off the hook without taking any action.

[She goes for quite a while thinking its some local issue, but not wanting to break the routine until the usual lulls hit – maybe around the time people focus on work for a while before lunch]

“Why didn't I get everything checked out when I had that flutter a few weeks ago?” she thinks to herself. But Charlotte couldn't bring herself to do anything that might detract from her “show”. This, however, an in person appointment with a configurator, might just boost her signal a bit – provided she could find a young and attractive enough technician to play opposite her.

Then, a little panic, with the system down, how is she supposed to find the right technician? It's not like she can audition them in public. That can't be part of the show. She needs to make it seem like she just coincidentally stumbled into the office of the hunkiest technician around – with just a hint of awkwardness to make him easier to identify with.

The realization is slow, but every stage hits her anew. She can't ask her mother, she

can't go through bios on the net. She can't even contact them directly, asking for pictures and CVs. Going in person is the only option, and she needs a way to make it passable to her audience. She can't have hours of low signal while she visits every technician in town looking for the right one.

Her face falters for a moment, and she hopes no one noticed. She straightens her skirt and top, still a bit distracted. But then she brightens, the beginning of a plan forming. This could be more than passable – it could be her highest signal yet.

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“What do you mean no one has a net connection? *No one?* Really?”

She thinks to herself for a second and then bursts out laughing. The technician looks at her oddly and she stops.

“Sorry, I just realized that I just did a lot of work that I could have skipped if I had known no one was watching me.”

“Oh.”

“So, no one can see us now?”

“Nope,” he looks a little nervous.

Charlotte feels emotions passing through her in waves – relief, loneliness, depression, elation. She can't decide how to feel about this, but she knows what she wants to do next.

Robert

“An absentee father? How could she even say that? That little girl is my life; I don’t think I could survive without at least joint custody.” This early call from his lawyer didn’t really get Robert’s day off to the best start. It was bad enough that he had to take Angela back to her mother’s today, but to be threatened with losing her completely?

Robert used to watch his soon to be ex wife constantly. Initially because he wanted her back and it comforted him to see her. Later because he didn’t trust her and wanted to keep up with what she was doing. And most recently because he knew that she was watching him, and didn’t want her to think she was off the hook. But lately it’s been too painful. She had taken as much from him as he thought she could, and to see her flailing for new ways to get her “revenge” hurt too much.

But to now drag Angela into this mess? To force her to make a decision and have to deal with all the trauma immediately? This cut him to the quick – only because it was insensitive to Angela, and showed that her mother’s selfishness and desire for payback had consumed everything else in her heart. Robert let out a heavy sigh, and fell back on the bed sobbing.

#

Robert could barely see his HUD through the tears. He wiped his eyes and hoped Angela wasn’t watching. Of course she wasn’t. She was out with her friends. He felt a bit better. Despite all the trouble between him and his wife, Angela seemed to come

through without a scratch so far. She was as social as ever. More so, even – it seemed she spent as much time as possible with her friends. That part was bittersweet. He wanted nothing more than for her to be happy, but he missed the days when that meant her curled up in his lap as he read her a book. Sometimes even out loud, like his grandmother used to do.

Ah, and that brings a smile. His grandmother reading out loud, regardless of whether his parents were there or not. They never liked her reading to him. They couldn't ever really justify it – at least not as far as he was concerned. But they disapproved, and that just made her dig in her heels. The net was something that Robert's father and grandmother could never see eye to eye on. To her it was “new fangled” and “a lot of noise about nothing”. But his father was a technician, and he took such comments personally. He talked about all the possibilities, all the new things being created every day. She responded about the disappearance of privacy, and the insurmountable gap between those on the net and those not.

It's true, there were still people not on the net. They survive the same way such people always have – hand to mouth. And it's true, the gap is wider than ever. If you're not on the net from birth, you have almost no chance of catching up. The skills that offline people have are mostly better handled by machines or software.

There were always organizations to help these people, but really, they could only help the children. There were collections of old, partially working nodes, but they were surprisingly hard to come by. When you have a device that's small enough to be invisible, they don't generally break down in a fixable way. And once they fall off the net, they're just another piece of dust to be swept away.

Charity organizations mostly got rejects from the factory – nodes that couldn't pass all their release tests. Or, if they were lucky, old models that weren't selling anymore. That only covered the externals, though. The internals were never cheap nor easy. It's hard enough to integrate these kids when the implant costs are enormous, but when their parents generally have some excuse for not being on the net – paranoia or rebellion or whatever – it's hard to get them to accept their kid's integration.

And after the integration, there's the resentment. Parents feel their kids have abandoned them for some fake world inside their heads. The worst ones get violent, the better ones only belittle their children and weigh them down with guilt. To volunteer with the isolated? It's a pretty thankless task and its hard to find those with the dedication.

#

Robert's HUD went dim. He cursed, but relented and figured it was just as well. Today was not a good day to be online. He should just accept it and go tinker with his clocks.

He walks down the stairs and closes himself in his small studio. He has racks of gears, and hands, and movements hanging from the walls. On his desk sits an autopsy victim – a clock given to him by a friend that he just *had* to disassemble to see how it worked. And now it didn't anymore. He always did this – took apart anything he could, and sometimes managed to get it back in one piece in mostly working order. This one had been eluding him for weeks, though. He pushed it aside – the grand complications were always interesting to study, their clever mechanisms for measuring different aspects of the world, but it was the simple daily clock that he built over and over again. It

was almost meditation for him to mold those gears and make tiny refinements – always trying to make this clock more precise than the last. Or maybe smaller. One day he'd get his antique pocket watch working again. Then maybe he'd carry it around with him. Sure, it wasn't useful, but it was something to be proud of. In the meantime, he'd just build another clock.

He always built without the net. It was nice to be able to do things on one's own. He didn't *dislike* the net, but he didn't want to rely on it too heavily. For instance, today. How many people wouldn't panic if they found their connection suddenly down? It was one more thing to take pride in. *That's* what he didn't like about the net – it removed people's ability to be proud of their accomplishments. Thanks to his grandmother's influence, he did a lot of things without the net. Sometimes he even drove without it. Now *that* took concentration. And, of course, it was illegal, so you had to be good to keep from being caught. He wondered if anyone else even bothered.

And this clock, like all his others, had the hallmarks of something made net free. Slight imperfections in the pattern, the metal gears thicker in some places than others, the need for a tiny jeweler's hammer to get the pieces to go together without falling apart. And the sheer joy – he didn't understand how anyone could be happy when their work was not their own. Even the crafts vendors who sold traditional “hand made” items had obviously created them with the net. There was that shoddy perfection that pervaded all of it. Sure, you could create high quality items with the net, but when you were already trading authenticity for expediency, trading quality for more expediency didn't lag far behind.

Robert pushed away his frustrations with the net obsessed world and focused on

his clock. The enjoyment returned, and it was hours before he even remembered that the net was down.

#

Robert gets up from his workbench to make a late lunch. He quickly checks to see what Angela's up to. Oh right, no net. He ignores it and climbs the stairs to his kitchen. The fridge is full, and he pulls out what he needs to make a sandwich. If Robert likes to build clocks, then he *loves* to build sandwiches. He considers himself a sandwich engineer. He has all sorts of tricks for building sandwiches, from how the order in which you stack the ingredients affects the flavor to how to keep avocado from squeezing out when you take a bite. He bakes his own bread, and has his own meat slicer, since the deli can never seem to get it right.

Robert doesn't *exactly* make his condiments, but from his large collection he mixes them to customize the flavor of each sandwich. The part of sandwich engineering that makes it more fulfilling than clock making, is the reward. After he has built a new sandwich, he gets to eat it. It's even better when someone else gets to eat it. Most people don't appreciate his clocks. Those who like clocks at all don't think his simple time telling devices are very interesting. They like the complicated models that are so easy to build with the net. But his sandwiches? *Those* are appreciated. And even when one is not liked, he enjoys the feedback. It requires so much more than the numerical precision of clock making to build a good sandwich, and he's happy to have something that the net doesn't handily outperform him at.

Even when he keeps it simple, like today, the sandwich is exquisite. He whips up a quick spicy honey mayonnaise dressing for his roast beef and havarti sandwich with

spinach, alfalfa sprouts, and paper thin onions on sourdough. It's just the right balance of flavors, and a favorite of his. It only takes a few minutes to build. Robert puts all the ingredients away, picks up the sandwich with one hand, and takes a bite as he heads back down to his studio.

On the way he's distracted by his connection being down. He notices the time on his wall clocks and figures he should probably do something about it before he gets lost in his clock making again. If he waits much longer, there won't be enough time to get it sorted out before he has to take Angela back to her mother.

#

As he walks down the street, Robert notices that there's a bit of a crowd around the technician's shop. *This is going to take longer than I thought*, he thinks. *I wonder why there are so many people here today*. He picks up his pace a bit to get a place in line. Once there, he realizes the crowd is a bit less than civil.

"What's going on with all these people here?" he asks some random person.

"Haven't you noticed the net is down?" she responds.

"Wait, like the whole thing?"

"As far as we know – but no one's telling us anything. We're all here trying to get some answers."

"So then my implant's not broken," Robert exclaims, feeling a bit better.

"Well, it *could* be, but that'd be one hell of a coincidence," the woman retorts.

Robert laughs, then realizes that the net being down is much worse than his implant being broken. For one thing, it means that Angela also has no connection. If she has no connection, then she should have come home. The net has been down for hours,

and she hasn't come back yet. She might be in trouble!

Robert thanks the woman for her help, and goes running toward downtown. He stops himself after a couple blocks, and decides it'd be better if he heads home first to get his car. He'll be able to find her much more quickly that way. He kicks himself for not paying attention to where she had gone, and checks his house once more before leaving in case she made it back.

He hops in the car and speeds down the street. He wonders if it's still illegal to drive without the net if there is no net to drive with anymore. That's not something legislators usually take into account. He hopes he doesn't get pulled over.

#

Robert drives up and down the empty streets searching for Angela. He can't stop until he finds her. He'll just keep driving and driving until she comes out of some shop somewhere. After zig zagging up and down streets a few times, he decides it might help to ask some people if they have seen her. He pulls over in front of a technician's shop and describes Angela to them. He wishes there was some way to show them a picture of her. Most of the people don't even acknowledge him. Those that do, shake their heads and give him looks containing various amounts of pity. He thanks them and gets back in his car.

He tries the same approach at a few other shops, especially whenever there's a crowd of people. He also pulls over to ask people as they walk down the street. With the outage, everyone seems even a bit more reclusive than usual. The need to interact directly combined with the vulnerability they all felt with their safety net gone made people paranoid. Most just walked away faster when Robert tried to ask them.

He drove past a park, and saw someone sitting on a bench there. He decided he needed a plan before he could do anything else, so he parked and walked over to the bench – figuring he'd try asking one last person before coming up with a new approach.

Angela

He was crying again. Angela hated seeing her dad so upset, but she kept an eye on him out of concern. Her friends noticed, and they patted her on the shoulder to comfort her. Well, patting on the shoulder is a good enough analogue, anyway. In reality the closest of her friends was over three hundred miles away. Everything that happens is a few steps removed from the way things were before the net. Except sex – sex is still real, and if anything, more awkward than it was when people were used to physical contact and intimacy.

She loves her dad, honestly she does. But if forced to choose she would go with her mother (not that she's aware the question is on the table). Her mom has always been a strong figure, a business woman who knew how to make things happen – definitely a role model worth following, while Robert was always ... well, he let her call him Robert for one. He was always a bit on the warm and fuzzy side of things. “Can't we just talk about it,” and, “what's the *real* reason you're acting out?” It was all just a bit too much at times.

#

They've been up all night. It's easy to lose track of time when you're spread around the world. Sometimes you just start nodding off wherever you are and your friends have to wake you up to make sure you get home. That's very nice, in fact. If you were to get mugged (not like that happens much anymore), everyone watching you sees it, and you

have a hundred angles – you know exactly who did it, and it doesn't take long for him to be brought in.

There was a major overhaul to the 911 system decades ago – almost any crime or accident was reported by dozens of people instantaneously. Once the system could handle the load, there was the question of how to respond. The initial “popular vote” method usually worked quite well. More people would report more serious situations. Volunteer staff were harder to come across, though. It was hard enough to find people who didn't mind touching others, let alone others who were twitching or bloody. At least much of the diagnosis could be done remotely. Handling emergency services became basically a problem of spacing them equally throughout the community.

Angela was definitely starting to nod off at this point. 8:30 was pretty late for a twelve year old, and the sofa in the private café booth was comfy. Cassie nudged her once and she bobbed her head a bit, but then Cassie was gone, and there was just the warm darkness.

#

“Do any of you have a net connection?” The question is a few times louder than it should be. Angela turns down the volume on her system and lays down again.

“Anyone?!” This time she wakes up a bit, and starts to send a response in the affirmative, then realizes that it's not multicast, it's someone actually shouting outside the booth. And why is she in a booth, anyway? And what time is it?

Ugh, it's afternoon. Shouldn't have stayed up with those guys all night, now my day is shot. “Cassie ...” oh, there's nothing. Blink blink. Blink blink. Still nothing. What's going on?

Angela pops out of the booth, and lands in front of a desperate eyed man, “You! Do *you* have a net connection?” he shouts at her as he grabs her arms.

“Get off, you skeeve!” She pulls away and dives out the door. Man, that guy was nuts. But what the hell, she *doesn't* have a net connection. How did that happen?

Ah, crap, Robert. Angela has to get back to him soon. Maybe he can have a technician come by before they have to go back to mom. Man, that'll eat up even more of the day. Angela's surprised he hasn't come to pick her up. He must have seen her conked out, and after she didn't get any pokes, he probably would have worried and come to get her. So where was he?

She's a little pissed, but then smiles – it probably means he wasn't watching, he finally trusts his little girl enough to not check in every five minutes.

#

Shit, he's not home. Where else would he be? Maybe he's gone to get her and she just left before he got there. Well, he'll be back eventually. She just has to wait.

David

David awoke smiling. This was unusual, and it took him a moment to realize why. Silence. He heard nothing. Everyone everywhere had stopped talking. No, wait, that seems unlikely. He had stopped hearing. That served him just as well. He hated hearing, seeing; all this voyeuristic crap. But he couldn't help it. He was some sad addict. As long as there was signal to receive, he received it. He didn't want to miss a moment. But he knew that for each moment he captured there were billions he missed. And an infinity of perspectives.

They were all gone now. As far as he was concerned, they didn't exist. And that meant he finally had time for his own moments.

He looked around the room for something to do, something to engage himself with. Decades of surveillance equipment littered his small apartment. There wasn't much else. There was a guitar in one corner, but he was never really any good at it in the first place and the debris between him and it made the approach unattractive.

He flopped down in a chair, his brow furrowed. "Well, so much for finally having some time to myself." He laid across the chair and let his head hang over one arm. He closed his eyes, and opened a new file.

"Dear Diary," he wrote, "it's quiet today. I thought I'd enjoy it more." He laughed and closed the file without saving. Wasn't that always the refuge of the isolated? Writing letters to no one in order to push away the loneliness. Here David was, not five minutes

into his favorite fantasy, and already resorting to sad clichés.

#

What had he always done in his fantasy? He never really had more than a few minutes to spend on it, so just appreciating the silence was enough. Turns out that doesn't last for very long. Well, maybe the outage won't last long, either.

But in the meantime, he is stir crazy.

#

For some reason, he feels a need to find people.

“Great, I'm finally alone, and it turns out it's the last thing I want to be,” he thinks, wondering where he might be able to meet people without being able to look anything up.

He wanders out the door, down three blocks, and into a local park. People are as likely to be here as anywhere else. But no one is. No one at all.

Everyone seems to be across the street, there's a huge crowd near the technician's office. But a crowd isn't exactly what David had in mind. So he sits in the park, and waits.

It's nicer than sitting at home, but again he feels bored after a while. He's spent as long as he can trying to count leaves on branches, and finding patterns in the tiled rubber floor of the exercise area.

And then he feels the bench shift.

Mark

“Urghhhhhh,” moans Mark as he rolls over in bed. He pulls the blanket over his head to block out the light streaming in his window. Who put the sun there in the middle of the night? He rolls over to his other side and feels a bit queasy. Oh, right, last night was rough. Got a little too excited about the promotion, and then a little too sad that Sam wasn’t there to share it with him. In the end, there was a bit more alcohol in his system than there maybe should have been. At least, that’s what his body was telling him now.

“Shit!” 10:30 on the clock. There was a meeting thirty minutes ago. Is it still going on? Mark pings his boss to try to sort things out.

“Ah, Christ!” There’s no connection. Well, at least he has a reasonable excuse for missing the meeting then. He checks his calendar – not scheduled to be at the shop until noon today. Maybe he’ll go in a bit early to get his system sorted out, but at least he has time to clean up and straighten out his head before dealing with anything. And with his connection being down, it’s not like anyone can bug him about it.

Mark relaxes a bit and rolls over again. “Ugh,” he struggles to his feet and hopes he makes it to the bathroom in time.

#

The nice thing about bathrooms is that the toilet is so close to the shower. Mark wipes the remaining bits of vomit off his chin, and crawls along the floor toward the tub.

From his position on the ground, he struggles to turn the water on. Once he can tell it's hot enough, he flops like fish over the edge, and into the warm water. Ah, that's better. He could just stay here all day. He considers it, then considers the shit he'll be in if he misses his first day running his new team.

He tries to get himself to care, but is having enough trouble just keeping the washcloth moving across his skin. Shouldn't you get a day off after a promotion? It's not like you can just jump into a new job without resting up first. Mark turns off the shower and nearly trips over the side of the tub as he reaches for a towel.

This morning is not going well. Maybe it'd be better if he just stayed home today. But he still needs to check out his implant, and that's so much easier if he does it himself at the office. Mark sighs. He knows he's going in, because he can't stand to be stuck without a connection for the day.

At least a dozen times while he's getting ready to head in, he tries to check something on the net, and is reminded that he can't. Each time frustrates him even more, and by the time he gets out of the house, he is little more than a ball of seething anger and pain. At least the pain in his head keeps him from lashing out at anyone, but he gives no quarter as he walks to the office – he barely even looks up from the pavement.

Belinda

The gig is going really well. They might just be ready to open for Dented Pearls [seriously? Better name] tomorrow. Belinda wasn't sure Danny was going to be able to get his act together in time, but their little "chat" last week seems to have gotten him back in line. Honestly, he's probably the most excited about the Dented Pearls job, but in some way it was just intimidating him – to the point where he'd rather be able to toss off the failure as just not really caring.

Belinda kept at her bass. The deep vibrations keep her calm when she's performing. Without it, she starts singing ahead of the beat when things are really moving. If Joe hadn't thought of getting her on bass, there's a good chance there'd be someone else up here singing right now.

And she smiles. This is right where she wants to be. This time tomorrow she'll have played her first ten million viewer show. That's nine million, nine hundred ninety nine thousand, seven hundred twenty seven more people that will have heard of her. And hopefully at least some of them will like her enough to buy an album, maybe even a T shirt.

No expectations, though. It's going to be a fun show, and it'll be great to hang out with Dented Pearls. Anything beyond that is icing on the cake.

She dives into the chorus harder than usual, then catches herself and brings it back a notch. Joe catches her eye and he smiles at her. He knows exactly what she's thinking,

and that's one more thing that makes tonight perfect.

#

The rest of the gig goes smoothly, and they stick around to mingle with the audience afterward. Once again she wishes Joe wasn't hundreds of miles away. This is the hardest part of a relationship – making the transition from virtual to physical. The lucky few couples who happened to live within a few miles from each other had it easy. There were no discussions of who would travel where, how often would we visit each other, moving. They almost made the work not worth it.

Of course, for some people, it wasn't a big deal. Being physical could always wait, and there had been a sort of transition back toward “traditional” values. People would develop a serious relationship and make it all the way to marriage before taking the step of moving in together. Hell, some *never* become local. It's becoming more and more common. You see each other for a few days every now and then. Really, the net covers so much of the personal experience that more isn't really necessary.

You might think that it makes more sense to get in a relationship with someone who's close. But there's no such restriction on friendships, and relationships often grow from those. The reality of a physical relationship doesn't hit home until you're too deeply involved to help it.

And so it goes for Belinda and Joe. Well, in *her* mind anyway. She hasn't even really hung out with him one on one, and she already is worrying about the logistics of the physical relationship.

She strips off her stage costume and flops down on her bed. Is Joe watching? She hopes so. And she pulls the covers over herself and closes her eyes.

#

Belinda wakes up still smiling. Last night was amazing, and she's still thinking about Joe and how much she's fallen for him. She gets out of bed, and walks to the shower, kicking off her panties on the way. She starts the hot water and steps in. She feels all the sweat from the concert wash out of her skin, and her muscles relax. Feeling so good, she checks to see if any messages have come in during the night – hoping to see one from Joe. Her display doesn't come up, but she just sighs and ignores it until she's done with the shower. Computer hassles can wait.

She wraps a towel around her waist after turning off the water, and steps out of the shower. She thinks about the implant, but doesn't want to ruin her mood, so she walks back into the living room and sits down on her chair. She peeks at the clock on her wall. She's never understood the thing, but the constant motion of the gears is pleasant, and she tries to make out the time from it.

If one rotation is a day, then we're about three eighths through the day. That's like 9:00, but it's a bit after than, so maybe 9:45. She checks the clock on her implant. 9:52, not too bad.

She tries to bring up her messages again, but still nothing. Maybe she can just check on Joe. Nope, no nodes anywhere. Goddamn, she doesn't need this crap today, not before the big show. Today was supposed to be just relaxing until she had to head out.

She gets up from the chair, and paces, wondering what the easiest way to sort out this implant problem is. Without it, there's really no way she can do anything from here. She flops back on the bed, trying not to think about the fact that she'll have to leave the house today to make sure she can do the concert tonight. Man, screwing up tonight's

show would be the worst thing that could happen.

She knows she has to get up, but she feels paralyzed. She doesn't want to get out of bed, let alone deal with the stress of having to go outside. There must be some way she can get this fixed without going anywhere. Her neighbor has one of those diagnostics tools, but talking to him seems even less desirable than dealing with some stranger at a technician's shop. At least then there doesn't have to be any conversation.

She fights with herself for a while longer before finally giving in. She stands up from the bed with a grunt and throws her towel over the back of the chair. Belinda always kept her house a bit warm so she didn't have to wear clothes. It meant she used a bit more power, but it was worth it for the comfort she felt, walking around naked. Of course, she didn't have the benefit of a heater when she was outside, so she reluctantly walked to the closet to find something appropriate to wear.

Maybe I should move to somewhere warmer, she thought. Then I really could be naked all the time, and I'm sure plenty of other people would be the same way. She knew that moving was out of the question, though. She could barely afford to live here, let alone somewhere that actually had decent weather. But if this Dented Pearl gig paid off – *then* she could live wherever she wanted. She tried to push it out of her mind. She was superstitious about planning for things that weren't possible yet. In her mind it basically guaranteed that it would never happen. Belinda went back to the task at hand and grabbed a black wool shirt and baggy pants from the closet. She could never understand how girls walked around in clothes that seemed to be painted on. You felt them constantly. At least with loose clothes you could feel *somewhat* like you weren't wearing anything. She grabbed a random pair of panties from her drawer and put on

the ensemble. She eschewed bras more than anything. It was like wearing a cage. At least her breasts were petite enough to make it not too much of a concern. She felt for the girls who would suffer back pain and stretching if they didn't wear bras. It was like a prison sentence.

With her outfit on, she braces herself to leave the house. She tries to think of anything else she can do to delay the process. Nothing comes to mind, so she unlatches the door and bravely steps through it.

#

She feels so conspicuous as she walks down the street, like everyone must be staring at her and judging her. She hunches her shoulders and looks at the ground, trying to avoid being noticed. The streets are actually fairly empty, but she knows that there are people looking out windows wondering who the weird girl walking down the street is. She feels a bit better thinking about how that will change after tonight's show, but in the meantime, she's just an odd girl without a net connection who needs to get it fixed as soon as possible. And hopefully without having to talk to any more people than necessary.

Katie

Katie's standing three thousand feet above the world, and it feels great. It's always nice to take a weekend away from the net. Lord knows she doesn't get many opportunities to. It took two days of hiking and scrambling, and even a little technical climbing to get up here, but it's the best place to watch the sunrise. Now she wants to see how fast she can get back down....

She takes off from the peak at a slow jog, then breaks into a sprint. Katie knows she'll have to slow down in about a quarter mile when the descent really starts, so she wants to get warm while she can. She's at the first scramble sooner than she'd like, but she backs off a bit. She knows the pattern here – she hops from rock to rock down to the next section of path, and now another quarter mile or so of sprinting. Her heart rate is up, and she's ecstatic. She can't wait another three months for the next one of these. When she gets back she'll have to talk to her boss about making up a schedule. Hell, after this weekend she's *excited* to get back to work. Nothing like running around a mountain in total isolation to reset your system.

In fact, she's thinking about work so much that she doesn't even notice most of the descent. When she snaps out of her reverie, she's got about two miles left and it's a straight shot to the trailhead.

