

Deadwise

by Jak Koke *and* Jonathan Bond

The hover's autopilot fails.

Sly is the first to notice as the air in the small cabin goes stale. He is the first to react as the dancing lights of the instrument panel go dead. Reflexes borne of Snowblading wipeouts help him to snap his safety harness free.

A flash of movement outside the window snags his attention as he slides across the plush seat, trying to wedge himself between the buckets, into the front. He knows what the movement is and screams.

Mom and Papasan don't notice the Nikitoan Speedster flashing out of an alley, shearing a lightpole at the base. They don't see the small craft as it slides sidewise in front of them, as its backend spins towards the foreshield. All they notice is Sly's scream. Both turn towards him to find the trouble.

Sly stretches for the manual controls. Got to pull hard right, but Papasan has made the realization and is there already.

Not fast enough.

Sly's fingers brush his father's shoulder as the foreshield rushes in to meet them.

All after is blanksheet.

Except for the strange memories.

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A pinpoint of whiteness wavers on the edge of fadeout somewhere leftwise, fluttering in the current of dark silk.

He swims toward it now, a singularity cutting smoothly through the billowing, black cumulus. The white flutter approaches in pulses like a beacon . . . and engulfs him.

He's running in an adult body, a body that belongs to Jonesy Ripka. He has strong muscles, a quick mind. He hurdles a pile of trash, speeds past a circle of junkies, ducks into another alley and checks for exits. The bitch is still back there somewhere. He decides to risk a peep behind him and flashes a glance over his right shoulder. Was that her two blocks back, behind the garbage? He figures seventy-five percent surety. At least.

As he runs, buildings tower above him like mountains of filth and neon video advertising on the verge of collapsing under their own weight. Phoenix has sent a hover to help him escape. The bodiless boy-devil will get him out if he can go just a bit farther. He nears the end of the alley with heavy, gasping strides. A few more and . . .

Deadwise stands before him — a dark form in the center of the alley, the streetlamp a dull, yellow halo behind her. The Ivory Tower's tusked elephant symbol rides ghost-white over her heart.

He pulls up, slow motion, lifting his pistol, but as he aims and fires, she's gone. A sharp smell of ozone crackles around him as the shell tears a chunk of building away. Why in Fin's name is she toying with me? he wonders, scanning the walls with the weapon's green-laser sight.

Something moves and he fires, obliterating an oversized rat and leaving a gaping hole in the pavement. The shot rings crystal in the following silence. He spins one-eighty, the slow-mo pulling at his gut.

Nothing but filth. No Deadwise.

Snic, he hears, and it's raining blood, his blood. Pain slides into his brow as a red curtain drips over his left eye. He fires at random. Is that her? Spin, maybe that shadow.

Something slams him against the wall and his right hand jerks. One, then two blows hit him before he knows his gun is gone. He tries to double over, but she vises a claw around his neck, lifts him and lets his feet dangle.

He opens his good eye to look at her. There is something inherently false about the slate-gray, bottom-feeder eyes that hold his stare — eyes set in a face that was once attractive. Until the scarring.

His feet tingle with numbness, and his breath comes in ragged gasps. He strikes at the scarred face beneath the V-cut of auburn hair. A fist connects with her jaw and blades of pain slice along his arm.

Deadwise responds with a brief smile and follows it by slamming his skull against the wall. For an encore, she clinches her grip to cut off his air. With a graceful, liquid movement, her other hand pulls a small, metal scanner out of her thigh pouch, flicks a switch and runs the probe sideways across his head, checking for the stolen sequence.

The smile returns as she finds it. Her grin is broad this time, showing clean, strong teeth. Morbidly attractive, she is, savagely beautiful. On that smile alone, odds of survival plummet — less than ten percent now.

As he begins to fade, the pain in his chest causes rainbow colors to dance in his brain; red curtains, green lasers, bright white teeth, so bright they blind.

Deadwise glances left, a blur of motion. She also sees the blinding whiteness.

A hover. Phoenix has come through at last. Survival odds jump to twenty percent.

The bitch turns to him again, rage twisting her scarred visage. Her mouth forms words, “Jonesy, you deserve worse than —” The rest is swallowed by the screaming blowers. She snaps his head left, and in a brief flash he sees the hover crash through a mountain of garbage.

Too late, he thinks, even as he hears the dry, brittle crunch of his neck breaking. The light fades and she is gone.

He doesn’t feel it when the hover hits and launches him across the alley. All he feels is irony when he lands and the sequence flashes in his mind — a series of letters and numbers he fought so hard to steal from her Ivory Tower. The sequence is loud and strong, but it will never get to Phoenix, and the boy will never get into a body where he can be killed.

Jonesy has failed. His father will remain unavenged.
Less than one percent now. The sequence fades.

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Sly wakes with lines of letters and numbers fluttering behind his eyes. The antiseptic sour reminds him of the clinic in Portland, of Quackman Garth and his hard-candy suckers. He’s on a hard mattress, cool and rough. Hair cut to stubble; pillows prop up his head. Washed up in Quackpalace he works it, gotta be. He risks a peep.

He’s flatbacked on a skinny sprawler in a peck-sized room which boasts five things: the sprawler, him included; the I.V. skeleton beside him; a flap in the wall marked “LAUNDRY” in blocked red letters; a dim ceiling bulb; and lastly, a dangling panic button stamped with a pictogram of a man/fem carrying a tray.

No sign of parents anywhere.

He wonders vaguely where they are and wonders just why he is back with the Quacks. He remembers the brittle snapping of his own neck, and a sequence of letters and numbers. No, he thinks, that’s not what happened. No way. Must’ve been a dream.

Where are Mom and Papasan? he wonders, and a dull ache runs down his arms and back. He decides to ask somebody and reaches up to push the picto button of the sexless one.

His call is flashing urgent at the desk, and he can see through the door-window that a nurse of about Mom’s age is moving his direction. The door boots open and the fem enters, wearing usual white coat Sly has seen so often on the vid, complete with the Quack symbol on the lapel — intertwining snakes. She totes the inevitable water and zoneland pill cup. “How are you feeling today, Sylvester?”

Better than righteous, or penitent for that matter, he thinks, silently cursing his mother for the grandfather’s name. What comes out, however, is simply, “I believe that I’m all right, ma’am.” And as he sits up, he realizes despite the ache, he feels strong.

“Good, good,” she says. “Now, you take this pill and drink the water.

It will help you sleep.”

He takes the zoneland and water from her. “My mother and father?”

The fem does a double-take.

She looks like she’s at a funeral already, he thinks, and his stomach does high gees as she says in a vidtoon voice, “Now you just take that little pill there. Your rest is important. The doctor will be here to see you in just a moment.”

He raises the pill cup to his mouth and drains the water, returning both empty containers to her.

“Just hold tight ’til the doctor gets here.” The ’toon voice again, and she turns to leave.

As if I had some F’en place to go, he thinks as the door closes behind her. He reaches up and pulls the zoneland from under his tongue, noticing the pictogram phoenix emblazoned on its side. In his mind he sees a place he’s never been — a massive, blue-black set of spires rise in a slow-twisting, double helix above the cruddy dinge of the city. A flicker of hate makes him crush the pill, the pictogram phoenix. He wonders why.

The sound of muffled voices, an argument perhaps, drifts from beyond the door. Sly looks up. Maybe it’s Mom and Papasan. No luck, only the large nurse with the ’toon voice doing the chat with someone on the vidphone.

It comes back to him then like fragments of a frozen dream — the shuttle from Portland to LAX, and his first look at LAGMA. The Los Angeles Greater Metropolitan Area was spread like an infection on southern California.

After landing, Mom and Papasan rented a hover, and for Sly’s sake, they programmed the autopilot for the same turnpike Slammin’ Sammy Dougan had used to stop Sledge Front in last year’s Tollrunner finale. Slammin’ Sammy and The Crew were Sly’s favorite Tollrunners.

Papasan, pointing out the marina, and Mom, listening to the hover’s tourguide.

The autopilot failing.

Sly, the only one of the three who saw the Nikitoan Speedster swerve out of the alley. Then everything clicking into delay mode as he reached over the seat to grab the console.

The Nikitoan spinning into the foreshield.

What happened to his parents? Where are they?

A hollow feeling forms in his gut then, and he wishes for the stuffed bear that had been a present from Papasan the Christmas before last. Just after his twelfth birthday.

Just after the wipeout.

The wipeout was the last time he’d been in Quackpalace — nearly two years ago.

He’d been chuting the ravine all day when Mom called him in for dinner.

“Just one more run!” he yelled, thinking about Rosalind Heath, who’d dared him to chute Sleeper’s run. Rosalind eyed him with superiority — the ruby, downward curve of her upper lip, her cheeks rosy from the cold air, her nose held high in mock aristocracy.

He turned and cased the run. It ran ruddy and narrow, angling slantways across the slope, then cutting sharply over the edge of the ravine and through the trees — deathwish heaven. If he wimped out, Rosalind would never speak to him again, never smile at him again.

Suck it in and go for it, he thought.

After a short smile from Rosalind, he pulled the Snowblade next to him and aimed it into the heart of Sleeper’s run. Prep for the worst, he thought, and rushed the chute. For Rosalind.

The small, fiberglass craft smoked the cleft dead center and picked up so much rip in the first thirty seconds that there was no way he could bail. Icy air dug spines into his face as the Snowblade plunged toward the steep edge of the ravine. He ducked into the ’blade as it launched over the rim and caught air.

