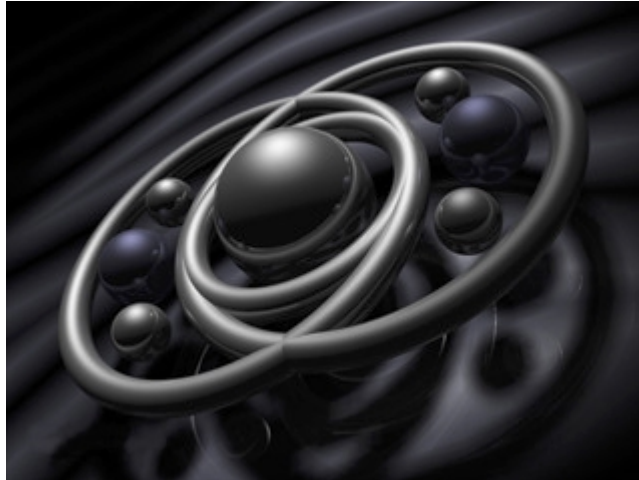




- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Introduction | 20. Green Fireballs Rising |
| 1. Transvandal | 21. The Locust |
| 2. Pac-Rim Osaka | 22. Liquid Jell-O Strobe |
| 3. Electra-Blue | 23. Interprompt Midi |
| 4. The Dsu3-VR Interface | 24. Thousands of Small Furry Animals |
| 5. The Neoprene Dreamscape | 25. High Orbital Micro-Environment |
| 6. Irian Jaya | 26. Neptunian Subspace |
| 7. Octogenarian Madman | 27. Mirrored Hollo-wheel |
| 8. I.I.F.F. | 28. Last Chance Hysteroid |
| 9. A River of Veils | 29. Silican Netherworld |
| 10. The Shining Xenon Spires | 30. The Love Drones of Vesta |
| 11. The Butcher of Luzon | 31. The Dracontium |
| 12. Neuro Chameleon | 32. Cthonic Passenger |
| 13. 2cb-p A.R.T. | 33. Rotting Ultraflesh |
| 14. Reptilian Cortex | 34. The Abyss |
| 15. E.M.P. | 35. The Apocalypse of Matter |
| 16. Hypervision | Epilogue |
| 17. REM Sequencer | Notes |
| 18. Dark Nostalgia | |
| 19. Trans-Oceanic Homicide | |



While the world population went online, traditional forms of government became obsolete. Regional forums sprouted up from within the networks, like mycelia spreading on the forest floor during early autumn rains.

However, this empowerment of the masses was to be short-lived. When borders became meaningless and nation states began to crumble, the same international conglomerates that played such a pivotal role in restructuring world economies, methodically seized control.

Private security forces attempted to fill the gap left by the crumbling police states, often with limited success. Corporate law became universal, and was strictly enforced.

Exponential technological growth transformed the planet's agricultural and industrial societies into a silicon-based, cybernetic jungle. Hybrid technologies, including devices fabricated from biological molecules, led to the development of microscopic Optical Neural Computers.

Implant design as fashion statement served as a tantalizing beacon of hope to the enslaved masses within this giant ant heap.

Individualism was replaced by a new imperative:

Human beings as corporate property.

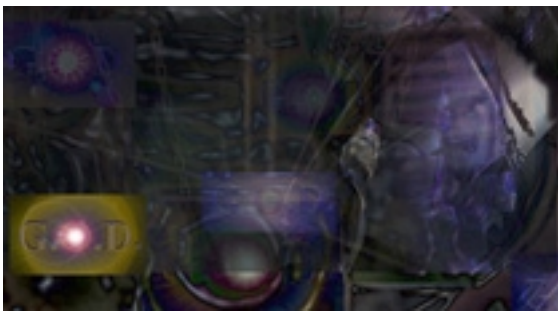
Conformity to the doctrines of consumerism.

Total service to the will of the Multinational giants.

As the third stone from the sun continued to spin silently upon its axis...

Transvandal

Travis flexed the muscles in his forearm, exposing shiny strands of razor ribbon filament protruding from his fingertips like the talons of some cthonic primordia. He had trashed two losers the night before, but he still hadn't found God. He had a lust to kill, a strong need that drove him on. His head throbbed in agony like the twisted metal resulting from a high-speed train wreck.



Travis was no ordinary antichrist or hack artist. He had wasted that I.D. a river ago with a needle in his arm. He'd come a long way towards becoming alien in his perspective, shunning the cultural niceties and leaning heavily towards the rougher trades.

He was an accomplished Transvandal.

Travis had always felt as if he was born without a soul. He could just tell. Everything was available for a price. He could feel the tension of the Megapolis rising and he knew he would hurt somebody tonight. He felt a rage coming on and the need to hurt something rose like the seething fountain of magma that flowed beneath the earth. He'd just as soon hurt them as look at them. He'd rather hurt them if it would lead him to God.