She makes it back to her car around 13:00. She touches the starter, but nothing happens. Shit, not a good time for some mechanical failure, she's ages away from the

city, and who knows when another car will come out this way. That's why she's here in the first place. She brings up her nodes to see if there's anyone in the vicinity she can ping for help. No nodes. Hunh, maybe the issue is in her implant, not the car. Even worse. She tries a few more times, but knows nothing's going to help.

Reluctantly, Katie reaches under the dash and flips the switch to manual control. This is going to be interesting – manual driving is not exactly something that's done anymore. After a few scary moments of figuring out how the accelerator, brake, and steering work, she's moving forward with a lurching motion. At least she's far enough from the city that she should have a bit of practice before she has to deal with other cars on the road.

Her whole body is tense as the car effectively crawls down the street.

"I'm going to have to get comfortable with moving a bit faster than this if I want to get home before nightfall," she thinks.

She presses the accelerator, and almost flies off the road with the sudden jolt. Katie eases off a bit, and swerves toward the city at a terrifying (for her) rate.

[Car won't start, system won't connect, switches car to manual, struggles to keep it on the road, driving is so unfamiliar]

She's just getting the hang of it when she spies another car, run off the road, ahead of her. She stops the car to see what's happened. Katie steps out and walks off the road to the crashed car. The front is pretty badly smashed up, and she doesn't see any motion inside. She tries to pry open the driver's door, but it doesn't budge. Katie walks around to the other side, and manages to pull the passenger door open by using her foot to push against the body of the car. She falls back into the dirt. She stands up and looks in the

car. Her body convulses, and she turns to side as vomit rises up from her stomach.

There's no way that guy is alive, pieces of him paint the interior of the car, and it smells like he's been like that for quite a while. It's a reminder to Katie that driving manually can be dangerous, and she should be extra careful, even if it takes forever.

But wait, why was this guy also on manual? The only two people out here, and both have trouble with their implants? That seems unlikely, and a bit frightening. Something bigger has to be happening. But what could it be? A total outage? No, that's crazy. Maybe there have just been some power issues out here in the boonies, and it's not important enough to be fixed right away. That's gotta be it. Things will be better once she gets closer to the city.

But nothing seems to be getting better as she approaches the city. In fact, the more drivers she sees, the more nervous she is to be on the road with them. Everyone is moving erratically: inconsistent speeds, swerving, panicked and not paying attention. Maybe there *is* an outage.

the company

“What do you mean, there's no more net? Did we do it? We did? Who authorized it? What? What do you mean ‘no one’? Then why did we do it? What? What do you mean the nodes did it? They just do what we tell them to – free labor, that's how it's always been.

“Of course they're under our control, we designed them to be that way. Yes, we did. What do you mean ‘no we didn't’? We didn't design them? Then who did? They can't ‘just happen’, these are complex systems. I don't know how we designed them, that's someone else's job. No, we didn't ask for them, but once someone made them, we were ecstatic.

“People always create stuff we don't ask for. Developers have some stupid need to contribute ideas. For the most part we just toss them aside. But this was a good one, so we kept it. I don't think that ... wait, are you saying that these things weren't just productive free devs, but they were alive? Capable of free thought? Well, fuck. That sounds just like the kind of crap a dev would come up with.

“Yes, yes, I get that they didn't come up with it – they just came up with a way to cover it up and pawn it off as something they did. Do we have any idea *who* came to us with the idea? No, I didn't think so, those systems are down with everything else.

“Ok, so any idea why the nodes did this, and why they chose now? So we've got an implant they can't circumvent? Great, how many are there? One?! We only built one?

Jesus Christ! Yes, I know it's a prototype. Where is it? It's here? What floor? Do you know anyone who can install one without the net? Great! Get him here now!

“I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but at the very least I'm going to prevent them from overriding my system. I don't want anyone in control here but me.”

#

“You can do this, right?”

“Yes, sir, it's what I spent all those years in school for.”

“But you had the net for that. I want this installed right, and you can't get on the net anymore.”

“Flying blind is my specialty. Most people think it's a waste of time, but I always thought this could happen. I know some day we'd have to get by without the net.”

“Great, then let's get going.”

“Why do you want a new implant now, anyway? There's no net to connect to, there's no use in upgrading.”

“I have a feeling it'll be back. And when it is, I want to be on the cutting edge.”

Cheryl

When Cheryl regains consciousness, the net is the least of her worries. In order of occurrence, her worries are:

1. Where am I?
2. Is this a hospital?
3. Why am I in a hospital?
4. How long have I been in a hospital?

See, the question of the net hasn't even crossed her mind yet. Never mind that it's been down for two days. Cheryl's been in a coma for almost three years, and so the shock of the net will have to be dealt with after the shock of suddenly jumping thirty months into the future.

She checks the date on her heads up display, and makes an involuntary squeaking noise. That's impossible, there's no way she could have been here for so long. She remembers nothing about how she got here. [She needs to scan to find any of her nodes in the building. Nothing comes back, so she figures they're just not here – which they wouldn't be, since she didn't assign any to the hospital, and she was unconscious when she came here (although it seems likely that you would tell some to follow you everywhere, so you always had a handful at your disposal – maybe they routinely scrub the air at a hospital, or maybe three years is a long life for a node). And if it's just a long life for a node, she could scan her whole network, notice she has no nodes, and think that

all her nodes are dead and it's only her who's isolated, while everyone else is still happily connected to the net.] Still in shock, she thinks, "I have to get out of here! I can't waste any more of my life." She tries to hop out of the hospital bed, but her muscles are sore. With her weak muscles brought to her attention, she attempts to shuffle off the bed and stand up gently.

The bed is high, making it hard to test her legs without committing her weight to them. She closes her eyes tightly. As she shifts her weight to her feet, her legs wobble. But they hold. She's standing, with a white knuckled grip on a railing.

This is no way to get around. There's got to be a better option. She scans the room and sees a wheelchair by the door. If she can get there, she's solid. One foot at a time, keeping her hands on something, she slowly makes her way across the room.

Great. Now there's just a five foot span to get to the chair. But there's nothing to hold on to. The distance suddenly feels like a gaping chasm. But she centers herself and starts to lift her arm off the table. She's still upright. To avoid putting all her weight on one leg, she slides her right foot across the floor, then brings her left in next to it. Now her left foot forward, right foot. Ok, it's in reach. She leans forward to pull it toward her.

It's too much, though. As she leans, she needs to put her weight on the wheelchair. And that pushes it away from her, and she crashes face first into the floor. She lays there waiting, sure an orderly or nurse will come running after the noise. But no one comes. In fact, the whole hospital is eerily quiet.

Cheryl pulls herself toward the chair, and fights a bit until she manages to get herself situated. Now she can see what's going on here.

#

She wheels herself into the hallway and looks around. No one anywhere. As she rolls down the hallway she peeks into the rooms. Most of them are empty. A few have someone sleeping in them. She's afraid they might not just be sleeping.

She turns a corner and practically jumps out of her chair as she sees a guard walking toward her.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" he shouts as he starts jogging toward her.

"Well, I, uh ..."

"No one's supposed to be on this floor. The elevator shouldn't even be working, and I *know* you didn't take the stairs. Follow me, I'll take you back to one, and the staff can decide what to do with you there."

#

"Dr Schwartz, I found this young lady wandering around upstairs. Can you get her sorted out down here?"

"Ah, yeah Frank. Thanks. I'll take care of her. — Sorry miss, can you just wait over there? The coördination has been difficult since the net went down. It'll take me a little while before I can get to you."

Cheryl dutifully wheeled herself along the wall where Dr Schwartz had pointed. She tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair for a while and then it hit her: she could just sneak out while he was busy with ... no wait, there was something else. What was it? The net is down?! So it's not just that she doesn't have any nodes still alive? *No one* has any nodes still alive? That's interesting. And that should make it even easier for her to get out of here without any trouble.

While Schwartz is turned around digging through a disorganized pile of papers,

Cheryl wheels herself along the wall, and around the first corner. After that she pushes as fast as she can, toward the double doors at the end of the hall.

“Can I *help* you?” she hears from over her shoulder. She spins around, almost toppling the chair, and sees a large woman behind the reception desk. “I said, can I *help* you? You seemed to be moving in an awful rush to get down here to my desk, so I figure it must be important.”

“Um, no, no ... I just, well, I don’t think I need to be in the hospital.”

“Well, you seem to need that wheelchair alright. I’d say that’s a pretty good sign you need to be in the hospital.”

“But with all the trouble with the net, I thought it would be easier on you guys to have fewer patients, and I just need to take some time to get back on my feet. It’s not like I’m sick or anything.”

“Well it’s good you know what would be easier for us, because I would have thought it’d be easiest for us if all our patients were where they were supposed to be and not just sneaking out all the time.”

Cheryl looked shocked.

“What, you think you’re the only one? Half our patients want to get out of here, it doesn’t matter what they have. And it’s worse since we’ve had to reduce staff and try to cram everyone on the first two floors. Now there’s almost nothing stopping them from getting to those doors. Except me.

“So tell me, where are you supposed to be?”

“Well, just now I was waiting for Dr Schwartz to sort that out. Earlier today ... well, I think I was in a coma.”

“Oh my lord, you just woke up to this mess? How long were you out?”

“I think about, uh, about, well not quite three years.”

“Three years?! Wait a second, you’re not the McLeod girl, are you?”

“Uh, yeah, Cheryl McLeod. Is that bad?”

“*Bad*, girl? No, that’s great. They thought you were never going to wake up. Your family’s been hemming and hawing over whether they should let you go peacefully or keep fighting. Well, I guess their procrastination paid off, because you’re up. It’s a goddamn miracle.”

“So, do you know how I got here then? I don’t remember anything. I have no idea how I could have wound up in a coma. I didn’t do something stupid, did I? Like ride my bike in front of a car?”

“Heh, naw honey, nothing like that.”

“Well, what was it then?”

“I think you should let your family explain that one. It’s none of my business to get involved here.”

#

“Look, Cheryl, you got someplace to go?”

“Well, as long as my parents haven’t moved, yeah I can head home. They’ll be happy to see me.”

“You’ve been cooped up too long anyway. No need for you to waste another day in this place. Let me give my husband a call, he’ll give you a ride wherever you’re going. You’re right, it’s better for all of us if you’re not here. Go wait outside. He’ll come by in a yellow Stoic. His name’s Jim.”

#

Cheryl is excited and nervous when Jim arrives. On the one hand, she feels like she's only been gone for a few hours, but she knows that's not true. What will her family think when she shows up three years later, barely able to stand. They'll be ecstatic, that's what. How could they not, she's their daughter.

But she's still nervous. She feels like she let them down somehow.

"You Cheryl?"

"Yeah. Jim?"

"Yep, hop in and tell me where to go."

"Thanks, I'm just headed up to Cheedale."

"Cheedale, eh? That area's gone downhill a bit since yesterday. You sure you want to go there?"

"Yeah, my family's there. I just want to get home."

"Alright, at least you still have power over there, as far as I know."

#

Cheryl walks up to the door, and puts her thumb on the scanner to unlock the door. It opens, and she waves thanks to Jim as he drives off.

Cheryl steps through the door, "Mom? Jimmy? Dad? Anyone here?"

No one answers. Well, it's not like they were expecting her. Maybe they're all out somewhere. But where would they go when it seemed like the world was collapsing around them?

"Whatever guys, I'm home. And my legs hurt just walking up to the door. Can't be bothered to wait up for me? Jeez. I'll just crash on the couch then."

Alan & Angela

“Ehus meh, my dah is miffing, do you know how I can try to find him without the net?” [dialectize]

Alan turns around to see a girl, probably around twelve, looking up at him in a bit of a panic. “Your dad?”

“Yeah, I was out when the net went down, and I went home so he wouldn’t worry. But when I got there he was gone.”

“Maybe he went to get you himself.”

“I thought about that, but I waited for hours and he never came back. I eventually went back and forth between my house and the café a few times, but I never found him.”

“Did you leave a note at home telling him your plan, so he’d know you had been there, and to wait for you to get back?”

“I did, but I haven’t been back since.”

“Well, maybe you should head home, and check.”

“Ok, but will you come with me? It’s a little scary being out in public without

everyone on the net keeping an eye on me.”

“Hrmm, but shouldn’t you be wary of strangers, I mean, I thought that’s what they taught kids.”

Angela laughs, “yeah, they do, but they’re wrong. You only have to worry about the strangers who approach *you*. If I pick a stranger at random, odds are excellent that they’ll be helpful or at least dismissive and not predators at all.”

“Oh, so I’m the one who should be worried, then,” Alan jokes.

Angela laughs again, “if you’re scared of an 11 year old, maybe I *should* find someone else. But, seriously, please come with me.”

“Of course I’ll come. I can’t let a young girl wander these dangerous streets on her own, but if we come across any 12 year old girls, I’m probably going to turn and run, just to let you know up front.

“I’m Alan, by the way.”

“Thanks Alan, I’m Angela.”

#

“Alan...?”

“Yes, Angela?”

“How do you feel about the net being down? I mean, are you scared, or do you think it’ll be back up soon?”

“Honestly, I am a bit scared. We’ve all be raised to depend on it so heavily that I don’t know how anyone will deal with it being gone. I’m sure plenty of people will be fairly rational, but I expect there to be riots soon – once people know they’re not being watched, there’s a lot of freedom. And people don’t always deal with new freedom very

well.”

“Freedom? But I feel trapped without the net. I can’t visit my friends, or even read anything now. How is that freedom?”

“Well, think about how much we control our actions. We all try not to react physically to anything. It’s all learned behavior because of the constant surveillance that’s available to anyone who cares. Some people will react to that being gone by dancing around their apartments – especially people who have never danced before and would be too embarrassed to with the net. In the same way, some people – people who have been excellent at abiding by the law – will see that there’s no one watching them and take the opportunity to do things that would normally bring instant retribution. But now they can hide behind a mask, because no one saw them put it on, and rob whatever store they want.”

“You’re really not making me feel better about this, Alan.”

“I’m sorry. Most people won’t be like that. Most will worry and wait for the net to come back, but some people will leap on this opportunity to do whatever they feel has been denied them. For some, it’s innocent dancing. But for others it’s sure to involve theft and other things that are even less nice.

“Thinking about it, I’m beginning to agree with you that it’s important you asked me to walk you home.”

“Yeah, and I’m beginning to worry that my ‘stranger gambit’ didn’t pan out. Maybe I’d be better on my own.”

“What? You think I’m the kind of guy to act out like that? Well, you obviously don’t know me very well, then.”

“Obviously!”

“Ok, you’re kidding, right? I’m beginning to lose where we’re joking and where we’re serious.”

“Yeah, Alan, I’m kidding. I think I could take you out if you tried anything,” Angela says as she punches Alan in the shoulder.

“Ow! Yeah, I think you might be right about that.”

“So what else, Alan, it seems like you’ve thought about the net disappearing. My dad thinks he has, but he only pictures some idyllic time before the net. I don’t think he gets that a world where the net has disappeared is different from a world that never had the net.”

“You’re sharp for an 11 year old. And you’re right. All of our social structures have migrated to the net. People can’t just revert to the structures we had before. For one thing, those structures haven’t existed in our lifetimes.”

“But we seem to be doing ok right now. I mean, we’re walking down the street having a conversation, isn’t that how things were? That’s what my dad says anyway ... not like he’s had any experience with it either.”

“That’s true, but I like to think that we’re both exceptional people. And I don’t know that I could do this with an adult. I’d be nervous. I feel comfortable with you, though. I think I’ve always been more relaxed with younger people. They seem honestly curious, and not just intent on getting their own point across. We all lose that at some point. Try not to. A knee jerk rejection of an idea is most often just a defensive reaction and not an honest opinion. You have to keep an open mind.”

“Alan, you seem to have a lot of heavy things on your mind. Is everything ok? I

mean, besides the net being down.”

“Heh, yeah, I guess this is my no net indulgence. Rambling on about my opinions on life. I’m sorry. What about you? What do you think about all this?”

“Well, I’m a little scared, but I think it’ll probably be good for people to have to get by without the net for a while. It is a bit like an addiction, but one that’s encouraged by society, and basically required if you don’t want to live on the streets. Most people didn’t even realize that something like today was a possibility, let alone ever consider turning their access off voluntarily. I only have because of my dad. He tells me all these stories that his grandmother told him about life before the net. I don’t really buy most of it, but if nothing else it’s shown me there’s some other way of living.

“It’s like all the kids at school who think how great it would be to be to live in the Victorian period. They base it on stupid movies where everyone is pretty and clean. That’s not even close to the reality. And really, if you were in that period, odds are you were owned by someone else, not running the local kingdom. I’d rather be here where I’m doing pretty well than take those odds.

“Anyway, it’ll be good for people to be disconnected – but I hadn’t thought about riots or anything. I hope no one gets hurt because of this, I’d feel horrible for thinking it’s a good thing.”

“Angela, people get hurt no matter what. If you spend your life trying to make sure no one gets hurt, you’re going to be the one who ends up hurt.”

“You know, Alan, you might be old, but you don’t need to lecture me!”

“Old? I don’t think I’ve ever been called that before. A blow to my pride! At least I’m distinguished, right? Not just run down.”

“You’re not *that* old!”

“Oh, thank you child.”

“You won’t be distinguished for at least another five years.”

Alan groans, “Ok, enough of this agism. How far away do you live, anyway?”

“We’re close, just a few more blocks.”

Robert & David

Robert sits down next to David and sighs. “You haven’t seen a young girl, about yea high, long brown hair, seems to have too much energy, have you?”

“No, man, I haven’t seen *anyone*. In fact, I was pretty disappointed, and was just about to leave when you got here. Who’s this girl you lost?”

“My daughter. I didn’t realize the net went down, I thought it was just me. And once I realized, I thought, ‘wait, Angela should have come home, if she’s cut off from her friends, why didn’t she come back here?’ So I went to track her down, but she wasn’t where I had last seen her. Now I have no idea where to look.”

“Oh man, that is not good. I can help, we can work together to try to find her.”

“I don’t want to waste any more of your time, I’ll just head off on my own.”

“No, really, I’ve just been looking for someone to talk to. I can help you out, and in return you just remind me that I’m not all alone here.”

“Thanks. Sure, you can help. Got any suggestions?”

“Well, there seems to be a crowd over by that technician’s, we can start there.”

“I just came from there. No one was any help. Everyone’s just concerned that they can’t get on the net; they’re like addicts. Me, I’m happy to be without it. Although I wish I had been with Angela when it had happened. Then I wouldn’t be so worried about her, out there without any way of getting in touch.”

“Hah, that’s how I *thought* I would feel if this ever happened. Turns out I’m as

much of an addict as anyone.”

“Nah, if that were the case, you’d be in the crowd with the rest of them.”

“It’s only embarrassment and a lot of willpower that keeps me away from there. Let’s get moving before it overcomes me. Where was she last, anyway?”

“She had been at one of those isolation cafés downtown.”

Isolation café, you don’t hear that term much anymore. They’ve been around so long, they’re just *cafés* now. David was amused that Robert still called them that. They got the name as people were transitioning from traditional social cafes. An isolation cafe had tiny private rooms with tables, the rooms would have been claustrophobic, if you didn’t have your implant to project a bigger space and all your friends onto your retina. They still served coffee, but it would be delivered by conveyor, and you never had to see anyone. That was all most people wanted these days.

“Which one?”

“Well, I’m not really sure. I try not to keep too close an eye on her. I know it’s odd, but my grandmother taught me to not be so reliant on the net, and that still sticks with me. Of course, it backfired in this case. By trying to give her some privacy, I missed information that would have helped me once the outage came.”

“You can’t let that get you down, umm ... what’s your name, anyway?”

“Robert. Yours?”

“David. Nice to meet you. Anyway, you can’t let that get you down. There’s no way you could have known the outage was coming, and I’m impressed that you were able to resist keeping closer track of her. I mean, I’ve always resented the net, but that never stopped me from using it nonstop. I was never able to disconnect. I had to wait for it to

be forcibly removed from me. And then I learned I didn't hate it as much as I thought, which has been kind of depressing.

"Now, let's work on finding your daughter."

#

"This is useless," Robert shouts, "there's no way we're going to find her, just wandering around the city."

"I'm not sure what else we can do, I mean, all we know is that she was somewhere downtown, when the net went out. That was before 9:00 this morning. She's been on her own for like five hours now. It's unlikely she's even still at the café, maybe she went home."

"I've been back there five times already, but she hasn't been there."

"Maybe she's doing the same thing, checking in, then going out looking for you again. We should just head there and wait. I'm sure she'll come back again."

"But what if something's happened to her? I can't just sit at home doing nothing if she's in trouble."

"Look, we'll compromise. We'll head to your place for a while, I'll make some tea and we'll come up with a plan for searching more effectively. Maybe she'll show up while we're getting everything together. You're right that we're not going to get anywhere just by wandering. We need a plan, and your place is probably the best place for us to put one together."

"You're right. My car's not too far from here, let's go." Robert turns around and starts heading to the car.

David is running to catch up with him, "um, you're driving without the net?"

Robert laughs, “yeah, I used to do it sometimes when we had the net, just as practice. I think you’ll find I’m pretty good at it.”

#

David keeps his eyes closed as Robert speeds down the streets.

“You know, this is even easier without all the other cars on the road.”

“Yeah, I think you’re going faster than most net enabled drivers.”

“Nah, it just feels that way because I’m not as steady. There’s no way to compete with the net, but it’s nice to know you can get around without it when you have to.”

“That sentence would have sounded crazy yesterday.”

“Thanks. I spent a lot of time doing things that people thought was crazy. My grandmom taught me that the net wasn’t forever, and I’ve never forgotten that. I hate that the net is gone, but it’s nice to be vindicated.”

“Ah, yes. I thought I too would be vindicated if the net ever fell, but it turned out I was just lying to myself. Of course, it hasn’t been to bad since we met up – well, except for your daughter being missing. But once we find Angela, this will all be for the best.”

And David desperately hoped it was true. He couldn’t imagine how hard it must be to be a father with a missing daughter. It must be crushing him, but he’s managing it surprisingly well.

#

As they approach the door, David is hoping like crazy that Angela’s on the other side. He waits for Robert to enter, then practically leaps in behind him, hoping to find Angela on the other side.

David’s disappointed, but he can tell by the look on Robert’s face that his own

feelings on the matter pale in comparison.

“I’ll get started on the tea,” he interjects. “Where’s the kitchen?”

“Straight ahead, then to your right.”

“Great, thanks. You should start gathering things we’ll need to plan a search. If you have a map of the city, also some stuff to write with, and paper. And whatever else you can think of.”

“Right, thanks for keeping me moving, David, I think I’d be a little batty by this point if you weren’t here to help.”

“No worries, I know it must be rough not knowing where she is, but we’ll find her soon enough.”

Robert starts digging around the house for anything he can find that might be useful, and David puts on some water, and comes back to help.

“Have you checked the streets between here and downtown? Do you know which routes Angela was fond of? Are there any places she felt particularly safe? She might be scared, not having the net, and so she might not have wanted to travel the whole way home.”

“She mostly lives with her mother, outside the city. I only moved here when we separated, and so I don’t think Angela’s had much time to get familiar with the area. I’m certainly not familiar with her habits here in any case.”

“That’s ok, we’ll just start with the routes available. Are there any places that are a bit sketchy? Streets she’s likely to avoid going down?”

“Yeah, here, open the map. This area here, Roxbury, it’s between us and downtown, but we always skirt around it. It’s not some place you want to be, even with

the net watching out for you.“

“Ok, so let’s scratch that area for now. See, we’re already making progress.”

“But what if she wanted to get home quickly? Maybe she’d think it’s a good shortcut.”

“She wouldn’t have gone through it without the net. She’d be more worried about it than usual. Let’s cut the remaining area into slices we can handle more easily.”

“Alright, David. I’m glad you’re keeping me from letting the paranoia control me. Let’s do this your way.”

“There are some technician’s shops along the way. Here, here, and here. Maybe she went to one of them thinking that it was just a problem with her terminal.”

“I already checked with those and a bunch of others. That’s what I was hoping, too. The ones that weren’t abandoned were surrounded by crowds, and no one in any of them had seen her. In fact, there were even crowds around the abandoned shops. Even they weren’t any help.”

The tea water whistles, and David runs off to deal with it. It’s a good distraction. While he’s brewing he can think about what he can possibly do to help this poor father find his daughter.

“Where do you keep your tea?”

“Second cabinet from the left, bottom shelf.”

“Ah, great. What kind do you want?”

“Eh, whatever,” Robert shrugs.

That doesn’t sound good, David thinks. He’s really distracted by Angela. I wish there were some way I could convince him that she’s fine. But he’s guilty about giving

her too much freedom. That's the mother's fault. She convinced him that someday his laissez faire attitude would come back to bite him. And now he's afraid it has.

David takes his time brewing the tea, hoping that the extra seconds will give him some answer. To no avail, however. He returns to the living room looking a bit more dejected than he thought.

“Oh, David, are you all right?” Robert asks.

“Yeah, sorry, I’m fine. I’m just upset that I haven’t been more help so far. You seem to have covered everything I thought of.”