His craft landed hard, groaning under the strain, and he looked down to see the emergency lights proclaiming that it was bail or fry. When he looked up again to see the run jag between two huge Red-

woods, he lost his nerve and tried to peel off into another chute.

He cut the turn too hard and flipped the 'blade. The sky spun above and below him in the split second before he hit the tree. The Snowblade was gone, and he knew that it was wipeout o'clock. The tree rushed up to meet him like Slammin' Sammy Dougan's huge Kenworth, but not before he could put a foot in front of him.

The Snowblade split in two, but his leg didn't fare as well. It cracked in five places. Luckily, nothing else broke.

He was taken to the clinic in Portland, fed on hard-candy suckers until he was sick, and let out on exocrutches the next day — Christmas day. Scrapped a great vacation, he thought, and though he didn't blame Rosalind and her sweet face, he swore he'd do slave action for no one, ever again. From now on, decisions were his and his alone.

At home, the sundered 'blade was piled like streetkill in the drive. Merry F'en Christmas, he thought to himself, quickly apologizing to The Fin for taking Its name in vain, and having visions of It slicing out of the ocean towards him. Mom always said The Fin would rise up and bend all the bad, little boyos. It gave Sly the 'jeebies.

He gimped into the house to discover his Christmas surprise, the one Papasan had fussed about, had said would help his leg heal. Visions edged into his mind of a new Snowblade, red on black, a slick scorpion on the slope. When Papasan handed him the package, he felt a hard fall coming on.

The present was peck-sized and looked even smaller in his father's hands. Sly tried to hide it, but his disappointment was evident when he opened the package and saw the worn bear, one eye missing, and much of its stuffing flat and bulging at odd angles like some elephantiasis casualty.

When he saw the look on his father's face, Sly summoned up his best fixture and said, overbright, "Thanks, Papasan. Really, I like it a lot."

Papasan's hand touched Sly's head. "Sometimes valuable things come in ugly packages, my son. Don't judge too quickly what you don't understand.

"I broke my arm when I was your age. My father gave this to me when I got home from the hospital, and whenever I got hurt, the bear was always there for me."

Sly'd hidden the stuffed animal in the closet the next day.

Now, flatbacked and in pain on the Quackpalace sprawler, he'd give most anything to have a tight grip on it. He rolls left, and a wave of dull ache moves from his chest to his head and stays there. Sly feels like Slammin' Sammy Dougan has driven Tollrunner on his skull, and The Crew has cracked rupture-city on the rest of his body.

Sly pulls the pillow into the pocket of a fetal crouch as a substitute for his bear, but it does little good. Finally, he shifts onto his back again, and decides to harden his will. Prep for the worst, he thinks.

Muffled voices drift from the lobby, close this time. "He's been asking about his parents."

"I'll take care of it," the voice is low and soft, "but notify neuropsych just in case."

The door seams open, and Quackman himself walks in, white lab coat matching the color of his hair. The doc comes close up to Sly with those Quackman peepers, scrutinizing. The small light makes his hair turn chrome and shadows the many wrinkles in his face. "How are you feeling, Sylvester?"

Originality in limited supply hereabouts, thinks Sly. A pictogram phoenix sweeps through his mind, and he says, "I'm sleepy, sir."

"Good, good. You are a very lucky boy."

Sly looks at him blankly. Okay, he thinks, get to the point already.

"You were in a very bad accident and suffered severe injury to the brain. In fact, we were about to box you up." He looks down, clears his throat. "Ah, but a donor with matching cerebral genotype was found at the last minute. It was close enough that we could do a partial cellular exchange. The procedure is still very new, but I think everything went rather smoothly."

Quackman pauses to give himself a congratulatory smile. "It was touch-and-go for a while there," he continues. "At best, you would've

been comatose, but even though the donor's body was well past even our capability to repair, his brain was in nearly perfect condition. Yes," he muses, "you are a very lucky boy."

Yeah, thinks Sly sitting up and stretching his arms against the pain, real lucky.

Quackman moves next to the sprawler and takes Sly's shaved head in his hands, tilts it toward him. "You're healing exceptionally well, but you may experience some discomfort, and vague images may trouble your dreams, but that should pass."

Vague images? thinks Sly, remembering Deadwise and her death grip around his neck. His hand moves absently to his throat. He looks hard at the doc. "Are my parents dead, sir?" His voice does a puberty punctuation on the last word.

Quackman peers hardline down at Sly, but when he speaks, his voice is soft. "Yes, Sylvester, your parents are dead. Both vehicles were scrapped. You were the only survivor. It's a miracle of The Fin that you're here at all."

"How long?" The crack in his voice is annoying.

Quackman gives him a puzzled look. "How long? You mean how long have you been here?"

Sly nods.

"The parameds brought you in yesterday afternoon."

Yesterday? he thinks. One day? It's hard to figure. Brain damage and experimental surgery followed by a recovery period of less than twenty-four hours. How possible?

The steel-blue image of a monstrous, double helix flashes into his mind, and a wave of fear-nausea creeps over Sly's gut. The quick healing, he knows suddenly, comes from a transposable cluster of genes that boost his internal repair past normal, way past.

The gene cluster was advance payment from Phoenix for a burglary at Deadwise's Ivory Tower, a burglary that failed in the end. Then he remembers a hover hitting him painlessly, launching Jonesy's body across a dark alley. "Sir," he says, looking up at the doc, "could I have a drink

of water?"

Quackman stands, smiles down at Sly. "Of course, my boy. I'll tell the nurse, and if you need anything else, you know how to ring." He turns to leave.

As the doc moves for the exit, Sly looks through the door window, past Quackman to the reception area. The nurse with the 'toon voice is doing the chat with someone in a battle-class enviroblend suit.

As the door boots full open, Sly sees the nurse swing and point in his direction. The suit swings as well, in the smooth way that vidstars do, and when he sees her face, the delay time cuts in and the 'jeebies do a razor-dance down his spine. The scarred face rides beneath a V-cut of auburn hair, and her bottom-feeder eyes make contact with his.

As she accelerates toward him in an inhumanly smooth blur, a word self-propels into his brain. "Joella," he hears himself say, and he knows Deadwise has a name.

The 'jeebies start kicking his heart around as the door seams to a close, leaving an image in Sly's mind of Deadwise Joella halfway across the lobby, and the memory of a viselike grip on his neck.

He tumbles off the sprawler, pulling over the I.V. skeleton with a crash, hits the floor on his feet and races towards the door. As it starts to open, he slams into it sideways and punches the lock stud. He stands, gasping for air, as the door chokes to a close behind him.

He scans the room. "Cluetime, Sly," he says, "keep it solid. Escape is the wise side of living, anything else is food for The Fin."

A loud thud sounds on the door. Another on the glass.

"Hey, you can't go in there! That's —" A *snic* cuts Quackman's voice to a wet gurgle.

The *snic* sends 'jeebie waves through Sly. There's pain in his brow, memory of blood. His eyes slam home on the blocked red lettering: LAUNDRY. The flap is small, but there's not much choice. Here F'en goes.

A ripple moves through the door as he launches himself across the room. He passes the bed rightwise and looks back as the door cracks

rupture-city, light spilling in from the lobby, framing Deadwise in flashing metal brightness. Quackman is on the floor behind her, dancing in a crimson pool of his own blood.

Sly finds the chute and dives in. As he begins to fall, she kicks across the room, and her unforgettable claws snag the leg of his pajamas.

He is caught instantly, but the thin cotton shreds in her grasp. He plunges into the black, arms wrapped over his shaved head.

Sly hits bottom and plummets sideways down the mountain of slickstained bedding heaped in the center of a whitewashed hoverhanger. He rolls until he hits the floor, pushes to his feet and scans for an exit. There it is, full open, big enough for a cargohover. He dashes for it, bare feet slapping against the concrete.

He skids through the exit and angles leftwise up the long access tunnel. As he looks to the end of the ramp, he glimpses the scarred face through a window up ahead. He sees the ugly weapon she's using to split through and fights down a flicker of panic — an urge to turn and flee. But the window has the slight distortion of lexan. Slammin' Sammy could smash at it with his Kenworth and it wouldn't break.

Confidently, Sly lengthens his stride, knowing he's safe for now.

Deadwise hits the window with the butt of the weapon as he nears, cracking the lexan. As he passes, a wicked piece of the clear polymer snags the bottom of his foot, slicing into it like The Fin through water. He pushes on, trying to ignore the pain.

Deadwise swings again — more cracks, but it's not shattering. She turns and vanishes into the background, liquid quick.

He glimpses the end of the tunnel, catching the city's reflection in the glass structure across the street, and darts up the final meters of the ramp. Neon and city-bright towers of mirror-black lean over him — precarious canyons of vidscreen and shiny streetways. Sprinkles of rain cool his face as he muscles around the corner, flashing a glance to the wet street behind him. Good, no Deadwise.

He spins his head to look forward, but sees the blur of movement too late and plunges into something larger than himself — a mass of too

many arms and legs, tumbling on the streetway.

"F'en, pipsqueak! Look where you're headed!"

His stomach lurches into his throat, but when he looks up, it's just a fem of about fifteen with blue hair plated to the sides of her head like she slept on it wet. She pulls him to his feet.