For two nights in a row he had stumbled aimlessly through the Xenon groves.

Soon he would be Set.

Soon everything was going to be real nice.

The stereophonic holosound blasting through his optical browser sounded like jagged knives piercing his nerve-wracked mind.

Cool night.

The cloak of darkness mixed with light rain and fog obscured the sparkling Xenon spires of the Western Megapolis. Travis felt wretched. In contrast to his massive scarified torso, his aura of virility, his animal strength had waned, giving the

appearance of a berserker on the verge of self destructing. His sigilized face, etched with bio-electric flame designs, reflected the deeper rampage of his youth.

The warm autumn rain fell steadily, causing some peripheral fogging on his U.V. Visor. Slight condensation formed inside his rebreather, creating prismatic rainbows of color across the optical browser.

Travis conjured the images of multiple sexual encounters with the whores of his choice as he indexed the hottest virtual cat houses.

He would often tantalize himself with the good things that lay ahead.

Endless possibilities lurked in the night as chaos sizzled the interface between his info-reality and the dazzling lights of the Megapolis.

Travis scanned the deserted pedestrian alleyways. Someone would pass by soon. He could feel it. His charcoal gray bio-latex outwear beaded up with raindrops as he lurked through the seedy side streets, with the lonely sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls of the towering metallic compounds.

It had been days since Travis had scored. Tonight would be his.

An hour must have passed before Travis located the sub-pheromone profile of his victim.

"Aha, fresh meat," he noted, with his biochrome recorders on full 360-scope.

He detected the sweet perfume of affluence.

Unprotected.

Oblivious...

He stepped into the swirling soup of fog and rain, pacing the elderly denizen through the peripheral tunnels and byways just outside the Korean Enclave.

His senses were heightened as a familiar tingling sensation rippled through his body electric.

He could smell the Kim Chi and rice drifting from the old woman's food basket as she wearily made her way back home from the Agro-Hub. It was rare for the elderly to travel unescorted, and he was not going to let this hapless victim escape. The woman had no way of knowing that this would be the last walk to the market she would ever take.

As the tension mounted, his throat became dry and his palms began to sweat as if the two phenomena were inextricably woven into a symphony, with the pounding of his bio-synthetic heart as the percussive instrumentation.

An accordion-shaped modular vehicle silently careened around the corner, startling the woman and causing several small items to fall from her basket.

Travis went blank for a second as his reptilian cortex began seething with combustion.

As the ageing woman stooped down to pick up the fallen item Travis approached her, appearing to be preoccupied with adjusting his rebreather nozzle. As she glanced up she could see his smile, now visible enough to reveal clenched denplants.

It was going to be shade and easy.

Real cool.

Real nice.

It would be over in seconds. Just a blur on her retinal scanner, a flurry of motion and her life would be switched off...

Forever...



For a minute instant he thought he noticed the recognition of horror on her face as he stiff-armed her neck, slamming her head into the cement. He ripped the delicately woven Optical Browser cable out of its neural interface with the machinations of a skilled surgeon.

Her browser turned to black.

Her "eyes" felt like soft mushy Jell-O to Travis as he ripped the Ret-scan appendage off her head and plucked the precious nano-circuitry from her eye sockets.

"I'd just as soon kill ya as look at ya, bitch."

Travis wasn't big on words. Big words just seemed to get stuck in his mouth sideways and he always felt as if he'd choke on them. It didn't matter what he said to the woman now, as she lay jerking spasmodically in pools of warm indigo.

Her shiny electronic jewelry was his.

He gloated over his victim for a moment, reeling with the freedom and ecstasy of pure adrenaline and then stomped on her skull, crushing her cerebellum like a piece of rotting fruit. It was like his signature on the painting. His trademark.

"At least her family won't have to waste money on a cryo- funeral," he laughed as he turned and fled the grisly scene.

Travis moved casually through the fog of shadow and light, loosing himself in the calliope of street vendors, ethnic eateries and light sculptures surrounding the inner-enclaves. He loved the anonymity of the Post-Modern Culture. It seemed to mirror the loss of self he experienced on the Net.

Travis flinched at the thought of Internal Security Protocol, forensics and such messy details as sub-pheromone chromatographs. Hanging around wasn't exactly what he had in mind. Travis shunned fixed locations like a curse.

"Fuck permanent residences," he muttered to himself as he climbed into a crowded, noisy air-tram for the five minute flight to the air-shuttle omnibus. The show wasn't over. It seemed to Travis as if it would never end.

Travis had little time to waste. The task ahead required yet even more finesse. He entered a cramped plastic lavatory alcove which reeked of urine and a noxious chemical odor. His "natural" eye stung smartly at the rancid, caustic smell.