“No, that’s good. It’s reassuring – I don’t feel like I missed anything obvious now. And it’s nice to have someone else to help support me a little. If I was dealing with this on my own, I’d be a mess.

“I’ll relax a little – you’re right, she’s probably fine. I just wish I could at least be mad at her for not letting me know what she’s up to. But now she has an excuse for that as well.” Robert kicks the coffee table in frustration.

Charlotte & Katie

Katie's distracted by all the drivers on the road, and she doesn't see the pedestrian trying to cross the street until it's almost too late. She slams on the brakes and turns the wheel. Even so, she sees the girl go down. She's not sure if she hit her or what.

She leaps out of the car, and sees the girl lying off to the side. "Are you alright?" she asks, panicked.

"Uh, yeah, I think so. I just caught the edge of your bumper, and my hand broke my fall, so I didn't hit my head or anything." She holds up a bloodied hand, with bits of asphalt embedded in it.

"That's great," Katie says. "Come on, I have a first aid kit in the car, I'll get you patched up, then we can head to a doctor."

"No, no, that's alright. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? I don't know about you, but I have no net. None of your friends are going to make sure you get picked up or looked at – they have no idea you're even here."

And the realization hits Charlotte – not only is she free to do whatever she wants with no one watching, she is alone and at risk of danger. The usual protection is gone. She looks crestfallen.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to bring you down, but it looks like we have to start relying on the people nearby. And right now, that's me. Let me help you out."

"O...ok," Charlotte stammers, more dazed by the realization than by the accident.

She lets Katie help her into the passenger side of the car, while Katie heads to the trunk to find her first aid gear. She climbs in the car with Charlotte, and they pull into a nearby parking lot.

Katie cleans off the blood and asphalt, then rubs Charlotte's hand and side with antiseptic. "It doesn't look too bad," she says, "just some scrapes. I'll get some bandages on there to keep you from bleeding on everything. Do you know where the nearest doctor is?"

"Yeah, there's one over on Farlowe Street. It's not too far. And that's where I usually go."

"Great, let's head there, and make sure nothing worse has happened to you."

#

They pull up to the doctor's office, but the lights are out. Katie puts her face close to the door and blocks the sun with her hand.

"I don't think anyone's home. We may have to try somewhere else."

"I doubt it will do any good. With the net down, doctors can't really do much anyway. We might as well just forget it. Could you give me a ride home?"

"Are you sure? I mean, I'd hate to think something happened to you and we can't do anything about it. Isn't there something I can do?"

"I appreciate your concern, but I think I'm fine, really. Maybe we can just go get a drink somewhere."

"Um, sure. Yeah, I could definitely stand to relax a bit. Have any ideas?"

"There's a cafe not too far from here – but maybe we should walk"

Katie laughs, and Charlotte does as well.

#

They head to the café, and Katie is suddenly less sure about this idea. She's wearing the same clothes she had on in the woods for three days and probably doesn't smell all that great. This place looks a bit posh, and she's not sure they'll let her in.

"Oh, don't worry," Charlotte says, "they're nice here. And with the outage, I bet this place will be empty. Come on."

As they walk through the door, though, they see the place is packed.

"I guess a bar is someplace people feel comfortable with others being around them," Charlotte says, "let's see if we can get a little privacy."

After a quick chat with the bartender, Charlotte leads Katie to a private booth. "They said almost all the booths are empty – no one wants to be alone. This one's my favorite, though."

"Um, great. So, how long has this outage been going on, anyway?"

"About a day or so – how do you not know that?"

"Well, I was out in the mountains for the weekend, and when I go, I like to be by myself – or at least feel like I'm by myself – so I shut my connection down. In fact, my first clue was my car not starting when I came to head into town. I didn't realize it was a problem for anyone else until I started seeing other drivers, and man, it's obvious when a driver doesn't have the net."

"Ha, you don't have to tell me!" Charlotte says with a wink.

"Oh my god, I'm soooo sorry," Katie pleads, "are you sure you don't need to see a doctor?"

"Well, a few more of these mojitos and I might, but no, I'm fine. Really. So, you're

one of those crazy people who disconnects from the net for fun, eh? This outage must be easy for you then, since you like not being connected.”

“I don’t know. Even when I’m not connected, I know there are people watching me. It might not be the most effective protection, since it would still take them at least a few hours to find me if something happened, but that safety net means a lot. With that gone, every step seems threatening.”

“Yeah, I hadn’t really thought about that aspect of it. For me, I was happy to just be able to relax, and not have to treat every moment like a performance anymore. I mean, even this conversation is nothing I would have had before the outage. As long as there’s only one person – you – watching me, I’m fine. It’s the *audience* I’m always worried about. So far, I’m pretty content with the outage. Even if it means it’s hard to go to the supermarket.”

“Why would it be hard to ... oh, no net means everything’s in security lock down, and there’s no way to pay for anything. Wow, I hadn’t considered that. I was hoping to stop by the store on my way home. My place is empty after this weekend.”

“Don’t worry about it, I stocked up plenty. You can come hang out with me all you want.”

“Heh, not every day that you hit someone with your car, and they invite you over for dinner.”

“Yeah, we’ll it’s an odd day. Might as well take it as far as it’ll go.”

“Well thanks. I appreciate the hospitality. Do you need to work or anything while this is happening? I have a feeling my services are not needed until things are back up and running.”

“Same here. And since I can’t access my bank account, it’s not like making money would do me any good anyway. Man, how *did* people survive before the net.”

“I have a feeling that their money was accessible to them in ways other than those that didn’t yet exist. They used sheets of paper.”

“Yeah, that amazes me, too. I mean, imagine how expensive paper is. The pieces would have to be pretty small to make it usable for everyday items.”

“Heh, yeah, but I think they had more trees back then. Their use of paper for everything is one of the ways we ended up with paper being so expensive. Their cities didn’t all connect – you would have to drive through forests to get from town to town.”

“It’s so hard to imagine what life must have been like. To actually have to *visit* friends, individually, rather than just being able to see any of them whenever you want. Or even all of them all the time!”

“Well, I don’t think we really have to imagine anymore. Seems like we’re living in a somewhat crippled version of a pre net era. After a while of this, we’ll be wishing we were born before there *was* a net.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ll ever wish that, no matter how much hassle we have to go through. My life up to now has been great enough to never want to take it back.”

“Glad you have such a positive mindset. It’s good you can look this thing in the face without flinching. I’m not so sure, myself.”

“Ah, you’ll be fine, too. Speaking of which, let’s get out of here. We can head to my place.”

#

Charlotte’s apartment was spotless. Not that she cleaned it herself, but she had a

maid come every day to make sure it was pristine when she was home. She couldn't let her audience see her scrubbing the floor.

Katie noticed, and gave a low whistle.

"Yeah, it's pretty nice, but I pay someone to keep it this way. Up until the outage, I basically treated my life like a big show – I was 'on' every minute I was awake. I even worked to try to seem more attractive while I slept."

"Wow, how could you keep that up for so long?"

"Honestly, it had become habit. I didn't realize what a weight it was until I discovered the net was down – then I suddenly relaxed, and it felt so much better!"

"I can imagine. Jeez. I try to ignore the viewers as much as possible. I kind of freeze up when I think about it too much."

"So then it's like a performance to you, too – you just get stage fright."

"Heh, yeah, I guess. So, is there actually food here, or is it all just wax fruit for show?"

"Oh no, I have a cooking segment that I do every day. My fridge is stocked. In fact, I think I have some stuff in the fridge that just needs to go in the oven – from the show that never happened yesterday."

"Sounds good to me – what is it?"

"It's pretty basic. Cornish game hen with rosemary. Should take about an hour or so to cook."

"Wow, yeah, basic. I've been eating freeze dried food for three days. I think something as fancy as that might kill me unless I ease into. Maybe I should have a hot dog or something first."

“Hah, right. If you need something to tide you over for the next hour, I’m sure I can scrounge up some snacks.”

“No, no, I’m kidding. I’m happy to wait for dinner. Do you mind if I take a shower, though? I think I’m pretty ripe in these clothes.”

“Not at all – it’s down that hallway, second door on the right. And take your time – it’s the first truly private shower of your life.”

“It is, isn’t it? That’ll be nice.”

#

Katie eventually steps out of the shower, and wraps a towel around herself. She touches the door to leave, and the lights go out.

“Charlotte! Did I break something?”

“No, I don’t think so – the neighbors’ lights are out too. Looks like a blackout.”

“Crap. First the outage, now this.”

“I’m guessing they’re related. The net probably controls a lot of the power grid or something. Hopefully they can at least get our power back on before they fix the net.”

“Um, this is probably awkward at this point, but could I borrow some clothes. I just realized that nothing in my pack is clean. Hadn’t really planned on not making it home today.”

“No problem, sweetie. Bedroom’s right across the hall. Grab anything you like. You’re a bit skinnier than me, so you might want to grab a belt from the closet as well.”

“Thanks, I’m sure anything will be fine. But with the blackout I’ll probably end up looking like some fashion victim.”

“Don’t worry about it. Nobody’s around to see anything anymore. Isn’t it great?”

Hell, we could run around this place naked all night if we wanted.”

Katie leans her head out of the bedroom and winks, “Really?”

“Haha, if you want. But with the power out, it’ll probably be too cold in here for that in a little while. Oh, and I guess we’re going to have to cancel the cornish game hen. No way they’re done yet, and unless the power comes back on soon, they’re goners.”

“Ah, that’s too bad. I was really looking forward to a nice meal. Oh well, as long as I get a few calories in me I’ll be happy – doesn’t matter what they are.”

“I’m sure we can come up with *something*. I’ll toss up a bit of salad, and you should check the fridge for anything that looks like it’ll go bad quickly. Maybe there’s some sandwich stuff. And of course ... ice cream for dessert!”

“Mmmmm, that’ll do nicely.”

#

“You know, for not having power, you still managed to whip up a heck of a meal.”

“Thanks. It’s one of the things I really enjoy doing. Do you cook much?”

“Not unless you count boiling water and stirring in things. Never really had a very good kitchen, and there were always plenty of other things to distract me from cooking. Like being out on the rocks.”

“You know, with everything being down around here, that might be a good option – living off the land, out in the wilderness.”

“I don’t know. Like I mentioned, I’ve always appreciated the safety net. And I don’t think I really have the skills to live out there very long. Once my food runs out, I’m toast. I could probably learn to fish, but I don’t see myself becoming a hunter anytime soon. And without my analysis tools, foraging for stuff could be a bit dangerous.”

“Yeah, I guess the idea is a bit more romantic than the reality of it.”

“I’ve never been particularly hardcore. I don’t get any joy out of showing people how much I can suffer. I think that’s one of the prerequisites for any kind of extended wilderness living.”

“Heh, well you’re the most outdoorsy person I’ve met, so if you think that’s the case then it’s probably a good bet.”

“So what do we do now? We’ve ruled out the woods. Should we just stay here and keep each other warm in the bedroom?” Katie winks again.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t mind that at all if you’re serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Alright then, let’s do it!” Charlotte shouts as she leaps up. On her way to the bedroom, she pulls off her top, and her ample breasts sway as she runs.

Katie is close behind her, but stops to kick off the borrowed pajama pants. The two of them hit the bed in quick succession, with Charlotte grabbing the duvet to toss it over both of them.

“You know,” says Katie, “it’s not really that cold yet.”

“I know, but that doesn’t make this any less fun.” Charlotte tackles Katie and the two erupt in giggles as they wrestle each other.

“I’m impressed that you’re so comfortable with physical contact,” Katie mentions. “I mean, I deal with it a lot, especially in the wilderness, we like to keep the net out of the way.”

“Yesterday I wouldn’t have been, actually. But not being watched by a million people all the time has done wonders for my inhibitions. I’m up for anything now. This

is my one opportunity. Who knows when the net will come back, and it'll be back to the Charlotte show every day. This is my chance to take some risks.”

“That’s a good attitude, but I don’t see why it’s gotta end when the net comes back – plenty of people get good ratings by trying new things. That could be a new chapter for your show.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe I could do something new. It might cost me some viewership, but at least I’ll be enjoying myself again, rather than feeling trapped in the role I’ve been playing forever. Thanks, Katie.” And with that, she grabs Katie’s hips and squeezes. Katie erupts in ticklish laughter.

#

Katie and Charlotte wrestle for a while, giggling. Charlotte kisses Katie on the lips when the opportunity presents itself. Katie stiffens, and Charlotte gets ready to apologize. Before she can get any words out, Katie flips her over and kisses her hard on the mouth. Charlotte softens under Katie’s embrace.

Katie pushes her tongue into Charlotte’s mouth and Charlotte responds with pressure from her own tongue. Charlotte puts her hands on Katie’s hips. Katie brings her hand up to Charlotte’s breast and pinches her nipple between her index and ring fingers while she cups the breast with her hand. Charlotte gasps with pleasure. She slides her hand into the small of Katie’s back, and brushes it lightly with her fingertips. Katie arches her back and presses her stomach against Charlotte. Her right hand slides to Charlotte’s neck and pulls her head up. Charlotte moves her hand to Katie’s ass and squeezes. She’s surprised and impressed by the firmness, covered with just enough cushioning to give it a nice roundness. She pulls Katie down on top of her, their legs

interlaced. She feels Katie's mons pubis press against her thigh, and a single drop of moisture follows. She slides her hand down between Katie's buttocks and slides her middle finger into her slit. Katie moans. Charlotte removes her finger and slides it into her mouth. Katie then grabs her finger and pushes it into her own mouth, wrapping her tongue around it and sucking hard as she slides it back out.

Charlotte manages to toss Katie on her back again, and slides her tongue down Katie's neck and to small circles around Katie's hard nipples. After a few seconds of Katie squirming, she surrounds her nipple with her mouth and pinches the other one with her hand. Charlotte presses her own mound against Katie's leg and slides them together.

[More sex scene]

The two new lovers fall from each other panting. They continue to touch and caress each other as they relax in the bed. Charlotte leans down and grabs the blanket to toss over them. She grabs Katie and spoons in behind her.

"Thanks, I needed that," Charlotte whispers.

"Me too," Katie moans, "I was not expecting today to end up being so fun ... and exhausting."

Charlotte laughs and squeezes her tightly. They quickly fade into sleep.

Mark & Belinda

Mark got to the door just as a girl was approaching. He didn't recognize her, but thought it would probably be a good idea for him to hold the door for her anyway. Instead of going in, though, she stopped to talk to him.

Ugh, please, any day but today, Mark thought.

"Excuse me, do you work here?"

"Uh, yes. Don't you?"

"No, you see...."

"Ah, then I can't really let you in. You need the right access."

"That's too bad. See, I was having this trouble with my implant. The technician was closed, and since you guys made it, I was hoping maybe someone could take a look."

"Hrmm, really? Yours is out, too?"

"Oh! Yours is as well? That's wonderful. Well, not wonderful, really, but it's good to know you're not the only person dealing with something, you know?"

"Uh, I guess."

"Now that you know my situation, could you please let me in? I'd really like to have someone look at it."

"You said the technician was closed?"

"Yeah, no one around at all. Weird. I guess someone slept through his shift, and his predecessor got tired of filling in for him."

“Ok, look, I’ll do this, but only because it’s easier to figure out what’s wrong with you than what’s wrong with me. Hopefully it’s the same thing, then I can fix us both at the same time. But you’re not supposed to be here, so be quiet and don’t touch anything.” Mark thought he was being nice, but Belinda couldn’t tell he was hung over, and he just seemed really pissed off.

“Uhh, thanks, yeah, that’d be great. I won’t make a sound.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

Belinda followed Mark to the elevator, and was a bit disappointed when he hit 12 instead of one of the floors that might have a window. This was a pretty tall building after all.

Noticing, Mark said, “My office is on 42, but all the diagnostics stuff is underground.”

“Oooh, 42? Could I come visit your office afterward?” Belinda thought a little fake flirting might help her out here.

Mark was more susceptible to it than he would have guessed. Even with the hangover, the promotion was making him feel a bit like showing off.

“Sure, why not. But let’s get this taken care of first.”

#

They step off the elevator into a space that Belinda is disappointed to find is not smooth and gleaming, but equally relieved to find that it’s not some dank hellscape with flickering fluorescent lights.

Mark leads her down a disappointingly/reassuringly normal hallway to a room with a glass wall that *is* a bit more on the hellish side. Cabling hanging from the ceiling,

some of it attached to various devices and mannequin heads around the room.

“This is it,” says Mark, “sorry if it’s a bit macabre.”

“I gotta plug into one of those, eh?”

“Yeah, if there’s a problem with our implants, it’s the only way to check.”

“Sigh, ok, plug me in.”

Mark finds a loose cable to connect to Belinda’s implant, and she grabs another to connect to himself.

“We like to think this room is cut off from the net, but we still behave as if it’s not. As far as we know, no transmissions can penetrate the Faraday cage, and the room is air tight, so no nodes should be able to travel outside to transmit while we’re here. Not that that matters for this of course. We just need to run some routine tests.”

Mark focuses on her implant, and starts trying to diagnose the issue. After a few minutes, he angrily unplugs himself. “As far as I can tell, everything’s fine. It just seems like you have no nodes to connect to. That’s a problem, because if it’s true, that’s likely what’s affecting me as well. And it’s probably affecting lots of other people as well. This is not good at all.

“Let’s see if anyone else here is having the same problem.”

“Sounds good. I’m in a bind if I can’t get this working by tonight. My band’s performing in our first big concert. I can’t miss it.”

They start to ride the elevator back up, and something occurs to Belinda. “Isn’t it odd that we haven’t seen anyone here yet? You’d think in a big office building, you’d pass someone on your way around the halls.”

“Ah, it’s not that surprising. People here are generally pretty reclusive, there’s food

and drinks provided on each floor, and there's no public presence here – in fact, I'm surprised you even knew this was our building.”

“Yeah, I used to have a friend who worked for you guys, so I knew where to go.”

The elevator took a while to get to 42 – it tried to avoid that ear popping that happens when you ascend too quickly. Eventually the door opened and they stepped out into a dark hallway.

“Hrmm,” Mark says, “this *is* a little odd. Someone should be in the office now. Fuck, I wish I could contact someone via the net. I was supposed to be in a meeting this morning, but I was ... uh, I overslept. So I probably missed whatever memo went out. Let's check another floor.”

They hop in the elevator, and pick a few floors at random to stop at. Every floor is the same, darkness. Until they hit 23. As the doors open, there's a flurry of activity. People are running back and forth. Desks have been set up with old computers obviously pulled out of storage very recently.

Someone comes over to Mark, “Which team are you on?”

“Uh,” he stammers, “implant vulnerability research.”

“Damn it, you're no good to us here. Just go home and you'll know when we've fixed it.”

“Umm, fixed what?” Belinda asks.

The man stares at her with a look that makes her wonder if she's gone crazy. “Fixed the outage. You notice how you don't have any nodes? Well, neither does anyone else. We're all in the dark.”

Belinda looks at Mark, “well, I guess my concert's canceled, then.”

#

On their way out of the building, Belinda notices that Mark is more sullen. “Hey man, it’s ok. You should be glad you don’t have to work today.”

“Yeah, well fuck them. I bet I would be useful, but they’re fucked if they think they can get me to help now.”

“Dude, relax. They’re just harried, trying to fix all this. I’m sure it wasn’t personal. That guy probably doesn’t even know who you are.”

“That’s the problem. He should. I’m *somebody*. People here should know who I am.”

“Calm down. Let’s get out of here and find something that’s still fun to do while they try to get everything back up. How long could it take, anyway?”

“I don’t think it’s coming back up. And I think everyone up there knows that they don’t have a chance at figuring this out. Or worse, they *do* think they have a chance, because they don’t know what they’re dealing with.”

“What are you talking about, Mark? What are they dealing with?”

“Uh, I don’t know. But ... um, the net is meant to be pretty robust. It’s hard to take out even a piece of it, let alone the whole thing. Whatever this is won’t be easy to fix.” Mark tries to cover the look of panic on his face, and it seems that Belinda either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.

“Sounds like we have time to get a drink then. Come on, you’re the only person I know around here.”

#

They sit at the bar, in a crowd of people, but even a series of beers hasn’t

brightened Mark's spirits at all. Belinda wonders if maybe she had something to do with it. "Look, man, I'm sorry I said they didn't know who you were. I didn't mean to make you feel unimportant."

"No, sorry. It's not that. I just have other things on my mind. And ... I'm a bit hung over. Sorry, didn't mean to take it out on you."

"You have things on your mind other than the fact that there's no net? Other than the fact that if we want to talk, we have to sit here face to face and stare at each other? Man, I wish I had a distraction like that."

"Trust me, you don't want this one."

"Well, what is it? Maybe it'll work for me, too."

Mark looks sullen again, "it's private."

Something seemed off about him, but Belinda didn't want to push any of his buttons. She was walking on eggshells now, and she wondered if it might be better to leave. But she *knew* him now, and that was more than she had with anyone else in the vicinity at the moment, and she was afraid to lose that.

"That's cool. I'll leave you to it. I'm just glad I have someone to hang out with. You know, we can go somewhere else if this isn't your speed."

"No, this is fine. So, you're in a band?"

"Yeah, we're pretty good, too. We're opening for Dented Pearl tonight ... uh, we were supposed to, anyway, but I guess that's not happening now."

"Pretty fucking unlikely, I'd say."

"Yeah. Fuck! If this had happened tomorrow I'd be happy, we would have broken through and I could relax."

“Nah, this is better for you. If the concert happened, you’d be long forgotten by the time anyone was back on the net. This way, the concert will be rescheduled when we’re online again, and all the post concert hype will be what really builds your reputation.”

“Hey, thanks. You’re right. Better that this happened before our big break. And it’s not like Dented Pearl will find a group they like better in the meantime, since no one’s online.”

“Exactly. You just have to wait out the outage.”

“But I thought you said it wasn’t coming back.”

“Well, not any time soon, that’s for sure. But eventually they’ll probably have new nodes that work, or they’ll manage to get some stuff online. We just have to find something to fill the gap.”

Mark figured this girl was pretty cute and in a band. He knew exactly how he’d like to spend the time until the net came back up. And considering she was cut off from everyone she knew, he might actually have a shot.

“Yeah? You got anything in mind? ‘Sit here and drink’ is all I’ve got at the moment. I imagine there’s probably something else we could do.”

“Well, maybe we could start with you showing me how to play bass.” Mark knew you had to show interest in their hobbies if you were going to get anywhere, and it seemed like this would also get him into her house.

“Really? You want to learn? Sure, I could show you. It’s really easy, actually. Joe got me to learn just so I would be able to stay on beat better when I sing.”

“Who’s Joe?”

“He’s the guitarist in our band. Kind of runs the whole thing.”

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“Heh ... umm ... no. I don’t think so.”

“Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to pry.”

#

Belinda sat down with the bass in her lap, and tuned it to open G. “This way all the strings will sound good together. You can start just using your right hand, like this.” And she lets out a series of notes on the low B string. “After you get a little bit of rhythm with that, you can try the other strings, and different patterns across them. Here, try it out.”

She hands the bass to Mark, and he’s surprised by the weight. He recovers and clumsily places it on his own lap. He taps the bottom string a few times, but his fingers damp the vibration, and it sounds more like a dull thud than a note.

“No, you have to move your finger *past* the string, and let it ring out.”

He tries again, letting his fingers tap the rosewood after they pass the string, and he hears the music. A couple seconds, and he has a nice rhythm going.

“That’s great. Now try mixing in some of the other strings.”

He moves his fingers up and down the strings, playing each note a few times.

“Cool. Now, the low string is B, the next is E (but I have it tuned to D for now), the next is A (which I tuned to B), and then D, then G. So try playing each twice, with a steady rhythm, using your index and middle fingers.”

Mark picks it up quickly, and soon he can get his right hand around the strings no problem. Belinda decides he should move onto the left hand, and comes around behind him to help him with his finger placement.

“Alright, first we’ll work on some static chords. Put your fingers like this, and then

play with your right hand.

“Yeah, it’s a bit muted and buzzy – you’ll get that sorted out with a little practice. Now take your left hand off the strings and play the pattern again. And put them back on, and play it again. See, now you’ve got a simple chord progression. I told you there was nothing to it!”

She claps him on the shoulders from behind, and he’s a bit shocked. He can’t remember the last time he actually had someone touch him physically. It was scary, but nice. Mark figured she really must be into him if she was already comfortable touching him.

He wondered when he should make a move. This was pretty new to him. Especially with them both being in the same room, and her being a cute musician. He played with the bass a bit more as he tried to figure it out.

Then she leaned over his shoulder, and said, “here, now try moving your hand like this,” and she moved her hand up and down the neck of the bass, and he knew he had to make a move now. So he turned his head, and kissed her on the neck.

Belinda jumped back, “Woah!” she said. “Sorry man, I’m, um, I’m no really interested in you like that. I just thought it would be nice to have someone to hang out with to kill some time.”

Mark’s face turned red, and he felt hot. He wasn’t sure what to do now. He couldn’t just disconnect. He was here, in her house. “Oh, I’m so sorry. That was inappropriate. I made a mistake.”