She tops him by millimeters, the multiple nose rings skewing her bitsy, red-cheeked face. Emerald eyes beneath blue brows hold his gaze. Something else is strange, but he doesn't waste time looking close. He peeps around frantically for Deadwise, but comes up blanksheet. Nothing.

Wet salt slides down his cheeks. He tries to run, but the fem holds him firm.

"Listen, fem, there's someone going to bend my bones if you don't let me loose."

She does a quick make of him, her blue hair reflecting the streetlamp as she looks him up and down. She catches the shaved head, the torn hospital pajamas, and the blood from his I.V. insert doing a slow drip-drip on the streetway. "Boyo, you'd best replace yourself before they find you're gone. Your parents will be the ones bending parts if —"

"Please. There's a deadwise with major armament. She's sliced and diced, and I'm next, so let me go ..."

His voice does a slow fade as he watches her face go slack, her gaze riveted behind him. He turns to see Deadwise Joella herself, streaming down the street towards them, pulling the ugly thing from under her coat, aiming it. He begins to wail.

A hand clamps over his mouth, and he feels himself being yanked sideways and down an alley. Bluehair tows him with as much kick as she can muster, while he stumbles and tries to keep up. They round the corner of the docking bay into a deadend alley heaped with trash. Sly remembers dying in a similar spot less than a day earlier.

She stops and looks for something amid the garbage.

Sly spins to watch hindwise.

Bluehair searches.

The wail pushes to the surface as Sly sees Deadwise round the cor-

ner, kicking toward them. Something inside him figures thirty percent survival odds and falling.

Bluehair finds it — a magnetic sewer cover — and punches in a code. The cover breathes loose and the fem bends down to move it, extending a waldo from under her citysuit. The waldo is a mechanical arm, thin and flexible, each section of laminated fibermesh designed to fit inside the one before. At the end, three mechanical fingers snap open and closed. The waldo telescopes down to help her arms edge the plate to one side.

Now, Sly realizes what was strange about her — the waldo. He wonders what other iceware she may be hiding.

“Get in!” she shouts, and the waldo shoots back and heaves him into the hole.

He falls less than a meter and hits metal gridding. He lands solid, but the mesh bites into his injured foot.

Gunshots thunder in the alley.

The fem jumps down, replacing the cover with her arms and waldo. Then the last hints of light are gone, and she hits a switch. The gridding begins to fall. “I put a randomizer on the code,” she says, “should keep her busy for a while.”

As they plunge into the darkness, the air thickens, congeals into a putrid heaviness. Sly breathes through his mouth, and tries to figure how far down they go.

The gridding hits liquid with a splash and continues downward as muck swirls up around their legs.

The fem hits the switch and they stop. “We’ll have to climb across from here.” A small pinlamp flickers on, held in the waldo, revealing a metal lattice along a concrete wall.

Sly can’t see the other side of the cavern, and he’s surprised at its size. He wonders in horror if it’s the famous Pit of old L.A. where the victims of a terrible plague were left to rot and die. He remembers the vidshows of the Zombies — how they managed to survive the plague in the network of wormhole tunnels under the city by eating each other

and stealing children and homeless for food and experimentation.

“Come on. This way.” Bluehair steps off the platform and heaves onto the latticework, angling up and left, keeping just above the swirling sludge.

Sly follows, quick as he can, his foot throbbing with pain.

When he’s off the platform, the fem’s waldo extends and hits the switch.

It sinks into the flow and disappears.

The mechanical arm telescopes out another meter and punches a button just right of the platform runners. Muted churning of far off machinery rumbles in the cavern. The muck rises to touch Sly’s toes. The sewer is flooding. Fast.

The small light arcs leftwise. She is moving up the metalwork now, quicker than he can follow. She reaches a two-meter wormhole and swings inside.

He tries to climb closer, but an image of a Zombie gang waiting in the wormhole sends icewaves through his bones. He can’t get his hands to budge. He feels the bubbling, black sludge rising coldly around his knees.

The scraping sound of a metal plate comes from high above.

The waldo grabs him, tries to lift him. “Let go!” Bluehair yells, but his hands won’t move. The urine-smelling muck is waist-high now. The waldo has pulled one hand free. “F’en ’squeak, she’s in. Only a minute before —”

A blinding beam of light penetrates the putrid dark, a pinpoint spreading from high above. He remembers billowing clouds of silk and wishes for sleep. The beam is searching the wall in quick arcs. Deadwise is on the lattice, moving down.

The waldo yanks him free, pulls him into the wormhole. They run, the pinlamp slicing through the thick darkness. He glimpses bits and pieces of the arcing sides of the wormhole. Defaced warning signs and graffiti cover the tunnel’s walls. He knows from the vid that all wormholes eventually lead to the Pit, and he wonders whether he should turn

back and try to make it past Deadwise and leave the chance of hitting Zombieville to the fem.

She pulls him rightwise into another wormhole, kills the light, and keeps running. He can't see anything, but feels the cold muck rising about his feet now, filling the wormholes. Bluehair must have hit the flood switch, he figures.

He wishes for light, wanting to see Bluehair's face and ask her about the Zombies, but she's moving too fast, and it's hard to breathe in the heavy stench. As they run, he listens for pursuit, but gets nothing but the splash of their feet and the rasp of their breath echoing in the dead tunnels. Even Deadwise has to make some sound in this sludge, he figures.

He hopes.

They pass 'hole after 'hole, turn too many times to count. Twice he stumbles and she uses the waldo to reach back and keep his face out of the sludge. He reaches for her, and she accepts his hand urgently, pulling him forward.

He thinks of his father and a heavy weight settles on his chest. His face is wet with tears. He wants to stop, to fall and sit in the slime and wait for Mom and Papasan. He wants to die and wake up. No such luck, gasping for breath, as she pulls him now left, now right. They pass through two cavernous spaces like the first one, having to climb across in the dark.

Finally, the fem is leading him up slantwise from the muck. They come to a dry wormhole, smaller than the others and almost clean-smelling. It angles upward and ends at a metallic wall.

The pinlamp flares on again like the sun. It's out before Sly figures what's happening, and the purple spot where it was moves with his eyes. He hears her fingers pressing an old-style digipad, and the wall seams at one side and slides open. He is pulled inside, stumbles and falls to the floor. He hears the wall slide closed, and his head sinks to his chest. Fire shivers up his leg from his foot.

Bluehair staggers off into the dark.

Suddenly the air is blinding as the overhead lights come on, and he squeezes his peepers shut and listens to the fem as she digs through her tools.

Sly opens his eyes, using fingers to brush tears from his cheeks. From near the door comes the sound of an acetylene torch and burnt-metal smells. An image comes to his mind of Deadwise cutting through the door. He heaves to his feet and spins to face the sound, squinting in the light.

Nothing.

Nothing but Bluehair, wearing goggles and hefting a large torch with both hands. She is welding two chunks of steel alloy into a wedge, holding the glowing metal with her waldo.

Sly flinches from the torch light and decides to ask what the Fem she's doing when she turns, stopping him with a hardline stare. Asking him the same question. He decides to keep his mouth closed and just watch.

Bluehair finishes her wedge and jams it into the edge of the door while it's still aglow. Drip-bonding a special seal, he figures.

Sly inspects the place more carefully now, propping himself on his good foot and leaning against the wall. The squat is nothing more than a widening of the wormhole. It's lit by three growlamps hanging from a spiderweb structure made of shiny fibermesh.

Must have city juice, he thinks, noticing the fresh air. Clean breathing means big filters. Too big for any battery rig.

In the near corner, a pile of sheets and blankets sits on a foamflake frame, and jutting from the other wall is a workstation of considerable size. The workstation fascinates him. He recognizes a Sephacume gene-fusion system and purification rig. There is some kind of holopad jacked to it, but Sly isn't sure what its function could be. In fact, he isn't even sure how he knows what it is.

Bluehair finishes another wedge and stands, pulling off the goggles and wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her sleeve. She twists the regulator valve closed and wheels the canister over to the workstation. Her gaze sweeps over Sly more than once.

“Whose squat?” he asks, not enjoying the silence.

She turns and gives him that hardline stare again. “Squat’s mine.” She pulls heavy gloves from her hands and drapes them over the canister.

Sly sits on the floor and asks, “Lonewise?”

She sits across from him, back to a leg of the workstation. “Yeah,” she says, “Lonewise.” She tosses him a rag, starts to unzip her citysuit. She peels the suit down to her waist, revealing small breasts.

Sly looks down.

His feet look worse than they feel, black spread with rot and a mosaic of thin, violet scars, healing rapidly without infection. He wipes away the rot to get a better look at the damage. Impossible, he thinks. The cut is dirty, but uninfected and not bleeding, although the separated flaps of skin would suggest a need for sutures and a culture graft.

Bluehair is not doing so well. Blackened blood has scabbed over a wound in her arm where a bullet grazed the surface. She hauls out a medkit from under the workstation, sets it between her legs, and looks at him. “That Fem?” she says nodding to the door.

Sly gets a visual of Deadwise, an audible *snic*, as ’jeebies shiver across his shoulders. He pushes himself farther from the door. “You mean Deadwise?”

“No, I mean your mother. Who do you think?” The fem unwinds the waldo and unjacks it from a socket next to her left breast. “Who is this Deadwise?” She lifts the waldo’s harness off her shoulders and sets it under the workstation.

“You want specifics?” He finishes with his feet and notices the sticky red on his arm. He pulls out the I.V. insert and cleans away the blood.

When Bluehair is done removing the waldo, she opens the medkit and takes out a scalpel. “I just want to know what in Fin’s name you got me into.” As she speaks, her nose rings wiggle in a way that makes Sly think of Rosalind Heath back home. “This Deadwise is all icepacked,” she continues, tossing him a healpatch and scraping at her scabbing with the blade.

Sly looks blank.

“Installed Cybernetic Enhancements, you know what that is, kid?”

Sly nods, “Yes, I know.”

“She’s got more rip than any icepack I’ve seen, and that means credits, kid. Major payout. And more, she’s no ordinary Deadwise. All her iceware is strictly hidden.” Bluehair looks down at her own jack, then stands and walks toward him, still scraping at her arm. “So now that I have time to think a few seconds, I keep askin’ myself, ‘what’s so much ’pack want with a pipsqueak like you?’”

He looks down at the tattered Quackpalace pajamas and rubs the stubble on his head. He tries to piece it for her, “I can’t be sure, but here’s how I work it. Deadwise has killed twice in the last day, and once was me, or at least someone who’s in my head.”

She gives him the hardline again. “Explain.”

“Our autopilot failed, and we wiped, rupture-city, with another hover. Everything was scrapped. My father . . .” He swallows, tries again. “My father and mother are swimming with The Fin, they say.”

She softens her gaze.

“I had brain damage, so they did a patch from some unlucky boyo by the name of Jonesy Ripka. As I work it, Deadwise snapped Jonesy’s neck, then found out about the patch, so —”

“So you’re screwed. You and me both, kid.” She applies cleaner to the wound, wincing. “But you’re in a haven for a while, at least until we can figure a solution.” She stands up and points to a folding flap in the chrome webbing. “You can take a chemshower while I make some food.”

It doesn’t sound like a request.

Sly stands shakily on his good foot and begins scrolling the shower down. He stops, says, “What’s your name? Mine’s Sly.”

She smiles, bandaging the wound with a healpatch. “Maleficent Rose,” she says, “but you call me Rose.”

He likes the name. “Rose,” rolling it off his tongue to himself, setting up the shower. He pulls his pajamas off, slightly embarrassed, but

not wanting to show it. But she's not even looking.

She grabs a bottle of water from the shelves. "Wipe rags in the pile on the bed," she says.

He pulls the plastic tight around him, flicks heavy cycle, and closes his eyes as the chemicals scrub at his flesh. It's all over in three minutes.

When he's done, she hands him a clean citysuit.

He thanks her, dries himself, and puts it on. It fits him comfortably — a one piece, vatsilk jump with a full length, seamless zipper and a small, velcro flap for the waldo. He towels his head dry and folds the shower back into the webbing.

She returns to the nukebox where foodstuff is cooking.

It smells like Mexican to Sly. He's feeling good by now, clean and hungry. "How'd you win a place like this?"

"Came down the wormhole a year ago," she says. "Arranged it with a friend of mine. He found this place a long time ago when he was running from some corporate heavies. The place is invisible to them, doesn't exist in any network."

She slaps brown piles of foodstuff on baby-blue, plastic shingles. "I was flatbacking my way at a place called The Velvet Pillow, and though the money was good, things got ugly with my pimp." She hands him a shingle and a matching, plastic spoon. "So I went to this friend of mine, Grids, to see if he could help, and we struck a deal. He set me up with this place; I do art for him as payback."

Sly sits, scooping up a heap of the spicy beans-and-rice mixture.

"But art doesn't pay for this place, and it doesn't buy food. So I pick up packages as well, transport goods through the wormholes. Anyone with the code to my netbox can hire me. In fact, when I ran into you, I was on my way to pick up a package. Somebody the Quacks wanted moved quietly." She shrugs. "But most of the time I do art."

She steps to the workstation, motioning for him to join her. "A week after I got here, Grids started to bring this stuff down, piece by piece until I had the whole rig. It took me another couple of months before I learned how to use it. Maybe someday I'll be good enough to make a

living at it. Here, let me show you." She powers on the holopad.

As he stands and approaches the workstation, Rose puts her hand into the flexglove, and a holograph materializes above the pad. Cubed, golden holographix spell out the words, "Masterfield Hologeneration Systems." The food is warming his stomach.

"After Grids showed me how to use the holopad, it was up to me and the manuals to decipher the Sephacume rig. It can do a lot more than build retroviruses, which is all I use it for." As she moves her hand in the flexglove, the holographix animate and reshape. The color becomes a dark cobalt, and the words form cylinders. The image solidifies as a blue-black set of spires twisting into a double helix that towers above a miniature city.

Sly has seen this before. "What is that?" he says, losing his balance. He grabs for the edge of the table and nearly drops the shingle.

Rose turns to look at him. "It's the Helix, the GenetiSource building. What's wrong?"

"I'm okay," he says, setting the shingle of food down on a corner of the work platform. No longer hungry.

Her gaze is uncertain, but she continues, "I'm a Biotist," she says, putting the stress on *tist*. "I make images with the holopad and download them into the gene-fusion rig." She points to the off-white box plastered with picto instructions. "The Sephacume genecodes the sequences, builds the RNA base by base, purifies it, and packages it all into a retrovirus vector. The retros infect certain cells in the brain and insert the genetic info that codes for the visuals that I've created. I set it up so that different images will be brought to mind depending upon the hormonal levels of the recipient."

"You mean you put these holos in people's heads, and when they feel a certain way, that image comes to mind?"

She nods, says, "Just like memories, except that I can code the intensity and time span that the memories will be active." She moves her hand in the flexglove. The Helix image languishes into a dark cloud that sweeps into a bird of crimson fire and finally comes to rest as a small

boy, laughing. “This is a sentimental sequence I’m doing for that friend, Grids. This is him as a child.”

“What’s the story on this boyo, Grids?”

She pulls her hand and turns away from the holopad. “Rumor tells that he was the sharpest cutting hacker in the private sector before he got involved in the pull down of the old GenetiSource monolith. He can still cut with the best when he’s sober.” She waves her hand in a slow arc. “He hacked through the security, re routed the power for this place and wiped it from the city’s system in less than a day. Like I said, to the datanets, this place is invisible. Of course I can’t have a vid, but I get along with payvids if I need to call someone.”

Sly remembers the steel-blue helix, asks, “What happened with GenetiSource?”

“Before our time, ’squeak, GenetiSource was the biggest monolith in the world. The way I work it, Grids was pulled into a scam by some friends of his who needed a gloveman with more balls than brains to hack for them. The rest of them had all been blacklisted and screwed over by GenetiSource at some time or other, so they united to steal all of the private information in the G.S. files and spread it across all the nets. They succeeded in the end, but it cost them.”

“And this Grids boyo was in on it?”

“Yeah. Rumor says that he got burned during the hacking run on GenetiSource, by an AI or ROMANN construct or something else — ”

“ROMANN?” The word brings an itch to Sly’s brain.

“A ROM based Artificial Neural Network. Learned about them from the Sephacume manuals.”

She stops to take a bite of food. “Grids lost some friends in the end,” she continues, “and betrayed his love. She never forgave him, and he’s boozed since. Now people don’t think he’s much. I know he can still burn if the flame’s lit for him, but the rest is maybe just rumors and drunken ramblings.” She shovels down another mouthful of food, hardly chewing.

“Here, I’ll show you something.” She walks over to the holopad and

presses her hand into the glove. “I’m almost done with the image of the fem he was heartfelt about — the one he betrayed.” And as she flexes her hand, the holographix melt and shift from the boy child into that of a fem — sweet face beneath long, auburn hair, and a clean white smile that is attractive, beautiful. But the features that hold Sly’s gaze and make him gasp for breath are her eyes — her slate-gray, bottom-feeder eyes.

Sly feels himself drop into a battle crouch, his hands clenching and releasing as the memory of a monster-strength grip on his throat surges in his head. He takes a deep breath and says, quiet and harsh, “Joella.”

Rose turns, “What?”

“Deadwise.”

• • •

In his sleep, a memory comes.

The stolen sequence floats on the blackout fringe just out of reach. He stretches towards it, kicking with his legs as it fluxes, wavers on the fringe and slides in a wide arc away from him. He struggles after it, a flailing cripple in the current.

A singular, white point flutters into his awareness away rightwise, moving rapidly toward him. The sequence blurs, melting into the visceral, fluid horizon. Gone, as the wavering pinpoint overtakes him.

He stands in the large body again, holding his breath due to the piss smell and staring with contempt at an obese, old woman sagging over a small chair. She throws an empty whiskey bottle to the floor, and glowers up at him, her face a varicose, full moon, orange in the dim light.

“I’ve done it again, Jonesy,” she says, looking down between her legs at the spreading wetness on her skirt.

The smell of fresh urine blends with that of the old as he summons the courage he needs. He remembers the face of his father in jail the day before he was murdered. He thinks about the genelocked file that Dad had left for him, remembers the list of GenetiSource elite who were responsible for his father’s framing and murder.

He remembers every name on the list, crossed off one by one until

only two remained.

Kicking greasy Chinese take-out cartons across the floor, he walks past the obese crone. Jonesy smiles at her when she looks afraid. “It’s going to be all right,” he says.