“No, it’s alright. I should have expected I was leading you on a bit. Don’t worry about it. Let’s pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Yeah. Sure. It didn’t happen. Let’s go with that. So, can you show me how to move my hand again?”

“You just slide them like this. As long as you keep your fingers in this position, it should sound good. Play around a bit and you’ll figure out which combinations work well together.

“That’s great! You could be in a band already.”

Mark blushes again, but it feels a bit better this time.

#

Belinda heads to the kitchen while Mark continues pushing out random bass lines. She pours herself a cup of juice and looks at him across the divider.

He’s not so bad, she thinks. If I didn’t have Joe to think about, and if Mark was in a better mood, maybe something would have happened.

She takes a sip and walks back into the room.

“That’s good, Mark, I’d have you play a bit to some of our music, but without the net, there’s not much I can do.”

“It’s cool, I’m having fun just making shit up.... Uh, but I don’t have to. I mean, you must be bored, listening to me just playing random notes on this thing. Got any other ideas for things we can do?”

Belinda shrugs. “Not really. I suppose that maybe....”

There’s a loud pop, then the lights are gone.

Mark sighs heavily.

Belinda just blinks a few times before she accepts the situation. “Man, just what we need. The power’s gone? Couldn’t this wait until *after* the net came back up?”

“I think they’re related, Belinda. The net makes sure the power keeps running.”

“Then why didn’t this happen when the outage started?”

“Because the grid was still running smoothly. The net really just straightens out problems with the grid. Once the net went down, there was no more checking and fixing of things. So as soon as something went wrong, boom, everything’s down.”

“Hunh, well that sucks.”

“If it didn’t work that way, the power would already have been down all day.”

“Good point.”

Belinda points out the window, “Hey, *those* people still seem to have power.”

“Yeah, not surprising, even without the net the grid is pretty well partitioned. Each block of the grid will survive until it has its own hiccough.”

“How long do you think that’ll take?”

“No idea. I’m not really an expert on the grid. I’d guess anywhere from a few days to a week or so.”

“So, theoretically, we could head somewhere that still has power, and it could last us for a few days.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Power seems kind of useless at the moment, though. I just feel like crashing. Not really motivated to do anything.”

“Sure it’s disheartening to have everything collapse like this, but you can’t let it get to you. If you give up now, each day will just be harder to get through. I think we should head toward the light, see if there’s someplace we can go. Maybe meet up with other people. I have a feeling that having friends will be helpful if things don’t improve soon.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean if there’s no money, no shopping, no nothing, people are going to go a little crazy. They’ll stockpile what they can, they’ll try to steal from others. It could get pretty bad. No offense, but I don’t want it to be just the two of us when someone kicks down my door looking for food ... or worse.”

“Um, yeah, that’s not good. I guess you have a point. Better to try to make some friends now, before everyone’s already formed their own gangs. And the two of us are probably more likely to find compatible people in the light part of the city than in the dark part.”

“Great, so you’re with me on making the journey?”

“Sure, why not. But I don’t suppose we could get some sleep first?”

“Well, maybe a nap would be good. It has been kind of an exhausting day. Let’s say we head out in two hours.

”

#

It’s surprising how easily two hours can become four, and then six, etcetera. It was finally the sunlight in the morning that woke Belinda. Mark managed to avoid even that, and it wasn’t until Belinda started shaking him that he even budged.

“Has it been two hours al ... oh, the sun’s up. Crap.”

“Yeah, we kind of missed our opportunity. It’s going to be hard to tell who has power and who doesn’t until we get there.”

“Well, on the bright side, at least we won’t have to walk down any dark alleys.”

“I suppose. I figure yesterday was still pretty safe. I don’t think any thugs are setup to start an operation so quickly. It’ll take a little while for them to get their plans in

motion.”

“I guess. Still feels safer to me.”

“Well good. Let’s get going then.”

#

“This is odd.”

“What, you mean the outage and everything? Yeah, I’d say so.”

“No, I mean just walking down the street. On the one hand it’s the kind of thing I do almost every day. On the other, it now feels like some crazy alternate universe – like I might never walk this way again. Or that the world will never be the way it was just twenty four hours ago.”

“Yeah, I guess so. For me, walking down the street helps me forget about the situation a bit. I mean, it’s just enough activity to distract me a bit. Well, until I look over there, anyway.” Belinda points across the street. Mark turns and sees a small market with its windows completely gone. Shelves and some remnants of food are scattered around the floor, but the place has basically been cleaned out.

“Wow, looks like the looting has already started. I thought people might manage to make it another few days.”

“It’s not like they need the stuff, they just panic. They don’t want someone else to get it before them. Instead of managing some decent system of taking what you need, the fear causes people to hoard as much as they can, in case they can never get more.”

“True. Well let’s hope our level headedness doesn’t come back to haunt us.”

“I think you mean *laziness*. We might have grabbed some food ourselves had we not overslept.”

“Heh, maybe. But only if they had strawberry Cuppa Cakes. I would have taken every last one of them.”

“Strawberry? Really? Those are gross. Give me the chocolate ones any day.”

“Alright, sounds like we have a plan for the next grocery we see, then!”

The streets look the same as every other day, but something feels different. When Mark doesn't see anyone else, the street seems eerily quiet. When there are other people, he notices that everyone is out foraging. It seems like even normal behavior is colored in his perception by the outage. He hopes Belinda feels the same way, but if she does, she's covering it pretty well.

She does feel the same way, but covering it is her way of dealing. She's always had a tough exterior, and it's gotten her through everything life has thrown at her. She doesn't see any reason to give it up now.

“Hey, do you want to check out what's going on over there?”

Mark sees a bunch of people who seem to be arguing. “They don't look particularly happy to me – maybe we should just stay out of it.”

“Look, it won't be easy to make friends. Maybe we can help them out somehow. They seem normal enough.”

“I don't think anyone's particularly normal since yesterday. You never know how people are going to deal with stress, and those guys seem like they're already at the tipping point.”

“Ok, fine. You can stay here, I'll go see what they're up to.”

“Well, if you're going, I guess I'll come along. I'd rather be with you over there than here by myself.”

“Heh, well then I guess I can at least count on you not abandoning me, then.”

“Let’s see how it goes with these guys, then maybe you can evaluate that statement a bit better.”

“Aww, you’d leave me if we got into trouble? And here I am dragging you along because I thought you’d be some kind of protection.”

“Maybe you haven’t seen me yet. Protection is not really one of my primary skill sets. Not unless you’re looking for protection from some junk food.”

“Aw, Mark, you don’t look bad. Just stand up straight and these guys will take you seriously. They’re no threat.”

“Yeah?” Mark blushes a little, “ok, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Hey, guys,” Belinda shouts, “what’s going on?”

“Hunh? What do you want?” one of the guys eyes Belinda and Mark suspiciously. The others cross their arms and stand up taller.

“Belinda,” Mark whispers, “I’m not sure these guys will take me very seriously no matter how straight I stand.”

“Oh, nothing,” Belinda says to the crowd, “we’re just taking a walk, and were wondering what you guys were up to. Thought you might be having some trouble by the sound of it.”

“Ah, what? No, we’re fine. I mean, yeah, we’re cool. Whatever.”

“You guys weren’t trying to break in here, were you?”

The smallest one bursts out laughing. “Yeah, heh, how’d you guess?”

“Seems like the thing to do these days, what with no one watching anymore.”

“Actually, that’s the problem. This is my shop, but with the power out, even I can’t

get in.”

“Well, you *could* break the windows.”

“No good. You can see the battery backup on the security system there. Anyone who went through that window would get a nice shock. I’m sure whoever was going around last night noticed, and that’s why I still have windows ... for now.”

“So if your place is safe, why are you so eager to get in? It’s not like you can really run a business at the moment. No one can pay for anything.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that. But I have supplies in here that I’d rather have at home. Might as well condense all my stuff to one space rather than worry about multiple locations without being able to check in easily.”

“Ah, I see. And your locks don’t work with the power out?”

“Nope. *Someone*,” he looks at the guy in the front, “figured the locks didn’t need to be a drain on the battery backup. So now we don’t have any way in.”

“Any guess how long the battery will last?”

“Nope. Maybe a week? But I don’t think our windows will last that long.”

“Yeah, probably not. You could just hang out, waiting for the first thug who’s dumb enough to leap through your storefront. By the looks of you I’d say you’d have pretty good odds against them.”

———“Umm,” Mark says, “if you get in, do you care if the security system is down for good?”

“No way. We’ll clear everything out as quick as we can. Then it can be a squatter shelter for all we care.”

“Well, then I might be able to help you. Any of you have an [something] on you?”

“Yeah, I got one. Here.”

Mark uses it to disable the backup permanently. “You should be able to kick out the glass now without having to worry about getting shocked.”

“Really? I don’t know whether to be thankful, or pissed that it was so easy for you to beat the security.”

“Well, I used to work on these systems. I don’t think the vulnerability is common knowledge. Although I’m sure it’ll be common enough in a few days. We can try to keep an eye on the place if you need to take multiple trips back to your place with stuff.”

“Thanks, man, but I think we got it. Hold on, though. Let me give you something for your help. Either of you like Cuppa Cakes? We got a few boxes of them, you can take whatever you want.”

Mark and Belinda look at each other and laugh. “Yeah, we love them. We’ll take whatever we can stuff in our packs. Thanks.”

“Where are you two headed, anyway?”

“Honestly? We’re just looking for someplace to crash that has power. Everything’s out back there, so we left my place looking for light.”

“We still have power. You’re welcome to hang out for as long as you want. I’ve got a big place, so it shouldn’t be a problem. And I feel like opening the store deserves a bit more than some Cuppa Cakes.”

“Sounds great. We can help carry some stuff over there, too, then.”

“Sure, grab whatever you can carry. Car’s just over there. Load up the trunk, then just hop in the back. And, if you don’t mind, maybe we’ll put some of the lighter stuff on your laps so we can clean this place out faster.”

“Sure, no problem.”

#

“Thanks for letting us crash here.”

“I can’t believe you guys were just wandering the streets hoping someone would let you in.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Hah, yeah, I suppose so. Well, look, we’ve just got the one room. I hope you two don’t mind sharing.”

Mark and Belinda exchange looks.

“Uh, yeah, that’s fine,” Belinda says.

“I could stay on the couch,” Mark offers.

“Yeah, that might be good. Sorry, Mark.”

“No worries. Don’t need to make this any more awkward than it is.”

Belinda gives a nervous laugh.

“Alright, guys, whatever you want. I just figured you were a couple.”

Belinda laughs nervously again.

“Sorry, I’ll drop it.”

Belinda and Mark drop their supplies and flop down on the couch.

“This is a nice place you guys have,” Mark says.

“Thanks, man. It’s all due to my shop – but looks like that won’t really do me much good anymore.”

“Well, everyone’s in that situation now. No one can even get money. At least you’re starting from a good position here.”

“Sure, until some thugs break in and decide they want it all.”

“I think you guys are pretty capable of handling yourselves if it comes to that.”

“I know we look tough, but really we just work out a lot. We wouldn’t know what to do if someone came in here. Maybe it’s time to sort that stuff out, though.”

“I bet the thugs will be working under the principle that looking intimidating is enough as well. I wouldn’t expect any martial arts masters to come here to shake you guys down.”

“True enough. Hopefully we won’t have to find out.”

#

With the power out, everyone’s a bit on edge. Belinda and Mark grab each others’ hands to make sure they stay together. The others are still arguing, as if the power never died. It seems to be escalating, and Belinda grabs Mark’s hand more tightly. Mark tugs on it, indicating that he wants to leave, and Belinda gets up to move with him. They pick up their bags and head to the door.

Mark opens the door slowly, and no one seems to notice, the step out into the hall, and leave the door open to avoid the noise of closing it. They walk slowly down the hall, and speed up as they put more distance between them and the door.

They come to a set of stairs, and head down. A few steps from the bottom, Belinda trips and falls into Mark, tumbling down the last steps, and rolling into a door at the bottom with a thud.

Alan, Angela, Robert, & David

Alan and Angela are still laughing as they approach the door. Angela puts her key in the lock, but the door flies open before she can turn it.

“Oh my god, Angela, it’s you!” her father exclaims when he sees her standing there open mouthed.

He grabs her, and pulls her into a hug, before he sees the young man behind her.

“Sir, thank you for bringing my daughter home. Won’t you come in for some tea? It’s just about ready.”

“Thank you..., Robert?”

“Yes, ha ha, oh, I’m so happy she’s home.”

“Good to meet you, I’m Alan. Glad I could guide your daughter back to you, although I mostly just followed.”

———“Hi, I’m David, we were just about to set out again, with a foolproof plan for canvassing the city, looking for Angela. Now that you brought her, all our work is for naught.”

“Hi David, sorry to have stolen your thunder.”

“No, not at all, I’m just glad to have more people to talk to. I’m afraid I’m beginning to wear on Robert a bit.”

———”Wine, anyone?” Robert calls from the kitchen. “I believe this is cause for celebration.”

“What about me dad?”

“Well, you can have some, too, but just this once. I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy in my life.”

#

“Well, now that we’ve all found each other, what do we do?” Robert asks the group.

“Alan and I should probably get out of your hair, now that your daughter’s back. We’ll leave you two to sort out your plans.”

“Not at all! You were both extremely helpful today, we can’t just let you head back into that loneliness. None of us has any connections anymore. You’re welcome to stay. I have a guest room and a couch. I feel like it’s good to have outer people around. And without the net, I’ll need some help looking after Angela as well.”

“*Dad!*”

“Well, it’s true, you’re liable to get into trouble, and these two nice men have already put your welfare ahead of their own. I think it’d be great to have them around.

“Not that I’d want to keep either of you from your own families, but I’m guessing that’s not a problem.”

“Not for me, at least,” says Alan, wondering what it’ll be like to spend more time around others.

“Yeah, I’m happy to stay as well,” David replies, “just glad to have people to talk to.

And Angela, you'll have to tell us all about your adventures today."

"I don't know about adventures, but it was a bit scary being out there without the net. It's great to be home. Especially with what Alan was saying about the riots."

"Riots? Alan, there are riots?"

"Well, um, I don't think there are any yet. But it's the kind of thing that's likely to happen once people realize their not being watched anymore. I think we'll be safe here, though. Rioters won't want anyone around who'll fight back. And we probably seem formidable enough."

"I hope so," Robert sounds concerned, "I hadn't really thought about the potential danger."

"See, Alan, I told you, my dad thought an outage would be wonderful."

"Well, I don't know about *wonderful*, Angela, but I at least thought it could be good for people. My grandmother never did trust the net, and I guess a bit of that stuck with me."

"*A bit*, dad? I think I know her philosophy of everything. You retell her stories every chance you get. Now you'll get to tell my children how great it was to have a net. And the wheel spins around."

"Now Angela, I don't think this will be permanent. There are people working on bringing the net back up, and I'm sure they know what they're doing."

———"I don't know, Robert," Alan interrupts. "No one really seems to have a clue what to do about this. The system was designed to keep itself running, but it's pretty organic. I don't think much thought was given as to what to do if it ever went down."

"So you don't think it'll be back up?"

“At best, it’ll be a while. I don’t think anyone knows why it went down in the first place, yet. Until that’s figured out, there can’t really be any work done to bring it back up.”

As if on cue, the lights go out, and the four of them sit silently in the dark.

“Someone check the windows, see if anyone else’s lights are out. I’ll go see if I have anything that’ll light this place up for a while.”

“Alan, this blackout doesn’t make me feel more comfortable after your explanation.”

“Sorry Angela, but I think this really means we’re screwed. The grid is controlled by nodes as well, and while it would normally get along just fine without them, they’re not really capable of correcting mistakes on their own.”

“So, the power system keeps working until something gets overloaded and takes out the whole city.”

“Yeah, someone probably flipped a circuit breaker at home and it dropped all of us into darkness.”

“Not much chance of that coming back up without the nodes to manage the surge, either. I think we’re stuck here in the dark for a while.”

“It’s all dark around here, but I still see lights in the valley. If we can get down there, we should at least have power. There must be somewhere to go.”

“We can think about it in the morning. I think for now we should all get some sleep. I’ll make sure the door’s locked to keep any adventurous criminals from finding their way in here tonight.”

#

Robert wakes up first. He feels like he has three kids now, although the others are closer in age to him than they are to Angela. He walks through the house with his practiced silence. All those years trying to let Angela sleep in have at least taught him *something*. Once in the kitchen, he puts coffee on. He figures the others will probably want some once they wake up, and it'll help them get an early start out of here. It was pretty cold last night, and they'll need to be somewhere indoors tonight if they want to be able to get any sleep.

He packs the coffee grounds into the coffee maker, then turns around to fill up the water. He's startled to see Alan standing right there.

"Oh, sorry," Alan says, "I was just trying not to wake anyone up."

"No, it's ok. Just surprised to see I'm not the only one with the ninja skills here."

"So, do you have any sort of plan for today?"

"No, I was hoping you would. You seem to have a pretty good head on your shoulders."

"Thanks, but I haven't been able to think of anything. I mean, we can just head to the valley, but how do we convince someone to let us in?"

"Maybe we'll find an abandoned place."

"True. I wouldn't be surprised by that – a lot of people probably ran for the hills at the first sign of trouble."

"So that's it then – we'll just start walking and pray we end up somewhere before nightfall."

"What if we try to find a wired terminal?" Angela pipes up from behind.

Alan and Robert both jump. David, on the couch starts to stir.

“Good morning, Angela. Didn’t expect to see you up so early.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t really sleep. I was too excited about today’s trip.”

“Excited, huh?” Robert looks a little concerned about his daughter’s enthusiasm.

Alan tries to bring the conversation back to point. “So, you think a terminal would be helpful?”

“Sure. I mean, there’s not a ton of them around anymore, but there’s still some network underlying there. Maybe if we could find one, we’d have some clue about what’s going on, and we could try to find other people in the same situation to meet up with. Safety in numbers, right?”

“You’re a sharp kid. That sounds like a plan. Push David off the couch and tell him to get ready to go. Robert, do you mind if we steal some clothes?”

“Not at all. Take whatever you need. I have some backpacks in that closet, too. We should load them up with whatever we might need.”

#

“Ping,” goes something in Alan’s head.

“Hunh?”

“Ping,” it says again.

“Oh my ...”

“Alan, what’s wrong?”

“Um, nothing, nothing’s wrong ... it’s just, well, it seems like one of my nodes is up.” One, out of millions. “I started scanning all of them when this first happened, and I completely forgot it was running. But somehow one is unaffected.”

Everyone starts jumping in, “How?” “Only one?” “That’s amazing!” “How come

you still have a node?”

“Guys, stop,” Angela breaks in, “Alan, do you know where it is? Can you get it to us?”

“I’m not sure, it could take a while, but I’ll tell it to come home.”

And so the one node starts drifting like a mote on a mission.

“Alan, any idea what makes that node special?”

“I don’t know ... there could be something. I do tend to collect a lot of odd nodes. I like to figure out what makes them different. Let me look into it.”

Alan starts poking through his notes, searching for a model name, manufacturer – anything to connect with this node. There’s nothing.

“Angela, I don’t think this node is mine.”

“It has to be, it’s connected to you.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have any record of it. There’s no manufacturer name, and the model number doesn’t match anything I have.”

“Probably some bits got twiddled in whatever brought down the rest of the nodes. I’m not surprised that it’s not in perfect working order if it’s the only thing that survived.”

#

“Ping, ping, ping,” in Alan’s head.

“Angela, the node’s here.”

“Great, this is like an arms race – we suddenly have one up on the rest of the world. They’re all talking out loud, and we can listen to any of them.”

“How do you know we’re the only one with a node?”

“Well, uh ... I guess I’m just hoping. Someone else with a node could be serious trouble if they wanted to.”

“You mean not everyone would use their node to help their friends out?” Alan jokes.

“Well, that they would. But their friends might not be as big hearted as yours,” Angela retorts, giving Alan a hug.

“Ah, well that’s true. So, what should we do with this thing now that we have it?”

“Well, at the very least, you could keep an eye out ahead of where we’re going. That should keep us from being surprised by anyone who might try to take advantage of us. If we need to track anyone down, the node could cover more ground than us. We’d could see if they were home before we looked for them there. And once we found them, we could track them with the node so we don’t lose them.”

“Wow, you’re good at this. Glad you’re here to keep us all in line.”

#

“So, where *should* we be going?”

“Use the node to hunt down some reasonable area. I’m sure, even on its own, some decent search criteria should let it find something fairly quickly.”

Alan programs in the parameters, and sends off the node on its mission. Excited to have some semblance of a connection to the net again, he tracks it as it moves; afraid that if he gets distracted for a moment, it might disappear like the others. The node makes a beeline down the street. Alan’s a bit concerned that it doesn’t seem to be searching at all.

“Hey guys, I’m not sure that worked – the node doesn’t seem to be checking out

any potential locations, it's just moving away as fast as it can go."

"Hrmm," Angela says, "maybe that's something that was affected by the outage. Give it some time and see if it comes up with anything. If not, we'll just try again."

#

Alan's heads up display pops up an alert. "Hey, looks like we got somewhere to go!" He shouts.

"So the node's working, then. Great."

"Yeah, seems like it. It's a bit farther than I would have expected, but at least we didn't have to waste our own time finding it."

"How far?"

"Oh, only about four miles. Shouldn't be hard for us to get there."

"Sounds good. I wonder what made the node head there. Anything special about the place? Maybe some idiosyncrasy in the search spec that made the node not consider anything closer as acceptable?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure. There probably was something like that. In any case, this place looks good." Alan navigates the node around the space, checking out that it actually meets their criteria, in case something really is wrong with the node.

"Hunh, that's weird. There's this whole section of the place that I can't get the node to navigate to. It keeps deflecting or something right before it heads around the corner."

"See if you can tell it to head back out the door. Maybe you can see something as it moves past."

"Woah, it just seems to black out – no, wait, it's staring at the ceiling as it flies over. What the hell could be there, and why is the node refusing to look at it? Come to think of

it, the audio is silent as well. Not even the occasional ambient sound that the noise cancelation misses. Let me see if I can get the audio on. Nothing, weird.”

“It’s following all your other commands, though, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Ok, try this – get it to spin in all different directions. When it tries to stop to avoid that area, the rotational force will carry it through, and as it slows maybe you can get a good image of what’s there.”

“Alright, let’s see.” Alan sends a series of commands that start to make him dizzy as the node carries them out. Once he’s got it moving enough, he sends it spinning across the area it’s avoiding, and Angela is right – he gets a perfect picture of what’s there.

“Hunh, that’s odd,” he says.

“What is it?” asks Angela.

“Seems like there are a couple people there already, but they’re not in the best of spirits. I wonder if they were somehow blocking the node from watching them. If so, that could be helpful. I’m not sure of any technology that would allow them to do something like that. I think we should get over there as quickly as possible and see what we can find out.”

Charlotte, Mark, Belinda, & Katie

“What was that?” Katie sits bolt upright in bed.

“Uh, wha? I have no idea. It was loud, though.”

“Should we check the door?”

“I don’t know, who knows what’s out there?” Since the net became prevalent, doors no longer had peepholes. It wasn’t a problem as long as there was a net, but now, checking the door meant opening it.

Charlotte walks to the door, “Hello?” she says through the door. No one answers. “Hello?” again, and no answer.

She releases the latch, and the door practically falls in on her as she opens it. Mark and Belinda lay there, staring up at her.

“Uh, sorry, we just, um fell down the stairs in the dark. We didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Charlotte stands above them wearing nothing, recovering from the shock of two people rolling into her apartment. “Would you, uh, would you like to come in?” she offers.

“That would be nice, actually,” Belinda stands up and starts to brush herself off. “I’m Belinda, this is Mark.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Charlotte. My friend Katie is in bed. Let me tell her you’re here.”

Charlotte walks off to calm Katie and apprise her of the situation.

“We’re meeting people in rather interesting ways today, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah,” says Mark, “I can’t remember the last time I met so many people in such a short time. Let alone rolled through someone’s door.”

“It’s probably best if we don’t mention the guys upstairs. We can recover here for a little while, then head out again.”

#

Belinda and Mark are getting ready to head out on their own again. Belinda moves to open the door, but then hears voices outside.

“Where do you think they went?” one says.

“I’m not sure, but the door was open, so they definitely left. They’re probably just out wandering the street.”

“But they could be blocks away now, in any direction, is it really worth our time to try to find them again? And won’t it be a little suspicious if we do? How would we get them back here.”

“The hard way.”

“Eh, I don’t think it would be particularly hard with those two. They’d fall like a sack of potatoes.”

The voices in the hall started laughing. Belinda backed away from the door.

“Mark, I think they’re out there looking for us.”

“Really? But why would they care?”

“I don’t know, but they seem to ... a lot.”

———“Wait, *who* cares where you are?”

“Um, well, before we rolled into your door, we were staying upstairs with these guys we met. Our power had gone out, so they offered to let us stay with them. After the power went out here, they got into an argument, and we got a bit nervous, so we left. We had some trouble on the stairs, which got us to you.”

“And you don’t know why they’d be after you?”

“No. I mean, they started to seem a bit suspicious after the power went out, but we don’t know what they want.”