Her face relaxes, and he is thinking that his task will soon be finished. After this visit, his revenge will be nearly complete. He circles behind her and leans down to whisper in her ear. “I’m sorry, Mother,” he says, lifting the pistol from his belt. Tears streak down his cheeks, and he curses himself for the tenderness he feels. He can’t afford it. Not now. He grits his teeth and puts the weapon to her head as he thinks of the second-to-the-last person on the list. It’s the one name he couldn’t bring himself to believe.

“This is for Dad, Mother.”

She turns, and her face registers first recognition and surprise, but after a second, calm resignation settles on her features.

“I always wondered why you kept your affection from me, boy,” she says, her voice suddenly strong. “I thought he might have told you, but that was a long time ago and you must understand the circumstances. I had no choice.”

“I understand,” he says. “I understand and can’t forgive you.” He winces as her head explodes.

As he leaves, he mentally crosses another name off the list. Only one remains — a boy who is healthy and alive even though he lacks a body, a boy by the name of Phoenix Brisbane.

And the sequence returns — a haunting, spectral vapor fluttering like a shredded cloud through his awareness. Its letters and numbers solidify until he can almost make them out. Then they twist and writhe, forming hard icicles, accelerating into the cobalt sky and spiraling out of his vision.

• • •

“Sly,” she sings softly, “Sly.”

He listens to her song and rolls in the flake to see Rose sitting cross-

legged on the bed next to him.

She reaches out to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “It’s only a night terror,” she says. “Your parents?”

He feels a twist of guilt. “Not parents,” he says, “not my parents,” and not wanting to remember the dream, he adds, “A sequence.”

“What sequence?”

“When Deadwise did the slice on Jonesy, the last thing to go through his head was a sequence — a long series of letters each followed by a series of ones and zeros. I figured the binary ends, but the rest means nothing.”

Rose’s face goes tight. “Sounds like hacker work to me. I’ll contact Grids. Maybe he can figure this sequence as well as get Deadwise off our tail.”

She pulls some bedding close over him and curls in tight, gently stroking his fuzzy head and humming softly until he falls asleep. He dreams again, of his father this time, pulling him from the broken Snowblade and carrying him home.

• • •

Their journey to see Grids passes like slow fog. They wind through wormholes in complete silence, complete darkness, and waist deep in sludge and salt water.

Sly is thankful that they hold hands even though Rose has said that the Zombies are largely a myth, and it’s unlikely that Deadwise can track them with the tide so high. So they trudge on, Sly’s ears straining for the telltale sounds of movement that would spell Deadwise. His feet have completely healed, and although he is still walking without shoes, he feels strong.

It’s almost twilight when they finally hit surface. Brown dust and low clouds filter and diffuse most of the remaining daylight. They climb into an alley canyon that smells like rotting food and human waste, but it’s refreshing compared to the wormhole. A weak streetlamp on the corner struggles to hold back the shadows.

Sly pulls himself up into a wary stance and looks around, only to find that they are surrounded by a group of heavy boyos. He falls into a battle crouch and prepares to either run or fight, looking to Rose for his cue.

Rose stands up full height and calls out, “We’ve come to see Grids.”

One of the gang steps forward, tall and black, a small gemstone imbedded in his front tooth. The others circle around behind them. “Rose,” he says.

She nods, “Diamond Man.”

Behind him another boyo is sand-stenciling the words ‘Ozone Freestyle’ deep into the building’s surface.

“Rose, what’s wit’ da brat?” All Sly can see is teeth and the whites of his eyes.

Brat? he thinks, standing up full height and pushing his chest out, this boyo isn’t much older than me.

“He’s a friend,” she says, grabbing Sly’s hand. “Grids wants to see him.”

“Glovesman tol’ us ya called. He staggerin’ in a bad way.” Diamond Man shrugs. “But he home if you wan’ him.”

“We do.” Rose turns and pulls Sly through the circle and up some metal stairs that hang on the outside of a brown brick building. They climb to the first floor and enter.

When Sly looks anxiously over his shoulder into the alley, he sees nothing. The boys are gone. “Rose?” he asks softly, motioning towards the alley behind them.

“That was Ozone Freestyle,” she says without looking. “A gang of muscle that works with Grids.” The hall inside smells worse than the alley — of cheap alcohol and stale urine. She leads him up some more stairs. “When Grids came here to the Nui-tang district, Ozone Freestyle was barely scraping out an existence. As a muscle gang, they were low on the power rung. Well, Grids needed protection so he got this idea to hook up with Ozone Freestyle’s head boyo, Chop Chop, and cut a deal — protection for information.”

They come to a thick, metal door, its frame reinforced with Kevlar-lignin fibermesh. There is a small vidscreen just left of it. A thought shuffles unbidden into Sly’s mind as he examines the screen and the locking mechanisms it controls. It would take three minutes to break it, he thinks, with a mirror, a circuit shunt or two, and some acid paste. He’d be in with plenty of time to take out the interior alarm before anyone noticed. Just like the job he did for Phoenix at the Ivory Tower, he thinks. Except this would be less dangerous because that icepacked bitch doesn’t live here.

Rose is still speaking when his mind returns to the corridor and the smell. “Well, Grids and Chop Chop managed to boost Ozone Freestyle to the level of a major underworld power. What’s better: they’ll do whatever Grids asks so long as he’s sober. Probably watching us now through the infrascop.” She points to a black-glass fisheye above the door, presses the screen and smiles into it, saying, “Hi, Grids. We made it.”

There is a sound of sliding, magnetic bolts, and Rose pulls Sly back. As the door swings out, they are enveloped in a cloud of incense smoke. It lays a thick covering to the hall’s stench, without eliminating it. They step into the room, and the door swings to a close behind them. The bolts click back into place.

Grids’ squat is large and cluttered with an almost organic compost of optoelectronics. The guts of vidphones and holopads, some of them not too old, are strewn like the aftermath of a massacre. Amid the clutter are vestiges of old, carbonflake furniture. There is a kitchen area in one corner and a separate toilet room, but electronic junk and organic garbage pervades. Only one area is trash-free — the computer and holopad in the center of the room.

Sly winds his way to the console, detailing the vintage Masterfield holoplatform and the Hyro-Kurchek generators. It is all very impressive. Pity everything is smeared with dust. As he sweeps around the equipment, his appreciation grows, seeing the custom flexgloves that bespeak a tandem interface — dreamtime to all but the most serious hackers.

“An’ jus’ what do we ’ave here?”

Sly feels his respect for the gloveman slide into the floor even before he can see him. The slur tells the tale of a heavy dependence on alcohol.

When he turns to look, it goes from bad to worse.

The man who stands before him is young, probably no more than thirty, but there are deep lines and creases in his face which tell of a life on the edge — the edge that evidently Jonesy had ridden. Sly has visions of dark cubicles of loneliness, along with memories of hot, scratchy liquid in his throat, thickening and drying the lining of his mouth until it feels cotton and foreign. The man before him fits those memories. He is filthy, with the kind of dirt which only comes from extended neglect.

The wrinkles widen as the man swings his gaze, slow and long to focus on Sly. “An’ jus’ who the hell is this? Rose? You an’ me, we had a deal, no strangers.” He sways toward a semi-clean chair, and Rose moves to help him.

“Grids, this is Sly. I told you about him on the vid. You said to bring him, ’member?”

The man looks at her as if she isn’t there and swings his head toward Sly, bobbing like a marionette.

Sly turns his disgust back to the console. The odds of successfully operating it himself pop into his head — about twenty percent considering his hands won’t fit the custom gloves. Still, if he were to confine himself strictly to the console, things would be forced and jerky, but it might improve his odds of doing something with the code in his head. At least he might be able to find out what it is. He spins back to face the pair. “Rose, this boyo is hardline goners — ”

Rose stands and stops him with an icy stare. Then she pulls an autoinjector from her pocket and jabs it into Grids’ forearm. A gentle hiss fills the room as the drug is pushed into his veins.

Grids’ head lolls back onto the flake of the chair, muttering.

Rose looks to Sly. “Get cluewise, kid. Grids is the only hope you’ve got. Just keep your yapper closed or he may put you back on the street and give Deadwise your address.”

“Rose . . .” From Grids, a whisper.

She stoops beside him, says, “What can I get you?”

His voice is weak. “Let the boy alone. He only knows what he sees.”

Memories, Sly’s own now, of his stuffed bear and the words of his father, hit him hardline.

Rose helps Grids stand and wipes the sweat from his brow. The drug is working. “So you’re the boyo that Rose says is in a pile of trouble with a certain Joella we all know and love.” His voice is stronger now, but when he mentions Deadwise, it fills with pain. He takes the towel from Rose and walks to face Sly, his eyes brighter now. “Do you understand just what trouble you’ve happened into, Slyboy?”

Sly shakes his head.

Grids wipes his forehead and sighs. “This Deadwise,” he says, “she’s the best there ever was, maybe ever will be. The icepack she’s got isn’t even on the market yet, and she was done over ten years ago.” He walks slowly, but steadily toward the commlink near the computer. “You see,” he says, turning to look at Sly again, “there is no more proficient bender in the business than my Joella.” Only the slightest hint of pain that time.

Grids hits the stud on the commlink, “Chop Chop. Grids. There might be trouble blowin’ our way — an icepacked fem. If so, warn me, then get out of the way. Understand?”

“Done,” comes the reply.

“If it’s anything else,” Grids continues, “standard execution.” He turns and strides back to the console, his step solid, and faces Sly. “What worries me is Joella hasn’t been in the business for the last seven years, at least not personally. She got into the GenetiSource pulldown because they killed her boy in some sort of personality transfer operation. Once that was over. . . once everything was over, she became a hermit of sorts. She hasn’t been seen outside her Ivory Tower in nearly four years.”

At the words *Ivory Tower* Sly feels the muscles in his neck tighten. He scans for exits. “Ivory Tower,” he says, trying to calm himself, “that’s where the man in my head got the sequence.”

Grids grazes him with a chill look, continues, “So if indeed she is handling this up close and personal, then things are seriously out of control.” He slides into the foamflake chair of the console and starts flicking switches to power up the rig. A bass hum fills the rooms as the Hyro-Kurchek generators rumble to life.

Rose moves up behind him to watch, beaming a look of vindicated triumph towards Sly.

“Well, let’s get The Luck’s view of things,” Grids says, blowing some of the dust off the holopads. “Come on, China Luck, talk to me.”

Let’s see what this gloveman can do, thinks Sly, stepping in close to get a good view. The space around them fills with the blackness of a closed-circuit library, and as Sly is trying to fathom an inhouse system of such size, a voice comes over the speakers.

“B-B-Been a l-l-long time, Grids. H-H-How you doin’?”

Grids smiles, and for the first time since they entered the squat, Sly allows himself to feel some semblance of hope. On that smile alone he is willing to add ten percent to his chances of making it through this intact. As Grids pushes his hands into the flexgloves, it goes up another five.

“Yeah, it has been a long time, my friend. I’ve got a prime amount of urgency rollin’ here. I’ll need a hypnotic pattern called up as soon as yesterday. Also, I’ll be inputting an unknown sequence. I want a library scan on it, and a Swissnet run ready as backup.”

The holographix swirl around them. The blackness becomes brown and forms into a kangaroo. Grids is talking to it. “Here is the situation: Joella is back on the scene. She is after a boyo with a code in his head — ”

“Then s-s-she will g-g-get him. I have conf-f-firmed a ninety-eight percent f-f-fatality given any type boyo.” A gray elephant with off-white tusks takes form behind the kangaroo, and flat datafields grow underneath them. “I’ve s-s-set up available d-d-data, and I need more specifics to refine the p-p-percentage, but either w-w-way your boyo is near death.”

“I know, I know, but if she has come out of the Ivory Tower, and this info is so important, maybe we can just give it to her in exchange for the boy’s life, at least until we can think up something more . . . lasting.”

“Ok-k-kay, Grids, I’ll set up an inhouse scan, b-b-but let me warn you; The Bird has been n-n-nesting all over your s-s-system for the last couple of days. If we d-d-do have to shoot into the Swissnet or any other d-d-datanet for that matter, any p-p-private online time is going to be brief.”

“What else is new? Any openings at all?”

“D-D-Damn Birdboy has been on me like a cheap s-s-suit and a bad haircut. I haven’t b-b-been able to breathe for running into s-s-some trap he’s constructed.”

“So what your telling me is that there are no openings at all?”

“N-N-Not anywhere near h-h-here, I c-c-can set up a remote relay disguised as b-b-bulk junk mail, but even so, it would only g-g-get us seven s-s-seconds.”

“It’ll be enough. Do it, and prepare for that inhouse library scan.”

Sly moves toward Rose as Grids and China Luck, or whatever his name is, set up the system to decode the sequence. “This Luck boyo,” he says to Rose, “what’s the word?”

Rose turns her attention from Grids’ back to look at Sly. “No boyo. Online ROMANN construct, class five AI. State-of-the-art when Grids did the hardwiring.” Rose gives herself a contented smile.

Sly looks back to Grids bustling at the console, a broad grin on the man’s face, his hands dancing in the flexgloves as holographix rock and shift around him. “What’s with the stutter?”

“Grids said it didn’t come like that,” she answered, “but The Bird damaged it years ago as payback for some sneaky deed on The Luck’s part.”

Sly looks and tries to follow what’s happening with Grids, but he’s moving too fast. “And this Bird?”

Rose sounds annoyed, “I don’t know.” She turns back to watch Grids.

But the gloveman is finished and cuts in, “The Bird, as The Luck likes to call him, is something of a . . . ah . . . a demon, if you will — an anomaly I ran across a long time ago.” Something catches his attention in the holographix and he turns away from them, back to work, molding and shaping the program with broad, sweeping hand motions.

“When I found The Bird,” he continues, “he didn’t even know what he was. He thought he was a boy with a body, living in New York.” Grids laughs.

From somewhere deep in Sly, he realizes that he’s heard some of this before.

“He really was a boy once. In fact, he was the heir to the GenetiSource empire, but he was murdered, and his brain was put into permanent stasis and hardwired to a reality generator. The whole set up was isolated from the datanets until we broke into GenetiSource to wire an interface linkup. That was during the takedown. GenetiSource had isolated their private network from all the others, physically removed any connections so that all the most important data would be safe from hackers. It’s the most effective security possible.

“Joella had to break into the GenetiSource headquarters and wire in an interface directly. When she’d finished, I cut them up from the inside.” The smile disappears from Grids’ face. “I found The Bird in there, lost and alone. I thought I could shape him, use him, teach him to be what I envisioned he could be, but he learned much faster than I expected, and by the time I realized my mistake, he had already screwed me blind, tricked me into betraying someone I cared . . .” he falters, pain evident in his voice, “. . . I care about deeply. He made me do things I’ll forever regret.”

A vision comes to Sly’s mind of a scarred face framed by short auburn hair.

“Well, by then he was already loose and there was nothing I could do to stop him.” His hands slow. “Ever since that day, the little bastard has dogged me, and I haven’t been able to make any major moves in any of the important nets without having to pull myself offline whenever he

comes near.”

Grids pulls his hands from the gloves and looks at Sly. “Come on, lets see if we can’t still put one over on Birdboy.”

Sly looks at the display. As bits of information swirl and dance, the flux and flow of holographix blend into a kaleidoscope of color. He hears Grids warn Rose not to watch the console, and some internal part of him fights for control, fights not to look, but it’s too late. The ebb and tide of a hypnotic, holographic wave surge around and through him, and he feels himself fall. Then someone is helping him sit, putting an autoinjector into his arm. In the distance, he hears a faint hiss and his head lolls forward onto his chest.

The sequence rushes toward him like the Redwoods on Sleeper’s Run, and, as the letters speed past like the cars of a bullet train, he can read each one clearly, easily. Lines of letters and numbers hiss around him, snakes of double-edged information in the shifting, holographic panorama. Sly hears himself speaking, but the voice isn’t his. The intonation is deep, older.

Sly wakes in waves as the holographix solidify around him. He hears voices, and feels the girl holding his hand.

“Its got two p-p-parts,” says a kangaroo in a forest of twisting, writhing, single-stranded RNA. “The l-l-letters are a direct c-c-coding sequence for an anomalistic r-r-retrovirus. I c-c-can’t find any inhouse h-h-homologies to known retros.”

“A retro sequence?” Grids asks, easing Sly from the chair. “What’s the other part?”

“The end is a binary c-c-code. The l-l-library has nothing on it either, b-b-but it looks like an elab-b-borate access key.”

Grids pushes forward towards the console, swinging the chair’s servos as his hands detail everything he’s saying. “How much time did you say we have online before we’re buzzed by The Bird?”

“Seven s-s-seconds.”

“Okay, cut the sequence into its two parts. We’ll punch into Swissnet and quickscan the sheets for a match to the binary keycode, but

even though Birdboy won't expect us to use a highbrow datanet, we can't spend too much time on it. You know what The Bird can do if he catches us out there."

The Luck's voice grows small, "Y-Y-Yes I do."

"So it'll have to be a strict data snatch. We'll analyze everything after the run."

"That'll still b-b-be cutting it c-c-close."

"Just set up the relay, and if you don't waste time out in the open, we'll be solid. Let me know when everything is ready." The gloveman's hands become a blur of fabrication as pieces of holographic data detach themselves from one another and realign to create a new whole. "Boyo," he says, "you ever do any hacking?"

Visions of the tusked elephant symbol — gray against the white stone of the Ivory Tower — rush his thoughts, but Sly answers, almost too slowly, "No, sir."

Rose eyes him, but Grids doesn't seem to notice.

"Well, what I'm doing is fashioning an information-extraction program." His flexgloves twist and squirm as a black spike forms, thin and sharp, above the holopad. Its tip is a gleaming, silver needle. "The spike is the holopad's way of representing the extraction program. The silver tip is the binary code you gave us."

Sly's neck tightens, and his eyes rivet themselves to the flow of images.

The Luck comes back online, "R-R-Relay set up complete, ready and w-w-willing when you are, G-G-Grids."

"Good. I want you to pull the RNA part of the sequence out of memory. If something goes wrong, I don't want The Bird to get everything, just in case it turns out to be valuable."

Sly balances on the balls of his feet. Anticipation and dark glee raise the hackles on his back as he absently rubs his hands together. Something important is happening — something he's been waiting a long time for.

"R-R-Ready to download."

Grids turns to them. "Here we go." He smiles, old and wise. "It's been ages since I've had this much fun." He pulls an optocard from under the table. The card shimmers silver and reflects a rainbow in the glimmering light of the holopad. Grids feeds it into the console. "Download," he says.

"C-C-Complete. I'll erase all other c-c-copies in memory."

"Give me manual control of the drive."

"Ok-k-kay. Just press the stud t-t-to reload."