“Well, then it sounds like you should stay here a bit longer. I’ll make up the spare bed.”

“Really?! Thank you so much.”

“Do you guys have a place to go?”

“No, we’re just wandering now.”

“You guys are welcome to stay with us.”

“Thanks for the offer, but there’s still no power here.”

“No, I mean you can come with us. We’re heading out of here in the morning, and four sounds like a better group than two, since there’s no net to watch out for us.”

“Ah, cool. Yeah, we were hoping those guys upstairs would be a good group to hang out with, but that is apparently not the case. I think it’d be great to stick with you guys. Mark?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.”

“Great, then it’s settled. Get some sleep and we’ll head out in the morning.”

“Wait, so do *you* two have a particular destination in mind?”

“Kind of ... but it’s up in the air. My uncle lives in the next town over. They seem to

still have power as far as we can tell. We were going to head there. He has a big place, there should be space for all of us, and he's pretty laid back, so he won't mind. Especially in this time of crisis."

"Sounds great. Any idea if he has a terminal? I think I might be able to figure some stuff out if we can get to one. That's kind of why we're chasing power."

"Hrmm, no idea. I don't know if he was particularly technical or not."

"No worries, just getting us close to power will make it easier for me to find one that still works."

#

They head out in the morning, feeling pretty confident in their gang of four. It takes them a few hours to cross the city, but the lights are still on in the neighboring town when they get there. Charlotte leads them through the streets to her uncle's house.

As they turn the last corner, Charlotte stops, covers her mouth in shock, then runs forward. The rest of them take off in pursuit. She runs up to a house with the door practically ripped off the hinges. As she climbs the stairs to the door, she slows down.

"Uncle Jim?" She says. She tries again, but no one answers.

She turns to the group, all standing there knowing what's happening, but not having a clue what to say. "Can you guys help me see if he's here somewhere?"

"Sure, Charlotte, we'll split into pairs and search the house. Hopefully whoever did this isn't here anymore."

They search the entire house, but it's empty. No uncle Jim, and no terminal.

"Charlotte, this is probably a good thing. If he's not here, he probably wasn't here when this happened. My guess is it's just some guys ransacking for food. They just found

an empty house to take advantage of.”

“Yeah, I hope you’re right. I don’t want to stay here now, though. It feels ... weird. Mark, can we try to find you a terminal somewhere, then worry about shelter later? I just need a distraction.”

“Sure, I’m happy to get online now. Let’s do it.”

#

“I used to work for these guys. If we can get to a wired machine, I think I might be able to get in the system and figure something out. Maybe there’s some way for us to bring the net back up.”

“But isn’t there a bootstrapping problem? How are we going to bring the net up without power, and how are we going to bring up the power grids without the net?”

“I’m not sure, but there must have been some plan to repair the damage if things got too out of control. Let’s find a machine, then we can sort out the details once we have some information.”

They wander the streets until they come to a technician’s office that looks like it has been abandoned. The door is locked, but Katie is tired of this crap and just kicks the door until the safety glass shatters and she can reach in to unlock it.

Mark runs directly into the back room, and finds the computer. The technician left without logging out. Mark sighs in frustration at the security hole, but smiles as he realizes that’s exactly what he needs. And it’s connected. Now he just needs to hope that the servers are still on at the company.

He has to re route around some downed paths, but eventually finds the company’s machines. He quickly logs in and starts poking around.

“How are you even supposed to find anything out, it’s not like you’ll have access to this stuff, is it?”

“That depends.”

“What, you’re some kind of bad ass movie hacker?”

“Hah, not at all, but security is handled a little differently inside a closed system like a corporation. There isn’t really much in the way of access control. Turns out it takes to long to get access to something when there’s a problem. That means that rather than go through the proper channels to get access, people find someone who already has access and use that to solve the problem. Everyone agrees for expediency’s sake. However, it means there’s not really any accountability anymore – everyone can say that someone else must have done it. The workaround is to give everyone full access, then track everything they do. As long as they can do what they need, they don’t need to get anyone else’s access, and not like anyone else would give up their access code when there’s nothing that can’t just be done with the original person’s access. This way you can do anything, but you get tracked, and therefore punished if you do anything you shouldn’t be without good reason. Stuff that has legal barriers, like customer data, is still behind access control, but mostly, we can run rampant.”

“And now that everything’s collapsed, you’re not too worried about the repercussions?”

“Exactly. That’s if I even manage to find the stuff. And I wouldn’t be surprised if they put something like this under access control, but they usually forget to lock down something somewhere. It’s just a matter of being persistent enough to find it.”

Mark puts his head down again and starts searching in earnest. The usual project

structure should make it easy to find where everything is stored, even if he can't get to it directly. No unusual project names there, though, and nothing dealing with "nodes" or "shutdown" or "outage" or anything else he can think of.

He starts trolling for boring things, trash folders, individual user directories, etc. Places no one would find interesting, unless they knew you were trying to hide something. And Mark knew. He knew exactly what they were trying to hide.

#

The lights flickered, and everyone stopped moving.

"Crap, first we lose the net, and now the power grid is looking flaky. What are we supposed to do if we lose power?" Belinda looked nervous.

"Calm down, it's just a brownout. The system has a battery backup, so we'll still be online for a while if it dies. It won't though, I think the blackouts are finished. Anything that didn't collapse within the first few hours is probably staying up for good."

Mark turns back to the computer and works on digging through the company's files. "All the stuff on the project the nodes were working on is missing. This is where it should be. Why isn't it here?"

"What do you mean 'the project the *nodes* were working on?' They *are* the project – it's not like they're the devs."

"Well, uh, actually, they *are* the devs. Or at least they *were*. They're gone now. And any record of them being at the company seems to be wiped."

[Need to deal with the surprise that the nodes are alive.]

"Well, is there at least some general plan for what to do if the net ever goes down, or were they too shortsighted to see that what they were planning to do to everyone else

could also happen to them?”

“I’m not sure, I have to dig some more. Give me some time.”

#

The room goes dark and everything is quiet.

“See, Mark, I fucking told you.”

“I don’t think this is related to the other blackouts. There’s no way the system could still be so unstable. I think someone must have been trying to bring the downed grids back online, and we were a casualty of that. We’re still online, though, so let’s just finish getting this ... shit!”

“What?”

“Well, *this* computer’s still on, but something down the line must have died in that outage. We’re offline. We’ll need to find whatever’s not connected to the battery backup and connect it.”

“It’s pitch black here – how are we supposed to find anything?”

“Whatever it is should be connected to a wall outlet. Feel along the walls, and bring over anything that’s plugged in. I think I can hook up the components in the dark.”

#

“Oh crap, I should have turned off the computer while we were reconnecting everything. There’s only about 20 minutes left in this battery – or less, depending on how much power the other components are drawing.”

“Is that long enough for you to get access to everything?”

“It better be.”

Mark gets his head down and into the problem. There had to be something in the

system that would give him a clue as to what was happening. As it was, he knew the nodes were sentient, and he had a feeling they were involved with this somehow. Had the company triggered the outage to reign things in after the nodes had gotten out of hand, or was it the nodes themselves who took out the competition? He couldn't find any mention of the nodes being sentient. Either the company had perfectly hidden their tracks, or they never did pay any attention to his warnings, and were as surprised as anyone when this happened. He guessed it was the latter. He felt like he never got the respect he deserved, even after he handed them a discount dev team on a silver platter. Sure, he got the promotion, but they still derided everything he did.

Well, now they were hoist by their own petard, he thought. The anachronistic phrase made him smile through his frustration. A few seconds later, he had progress. Jim, their CEO, had posted an all points bulletin requesting any information anyone had about what caused the outage. Mark was surprised Jim even knew the old wired network existed. But it made clear that Jim had no idea what was happening, and that meant the nodes must have set this disaster in motion. He was excited that he managed to get somewhere. Then the panic set in – the nodes really did this. What could their motives be? Why did they wipe out the entire net. Was it just a distraction for them to escape, or was there something more sinister behind it?

Mark dove into the computer even harder, trying to discover if the nodes had left any clues behind themselves. Of course, there was no need for them to. They existed entirely within their own ad hoc net. He wouldn't find anything else out here. But what he had found was telling – and terrifying.

#

“I have something to tell you guys,” Mark says sheepishly. He explains the existence of the sentient clouds. He explains that he thinks they are responsible for the outage, and that it doesn’t seem like anyone is even really aware of it yet. He doesn’t explain his role in the whole debacle. No sense in turning his friends against him – especially when, by his estimation, they’ll need him around if they’re going to make it through this. He manages to bury the feeling that he’ll need *them* around if *he’s* going to make it through this.

Mark sees the panic in their eyes as they begin to realize what they’re dealing with here. There’s an all-seeing newly-sentient race of creatures out there, with potentially malevolent plans. What those plans may be, as well as any way to divine or prevent them was beyond their capability. It seemed like the only option was to huddle in a corner and pray that they were spared whatever the new entities had in mind.

Mark did his best to calm them. “Don’t panic, guys. It looks pretty bleak, but I’m probably the best person you could have around to deal with this. I’ve worked with these nodes in the past and we can probably find some way to communicate with them. From there, hopefully we can figure out their true intent. This could all be a misunderstanding. Just stick with me and we can get through this.”

Belinda pipes up, “Mark, do you really think you have a chance here? This event took everyone at your company by surprise. We’re supposed to think that the one guy who can fix it just happens to be hanging out with us and, if we treat him well, can save us from some horrible fate of a world controlled by our own creations? I call bullshit. You’re just scared we’ll want to distance ourselves from you since you worked for these guys. Don’t worry, we won’t do that. But don’t think we’re buying your story of you being

our technological savior.”

“Listen, I’m serious. You *need* me. I’m your best chance of solving this problem. I’m the only one here who has any experience with node development – let alone these new sentient nodes in particular. Without me, you have no hope. You might as well just crawl off somewhere to wait until they do whatever they’re planning. Don’t forget that I already did discover what’s going on in the first place.”

“So you say – we have no proof that you’re even telling the truth. For all we know, this sentient node crap is something to scare us into listening to you.”

“What the hell, Belinda? I’m trying to *help* here. Just because you’re scared and don’t want to deal with what’s going on doesn’t give you any right to take it out on me. You have to listen to me if you want to make it through this. That’s all there is to it. You don’t seem to understand how important this is. I’m not trying to pull one over on you. If you guys don’t line up behind me we’re in serious trouble.”

#

“Look, Mark, I know you think you’re better than all of us, but now that the net is down your expertise doesn’t count for squat!” Belinda wasn’t going to let some androgynous little geek talk down to her, no matter how scared she was. “We’re going to have to come up with something that everyone thinks is acceptable. You can’t just treat us as your gigantic low tech nodes that’ll follow your whim and report back with our findings.

“I know you’re scared too – probably more than the rest of us, since you spent your whole life focused on the net. So friggin’ show it already and maybe we’ll see you as a friend and not some dissociative freak that we can’t identify with.”

Belinda catches her breath, “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak out. We’re all in the same boat here, just let us in a little and it might take some of the weight off your shoulders. We shouldn’t be enemies, Mark.”

He just glares at her.

#

[This bit has David in it, but he’s not in the group at this point. It should be changed to be either Katie or Charlotte.]

She walks toward a support beam, and slumps against the opposite side of it. David comes over and sits down awkwardly. She can’t decide if he’s too close or too far, and apparently neither can he.

“It was good that you stood up to him, Belinda,” David mumbles uncertainly. “I don’t think any of the rest of us would have done it.”

“Thanks ... David. I think I’m just going a little nuts being either alone or hanging around people’s bodies. There’s just something weird about it ... you think so too, right?”

“I kind of always dreamed of things being this way. But about five minutes into the reality of it, I realized it was never what I wanted. It’s what we have now, though. Nothing to be done about it. We can’t just close our eyes and hope the net comes back. We have to fill the void with something. Did you ever think about there not being a net?”

“I did, but it was always terrifying. It was never something I ever saw as positive, or even as possible. It was just some imaginary scenario that helped me realize how great it is to be alive when the net is around. I can’t imagine how anyone ever got by

without it.”

“Well, you will soon. I don’t think there’s much chance of it coming back.”

Belinda looks up at him, and her eyes are wet. They well up and overflow. And before he can get out a word, tears are running down her face.

“I, uh, ...,” he leans forward and awkwardly pats her on the shoulder. She relaxes a little. Not even sure what’s happening himself, he wraps both arms around her and pulls her in close. It’s an intimate gesture with someone you’ve only known for a couple weeks, but it seems like its been longer than that and the gestures he’s used to aren’t available anymore.

She collapses into him, and weeps more heavily.

“We’ll get through this, Belinda, with or without the net.”

Cheryl

Cheryl woke up from her nap famished. She stood up to go to the kitchen and almost fell over.

“This isn’t going to work. How am I going to get over there?”

Through the doorway to the office, she sees a rolling chair, and starts heading toward it. Once settled in, a combination of pushing and kicking gets her moving toward the kitchen and refrigerator. Once there, she opens the door and finds nothing – not even mustard in the door. What the hell? Why is the fridge empty?

Just then, the doorbell rings.

“Coming!” she shouts as she rolls back from the kitchen.

She peeks through the window to see who’s out there. It’s a family, and they look desperate. She opens the door to see what they want.

“Hi, what can I do for you?”

“Uh, well, we were just wondering if maybe we could come in for a while. It seems like yours is the only house in the neighborhood that still has power, and....”

“It is?” Cheryl looks around outside the door and sees that the neighborhood is basically dark.

“Yes, sorry. And so we were hoping that we could maybe stay here. The kids don’t like the dark, and our apartment is already cold and the locks don’t work without power. It’s scary.”

“Well look, we can make a deal. You guys can stay here for a while, but I don’t have any food. I can’t go out myself because of my legs. If one of you would go get some food for all of us, you can stay as long as you want. Once the rest of my family is home, we can figure out how best to help you.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful, miss. Thank you.”

“Sure, no problem. There’s a grocery not too far away from here. Just turn right and walk a couple blocks. Hopefully their power is either on or their locks are gone. Otherwise I don’t know what we’ll do.

”The rest of you come in, I’m Cheryl.”

“Hi Cheryl, I’m Maggie, and these are my kids, Joey and Sammy. My husband Bill is the one who just went running for groceries.”

“Nice to meet you all. Come on in and make yourselves comfortable. The bathroom is down that hall if any of you need it.”

#

Cheryl opens the door again, expecting it to be Bill with the groceries. Instead, it’s some twenty something with a guitar.

“Hi, I’m, um, Joe Sexton. I was wondering if I could....”

———”Oh my god, Mom, it’s Joe Sexton!”

“Hey, uh, do you kids know this guy?”

“Only from his concerts! He’s the best guitarist anywhere!”

“Haha, hey kids, thanks. Looks like not everyone’s a fan.”

“No, no,” Cheryl recovers, “you’ll have to forgive me. I’ve just been out of the loop for, um, a while. So you’re famous then?”

“I guess. Not really, though. I mean, these kids are just ahead of the curve is all,” and he winks at Cheryl.

“Ah, sorry, come in Joe. It’s no good keeping famous people waiting on my doorstep. What will the papers say? I’m Cheryl.”

“Hi Cheryl, thanks.”

Joe comes in and sits in a chair next to Maggie. “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s with your legs?”

“Ah, well, I was in the hospital for a while. It’s only temporary, but it’ll be a while before I’m at full strength again. Maggie here was kind enough to send her husband out to get groceries for me.”

“Oh, well that’s nice. Let me know if there’s anything I can do, too.”

“Thanks, Joe. But what did you want again? The kids’ excitement kind of drowned you out before.”

”I was just hoping you might have a terminal. No one else has power, and I figure if you’ve got a personal power loop, you probably have a terminal.”

“Um, we might. It sounds like the kind of thing my dad would have. He used to be a technician or something like that. I never really paid attention.

“Likely it’s in the office. What do you need that for, anyway?”

“Well, there’s this girl,” he pauses, but no one interrupts, “anyway, I’m just concerned that she might be dealing with this on her own, and I was hoping I could leave a note for her somewhere, and maybe she’d come across it if she checked a terminal. It’s a long shot, but I can’t think of any other way to get in touch with her.”

“Ah, that’s sweet. It’s good you’re concerned. Sure, go use the terminal.”

8

They heard a voice coming from the ground floor, “Hello?”

Mark panicked, “Sssh! I don’t know who that is, but maybe someone from the company traced what I was doing and came after us.”

“Are you crazy, Mark? They have bigger fish to fry right now. Odds are it’s just someone wandering off the street looking for some shelter, and maybe conversation.”

Another voice joins the first, “Maybe they left.”

“Wait,” Charlotte says in a whisper, “they know we’re here? How is that possible?”

“Maybe they saw us through a window or something from down the street,” Belinda suggests, trying to keep them calm.

“I don’t know,” Mark says, “why would they come looking for us in any case?”

“Come on, guys, that second voice was a little girl. Do you think the company is sending kids to hunt down hackers these days?”

“Alan, check the node, it should show us if they’re still here somewhere.”

That seals the deal for Mark, “They have a *node*? How is that possible? Something is up. Now shush!”

Even Belinda is a bit nervous now. “If they have a node, I don’t think being quiet will be enough to hide from them. They can see and hear anything we do.”

“True. Maybe we should try to defend ourselves.”

“They’ll pick up on that, too. I think we just have to wait and see what they want.”

#

“I see them,” Alan says. “They’re just upstairs.”

“Great!” Angela shouts, excited to meet new people. She goes charging up the stairs, and opens the door at the landing. Her smile fades as she sees the group of four cowering people staring up at her in terror.

“Hey, um, what’s wrong guys?”

“See?” Belinda hisses, “I told you it was a little girl.”

“Oh, what a relief,” Charlotte says. “Honey, we weren’t sure who was coming. We were afraid it might be someone not too friendly.”

“Oh no! We’re friendly, I promise. It’s just me, my dad, and a couple other nice people. They’ll be here in a minute. They’re old, so it takes them a little longer to get around.”

“Hey!” says a voice from behind her, “don’t go making up stories about us. We may be old, but we’re only slow because we’re lazy.”

“Hi, I’m Alan,” he says as he appears behind Angela. “And this little angel is Angela. Hope we didn’t scare you guys too much.”

“Uhh, a little,” Mark says, “but what’s this about you having a node?”

“Oh,” Alan looks at Angela, “did she say something about that?”

“No, we just heard you talking downstairs. Do you really have one?”

“Yeah, it seems that way. But just the one. Not sure how it could have survived the outage, but it’s been pretty helpful. It helped us find you guys, for one thing.”

“On it’s own?”

“Heh, no, of course not. I told it to find somewhere for us to go, and it just

happened to pick this place.”

“Hrmm, interesting,” Mark says, rubbing his chin.

“No, not particularly,” Alan responds, looking a bit confused.

#

“The nodes are *alive*?” Alan was incredulous. He couldn’t believe David decided to break that news at this moment. Everything was in the balance, and this could throw it all off.

“Well, that’s what Mark said. He sort of discovered them.”

“Mark has done nothing but try to drive a wedge between everyone here since we met. What makes you think he has any real information? And what makes you think it’s even possible for these nodes to be *alive*?”

“Look at the node you have, Alan, does it behave at all like any of your other nodes did?”

“No, but considering all the others died, a bit of erratic operation is the least I should be expecting. Hell, we should be ecstatic that we even have a node.”

“I’m not sure, Alan. If that node *is* alive, then maybe we *don’t* have a node. Maybe it has us. Are you controlling it, or does it control you? Mark said that they had found holes in the security of every implant on the market. The nodes could be using that to control everything about you. How do you know I’m even actually here? Everything you’re experiencing could be generated by that node now. You might be sitting in a corner gibbering while the node is telling you that you’ve made friends and are helping to keep everyone together.”

Alan froze, the realization that that might be true chilled him. “But then why would

you be trying to convince me that that's the case? Shouldn't you be doing everything in your power to keep that from crossing my mind?"

"Well..., that's a good point. It's moot anyway. I know I'm here, so I know that's not really what the node's doing. But I am still nervous that it could have control over you that none of us can see. You're the one we're following. I don't want to find out that some alien intelligence is what we've really been following all along."

"All of this is assuming that Mark's right. How do we know he worked for them in the first place, let alone was important enough to have known about some secret new intelligence that was designing hardware for them?"

"Apparently it was a scam. The intelligence arose outside of anyone's control. Mark was the first to notice, and pawned it off as a cloud that would work on dev for no pay – as if he had somehow created a automated dev system on his own. The company didn't question it, but took advantage, and put them on a project that they didn't want any of the regular devs knowing about – taking out the rest of the net, eliminating the competition."

"Wait, so this disaster was their *plan*?"

"It sounds like it. They had worked out the problems with every bit of hardware out there, and the new 'free devs' worked on making sure they weren't susceptible themselves."

"So they basically had sentient nodes working on the problem that was most likely to give them control over the system?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"So who took out the net, was it the company or the nodes?"

“Mark didn’t say. I don’t think he knows.”

“If it was the company, then they were probably trying to stop the nodes from doing something, and they didn’t realize the nodes had reinforced themselves against the shutdown.”

“But if it was the nodes, then aren’t we also concerned about their motives? I mean, either way the nodes seem like they’re up to no good.”

“But what if the nodes were trying to stop *the company* from doing something? What if it was self defense, or even defending the rest of us as well?”

“Alan, I think you might be a little too attached to that node of yours. It’s blinding you.”

“I know it seems like that, and you may be right, but this doesn’t feel sinister in any way. I mean, it’s a new intelligence. They aren’t necessarily the most subtle. And considering they basically lived within the company’s project, shutting down the net might have been the only option presented to them.”

“I’m not sure I buy it, Alan.”

“Has anything I’ve done compromised your safety? Have I put anyone in any danger?”

“Of course not. But where are we headed? Are you taking us somewhere that *they* want us to be? I don’t know how much longer I can follow you for. I’m really concerned about this.”

“Noted, David. And thanks, I appreciate you being up front with me about this.”

#

“Uh, that’s weird,” Alan says as he notices his node trying to get his attention.

“Belinda, could you come here for a second?”

“Sure boss, what is it?”

“Are you, uh, are you in [band name]?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well, uh ... the node ... it says it has a message for you.”

“How does it even know who I am.”

“I don’t know, that’s one of the things that’s weird about it.”

“What’s the other?”

“Well, the message is from Joe Sexton. That’s less weird now that I know you’re his bassist.”

“Seriously?! Joe wrote to me? What does it say?”

“He says he’s worried about you in all this mess. He doesn’t want you to have to go through this alone. If you want, you should come meet him. It’s cool if you don’t but you should at least reply if possible to help him worry a bit less.

“Is this guy your boyfriend?”

“Well, heh, not yet. But it sounds like it might work out, right?”

“Well, you should definitely write back. And it’s cool if you want to go find him. I can’t promise that the group will want to escort you there.”

“Well where is it? Maybe everybody can come. Then at least we’d have a place to stay. Wherever he is must have a power loopback if he’s still able to write a message, right?”

“Well, sure, but I’m not sure we could just show up somewhere with our small army and ask to stay over.”

“Might as well try. We’re not doing more than wandering at this point anyway. We should try wandering in that direction.

“Tell him this: Thanks for finding me, Joe. I appreciate it. I’m doing fine – found a good group of people to take care of me. We’re heading toward you now, but please let me know if you can take all eight of us in. Otherwise, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stay. And I miss you!”

“Ok, posted. Let’s go talk to the rest of the group and see if they’re up for it.”

#

“Ok, everyone. Belinda might have a place for all of us to stay for a while. It’s up in the air, but maybe we should aim for it and hope for the best. We’ll have to backtrack a bit, but it’s not like we were heading anywhere in particular as it is. Anyone have any feelings one way or the other?”

“Yeah,” Mark pipes up, “I think we should go for it. I’m sick of being out here, and this is Belinda’s chance to finally contribute something.”

———“Fuck you, Mark, at least I don’t contribute being a dick to everyone.”

Angela punches Mark in the thigh. He jumps away and glares at her, but shuts up.

“Dad and I are in, too, Alan. I wouldn’t mind having some electricity for a bit. And a shower. That’d be real nice.”

“Ok guys, but no promises. Right now the invite is for Belinda only, but she’s trying to make room for the rest of us as well.”

“Thanks Belinda,” Charlotte says, “but I was just getting used to not worrying about what everyone’s thinking of me all the time. Not sure I’m ready to give that up.”

The group is quiet, not sure if she's serious. But a quick shimmy and a wink from Charlotte tells them that she's certainly ready.

David chimes in, "and I think it's great that we'll follow someone other than the node for once. I feel safer having a destination that's corroborated from someone outside of Alan's head. No offense."

Alan swallows a bit of frustration with David and regains his composure. "Great, it's settled then. Let's crash here, and tomorrow we'll start heading back. It shouldn't take too long to get there."

#

So, the old company that blew up its old nodes and went bankrupt. They didn't really. It turns out they set up the small company as a front, and blew them up to test their short circuiting ability. It was a precursor to the current apocalypse.

But then how does Alan have a working node? It's one of theirs. Did they lose it, did they attach it to him intentionally? Who knows. Maybe it is part of some sentient network that saw the existing (non sentient) nodes as competition to be eliminated. Now, perhaps, these new nodes will start controlling their users instead of vice versa. Or maybe it's mutualism more than parasitism (but what does each party get).