Sly sees the button over the optocard slot — a silent, red beacon on the face of the ebony-black holopad. Red on black are the colors of a Snowblade the boy always wanted for Christmas but never got.

"Okay, enough teasing," Grids says. "Let's get down to it." Then his hands are carving holographs again. "Luck," his voice is low and steady, "the run is laid in. Counting down. Three. Two. One. Now!"

The extraction program flies — a chrome-tipped needle pulsing through the light of the fiberoptic tunnel. It blasts over an endless field of identical gravestones, guided by the silver coding, and plunges deep into the heart of a tomb, piercing it with binary precision.

The wound bleeds crimson, and the needle sucks it up. Not a drop is lost. The needle flexes and slingshots back through glowing, fiberoptic tunnel and into a shower of sparks.

The sparks are real, accompanied by a screeching crackle and the smell of burning circuitry.

Sly lunges to the side, and rolls forward into a crouch as the console cartridge fries.

Rose ducks, but remains behind Grids.

The gloveman howls, yanking his hands from the gloves and slapping shutoffs as fast as he can. The smell of burning flesh joins that of incense and fried circuits. He jams his fingers into his mouth, reaching down with the other hand to open a small compartment under the chair that contains a dozen or so replacement circuits.

As he grabs a fresh cartridge, the intercom crackles. "Grids. Dis Chop Chop. All straight up?"

The gloveman snatches the blackened cartridge from its slot, its Masterfield logo melted and dripping. He slaps in the new one, pulls his fingers out of his mouth, and calls over his shoulder, “Dicey, but stable. Just keep sharp.”

“Done.”

“China Luck, come on. Speak to me. What’s up, friend. You still online?”

The Luck roars, glee in his voice overriding the stutter, “F’en hell bent, you should have seen it — that stupid Birdboy, caught with his pants down and playing with himself.”

Grids smiles, but his tone is harsh, “Luck, calm down, get us offline and tell me what happened.”

“Had his back to us. By the t-t-time he realized he couldn’t b-b-be everywhere at once, I had d-d-done an interp on the code and was already b-b-back. He fried the c-c-cartridge after the fact.”

“We’re still showing a reflection in the net, Luck. Take us offline now!” His hands plunge into the flexgloves and begin to dance. The holographic spike drains of color and fades.

“I’m t-t-taking us off —”

A rumbling hiss fills the room, coming from the bank of speakers. A voice seeps out like death as a child, high-pitched and ugly. “Shut up, you tiresome toy.” The holographix bubble dark oil, flooding the forest and drowning the small kangaroo. When the marsupial is completely immersed in black sludge, the oil freezes and begins to crack.

Sly moves for a closer look, and a quivering chill passes through his chest. Recognition and hatred fill him, but in the forefront of his head there is a sense that things have moved just one step closer to completion.

Grids yanks his hands out of the gloves and leans back. “Well, well, long time no see, BirdBoy. You should drop by more often.”

The oil splits completely, shards crumbling to reveal a huge ball of red fire. The ball grows wings and a spine-studded tail of blazing poison. “Your attempts at bravado are almost as pathetic as the antics of that an-

tiquated pile of circuits that you keep to do your dirty work.”

Grids coughs politely. “Get to the point, you spoiled brat.” His tone is dry, caustic. “I have no time to listen to arrogant insults from someone who doesn’t even have arms and legs. Just what do you want?”

The hiss rises in volume, and the voice thunders, “You have something of mine, mortal, and I want it. I have easily acquired the binary key from pathetic, little China Luck, but there is a part missing. Since you have the binary, then you must also have the RNA sequence. Grids, it belongs to me!”

Grids flashes a glance to the blinking red button, then looks to Sly, his eyebrows arched. He turns back to the hovering bird of flame. “Well, let’s see here, Phoenix. Ah, nope, I don’t see the word ‘BirdBoy’ anywhere on it, so I guess it’s not yours.”

Silence. Nothing but the hovering phoenix, flickering.

He speaks again, but the voice is different now — evenly pitched, reasonable. “Grids, listen. The sequence contains information vital to the success of a personality transfer procedure that my uncle developed when he was president of GenetiSource, a couple of years before your icepacked bitch killed him. She took that code from him, locked it away, and erased any trace of it from inside.”

Sly looks from Grids to the girl, but she is watching the holographix. He glances around and his eyes land home on the button, winking red on the Masterfield holopad, waiting to fill memory with the contents of the opticard — with the second half of the sequence.

“I got Jonesy Ripka to steal it from that cyborg whore. As advance payment I even gave him a highly sophisticated set of self-splicing genes designed to aid healing. But the bitch got to him before I could have him picked up. That’s when things got a little tight. Arranging for the boyo’s accident was nearly as easy as paying off the doctor, though it was a miracle that your blind and stupid little Maleficent actually managed to retrieve the package I sent her to get. Especially after he’d escaped with the death of the doctor. And considering the boy’s determination, it was a long shot I’d get to the code before the bitch did. But as you can see,

sometimes the gods smile.”

The flaming bird droops and wavers until his fire is faint. His voice changes again, taking on a distant whine, pleading. “Grids, listen to me. Give me the retro sequence, and within two weeks you won’t ever have to worry about me again. I’ll be back in a body where I belong and out of your way. What do you say?”

Blink. The light on the holopad beckons to Sly.

Grids steeples his hands and sinks further into the foamflake, his brow furrowing. “Birdboy, why would you hop into a body where you’d be vulnerable, when you could stay where you are, and be the most powerful little prig on the planet?”

The flamewing splits and falls, forming the face of a small, crying child. “How could you know what it’s like,” he said. “There’s nothing in here, but cold, barren data. There’s no warmth, no one to hold me, no one to talk to.” The child looks up and wipes the tears from his face. “All I want is to be a little boy again, to feel my arms and legs. I want to eat and sleep again. I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to feel anything ... except disappointed and lonely.”

“So,” Grids says, “if I give you the code you’ll be out of the datanets forever?”

“Forever.”

Blink. The retrovirus sequence waits on the optocard.

Savage glee fills Sly as he watches the flashing button, and a picture comes to him of his mother. She is huge and deteriorating still, but now she has the face of young Phoenix. There is no hesitation this time as he puts the pistol to his head and squeezes the trigger, giggling as the cherubic face explodes.

Grids is pondering. “All right, Birdboy, get The Luck back online.”

“Okay, but —”

“You want an answer or not?”

The holographic boy becomes a phoenix again, says, “Whatever you say.”

Blink.

Below the bird appears a small kangaroo in mid hop. “... d-d-does is g-g-give the ...” Realization hits, “Oh.”

“Luck, Birdboy has offered to leave all the datanets for good if we give him the code. What do you say?”

“W-W-What about Joella and the b-b-boy. We were doing this t-t-to get him out of his mess —”

Phoenix cuts him off, speaking with confidence, “Listen, if it’s the boyo your worried about, once you give me the sequence, the bitch won’t have any reason to hunt him. She’ll be too worried about tracking me down.”

Grids turns to Sly, “What do you say, Slyboy, do we make a deal with the devil or no?”

Sly wrenches his eyes from the flashing light on the holopad and looks to Rose, a broad smile forming on his lips. “Whatever it takes to get Deadwise off our tails.” Then he faces Grids again. “And it sounds as though I’d be doing you a favor as well.”

“More than you could ever know.” Grids turns back to the console. “All right, Birdboy, I want some compensation.”

“Naturally. Name it.”

Grids looks back at Sly, then at Rose. “First, I’ll need two uncoded, false passports, for a boy of around thirteen and a fem of fifteen or so. Then I want a million credits put into a genelocked account under those two passport’s I.D. prints, so you can’t jerk the money back after you get what you want.”

“It’s done.”

The pictoprinter coughs and rumbles. Two passports and two optocards with ‘Sadiate Bank of Zurich’ emblazoned on the side in forest-green pictographix emerge from the slot and fall to the bin below.

Grids gives Sly a wink.

Sly feels his hands clench, the bite of his nails digging deep into his palms. It’s really happening.

“Also,” says Grids, “I want you to secure a privileged account on one of the orbital nodes and let me code the passkey.”

“A privileged account?”

“System-level access at least. It seems such a modest price for freedom.”

“Okay, you’ve made your meaning. It’s set up. I’ve given China Luck the coordinates. Code at your leisure.”

“I will later, when you’re out. Meanwhile, prepare to receive the code.” Grids leans forward.

Yes, thinks Sly, now is the time.

The gloveman’s hand is in motion towards the button when it is stopped by an ear splitting shriek of rending metal from the door behind them.

Into the following calm, the voice drops like liquid fire, “Grids, please don’t make me kill you.”

The muscles in the gloveman’s back bunch up, but he turns slow and easy, his hands spread wide.

Sly feels a chill slice up his neck to make his hair stand on end. His head begins to throb, and he turns, dropping to a crouch, to see her standing in the ruined doorway — the V-cut splattered with muck. A thin spray of blood is traced across her features, mixed with sweat, and streaming along the fine scar lines on her face. Blood and sewage stain her battlesuit so that Sly can barely make out the tusked elephant symbol on her chest.

She is poised in easy readiness on the balls of her feet, arms at her sides, her right hand dripping with vermillion gore.

Sly peeps hints of gridded robotics, exposed icepack, beneath the flayed skin. As she moves slightly, the flesh slips further and he sees it clearly — a milky-white mesh of flex armoring beneath the seeping wound.