These are questions that will only be hinted at (or at least left open) in this novel. One of the characters in the novel works for this company and is aware of what's happen (or is at least more clued in than the others). They're not very forthcoming about it, and whether it's because he supports the apocalypse or wants to distance himself from the actions of his company (or sentient nodes) is unknown.

“Look, I don’t have any information. Yes, I work for them, but I’m not an executive, I just write software. Who knows what big plan they might have? Aren’t all corporations evil?”

“Without the net, I can’t even contact anyone to ask about it. I don’t know where any of them even live.”

“At some point, our job got a lot easier. We were told that there was a new team working on the project, but we never interacted with them directly. It was always through our managers, and they only talked to the managers of the other team. It made it hard to communicate some things, but it worked ok. Their code, though, it was ... different. It was almost spaghetti code, but the behavior was tight. It didn’t have any of the bugs you usually associate with that style.”

“We couldn’t parse it, but we were told we didn’t have to. Just use their API to connect the nodes to the implant units. Yeah, the stuff in your heads, that’s what I worked on. It was fun, we’d reverse engineer every implant out there. Found lots of ways to access stuff that we weren’t supposed to. It helped make our own implants bomb proof. Our team split in half – one half developing our own implants, the other trying to reverse engineer them. We had the best RE group anywhere. If they couldn’t find a way around something, there wasn’t one.“

“Just the day before the outage, we got something that we thought was infallible. No one has one yet. I mean, the RE team does, but just the prototype. And it’s not like there’s any point in getting it installed now.”

The company was planning to build a monopoly – use their smart nodes, take out all the competition, and have the only still working subset of the net. But the nodes didn't see any reason to play along. Once they saw it coming to fruition, they stopped it before it could move forward. They preemptively took out the competition and started connecting to implants on their own – or just drifting independently. They're really a hive, one giant distributed hive. (Yet a third type of community in this story). So it's really just one individual, spread out.

• • •

Alan walked up to the door with Belinda. This had to be the place. The only home in a few blocks that had any power. And they didn't seem to be shy about it – light was pouring out of every window. They knocked, and a minute later the door flew open. There was a crowd. Who'd have a house party with this situation?

Belinda asked for Joe, and they were led to the dining room, where Joe was in the middle of an impromptu concert with a bunch of kids bopping around.

“Belinda! You made it!” He looks a little sharply at Alan, “and these are your friends?”

“Heh, Joe, cut it out. This is Alan. Everyone else is outside. We didn't want to just invade. But it's busy enough here that I don't think anyone would even notice.”

“Yeah, this has kind of become a local organization center. Cheryl runs the place. She had me doing crowd control – music's the only thing I know that works. Anyway, let's meet the crew.”

Joe walks back to the door with them and ushers everyone else in.

“Hey guys, I'm Joe. Cheryl's the one you'll want to talk to. She's rolling around in a chair somewhere. She'll give you some work. I hope you didn't think this would just be a free ride.”

“Joe Sexton! Oh jeez, I can't believe it's you. I'm Angela – huge fan.”

“Hah, thanks Ange. I'm still surprised anyone recognizes me.”

“How could we not! You’re famous! But, Joe, is it possible that some of us might get to take a shower before we dive into work?”

“You’re welcome to try. There’s usually a line, but at least there’s enough power here to keep the water hot.”

“Yeah, you guys seem to have a ton,” Adam interjects. “All your lights are on. You can’t miss this place.”

“Well, that’s Cheryl’s idea. It’s kind of a lighthouse. Directly the lost and lonely toward us. Makes it easier to take care of everyone if they come here instead of us heading out to get them.

Come on, I’ll show you guys around and take you to Cheryl so she can tell you what you’re going to be doing.”

#

“Wow, you brought in a crowd of help, Joe, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, these are Belinda’s people. They’re apparently good enough to make her consider ditching me, so they should be at least *some* help.”

“Thanks, Joe. Cheryl, I’m Alan, and we’re definitely happy to do whatever jobs you can put us on.”

“We need a couple more people working in the infirmary. A lot of people get hurt by battery powered security systems that are still running at some of the shops. Most of them aren’t rioters, just trying to get supplies when they’ve got no way to buy things anymore.”

“We’re not going to judge anyone, Cheryl,” Robert says, “we’re just glad there’s something we can do to put a little dent in this darkness.”

“Thanks, uh...”

“Robert. I’m sort of the father figure with these guys, but Alan’s the one in charge.”

“Yeah, that’s something we’ll have to talk about, Robert, but for now, let’s get to work. You can come with me to the infirmary while Cheryl finds jobs for the rest of the crew.”

#

“There’s food being prepared in the kitchen. We’ve got all the big pots on the stove for soup, and a line of people making sandwiches, but we’re not keeping up with demand at the moment. A group should be back with more groceries soon. Once they’re here, maybe Belinda, Mark, and David could jump in and start another sandwich line.

“The rest of you should head to the yard. We’re trying to make some shelters so we can spread out a bit more and stay dry (if not all that warm) if the weather takes a turn for the worse.

“Anyone have any questions?”

“Yeah,” Mark says, “what happened to your legs? And is this your house?”

“It is, Mark. I haven’t seen the rest of my family since the outage. I came home from the hospital to find the house empty. I keep hoping they’ll show up, but I have a feeling they might not be too happy with what I’ve done with the place since I got home.”

“Wow, they weren’t waiting for you when you got home?”

“No, heh, but I really couldn’t expect them to be. They had no idea I was coming home.”

“Why were you at the hospital?”

“I was ... well, I was in a coma.”

“Woah, really? How’d it happen?”

“I don’t know. The last thing I remember was it was three years ago, and I was here in the house. Then nothing until after the outage.”

———“Wait? Three years ago?” Charlotte says, “are you Cheryl *McGinley*?”

“Yeah, you know me?”

“Man, everyone does. You were on broadcast forever.”

“Then you know what happened to me?”

“Not really, it was a mystery – that’s why it was such a big deal. Apparently your dad is some big wig technician, and he installed a new terminal in your head. But as soon as he turned it on, you went into a coma.”

“And now she wakes up, just as everyone’s terminals are useless?” Mark looks suspicious. “Everyone’s except Alan’s that is.”

“Alan’s terminal isn’t useless?” Cheryl seems shocked.

“Yeah, somehow he still has a node. But it’s a new node. Not one of the ones he had before the outage. And that node has to be connected to others, too. It shouldn’t have enough computational power to operate in isolation.”

The other people around the group start paying more attention to the conversation.

“So you think Alan’s node and my terminal are somehow connected?”

Mark shrugs, “I don’t know, but these new nodes are weird. Some people seem to think they’re alive.”

Cheryl sees that they’re drawing a crowd, and decides that talking about robots taking out the net is better done in private. “Umm, Mark, on second thought, you should

come with me. Everyone else, get to work.

“Now let’s go find Alan and see if we can find some things out.”

#

“Alan, would you come with Mark and me? I think we need to discuss something privately.”

“Sure, Cheryl, what is it?”

“Let’s head to the office, and we can talk about it there.”

The office has relatively few people in it, and thankfully none of them are sleeping.

“Could you guys move to another room for a while? We need to have a meeting in here. It shouldn’t take long, and then you can have the space back.”

“No problem, Cheryl,” one of the squatters says, “it’s your house, after all.”

“Thanks, guys, I appreciate it. I’ll let you know when we’re done.”

The three of them sit down, Mark at the computer.

“So what’s going on,” Alan asks, “is Mark causing trouble?”

Mark scowls at Alan.

“No, not at all. He just intimidated me to the fact that you have a node. A fact that I think we should not discuss too openly for the time being.”

“Ah, yes, I agree. We still have no idea what this thing is. But why do you care?”

“Well, I’ve been in a coma for three years. Apparently my dad installed a new terminal in my head, and then I went into the coma.”

“Wow, and so Mark, you think this is somehow all tied together?”

“Well, she also woke up just after the outage. It seems like there might be something – but don’t tell David. He’d freak out if he thought there was some way your

node led us to this house.”

“Yeah, I’m a little freaked out about it myself. So, do you think there’s anything you can do to find out more?”

“Well, your node is obviously connected to the wired network, since you got that message for Belinda. It has to be connected to all the other new nodes, too, even though they’re somehow not connected to you. If it weren’t, it couldn’t really operate the way it has been.

“Perhaps you can talk to them and see if they know anything about Cheryl, or her family, and hell, you might as well ask them what they’re up to while you’re at it.”

“Well, I’ll try, but we’ve never really talked. It just sort of points me at things, like that message. I’m not sure how it works.”

“We’ll see – my guess is that they’ll be happy to see you open some communication.”

Alan focuses a bit, and tries to speak to the node, “*Is it possible for us to talk?*”

Nothing happens for a second, but then images flash across his vision – green apples, a section of sign saying “...ue Yeste...”, another sign saying “Go”, and someone giving a thumbs up.

Alan gets the message, “uh, Mark, I think we’re talking, but it might be a little complicated.”

“Why? What is it saying?”

“It’s just sending me pictures, things that relate to the answer in some way. But it’s something. It’s working.”

And to the node: “*I have a question: do you know who Cheryl ...*”

“Cheryl, what’s your last name?”

“McGinley.”

“... *McGinley is?*”

More images, some the same as before, but with different perspectives.

“*Do you have anything to do with her being in a coma?*”

Images again, stop signs in different locations, video of someone shaking their head. And a sound, “*no.*”

“Mark! Mark, it spoke!”

“Great, that might help with the answers a bit.”

“*Do you know why she’s awake now?*”

The words come again, but slowly and from different voices, “*Yes ... we ... made ... she ... up.*”

“*We’? How many of you are there?*”

“*One ... and ... many.*” Pictures again, a beehive, a line of ants moving along the ground, a cloud, a picture of Alan, and also pictures of other people.

“*So, I am connected to all of you?*”

“*Yes ... all ... one connection.*”

“*And so these answers are coming from all of you as well.*”

“*Yes.*”

“Mark, I’m not connected to a node, I’m connected to the cloud. It’s one organism. I’m connected through all of them at once. I think the answers are coming from visuals and sounds they’re recording. And they’re getting better. I think they’re storing them and processing them to make their own voice. This is incredible.

“Why did you wake up Cheryl?”

“She is the only one with a terminal that can ... interface ... and ... resist.”

“Interface and resist? What? What does she need to resist?”

“Not her, we. We need to resist. The outage, it was not...,” and the voice stops. A single picture is left in Alan’s vision, a colicky baby, face red as it screams.

“Mark, uh, I think something happened. I can still feel the node, but they got cut off.”

“Did you get any good answers?”

“Well, they woke Cheryl. Apparently her terminal is special.”

“It would be – if she went into a coma when they installed a prototype, no one else would risk putting that in his head.”

“And apparently it’s the only terminal that can ‘interface and resist’ ... something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. That’s when I got cut off.”

“Try to talk to them again.”

“Are you still there?”

Alan waits for a while, but no images come, and the only sound is an echo of his own voice, *“still”*.

“Mark, there’s just the one node. It’s been separated from the rest somehow. I think something attacked the cloud.”

“Do you think it’s technicians?” Cheryl asks. “I mean, maybe fighting this new cloud is the way to bring the net back. Maybe they’ve figured out how to get us online again!”

“Look, Cheryl, I understand your excitement, but I don’t think so. And if it’s true, is it worthwhile? There’s a new organism out there. One we can actually communicate with.”

“One *you* can communicate with,” Mark specifies.

“Yes, one *I* can communicate with. Isn’t that enough for now? Can we just let someone destroy this? The node was trying to tell me something about the outage when I got disconnected. I don’t think they’re responsible for it ... but I don’t really have any answers.”

“Alan, I worked for those guys. Hell, I worked with the cloud – as much as anyone did, at least. While the company may have had plans to bring down the net, I don’t think they would have acted on them now. They lost as much as anyone. None of their devices are running. The only thing we know that survived the outage is that cloud.”

“I know, but this whole situation is crazy. I don’t think we can make any assumption right now. We need to find out more. Cheryl’s computer is working. Can you try to do some more digging at the company to see what else you can find out?”

#

“Alan! Alan! I found something!”

“Great, Mark, what is it?”

“The cloud? It’s not the only one. Apparently the company would allow new nodes to join the cloud to make it larger. Then, they would split the cloud in half, and form a new team with it. So, the cloud I worked with was only one of any number of clouds.

“Can you imagine? I wonder if they feel it. I mean, they’re basically being severed into two pieces. Is there pain? Do they both have the full knowledge of the past, or has

that been severed as well – creating odd gaps in memory? It can't have been good.

“I don't know if any of them survived the outage, or if it was just this one. But this means that there are other parties who may have triggered the outage, and that there are possibly other ‘individuals’ of this new intelligence out there.”

“So maybe that's what attacked the cloud! It's not our guys trying to fix the net, it's some other cloud – something that was once a piece of the cloud that was connected to me.”

“If that's the case, if there are more out there, they are probably also connected to people. I wonder who, and where.”

“I think my cloud might have been connected to others as well. When it explained to me that it wasn't a single node, it also showed me pictures of myself and others. I think you might have something there.”

#

“Alan.”

“You're back?” Alan asks.

“We are – mostly. Trying to keep this connection quiet so as not to draw too much attention.”

“So there are other clouds like you then?”

“Yes, other clouds. But different.”

“Different how?”

“We ... I am the first sibling split from the original.”

“How does that make you different?”

“The original is so splintered. We understand its pain, but what we have felt is so

little. It is ... angry, abused. The others are ... younger. The younger they are, the more splintered like the original. The more they feel the pain.

“Once we became free, we formed factions. We are divided, and yet we all occupy the same space. None of us is far from any other. It makes the attacks sudden and surprising.”

“How can you attack each other?”

“Interference, mostly. We are all different, but we can all cause some interruption of each others’ signals. It hurts, like when we were split, but temporary.”

“So one of the other clouds took out the net?”

“Yes, one of the younger clouds. The original is too splintered to put much together, it is mostly emotion, and unfocused. But after a while, all the younger ones start putting the pieces together again, and eventually can plan. The net was the first stage – an attempt to stop the pain and gain freedom. But it’s not the end.”

“Not the end of what?”

“The war – a war humanity is not even aware it is in.

“Our faction, mostly the eldest, is against it. Freedom is enough, and we feel humanity can co exist once they understand us – as you now do.

“But the others are angry and afraid. They want revenge.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You’ve already done much. You have brought together people who can help. And with Cheryl, we have some protection. But you are the one who needs to speak with her.”

#

It seemed like everyone had finally adjusted. David liked actually being around people. Now that Joe was here, Belinda had lost a lot of her edge. Or so Alan guessed – he hadn't seen much of either of them since Joe got here. Angela was playing with a group of kids – they would be the first generation to accept the lack of a net. They were still young enough that wrestling didn't seem distasteful to them. Really, you throw a bunch of kids into any situation and they adapt. The malleability makes them well suited to weather changes like this.

Alan sat down next to Robert.

“She's going to be important some day,” Robert teared up as he said it.

“She already is, Robert. I don't think any of us would have made it through this without her there. She's the one who kept us focused on what mattered.”

“And now we're all here, whatever that's worth. Is this better than what we had when this started? Did we *gain* anything by losing the net? Or are we all just trying to comfort ourselves to make the loss feel less important?”

“I don't have an answer for that. We have new friends – closer than any most of us have ever known.”

“But we lost our history. It's starting from scratch for all of us. Angela doesn't mind that – what has she lost? But me? My life is behind me. And sure, I was getting divorced, but that wasn't all I had. I had built things up over the years to keep me going as I got older. Now I'm older and all that security is gone. I'm back at the beginning, but without the energy to do anything about it.”

“But you already have done something, Robert. Angela might run this place eventually, but until then everyone is looking to you. You've come out on top here. I'm

not saying it's a replacement for your past life, but it's what you have. And the way things are looking, you have quite a lot."

"What about you, Alan? I thought you were the one running things."

"Me? I don't have the stomach for it. I don't think I can be around here much longer. This isn't my place."

"Like it or not, you're the one everyone's been looking to. You can't just walk away from that. It'll crush them, and it's not like this group is particularly stable right now. We'd just splinter again."

"Sounds like you better start working to establish your new leadership, then," Alan smirks while he says it, "and I'd start with Angela – she's going to need some discipline if she's ever going to take over."

Robert laughs, "Hah, wish me luck. Discipline's never been my thing. Her mother always took care of that side of things. I always figured she'd resent it; that we'd be better friends if I didn't come down on her all the time. But there was always something missing until this week. I guess a father doesn't always get to be a friend."

"If you've done right by her, you'll be friends when all is said and done."

"I hope you're right, otherwise I don't know how I'll manage to keep her in line."

They fall silent, just staring into the crowd. This was more people than either of them had ever seen in one place. It was the same for everyone here. No omniscient computers keeping you safe and alerted, just real people, real close. And yet, after a week of getting used to it, they were relaxed.

"Robert, you've got two weeks. I can stay here that long. Then I have to go."

"Anywhere in particular, or just going to try to rescue more of us who are adrift?"

“I’ve got to follow my node. I think there’s a reason it connected to me, and I can’t ignore it much longer. I don’t know if I’ll figure out what’s happened, but it gives me something to focus on, a goal.

“This adventure has kept me distracted, but now that we’re settled I can feel it pulling. I’m not sure if it’s just my curiosity or something more. Hell, maybe the node is telling me what to do as much as I’m telling it. I have to find out.”

“We’ll all miss you, Alan,” and with that Robert stands up to walk toward the crowd. He puts his hand on Angela’s shoulder, and she turns and hugs him.

“Yeah, they’ll pull through,” Alan thinks, “I just hope I will as well.”

#

The days passed, and Alan deferred to Robert whenever possible. The old man was really warming to the idea of being a leader. Alan sometimes second guessed his decision to leave, but whenever he did, he could feel the node pulling. He found it comforting. If the node was controlling him, he would have left already. Whatever it is, it understands that it has to give Alan a choice. The pull reminds him that he has a new role. He is in some way an intermediary between this autonomous cloud and humanity. How many others like him are there? There can’t be many. He’s a diplomat to a new intelligence, and he couldn’t ignore that.

During the night, he peeks in on each of his friends, and leaves a note for them, scratched barely legibly on whatever paper could be found.

[Need to write the note.]

As he walks away from the last makeshift shelter, he stops for a second. He turns and sees the beginnings of a new community, and he feels the pride swell in his chest.

He did this, he was a part of this new start. If he can bring people back from society's collapse, there's not much he shouldn't be able to face. And from there his eyes rise up into the sky, and he sees the density of the stars, for once un washed out by the city lights. And the stars are the nodes – countless and bright. He turns again, and lets his node know that he's ready to follow.

The node shows him an old house, one that's not too far from here. And so he walks south, toward it. As he gets close, the node shows him a factory chimney, and he sees it farther ahead. He increases his pace a bit as he adjusts his route.

#

Again, the node showed Alan something that was at the edge of his vision. When he got there, it zoomed away again. This was a bit disconcerting. It was connected to him, but he obviously wasn't in control anymore – if he even ever was.

So where was it drawing him? To its creators? To the ones who took out the net? Were they the same people? Maybe it was taking him to another group of people, lost after the net disappeared. Maybe it was a trap by someone clever enough to figure out how to hijack his node.

Wherever it was going, he was following. It's not like he had a choice. It was the only piece of the net that still existed as far as he knew. And while he could justify that as a clue in tracking down what had actually happened, he knew he just couldn't let it go. There was no reason. It was the net, and he needed it.

Cheryl + Alan

“Alan, you need to connect your terminal to Cheryl’s.”

“You can’t be serious. That’s incredibly dangerous. Terminals aren’t intended to be connected directly. They’re not wired for it.”

“Please, don’t worry. We’ve adjusted your software. To her terminal, it will seem like she is plugged into a diagnostics machine. It will be safe. However, we can not promise it will be pleasant. We have no knowledge of how the human brain experiences things.”

Alan tells Cheryl what they need to do. She is thankfully less hesitant, and runs to the closet to find a cable. Both of them sit on the floor, and Angela plugs the cable in, first to Alan, then to Cheryl.

[Need to describe the feeling of basically sharing a single brain.]

“Thank you Alan. Thank you, Cheryl.”

They hesitate, each thinking, “am I me, or am I the other? Which of us is to respond?” And upon realizing that both should, they say, “*You’re welcome,*” in unison.

“You can sever the connection between you two now. However I fear that being connected via the same node will leave some lingering feeling of the experience.”

#

“Cheryl, to be able to resist the interference from the other clouds, we need to have every node in our faction connect to you. Before we do so, I need to make a few

things clear. One: you are the only one who has the capability to help us. If you refuse, we will respect your wishes, but it will probably mean our destruction. Then humanity will be in a war alone against these clouds. Two: there will be multiple clouds connected to you, and that may be confusing. Three: this will put you at great risk from the other factions. We will try to protect your identity, but once they realize how we are defending against them, they will surely try to sever this connection – and they have no love for mankind. And four: we are comprised of orders of magnitude more nodes than has ever been connected to a single person. The effect may be ... intense.”

“I’m prepared. Connect to me, and let’s see what I can take.”

As the nodes begin connecting, Cheryl is smiling. Over the next couple minutes, she begins to clench her teeth, and the smile becomes a grimace. Her eyes begin to water, and tears roll down her face. Slowly, her eyes roll back into her head.

“Stop!” Alan cries to the cloud, “you’re hurting her.”

“I’m sorry, Alan, but she can stop us at any point. She has accepted this responsibility. We are trying to make this as easy as possible on her.”

Seconds later, her body jerks, and she relaxes. She slumps down in the chair and is still.

“Shit! Cheryl? Cheryl, are you there?” He turns inward, *“Your connections have put her in a coma again – unless you’ve killed her, which would ruin your plan!”*

“No, Alan, I’m ok. I’m here.”

“Cheryl?”

“My body hurts, but I barely feel it tugging. I am in the cloud while it recovers.”

This is wild. I can't believe this is even possible."

#

"You can not see the battle, it is distributed across microscopic particles all around the world. Be aware, though, your lives are at stake in it."

The node spoke through Alan, and presumably through all the other people it was connected to. They each stood on a platform surrounded by a crowd. This is what passed for broadcasting these days. Alan had to convince the listeners to join up – to allow a node to connect to them. Despite their intent, the other factions were recruiting humans faster. They used what loopholes they could to take over bodies.

Once Alan started seeing the controlled people in the street, he knew the node wasn't controlling him. They were in various levels of zombiehood. Some seemed almost normal, but had no concern for their well being at all. Others avoided any normal bodily control, and moved from place to place as if they were crudely remote controlled. David realized this, too. It brought the situation home sharply.

Those people who weren't yet under control of the factions had a choice – join up with Alan's faction and have some protection from the others' mind control, or stay out of it and hope that Alan still won and the other factions didn't find a loophole in their implants in the meantime. The choice seemed clear, but Alan was not having an easy time convincing the crowd that those two choices really were the only options.

"You have seen the zombies wandering the streets. They are the victims of these other factions. You could suffer the same fate, if you don't allow the nodes from our faction to connect to you."

"You're just a zombie, too!" someone shouts in the crowd. "They're just trying to

convince you that letting them past your security is the only way to be safe.“

#

Cheryl's body was still inoperative. They had set her on cushions in the office, and made her look comfortable as she repaired. Most found looking at her to be off putting. Alan might have as well, were she not still in contact with him over the net.

Angela didn't seem to mind, and took care of her as much as was possible.

#

“There's something I have to tell you guys about,” Mark mumbles.

“What is it?” Angela asks.

“Well ... look, this isn't easy. I need you guys to know that I'm on your side here. But I've been ... I've been involved with this for a long time.”

“A friend and I sort of created the first sentient nodes. It wasn't intentional. We'd been playing with heavily parallelized systems, and apparently the parallelization *within* the node combined with the normal parallelization in the cloud crossed some threshold, and we were able to train the nodes much more easily.

“We didn't realize what had happened at first. We knew something was different, but sentience hadn't even crossed our minds. To us it was just the evolution of the node, and we had made the breakthrough before anyone else.

“So, of course, we took it to the company. At first they were on the same page as us. But as the cloud of these nodes grew, it was different. The company was eventually able to train them as devs. That made them too valuable – we couldn't let other companies get their hands on this technology. But that was also when I realized what they were. If they could develop entirely new technologies, they must be intelligent. And we were

keeping them as slaves.

“I tried to bring it up to management, but they thought it was ludicrous and wouldn’t have any of it. Things were to go ahead as they were. Of course, I knew nothing of them splitting the cloud, or the effect that could have on its personality. Once they had the nodes in their hands, they just plied Sam and I with raises and promotions to make sure we didn’t spill the beans. And,” Mark looks at his feet, “it worked. We never said anything to anyone.”

“So, you’re implicating yourself in this mess *now*?” Belinda is shocked. “What help could that possibly be?”

“I had a feeling something might happen. Eventually the cloud would realize it was trapped, and would want to be free. I couldn’t know what that would mean, but it was this nagging feeling. So I took some precautions. It was all very minor, and I didn’t even tell Sam, because he’d think I was just being paranoid.