“Well, well, today must be a family reunion,” Grids says, standing to face her. “If somebody’d told me, I would’ve had refreshments prepared.”

A wistful smile pushes at the corners of her mouth. “This is a do-or-die, my love, please don’t push me. You were about to do something out

of your depth, as usual. Trust that I would rather kill even you, than let you make this mistake.”

Sly looks from her to the holopad’s flashing button and back.

Her attention is focused on Grids.

Once more his eyes stray to the console.

Blink. The button beckons for his touch.

Teasing death just one more time, he thinks to himself, straightening slowly and not wanting to look towards the button — the button that means sweet revenge. Instead, he focuses on Deadwise.

She bares her teeth in a cat’s smile. “I’ve spent seven years trying to keep Phoenix in check, and I’m not about to let you destroy that.”

Grids looks stunned, “What are you talking about, Joella? He’s loose in the datanets, free to inhabit any online system, steal any public and most private information and manipulate it to his heart’s content. How have you been keeping him in check?”

The grin fades and her tone becomes soft, out of place with the face, “Grids, for years I’ve watched him use the power you gave him to manipulate the corporate monoliths with precision; acquiring stock, crashing files, selling any and all information. He’s been buying bodies from killers like Jonesy for years, even though I don’t see how Jonesy could have worked for him after what happened. Phoenix was a big part of the GenetiSource plan to get rid of Jonesy’s father by framing, and later murdering, him.”

She focuses her attention on Grids alone. “All this time, Phoenix has been waiting for the right moment, watching, pushing buttons, until the climate is right. He’s been after that code all along, because when he gets a body, everything will be set up to make him, overnight, the most powerful person in the world.”

Grids sits on the edge of a chair and looks down, thinking.

Desperate frustration fills Sly. F’en lame gloveman is being convinced! Can’t wait for him. It’s time to take matters in hand. He flashes a glance at the button and starts to edge towards the holopad.

Blink.

He shifts his weight onto his left foot and leans ever so slightly in the direction of the button.

Grids shakes his head. “That still doesn’t make sense. He’s already the most powerful person in the world. He runs rampant through the lines. Nobody can stop him. Even I can only fake him out for brief spurts. If he gets a body, then it’s just like he says, you’ll try and take him out, and I’ve never known you to fail, Joella.”

Blink. A little further.

“Grids, think about it, all he controls now is information. It’s power, but he has no real way to benefit from it. If he gets a body, not only will he manipulate all that information, he will have the hands and feet to physically put that information into action. He can come out as anyone at anytime. If that happened, everyone in this room would be taken out sooner or later. Even I would only stay alive for a short duration under the onslaught that he could bring to bear, unless I was lucky enough to find him in time.”

Sweat beads on Sly’s brow as a timeless centimeter crawls under his foot.

Deadwise glances down, bone-weary written on her face. “And that’s not all. The sequence that Jonesy stole allows one personality to be mapped over another, but it doesn’t completely kill the victim. It just pushes him into the background. That’s how GenetiSource drove my son insane. I swore I’d never let it happen to anyone else. The only way I can be sure is by guarding the information, keeping it secret. Phoenix could use the sequence to map himself or any of his demented henchmen over the minds of as many people as he wanted. Besides . . .” She holds up the ruination of her right hand, and the blood changes direction, running over her forearm to her elbow. “I’ve slowed, Grids. One of your boyos did this to me, and I don’t even think he was jacked up.”

Grids gasps, spins to the commlink. “Chop Chop?”

A new voice enters the room, “Chop Chop restin’ with The Fin, Grids. Dis Diamon’ Man.”

Grids chokes, and his face goes pale.

“Gloveman, I gots twenty killjoys, ready to back you up, jus’ say da word and we rumble like thunder.”

Sly looks up. Deadwise is poised in perfect, stationary balance.

Blink. Just a little farther and he’ll be in reach.

A tear glides down Grids’ cheek. “Hold off, Diamond Man,” he says. “I’ll cope.”

“Icepack!” It’s Phoenix, flaming brightly in bird form above the holopads.

“Go away, you infantile megalomaniac.” Her lips barely seem to move. She lowers her hand, and the drip of gore reverses, slipping to the floor again.

“Icepack,” says the demon-child. “Think about it, give me a body, and you’d have at least a week to try and kill me. As is, you can never touch me, can never get those fine strong hands of yours around my throat.”

“Trust me, it’s an image I fall asleep to. But I’d rather know where you are, so I think you should stay put.”

Blink.

Nearly there.

Blink.

One more step and . . .

“Boy!”

Sly feels his blood freeze.

“There is an eighty-nine percent chance that I can kill you long before you hit that button. I don’t kill children, but believe that I will make this exception if I have to.”

Sly begins to tremble, but keeps a grip on his nerve and answers cool as he can, “Yeah, Deadwise, but there’s sixty percent odds that my body keeps right on going, and presses the button anyway. The little son of a bitch must come out.”

Rose gives him a wide eyed stare.

Deadwise whispers, “Jonesy.”

Grids cuts in, “Sly, you’re a sharp boyo. This isn’t worth dying over.

Just back off the button, and we'll get all of this settled."

Blink. Sly feels a small, insane laugh bubble up. "Oh, that's easy for you to say. She hasn't broken your neck recently."

From the speakers comes a satisfied rumble.

Blink. Sly continues, "She couldn't let me live anyway; I have the code. No matter where I go or what I say I'll do, she'll know I have the means of her downfall in my head. I'm going to keep my bargain with the devil."

"Sly, don't," from the girl.

Deadwise says, "The boy's overshadowed. When Grids pulled the code from him, Jonesy got on top."

Blink. Sly keeps his mind focused on the button, trying to disregard the cry of panic from the small boy in the back of his brain. It's Jonesy's voice that speaks, "You've got it right, you stupid bitch, and what's more, you're going to end up doing my work for me. All this time I've been trying to devise a way to get to the last of the people that betrayed my father, and the only way to succeed is to get him out and into a body were I can kill him. That's why I was willing to do his dirty work."

Blink. Sweat drips down Sly's neck.

"So now, you are going to kill me, but not before I let him out, and then you will have to kill him to stay alive. As it stands, I guess that it really doesn't make that much difference, does it?"

Blink. As if from far away, Sly feels muscles, not under his control, jerk. Then he is jumping towards the holopad. In slow motion he sees his hand arc towards the button, its steady blinking growing ever brighter. This can't be happening, the small boy thinks. Promised he'd do slave action for no one, ever again. His decisions were supposed to belong to him and him alone. Now, he's failing again.

Then fire races up his legs as the rounds hit, and he begins to collapse. But his fingers are almost there, tips grazing the button — the button that means the death of Phoenix Brisbane, the last name on his list. He can feel the smooth texture of the glowing, red glass as it flashes beneath his fingers, as he prepares to press it.

No! In the back of Sly's mind, a small boy yells, "NO." The hand wavers, fingers hesitate, and for an instant the boy is back on top.

Then Rose's waldo slams the breath from his body and throws him wide of the console.

He rolls over to see the mechanical arm above him coming down hard for a second time. It hits him in the chest and pins him to the floor.

His legs are on fire and he struggles to move. No luck, her waldo holds him strong.

Deadwise stands above him, one hand casually pushing the arm aside while the other blurs for a pocket.

Sly looks towards the console to see the button still blinking in relentless repetition. The code was never sent. He has failed at the end.

Deadwise has won.

Then the cyborg is all over him, the autoinjector sliding seamless into his thigh through the citysuit.

"Sleep, Boy. When you wake, I promise, Jonesy will bother you no more."

• • •

He wakes from a dreamless sleep, flatbacked on a comfortable mattress. When he peeps, he knows where he is, washed up in Quackpalace again, though this time the accommodations are plush.

On the wall in front of him, a huge vidscreen tells softly of gang riots in the Nui-tang district downtown. The words 'Ozone Freestyle' come up more than once. He turns away, not really interested and thinks about his stuffed bear, but there isn't much longing for it.

To his left sits a small packet on a night stand that looks like real oak, not synthetic. He reaches gingerly, pain streaking down his legs as he turns. Inside the packet is an optocard and a passport. He opens the passport and sees his face done in clean pictographix, and the name Andrew Morgan Ridgefield. He laughs at the picto of himself. He looks funny without hair.

The nurse comes in, same vidtoon voice in place, but now her lab coat displays the tusked elephant on the lapel, “And how are we doing today, Andrew?”

He smiles, remembering the million credits on the opticard, and says, “I guess I’m fine, just fine.”

She pinches his nose and smiles back. “The doctor says that you’re healing exceptionally well and should be able to take visitors. Your sister has been waiting most of the day. Do you feel up to seeing someone?”

“Yes.”

As she leaves, Sly just keeps smiling.

When the bitzy face, lopsided with genuine diamond nose rings, pops around the door frame, his smile stretches to a grin. She walks up to him, her blue hair shining clean in the light, and takes his hand in hers. “Pipsqueak,” she says, “it’s good to see you awake. Dad is at home, waiting for you to get better so we can go away for awhile.” He closes his eyes as she kisses him on the forehead.

Behind his eyes he expects to see the numbers and letters of the sequence, and when they don’t come, a wave of relief passes through him. Wiped from his memory.

I don’t care, he thinks, and concentrates instead on the cool wetness of Rose’s lips on his brow and the secure grasp of her hand.

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