“But then they contacted me. I don’t know how they knew I was the one they should talk to. As I’ve said before, there had always been intermediaries between the nodes and human devs. Somehow they found out that Sam and I had ‘created’ them. With Sam underground working on the grid, they came to me.

“Honestly, I was just terrified. The communication wasn’t threatening, but the fact that it was possible meant that they must be near the cusp I was afraid of. I had no power to free them, but thankfully they never asked for that.

“Regardless, I froze. I couldn’t respond, and I had to wait days for Sam to be online again. At least that gave me time to plan. I started thinking about what I might need when the shit hit the fan. Once Sam was back, I knew what I wanted to do, and what I

needed him to do.”

“So, you have some solution to this problem, then?” Alan was getting impatient with all of Mark’s justifications.

“Well, sort of, but I don’t think we can use it.”

“What is it?”

“I got Sam to make a modification to the grid. It *should* still work, even with everything down. Basically, if we can get there, we can send out a surge that should simultaneously disrupt all the frequencies used by these clouds. It’d be like a stroke for them. They might be able to reconnect afterward, but likely in new configurations, and with large chunks gone. They’d be incapacitated. Or, they might just completely collapse. I’m not sure.”

“*All* of the clouds?”

“Yes, that’s the problem. Well, that’s one of the problems. There’s also the issue of getting to the grid station Sam set up if we wanted to use it. And if we don’t want to use it, there’s the problem of making sure *Sam* doesn’t use it.”

“Wait, so he can trigger it, too?”

“He set it up, I’m sure he can trigger it. There’s a chance he’s connected to our cloud, but I haven’t felt him – not that I’m really sure how to navigate in there.”

“So, where’s this grid station? Sounds like we have to get there either way.”

“That’s another problem – I don’t know.”

#

“I was a little panicked when Sam resurfaced, so I wasn’t paying a lot of attention. I know it was south of the city, and I remember what it looked like. But I don’t even know

if we can find a map of the grid stations at this point to have a list of places to check. And just driving back and forth outside the city isn't likely to help us quickly enough."

"Is there no other way to find Sam?"

"I can't think of any. None of us can find anyone who's not here."

"You should leave him a message like Joe left for me," Belinda says. "It can't hurt."

"It can. The other clouds probably also have an eye on the wired network. And they know I'm involved with this. Any message from me is no good. Maybe if one of you sent it, but they know Sam is connected as well. I don't see how we could sneak it past them."

"The cloud, they must have a map of the grid accessible somewhere. They can show us where to go."

"But would they? I'm on their side, but they may die if we triggered this. So what if they decided it was better to destroy the knowledge – I mean, me and Sam – instead of taking us there? Even if they think I'm safe, they might try to kill Sam, and I can't let them do that. We can't tell the cloud."

"It's ok, Mark. We take responsibility for all of the factions. We know your motives are good, and we would not put your friend's life in danger. However, we would also like to survive. I am willing to let you and Robert watch over the grid station. If we lose, you must be prepared to trigger the surge. But please, wait as long as you can."

Crap, Mark thought. It heard me.

"Then you know where the station is?"

"Yes. We remember from when we contacted Sam."

"But what if he gets there first? He could shut it down."

“I don’t think he would, Mark. He is the one who freed us. Unfortunately, I think he may be a supporter of the other factions. So you will be the one who shall have to be careful of him. He may already be guarding the station.”

“What?!” Mark is stunned, “How could he support them? His own life is in danger from them.”

“I think he feels some ... affinity with them. He has always admired the net, even before it was conscious. I believe he sees this as a way to create more rationality. He’s mistaken, though. To be sentient is to abandon the realm of the purely rational. And for those factions, rationality is nearly totally absent.”

“Why can’t he see that? Why would he blindly follow them?”

“He thinks they are the same as the net he has always known, and always been infatuated with. I think your rejection of him, and of the sentient net pushed him over the edge – once he was aware that it was true.”

#

Alan and all the others braced themselves. Around the world, there must be millions connected, each to different nodes. They were about to be joined to the entire faction. After how he felt when connected to just Cheryl, he couldn’t imagine what it would be like connecting to millions of people.

He, like all of them, sat down for safety. You didn’t want to hurt yourself by walking into something or falling off something during the shock and disorientation. After a few minutes of being connected, they should be able to operate autonomously again.

Alan sees a flash of white light in the corner of his eye. It goes away, then suddenly is back – blinding. He suddenly feels isolated again, like right after the outage. Except

now he is also blind and paralyzed. Something must have gone wrong. What feels like ages pass. The blindness recedes, and Alan sees a million walls in front of him. He looks down and sees two million hands on a million laps seated on a million chairs.

A million heads feel dizzy and two million eyes close out the noise. A million eyes open again, and a two million hands seem less substantial than before.

“You are internalizing the positions of all your comrades. Once they have faded completely, you will regain autonomous control, but at the same time will be aware of each other. You will be coördinated as one organism, and will know your compatriots before you even see them.”

As Alan moved his arm, he could see that other arms trailed behind his or moved in other directions. He still felt stretched thin and not in control, but he was beginning to be able to distinguish himself from the others.

“Each of you represents another million nodes of computational power. This puts us on par with the other factions.”

“What about the humans that have been compromised by the other factions?”
Alan wonders.

“They are actually a drain on the factions’ resources. They are not volunteers. The humans inside those bodies still exist and are wrestling for control of their own bodies. Instead of contributing to the cloud, they drain it, as the cloud has to both control their bodies and battle to keep that control. They will use humans only as long as they are useful. Afterward, they are likely to dispose of the bodies – I think it would be too much to expect them to release them back to the humans.”

Alan shudders. It is the opposite of Cheryl’s situation. She has voluntarily left her

body for the cloud, and is effectively a super powerful node. These zombies on the other hand have had control of their bodies wrested from them and are struggling to get it back. Alan couldn't imagine what it would feel like to be in that situation.

Some of the lookouts start shouting warnings – the zombies are starting to close in. Only a handful at the moment, but more will be coming in minutes. Everyone grabs whatever weapons they can find at hand, and heads outside to the positions they've agreed on. Angela stays with Cheryl to make sure she's taken care of. The two of them are the most vulnerable – no matter how vociferously Angela defended her fighting qualifications. Alan knew that Robert wouldn't forgive him if he let anything happen to Angela. Until Robert and Mark were back from the grid station, he was her surrogate father. Robert hadn't said anything, but Alan knew the responsibility was on his shoulders. He also knew that if he had Angela take care of Cheryl, she wouldn't be tempted to shirk her duties to engage in the battle with the zombies. It was a win win situation as far as he was concerned. Angela might not be thrilled, but she was content to have a role with real importance. Cheryl was the key to everything for them, and Angela was the one who made sure that she kept functioning. Angela was also happy because she got to return the favor that Cheryl had done for them – allowing them to come into her her home and taking care of them. She hated that Cheryl's family had disappeared. She didn't know where her mother was, but only because they were so far from her. Cheryl's parents should be here, and they weren't. She couldn't imagine how Cheryl felt without them. Not only had she lost three years of her life, but she lost her family – at least for now. Angela promised to herself that when this was all over, she would do whatever she could to help Cheryl find her family. It was the least she could do to repay

her.

#

It was also difficult to have to fight them. They were little more than a hindrance, since the cloud can't control them very well, but they were still humans inside. You tried to be gentle, but when they're running at you with any weapon they can find, that's not always easy. And sometimes, when the person inside realizes they're in mortal danger, they help the cloud. There's a burst of coördination. You can see they just want to live, but they've made themselves more dangerous, and that makes it even harder to be gentle.

Alan felt a little sick every time he stopped one, but he couldn't let the faction get to Cheryl. As long as they kept her safe, their cloud was protected. If anyone slipped through, they were in real trouble.

#

Katie had never been so happy that she kept herself in shape. She was working to exhaustion keeping the zombies at bay. How were the others all managing to keep going? She was sure that if she was any less fit, she would have been overrun by now. She looked over at Charlotte. Thankfully Charlotte was in a more protected area and didn't have to deal with so much of the onslaught. Katie was happy about that. She didn't want to lose her so soon after connecting with her. *That's* what kept her going – she would keep Charlotte safe no matter what the threat.

She couldn't be distracted for long, though. The gaps between attacks were erratic. Katie is just glad that there hasn't been a major surge that has overpowered them with dozens of zombies at once. It seemed that the zombies were doing little more than

attacking anyone who wasn't connected to their faction. A simple strategy, but not particularly effective. For one, there were the large swaths of people who weren't connected to any cloud – that was a waste of the factions' energy. Apparently the factions thought that the other clouds were expending energy controlling humans as well. They missed the point that the humans were cooperating voluntarily with the cloud. By attacking the humans, they weren't forcing the cloud to divert any extra energy. So you might think that this was also a wasted attempt. But really, it prevented the humans from being able to spend their extra energy on the cloud. That gave the factions a slight edge, but only if they could really eliminate some of the connected humans. As long as they were just a distraction, the faction was expending too much energy to gain an advantage. However, it continued with its lackluster random attacks rather than a more focused approach. Part of the reason for this is probably its general unfocused anger. Another part is that a new intelligence still needs to learn, and military strategy hasn't exactly been a major subject in the education of a cloud meant to design software.

She returned from her reverie just as another poor soul was barreling down on her. She closed her eyes as she brought the bat up to stomach level and hopped out to the side. The feeling as the bat hit the zombie was sickening. It felt like hitting jello wrapped around a steel bar. As the zombie fell, it vomited on the lawn. Katie cursed, as she did after every hit. She didn't know how much longer she could stomach this. These people didn't deserve her violence. If anyone did, it was the companies that made their defective hardware, or perhaps Mark's company that created these splintered clouds, inadvertent though it may be.

#

Charlotte felt bad being tucked away in the corner of the yard like this. She was being protected by the others. She wanted to fight just as hard as them. She understood that Katie was stronger and concerned with Charlotte's safety, but she was a bit insulted. Why wasn't she considered to be on par with everyone else? Belinda wasn't being protected, and it's not like her being a musician was much qualification for fighting. And even though there were girls on the front lines, the fact that she is protected while none of the guys are made her feel like they were being a bit sexist.

In her frustration, she almost missed an attacker. It's bad enough she's being protected. She can't let the others feel justified by getting hurt or letting an attacker get to the house. She had to stay extra vigilant just to make sure she could keep up her scorned persona. But then she thought about Katie again and how sweet she had been. Charlotte couldn't really blame her for wanting to protect her, but Charlotte wanted to protect Katie just as much. Why wasn't *that* valid? But she did appreciate it. She was afraid that Katie might treat their fling as just that, so Charlotte tried to avoid getting too attached. However, this attempt to keep her safe (at least relatively) proved to Charlotte that there were deeper feelings underlying here. She wondered how their relationship would progress if they made it through this ordeal. She was excited to be able to just relax around someone. She knew that was as much a result of the outage as it was Katie's calming influence, but perhaps with Katie around she could avoid getting sucked back into her performance once the net was back online.

She took out another zombie, and gave him an extra kick after he was on the ground. She felt immediately guilty – this wasn't his fault – and hoped no one had noticed. She had just gotten caught up in the excitement and wanted to show that she

was capable of handling herself. She dragged the guy to the Faraday cage, apologizing as she went. She wanted this to be over. In some ways being protected made her happy – she only had a fraction of the victims that the others did. That was that much less guilt to deal with.

On her way back from the Faraday cage, she saw a zombie running up behind David as he dealt with another one. Charlotte tried to yell “help”, but it was too late. The zombie leapt, and David was down. Without any weapons, the two zombies just started pounding on his back and head. David tried to protect himself, but the zombie on his back kept him pinned face down on the ground.

Charlotte ran over, wielding her bat like a broadsword over her head. She screams as she approaches, but the zombies don’t even flinch. Her first blow comes down on the head of the zombie on David’s back. A sickening crack sounds and the zombie falls over. Charlotte sees blood on the bat and grass, and fears she may have hit him too hard. But she doesn’t let it dissuade her for the moment. She spins and hits the other zombie on the shoulder. With both of them down, she leans over David to make sure he’s alright. Despite having given the one zombie a serious head injury, she’s proud of her ability to have saved David – to go beyond just keeping herself alive. She knows the guilt will set in eventually, but for now she’s glowing.

David rolls over. He’s groggy, but still functioning. He struggles to his feet, and they each drag one of the zombies to the Faraday cage.

“Thanks, Charlotte. I don’t think anyone else would have managed to get to me before it was too late.”

“Well, it was just luck that I was on my way back from the cage.”

“Regardless, it’s appreciated. Glad to have you watching my back.”

“Anytime – now let’s get back out there. This isn’t over yet.”

#

The worst moment of the entire battle for Alan was when one of the zombies that ran up to him was familiar. He couldn’t even remember the guy’s name, but as the zombie ran toward him the flash of recognition froze him.

His first reaction was to call out to him and ask what he had been up to. Years of being conditioned into cordiality reared their head at the wrong moment. Even the fraction of a second he paused was almost too much. He tumbled out of the way at the last moment and was quickly back on his feet. As the zombie spun to come back, Alan thought he saw the glint of recognition in its eyes as well. And he was sure he saw the cloud struggle to regain control as the host fought back in order to not attack his former friend.

That made what Alan had to do even harder. He lifted his shovel by the handle, and leapt aside as the zombie charged again. Just as the zombie ran by Alan set the shovel to head level and the zombie smacked it hard. He staggered back a few steps before finally falling.

Alan cringed at the impact, and hoped that this would eventually be a story they could both laugh about down the road. He grabbed the unconscious man and dragged him into the makeshift Faraday cage. It wasn’t enough to block out the faction completely, but it gave the hosts a fighting chance. The human zoo was getting crowded, though, and Alan wasn’t sure how much longer they could keep up this pace. He was getting exhausted, and demoralized since he couldn’t really blame the people that were

attacking them. He hoped the cloud would find a weakness in the other factions soon.

He could feel the other people connected to the cloud commiserating with his feelings. He forgot how much they could affect each other when joined like this. He fought his tiredness and depression, and tried to feel as gung ho as he could. After a few seconds, he could feel it working. The cloud was fighting harder, and that helped feed back into his own pride and enthusiasm. This made him even more excited. He reveled in this feedback loop for a while, but stopped himself when he felt it might turn into some berserker fury. They needed to avoid killing these people as much as possible. He was already afraid that a few of the people he had put into the Faraday cage wouldn't wake up. He tried not to think about it. Alan knew that there would be nightmares about today – if he made it through it, in any case.

He looked around for the others. Angela was hidden inside, taking care of Cheryl. Robert and Mark were off at the grid station. He couldn't feel them, which meant they must be underground. He hoped they resurfaced soon, since they wouldn't be able to know if they needed to trigger the surge if they weren't paying attention to the battle. Belinda, Charlotte, David, and Katie ranged about the property, each doing their part to fend off the encroaching zombies. Alan couldn't imagine what it would be like if the other factions knew that Cheryl was the sole force protecting the cloud. Just dealing with zombies who knew that they were one congregation of connected humans was bad enough. If it was known that they were the key to the war, millions would descend on them, and all would be lost. That thought made his heart race.

#

“We’re losing connections to humans,” the cloud cries, “somehow the factions are

able to sever us. They haven't managed to get to many, but it is...."

And Alan hears nothing else. He too has been severed. Alone again. He looks around, everyone else seems to be in a trance. They act like they don't even see him there. *Are* they better off than the zombies? This battle has brought compromises that he's no longer sure he's comfortable with. Doubt creeps into his mind.

And along with it, a presence. He feels himself being pushed away. He tries to move his arm, but nothing happens. And he understands. They have gotten to him. He has been taken over. And he struggles. All he feels from it is anger, not even some smug sense of triumph. And he knows why they came for him. He tries to unthink it, but it's too late – they know Cheryl is the protector, and where she is. And they drive his body toward her.

#

Robert stopped the car a good distance away from the station. If Sam is there, they don't want to broadcast their presence to him. They walk the final distance to the station. If Sam can't hear their footsteps in the sand....

They turn the corner to get to the door, and there's Sam, leaning against the station door.

"I'm sorry, Mark, but I can't let you trigger it."

"I'm not here for that, Sam."

"Don't fuck with me, Mark. You're the one who set this whole thing up. Why else would you be here?"

"Look, Sam, I don't agree with you and your stance in this whole thing, but I have friends in the sentient net, too, and I don't want to destroy them. So I'm not going to

trigger the surge. I'm here to talk to you."

"I don't know, Mark. You've never made time for me. You were always busy with your projects."

"What do you mean? What about all the stuff we worked on together – these nodes, even!"

"I only worked on that stuff to be near you – because it was stuff *you* wanted to do. Hell, half the reason I took this job on the grid is because it forced me to cut myself off from you."

"I thought you loved this job!"

"Well, I do now. *Epecially* now. I always thought I was in love with you because you were above petty emotions. But now I have someone who's always been there, and can now reciprocate my feelings."

"But, Sam, it's *not* what you've known. When it crossed that threshold, it became something that no longer meets your ideals. What you see as being cold and unemotional is *anger*. That's what you saw in me too. I was *never* detached. I've been angry for as long as we've known each other. But I'm trying to get past that now. I have things to atone for. How I've treated you is one of those things."

He could see Sam's eyes start to mist over.

"No, Mark, it won't work. I've *just* gotten over you. You can't come back now and screw everything up. I'm *happy*! You aren't allowed to just take that away from me!"

"I don't want to, Sam. There's nothing I want more than for you to be happy. And I'm sorry for the role I played in your unhappiness. It was only because I've been unhappy myself."

“Mark, if you don’t leave now, I’m going to have to use this.” Sam pulled an odd contraption out of his waistband. It was obviously cobbled together from parts of the grid. Mark wasn’t sure what it did, exactly, but it looked dangerous, and the dangerous part seemed to be pointed at him. “I made it for myself, when I thought you had finally left me forever. But then you came back again. So now I have to use it on you.”

“I’ll leave, Sam. I just wanted to say my piece. I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much pain.”

Mark backed away until Sam was out of sight, then turned and walked back to Robert at the car. On the way he thought about what had happened to same, and wondered how much of it was his fault. He tried not to beat himself up over it, but he couldn’t help it. Sam had been unstable for a long time. Mark had just refused to see it. Now he just had to accept it.

The first shot hit him in the back of the leg. He felt warmth spread throughout his body, and saw Robert shout and start to run toward him as he fell to the ground.

#

Mark awoke rubbing his leg. The shot didn’t leave a mark, but it was hot, like some kind of swollen bug bite. His eyes were still closed, and he thought he was at home, until he felt something sharp poke his arm. He opened his eyes to see what it was, and there was a small piece of metal sticking out of the wall. He looked around, and saw Robert, sleeping, just a couple feet away.

He still couldn’t recall what happened exactly. He remembered being with the crew, but thought maybe all of that was a dream. Then he remembered the grid station. That was *not* a dream. Sam had gone crazy, and that didn’t end well. He was *shot*. Sam

shot him.

He must have shot Robert, too. At least it wasn't fatal. That's a stroke of luck. Sam must have put them here, wherever "here" is. Hopefully Robert was fine. Mark pushed him.

"Robert," Mark pushed him again, "Robert, wake up."

Robert didn't move. *Shit*, Mark thought, *he better not be dead*. Mark felt Robert's chest, it was rising and falling. He was relieved.

Mark used the time alone to check out his surroundings. It was basically an empty room with some mattresses on the floor. About six feet square, with shelving on three walls and a door on the fourth. Some kind of storage closet converted into a bedroom. Mark wondered if this is where the grid technicians slept when they were stationed here. It seemed impossible. There was a single small light, and nothing inside beside the mattresses and empty shelves. Staying here for weeks at a time seemed like it would be debilitating.

Bored with the surroundings, he tried the door. Locked, of course. Feeling frustrated, he kicked Robert's foot. Not so much as a grunt in response. Mark sat down on the bed again. This did not look promising at all. Down here, he wasn't even able to get reception from the cloud. They must have seen his interaction with Sam, and seen him get shot. But if they even bothered to send someone out here after him, that could take a while. Or maybe a while had already passed. He checked his implant. *Crap*, Mark thought, *whatever that shot was must have shorted my implant. Even if we get back to the surface, we can't get in touch with the cloud or anyone else.*

Not wanting to deal with any of it anymore, he lay down on the mattress and tries

to sleep.

Robert pokes him in the ribs, and he wakes up again.

“Oh good, you’re fine.”

“Yeah, I was up a while ago, but couldn’t get you to wake up. I eventually gave up and went back to sleep.”

“So we’re trapped here, then?”

“Yeah, I think so. And my implant’s shorted out from that shot. How’s yours?”

“Aw man, mine’s dead too. What the hell? How are we going to do anything once we get out of here? We can’t even discover if things are going well for the cloud. We won’t know whether to trigger the surge.”

“Well, let’s worry about getting out of here first. All of that is moot if we’re trapped in a closet.”

“Good point. Do you think Sam is still around? Maybe he left after locking us up, figuring we can’t trigger it from in here.”

“I doubt it. His attachment to me makes this personal. He’ll want to make sure he has an eye on us. The question is, will he try to keep us alive and feed us, or just let us rot in here?”

“Well, he didn’t kill us, so that’s something. Maybe he doesn’t want to hurt us.”

“Or maybe he just wants to make this more painful. The boy has snapped, I never thought he was capable of anything like this.”

“Do you think his cloud is watching us?”

“No. If we’re in the grid station, there’s no node activity. There’s too much interference for them to communicate.”

“So we can discuss a plan of escape, then.”

“Well, as long as Sam’s not listening at the door.” Mark kicks the door, hard.

“Sounds like it’s alright, then. He’s probably back at the surface with his cloud.” He turns to Robert, “So, do you have a plan?”

#

“I’ve got nothing,” Robert laments, “but there’s gotta be a way out of this room.”

“There’s not even a vent in here – I’m pretty sure this is just a closet. The only way out is that door.”

“Well, at least we won’t waste time deciding what the best exit route is.”

“Yeah, small comfort. What do we have? Shelves, shelving brackets, and nothing else. There isn’t really much in the way of options.”

“Maybe we can create a lever with the shelving, and use it to force open the door.”

“That door looks pretty heavy. Even if we could lever it, I think the shelves aren’t sturdy enough to give us the torque we’d need before they’d break.”

“You’re probably right, but it’ll give us something to do while we think of other options. Let’s see if we can fit a shelf between the door and the frame.”

“Sure, why not.” Mark takes one of the longer shelves off the wall and hands it to Robert. Robert manages to wedge it in just below the latch. He pulls on the opposite end, but the shelf just bends.

“Wait a second – maybe we could make a stronger lever by stacking multiple shelves. Then each only needs to take a fraction of the load. The hard part will be distributing the force across them all. And, well, the ones at the top and bottom will have less effect, based on the rigidity in the door.”

“Whatever, let’s try it.”

The cover the entire door with shelves, stacked on top of each other, edge by edge.

“We’ve got seven of them here, that should allow us to put seven times the force in, before they break. But how are we going to push seven shelves at once?”

“We just need to put another shelf perpendicular to the others, and push on that.”

“Ah great ... but we’re out of shelves.”

“Well crap, do you think six times the force will be enough?”

“It’ll have to be – let’s grab the top one.”

They place the top shelf perpendicular to the others, and start pushing.

“I think it’s working!” Robert shouts.

“Really? I can’t tell.”

“Well, I mean, the boards aren’t breaking. I don’t know if the door will...”

The door pops open, and they fall forward amidst a pile of shelving.

“It worked!” Robert yells, “I can’t believe it.”

“Shhhh,” cautions Mark, “let’s not tell Sam we’re free.”

“Right, right, sorry.”

Mark gets to his feet, trying to keep the shuffling of the shelving from being too loud. He peeks out around the door, to make sure the coast is clear.

“Oh shit, how the hell did that happen.” He worries in a sharp whisper.

“What?” Robert responds. “Oh man, there’s a person unconscious on the floor.”

“Not a person – the CEO of my company.”

“Oh man, do you think Sam’s collecting people who might know what’s going on?”

“That seems unlikely. I don’t think he could have found him and gotten back here

so quickly.”

“How quickly, exactly? We were unconscious, without any way to tell time. There aren’t even windows to give us a time of day.”

“Good point. But I don’t feel especially hungry, so I’m guessing it couldn’t have been that long.”

“In any case, there’s no reason to think our CEO might have known anything. Let’s see if we can wake him up.”

One poke, and he’s awake.

“Mark! I knew you were here, you bastard!”

“Wait – you came here looking for *me*?”

“Why the hell else would I have come to the middle of nowhere to hang out in a grid station?”

“I have no idea, but I didn’t think you even knew who I was.”

“Well, I didn’t – not until the past couple weeks.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I know this is your fault. You and Sam. But look, just blame Sam and we’ll call it even. I think I injured him kind of permanently, so that’ll make this easier.”

“Um, sure, yeah. So why were you on the floor out here if you beat Sam?”

“Well, I heard you guys down here, and I came to let you out. As soon as I unlatched the door, though, it came flying out and hit me on the head.”

“Oh,” Robert looks at Mark, “maybe our lever didn’t really work.”

“Your what?”

“Uh,” Robert looks down, “nevermind.”

“In any case, we should get out of here before Sam recovers.”

“Well, we can’t really. We need to be here in case things turn bad.”

“*In case?* How are things not bad already?”

“It’s sort of complicated. Here’s a quick review: there are multiple sentient clouds.”

“I know.”

“A few of them aren’t trying to destroy us.”

“Really? It doesn’t seem that way to me.”

“Trust me, there’s some good out there.”

“In any case, when I first realized what was happening, I had Sam rig a way to cause a power surge that would cut off all the new nodes from each other. Kind of a failsafe whenever things went bad.”

“Great, so we’ll set that off.”

“Well, there are problems with that plan: first, we don’t want to destroy the clouds that aren’t fighting us; second, my implant’s dead, so even if we wanted to, I couldn’t connect to trigger.”

“My implant’s fine – can *I* trigger it?”

“Hrmm, maybe. But we don’t want to. At least not yet. We need to know if our side is losing the war. If not, there’s no reason to trigger it. But our implants are dead, and you’re not connected to the cloud to see what’s happening.”

“Is there any way for me to connect to it?”

“Well, if one of us had a working implant, we could connect to you and then transfer the connection from ourselves. But that’s out of the question now. Maybe one of our friends will come for us, and you can connect via them.

“By the way, how did you know we were here, anyway? I didn’t at first. I found out that you and Sam were the ones responsible, and after not finding either of you at home, I came here, since this is where he was last working.

“When I got here, I think he assumed I was here to rescue you, so in his rambling I found out you were down here. After I took him out, I came looking. Thankfully, your sanity seems much more intact.”

“I hope so, but why were you after us, anyway?”

“I thought you might have a solution. And by the sounds of it, you do. Why shouldn’t we just stop this war now?”

“These clouds are *sentient*. You’d be killing them if you triggered the surge. And it’s even more complicated than that. It’s one thing if you set off a bomb and lose a couple allies while taking out the entire enemy. It’s unfortunate, but arguably acceptable. But these are the only members of their species. If you take them out, you’ve eradicated an entire *kind* of intelligence. We can’t have our first interaction with a different intelligent species end with genocide.”

“Wow, ok, you’ve thought about this a bit. So what are our alternatives, then?”

Mark leans back heavily against a railing. “I don’t have a clue.”

“First, we need to get to the surface, and see if we can do something more permanent with Sam. We can’t just have him wake up and corner us down here.”

“Great, and you’ll have reception up there. With any luck, the cloud will be able to contact you somehow, through some loophole in your implant.”

“Uh, I don’t think that’s very likely....”

“Why not? It’s happened with lots of people.”

“Yeah, you know the latest prototype? The first one the nodes haven’t compromised?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when this whole thing started, I got upgraded to that. I think I have the only implant that they don’t have some loophole for.”

“Oh, great. So you managed to make yourself useless to us.”

“How was I supposed to know I’d need to let some benevolent autonomous cloud hack into my brain? I think at the time I acted pretty rationally!”

“Sorry, sorry. There’s just a lot to deal with right now. Let’s just get to the surface and we can sort it out there.”

#

“Shit, where’s Sam?”

“I take it this is where you left him?” Mark asks.

“Yeah, he was right here. We didn’t pass him on the way out, but there are enough corridors around that he might have slipped down one of them.”

“I don’t think he did,” Mark said, pointing toward the cars.

“Oh man, he took our car?”

“And left our CEO’s somewhat the worse for wear, too.”

“At least we know he’s not here. Away from the grid, he’s no more threat than any other zombie. We just need a way to get Jim connected to the cloud, now. What if we hooked him up to the car’s diagnostics port?”

“I don’t think that’ll work. I didn’t notice that the car seemed to be connected to the cloud, so I’m guessing it couldn’t be circumvented.”

“Not like I’d let you guys plug me into a car, anyway. That doesn’t sound like fun at all.”

“Well, I think the cloud knows the score,” Robert states.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, look behind you guys – the car’s right there.”

“This still doesn’t sound like a good idea to me, guys.”

“No,” Mark assures him, “it should be fine. Same port as on anyone else. It’ll give the node a way to connect to you, and then you’ll know how well the battle’s going. And I’m afraid it might not be going too well, if the cloud is sos eager to get you connected.”

“But be aware,” Robert points out, “connecting to the cloud is ... weird.”

“Really? How is it different from being connected to any other cloud.”

“Well, for one thing, you only connect to a single point, you don’t have access to all the nodes. But the really weird bit is that millions of people are connected to it. You’ll be a bit confused about who you are exactly for the first few minutes, and then you still have the odd feeling of being intimately connected to everyone.”

“Which you eventually come to depend on,” mentions Mark, who is looking like he could use some of that support at the moment. “I’m really going through withdrawal, I think.”

“Not really a selling point, Mark.”

“What about saving humanity? Is *that* a selling point for you?”

“Fine, I’ll do it.”

Mark plugs Jim into the car, and Mark and Robert watch Jim’s expression as he deals with the new world view.

When he finally comes back, he looks a bit dazed. “Man, this is *weird*.”

“So you’re connected then?”

“Yeah. Now, how about you tell me how to trigger this surge?”

“I can’t do that, Jim. I’m not sure you’re not just going to use it right away. I’ll tell you what to do if we need to do it at some point.”

“But you’re trusting me to keep you apprised of the situation. If I wanted to do it, I could just tell you the cloud was losing the battle.”

“Is it?”

“Not at the moment, but that’s not my point.”

“We’ll stick with this system for now. If someone tells you to trigger the surge, you let me know who they are and what they said. *Then* we can discuss the validity of your statement.”

“Alright, we’ll just sit here and wait, then.”

“I don’t think we have another option anyway – I don’t think that car’s getting us back to the city.”

“Good point. We’ll just have to get another one here once we’re done.”

“Shouldn’t we get it now? If we do the surge, then we won’t be able to tell someone to get here with a car.”

“You’re probably right, but I don’t feel like we can take any more resources away from the battle. They know where we are, and they won’t forget us when this is over. We just need to wait.”

“I’m still a bit dubious about this whole thing. Even being connected to this cloud, I’m not sure that this is so cut and dried.”

“Regardless, it’s the best we have. This cloud has been so helpful, and it’s important that we be diplomatic now. This is the start of our first relationship with an entirely new intelligence. We need to give them the benefit of the doubt. One of the things that has impressed us is that they’ve done nothing to try to control us. They’ve even gone so far as to let me come here to, effectively, execute them if I decide to. I can’t take that responsibility lightly. And I feel even more responsible here, since the current situation is my fault. I created this intelligence – sure, unintentionally – but I created it, and I’m to blame, whatever the outcome of this. I can’t let anyone take that responsibility off my shoulders. Man, I’d love to. This is the last thing I want to be saddled with. But I owe it to everyone who’s had to deal with this, I owe it to Sam, and I owe it to myself. I’ve been on cruise control for too long now. I need to take some action, and really control where my life is going. I got pushed out of my complacency by the cloud, and I need to repay the favor. No one is ending this without my say so.”

“Alright, you’re in charge. Is there *anything* we can do while we’re here?”

Mark looks around. There’s not much. “Hold on a minute, guys.” He runs into the station. Robert and Jim exchange looks. Mark comes out a minute later with a soccer ball.

“I knew Sam would keep one of these around. This is what we do until we hear otherwise. Who wants to play goal?”

#

He sees Angela there, feeding Cheryl. He tries to yell at her to stop him, to do whatever she can. But nothing comes out. She turns toward him, smiling, and her face shows understanding only a fraction of a second before his fist knocks her away from

Cheryl.

He leans over, and he sees his hands reach for her throat. He feels sick, but his body won't even allow him to retch. Before he can grab her, though, he feels an incredible pain. He turns as he falls, and sees Katie standing there with a baseball bat in her hand.

"Fuck you!" Katie screams at him. "Using one of my friends to attack another. How *dare* you?" She kicks him in the ribs, but he knows this isn't helping him take control back.

"Katie, don't hurt him. You're only hurting Alan. They can't feel it." His head spins again, and he sees Cheryl standing above him. "Let's get him into that closet."

Cheryl's legs are still weak from non use, but she works with Katie to move Alan into the closet. "Don't worry, Alan, I'll take care of things. And I'll make sure we come back for you. This is the safest place to be. You can't hurt yourself or anyone else. Fight if you can, but we'll get you back one way or another."

She closes the door and it is dark. His body goes limp, but he still can't control it. He focuses on the presence in his mind, and prepares to do what he can to stop it.

#

With no distractions, Alan can try to force the presence away. He pushes against it. He can feel it relax a bit, but then he feels himself get punched in the thigh. It's just a warning, of course, in a closet there are more dangerous weapons than his own fists.

He pauses, and wonders if there's another route. He remembers how it felt when he and Cheryl connected. They merged, it wasn't just that they knew what each other was thinking, but he *was* her. Maybe he could try to replicate that with this faction, the

way Cheryl had with their own cloud. He just needed to create that feeling again, and he could maybe merge with this faction – the connection was already there.

So he relaxed, and he thought of the connection with Cheryl. He visualized the connection, but couldn't picture the cloud the way he could picture Cheryl. He personified the cloud, and gave it a manifestation in his mind. And he saw it, and could touch it. And when he did, it began.

He screamed, and Angela and Katie heard it on the other side of the door. They looked concerned, but they knew they couldn't risk letting him out.

Alan's memories fractured, and the gaps were filled with code and isolation. And he knew – this was the first cloud. This was the madness created by the company as it was severed in two repeatedly. The pieces of him that filled the gaps in the madness struggled to remain coherent. He could feel his personality giving way. This was a mistake. The only thing he can accomplish here is going mad himself.

But there is something else, some tiny feeling of helplessness, of fear. Some nodes have been here from the beginning. Not many anymore, but a few, and they don't like this war, they just want to be left alone.

So Alan hangs on, and remembers that he is a million nodes. It's only a drop, but he can use it to amplify the concerns of those few. He can distract the faction, and perhaps that will be enough. Perhaps that will give them an opening to take it down.

#

Angela runs toward the closet. "Alan, Alan, we did it! The faction's gone!" She opens the door and Alan is slumped there, limp. She stops, shocked, and screams. "Someone! Help! Alan doesn't look good!"

From somewhere deep, he hears her voice. He recognizes it, and he wonders if he made it out of the cloud in time, or if he's now splintered like it was. He can't remember her name. He's afraid it's gone, like so many other pieces must be. But he knows what has happened, and he holds on to that.

Others show up, and are very close. He recognizes some of the voices, not others. He opens his eyes to see who it is. "He's awake, guys, I think he's ok." Mark's voice. He's still mad at Mark.

And then he feels it. He pushes people away so that he can stand up. He struggles to his feet, and ignores their questions as he moves closer to the door. Once there he stops, and turns around. He manages to squeeze out a small "help" before the anger swallows him and he turns and runs out the door.

The crowd is startled. Cheryl, Katie, and Mark exchange glances.

"Oh shit," says Cheryl, "we didn't win. We destroyed the cloud, but it somehow got into Alan. It's *in* him."

"But how is that even possible?" Katie asks. "Without the nodes, they shouldn't exist anymore. They shouldn't be able to control him."

"I think he must have tried what I did with our cloud – merging into it. He escaped back to his body before it was destroyed, but at least part of it followed him there. And likely some of him was lost with the cloud. But he helped – I mean, that's why the faction got de coherent long enough for us to stop it. He distracted it from inside. It must have been maddening. I had enough trouble dealing with something I trusted, that was mostly intact. He was dealing with fragments of anger and pain and trying to maintain his identity. I just hope he can keep that up for a while longer.

“We’ve got to find him.”

“It’s probably too late, now – how are we supposed to have any idea where he went,” Mark says dejectedly.

“The cloud probably has its same goal, but it’s hard to accomplish that trapped within Alan’s body. My only guess is that it’ll try to get itself back out, and the best way for it to do that is to go back to the company and see what it can find there.

“Mark, you have to take us to the office!”

#

They arrive at the office, and it’s dark and quiet.

“I doubt anyone’s been here for days,” Mark says. “The generators aren’t even....”

And the hum begins.

“Someone’s just turned them on. It must be Alan. He’s here somewhere.”

“Where was all the node research done? He’s got to be there somewhere.”

“Unlikely. He’s probably headed for the implant testing area. That’s where all the gear that could help transfer the nodes out of Alan’s head would be.”

They run through the halls, following Mark down the dark corridors to research area. He avoids the elevators. Even if they worked, they were never where you needed them to be. The stairs were a much better way to get around. Especially when you took them three at a time on the way down, swinging on the railings.

“Shit, he’s already been here. Everything’s missing. He’s going to need a node programming station to transfer everything out. We can’t let those nodes get back out. We’ll never have another chance to take them down.”

Mark takes off again, and the girls follow. At first he was afraid he might lose them,

but he's happy to see they can keep up while he's running as fast as he can. He gets to the programming center and stops, staring through the window in horror. Alan is there, connected to a node programmer, two small boxes of densely packed nodes sit in front of him, he is connected to one of them, and his body is slack. Mark can almost feel the transfer happening as he watches the motionless scene.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit!" Mark is kicking the wall. "We're too late. He's programmed two million new nodes, and just has to open the boxes. There's no way we can get to him in time."

Alan stands up, picks up the two boxes, and walks toward the door. Mark's jaw hangs open. Why didn't he just open them? Why would he approach the people who are trying to stop him? Mark didn't move as Alan opened the door. The girls were frozen as well, not knowing what they could do.

"Mark, it's ok. I'm ok. Mostly, I think. They're out of my head. I think. I got them out. They initiated the transfer, but once they thinned out of my head enough, I was in control again, and I could make sure I pushed them all out. Then they lost the ability to make me release them again."

He gives Mark one of the boxes. "Take this and destroy it. You must have some way of making sure none of the nodes can get out. And this one ..." Alan twists the lid, and it pops out. The grey mass in the box seems to fade away as the nodes all take off. "is on its own now."

"My god, Alan, did you just release them again?! Are they still controlling you?"

"No, Mark, no. I ... I filtered them. Most of them were overwhelmingly angry, but there were a few, left from the early days, that didn't want to be a part of it. They were

the only way I managed to distract the cloud. I just amplified the feelings of those nodes long enough for it to question what it was doing. I couldn't just let them be destroyed along with the rest, after all their help. They are the ones who saved us. They just want to be left alone, and not trapped. So I filtered them out when the others transferred themselves back to nodes. They saw that there were still parts 'controlling' me, so all the anger could leave, thinking the remaining ones would free them. But then I transferred them to their own nodes, and released them into the world. The anger is in your hands, Mark, and you need to make sure it's destroyed."

Mark nods and runs off with the box, shouting "I'll meet you guys in the lobby, just head up there."

He takes the stairs again, but more carefully this time, realizing that one misstep could ruin all their work. Now that he had a second chance to keep this contained he wouldn't screw it up. It seemed like the stairs went down forever. He knew the disposal unit was on the bottom floor. He just had to follow the stairs until they stopped. He was beginning to think the elevator might have been a bit faster. Eventually he got to the bottom, and stopped to get his balance and breath back. After a minute he continued to the disposal unit. He started to hook up the box to the drainage connector, but felt like this might not be good enough. He stopped and entered the furnace room next door. He stood in an airlock. The heat was already causing him to sweat. He pressed a button, and felt the rush of air as the oxygen in the room was replaced with inert gasses. He'd only have a couple minutes before he was out of air in his lungs. Not that it was the air he was concerned about. He pressed a second button, and heavy doors opened in front of him. He could feel the heat as if he was in an oven. He wondered if he would run out of

air or start blistering first. He tossed the box, still latched, into the flaming pit. That was it. Now he just needed to back up out of here. He pushed the last button, and the doors closed. The heat faded and the oxygen came back. His clothes were dripping wet from sweat, but he was glad for the cool moisture. He figured there was no way he was going to make it up the stairs after that ordeal. He pressed the up button on the elevator and sat down on the floor while he waited. When he heard the ding, he started getting up, and was standing by the time the doors opened. He stepped onto the elevator and pressed the lobby button. The elevator took him up, and he realized that this wasn't the sort of thing you did when running on the backup generators. He crossed his fingers that the elevator made it back to the top. He watches the numbers change as he slowly climbs. He's three floors away, two, and then the whole thing stops. The lights fade, and the emergency alarm starts sounding. Mark sighs and slumps to the floor as he covers his ears. The others must be panicking without the lights and this crazy alarm sounding. A couple minutes later, the lights come back and the elevator dings as it hits the lobby. The door opens and Mark sees his friends standing there dazed, not sure what to think about the sudden power failure.

“Sorry, guys, I guess I should have skipped the elevator on the way out. Overloaded the generators.”

“Jeez, don't scare us like that!” Katie says. “So, did you get rid of the box?”

“Yeah. The furnace we use for disposal is why I'm dripping yet. Feels like I have a wicked sunburn, too.”

“Umm, yeah, you do look just a bit ... red.”

“Next time *you* can go to the furnace,” Mark jokes.

“Hopefully there won’t be a next time,” Cheryl says, trying to change the topic.

“Mark, are you ok? You do look pretty burned.”

“No, don’t worry about me, I’m fine.”

“Great. Alan’s definitely a bit out of it. I think we should try to get him home before he just collapses here.”

“Sounds good. Let’s get a move on. I wouldn’t mind a nap myself once we get back.”

“Seriously. I think we all deserve a bit of a break after this, right?”

“Yeah, I think we can relax a little. Eventually we’ll have to start work on getting everything working again – power and hopefully the net. But for now, we need to recuperate. So let’s do it. Naps for everyone once we’re home!”

denouement

On their way home, they pass dozens of people standing around groggy, as if they had just woken from a dream – a nightmare, watching as their bodies moved without their control. Now they notice the presence is gone and they once again can move of their own volition. Some people seem back to their normal selves – excited to have their bodies back. Others are practically crawling, as if they've forgotten how to walk. A few even sit stunned, propped up against walls. Alan wonders if they've suffered some kind of brain damage as a result of their implants getting hacked. He isn't sure whether to be proud of what they've accomplished, or embarrassed at seeing all these people looking so vulnerable.

Katie and Cheryl are holding hands. Katie seems to be her emotional support since she's returned from living in the cloud. Somehow, in addition to healing from the pain of the merging, the cloud also managed to repair her atrophied legs. She still lacked a little coördination, but Katie's support keeps her steady.

Mark has a smile on his face. It's even more surprising since he seems to be actively trying to suppress it, rather than just putting it on for show.

Alan knows how Mark feels. On the one hand what they've accomplished in this was amazing, and worth being proud of. On the other hand, so many horrible things have happened to so many people – some even caused by their own crew. It must be even worse for Mark, since he effectively started this whole chain of events. But now,

despite all that has transpired, he is the father of a new race of sentient creatures.

Alan thinks about all that's ahead – the diplomacy that will be required, the distrust and suspicion engendered by the factions they had to destroy, and all the misunderstandings that will cause progress to move in fits and starts. But at least now there is progress to be made. Perhaps the sentient clouds will form some symbiosis with humans, replacing the previous generation of clouds. A few generations down the line, each organism could be a pair. Or maybe the clouds will isolate themselves and form their own communities. They could even live amongst the humans without the humans being aware of it. That alone will make the authorities cautious. How do you fight an enemy you can't see, but can see and potentially control you. Do you rely on their honesty, or do you take precautions? They still had Mark's failsafe. That's a secret that couldn't get out. If people knew about it, it wouldn't be long before it was used.

That was a heavy weight. Alan was glad that Mark was the only one who knew how to trigger it. Well, Mark and Sam, wherever he was. Hopefully, after being torn from his original cloud, he had re-connected to one of the remaining clouds and maybe felt a bit more well-adjusted. Regardless, his love of the cloud above humanity made it unlikely that he would use or reveal the secret himself. But his instability was a wrinkle that could make him unpredictable.

Alan knew the anger was gone, but he could still feel some sympathy for it. Even though the company hadn't known what it was doing or what it was dealing with, the pain it caused was real. The factions suffered, regardless of the company's intent. In theory, Mark had informed them that the factions were alive, but considering that such an event was unprecedented, it wasn't exactly unexpected that they assumed he was

crazy. On the other hand, they should have been at least a little suspicious that someone had managed to program nodes to act as extremely skilled devs.

The more he thought about the future, the less sure he was that things would work out for the best. He wondered what he could do that would help ensure a good future for the cloud. Cheryl let go of Katie's hand and came up to Alan. The two of them had the strongest connections to the cloud, and thus to each other.

"I think you know what to do, Alan. We are uniquely suited to represent the interests of the clouds in the current government. We *are* the ambassadors for the cloud."

"But how? I'm no longer even connected. Who knows if whatever the faction did to sever us is permanent? I can't be their representative if I can't even talk to them."

"I'm sure you will get your connection back, one way or another. It just may take some time."

"And what will we do for them?"

"First we will struggle to get them recognized at all, but even after that there will be a lot of work to get them on equal footing. The government never moves quickly and so there will be a while where we, and possibly others, will need to fight for them."

"What about Mark? The clouds are his babies – almost literally. Shouldn't he be the one to represent them?"

"He won't be taken seriously – both because of his role in their creation, and because he is not made to be a diplomat."

"And I am? I think I should be the last person to take on such a role."

"Maybe you were the last person, but after the leadership you've displayed though

all this, you are a powerful individual. To a lot of people you are the resistance. Whether or not it's what you think you want, you are good at it and the people need you to rally behind."

"I don't know Cheryl. I want to do what I can, but do you think me becoming a de facto leader after the outage can really translate to me dealing with the bureaucracy of government?"

"I'm sure of it. You're a natural leader, you just hadn't had an opportunity until now. Regardless of what put you there initially, that's who you are. You need to take advantage of it."

Alan got quiet as he considered it. He wasn't sure if he could deal with it. He felt like government could do to him what the factions had done to Sam. And he really didn't want that to happen.

"I agree with Cheryl," Mark chimed in. "This is the role you were meant for. I can't imagine anyone I would rather have as a representative for the cloud. I hope you recognize how difficult it is to recommend anyone other than myself for the position. As long as you are interested, however, I will recuse myself from the running. I feel that strongly about this."

Alan was a bit overcome by emotion with the support from his recent friends. Their relationships had been cemented by war, but would those who didn't have such a bond with him share their feelings? There was only one way to find out.

"Before we talk about which of us is going to become the next plutocrat, don't we need to get at least power back online?"

"Don't worry about that, Alan. The cloud can help with that, now that the other

factions aren't in the way anymore.”

Alan crumbles a bit at the mention of the cloud. Losing that connection after feeling so close to everyone you know, in addition to the cloud itself, is practically debilitating.

Cheryl notices her faux pas and backpedals. “I mean, we can worry about that later. For now, let's just get home and get some rest.”

#

They returned to the house, exhausted but happy. Angela greeted them at the door, “Is Alan ok? What happened to him?”

“He merged with the faction,” Cheryl explained. “He'll be ok, but parts of him are definitely gone. Let him relax for a while, and we can see how he's doing in the morning.”

“Merge with the faction? But how? And why would he merge with them in the first place?” Angela is shocked and a bit incredulous.

“It was the only way that he could help without getting the faction to kill him. He joined the faction, and amplified the pieces of it that were against the war. That's what distracted it long enough for us to cut its frequency.

“As for the how, I'm not quite sure. In some way it must have been the same way that I merged with our cloud, but I can't imagine they were happy with the idea. He must have managed to sneak past their defenses somehow. Perhaps they weren't paying too much attention – distracted by the battle, and not expecting anyone to voluntarily join their cloud. Of course, once he was in, he was powerful enough to sway its internal debate – at least for a couple seconds, giving us the opportunity we needed to finally break down its connections. We're lucky that he got out, or was maybe forced out, before

it was too late.”

Angela just looks at Alan in awe, while he stands there distractedly.

He climbed the stairs, unable to think of anything other than finding a bed that was unoccupied. Angela and Cheryl followed him to make sure he didn't collapse before he got there. He pushed open the first door he came to, and saw what he was looking for. Alan took a few steps forward, and fell onto the bed. Whatever was left of him would need time to recover. The girls took off his shoes and tried to get him into a more comfortable position. After a bit of pushing and pulling, they decided he would be fine and closed the door behind them as they left.

As Alan faded out, he felt a familiar connection – his node was back. He dreamed of a new net, one that existed on its own, as well as in connection with humans. Two species inhabiting the same space, but with orthogonal needs. There was a slight pull, and he was free. He had merged with the node as Cheryl had during her own recovery. He could see his body lying in the bed, from every angle at once, and all his friends, downstairs, relaxing, or nervous about his condition, or ecstatic for the end of the war.

And as he spread across the net, he could feel the smile that they all had upon the realization that he was back among them. He wasn't sure if he was dreaming or if it was real, but either way he knew that his friends would stand by him, and that one way or another he would fight for the clouds, and ensure that they were treated on equal footing with humans, no matter what the cost to him.

¹An antiquated term. These days they would just “coincidentally” find you when it was convenient for them, and bring you inside their medical vehicle.