"Nice," he thought to himself sarcastically. He worked frantically, stripping down the Trans-face and popping out the works. He was stressed physically and beginning to show symptoms of CNS damage. His hands trembled slightly. Travis braced himself against the overflowing toilet to stabilize the meticulous operation. Each design was precious, containing its own unique sub-atomic lithography. Each wafer was locked into its own custom-designed shock box to preserve the fragile bio-electric trace lines.

The tram creaked and moaned as it began braking for the omnibus landing platform.

As the air-tram touched the tarmac, Travis snapped the shiny new chips into place, hidden within a small sample case of pleasure-wear.

The Omnibus could be a security nightmare. Exiting the tram, Travis followed his own 4Dbot down the visual overlay into the Regional Omnibus.

Travis was scanned briefly and soon found himself seated in the Commerce section along with several hundred other nocturnal travelers. The heavy cloak of night obscured the sluggish low orbit Solar-Glides that constantly traversed the Western Skies.

With movements not unlike robotic pterodactyles, wasp shaped glider-craft silently proliferated the global hive. The mutation of the transhuman with the sticky memetics of electrochemical consciousness sloshed like a full tide across the continental data waves, spilling into the chaotic medium of a post-cybernetic wasteland.

As the shuttle lifted off the tarmac Travis was right on the Optical Browser, immersed in the medium of choice: a rather serpentine hallucination. There were Greek islands and ancient cave-temples to explore.

As he swirled into a foam of luminous data clusters, the info galaxy embraced him. For Travis and billions of other broken personas, this gleaming chalice of telepresence was the pathway to freedom and ecstasy. Here there were no perversions; every act was permitted and glorified. He observed exaltation supreme within the electro-subterranean playfields... He received supplication.

This was where Travis routinely discarded his own excess baggage, deconstructing himself within the void of "no-mind".

A consciousness beyond duality had its merits. He was standing on the outside of pleasure and pain. He was standing outside of the post-human tragedy. He stood within the threshold: the twilight of the mortal. He remained submerged within the depths of the collective psyche until the last traces of self-compartmentalization were annihilated.

Upon his arrival in Pac-Rim/Osaka he streaked into one of the local hideouts. The dump provided the usual casket sized sleep cubicles. Travis knew his limitations. He was hurting. He had a few hours to wait for his appointment with Mitsui and he didn't think he could make it too far without collapsing. Climbing inside the sleeper, Travis couldn't help but notice the similarity; it reminded him of an ancient sarcophagus with its pseudo-traditional decor richly inlaid with Mesopotamian stellae.

A single xenon crystal illuminated the miniaturized sleep chamber. He blinked on his personal Cyber-node. Nothing put Travis in the outer zones quicker than subcutaneous nanotech. He warmed up with a quick spin around his favorite Ero-zone and gradually found himself floating through tubular corridors of crimson light. Gothic Archways expanded horizontally to reveal azure skies and classical Greek architecture gleaming in opalescent hues, fading beneath him like a fog enshrouded landscape in the strobe light morning.

It was just the way he liked it. This was what he craved. With only a rice mat on the floor, he felt cleansed.

Pac-Rim Osaka

That night was the first time in weeks that he would sleep, while the rain fell softly and the golden Xenon glittered on the shiny byways of Pac-Rim Osaka.

Travis overslept. From darkness to darkness he dreamed a dreamless sleep.

Almost 14 hours had elapsed since his arrival. He triggered his Retinal-scan and logged on through his Optical Browser. Travis knew Mitsui. He knew Mitsui would be pissed off.

As if in perfect synch Mitsui appeared in real-time, mad as a swarm of fire hornets.

"Why are you always late? I almost had you extracted from your sleep chamber and brought here forcibly."

"I'm there already," replied Travis, as he shut off the conversation and laughed with his usual acidic humor.

Original Nano-circuitry was worth plenty, especially the new viral based RNA chips.

These tiny wonders were literally swarming with intelligence. "Mitsui is going to pay. That's all there is to it. He has no choice."

Travis became ambulatory. He stumbled down the musty hallway leading towards the streets of Pac-Rim Osaka, still struggling with his rebreather and the cartons of pleasure-ware strung haphazardly over his shoulder.

He merged with the teeming hordes, all vying for space on the underground transit. He made a routine notation on his log, "This is where I score. This is where I'm gonna get me some colors. I'm sick of trying to wire into these electrons on the Net. I gotta have some fucking colors, gotta reach God".

There was no point in attempting to rehearse the bargaining process ahead. The price of God wasn't carved in stone, and the value of "hot" Nano-circuitry was driven by the engine of piracy, the most efficient of all free market cycles.

Travis made good time. He stepped out of the congested underground into the humid choking surface of Pac-Rim Osaka's fetid streets.

He was just a few minutes away from Mitsui's office, a typical Yakuza Palace sitting upon the side of a rather steep hillside.

Torrential rains had washed away some parts of the muddy incline, encrusted with rickety older dwellings adjacent Mitsui's "palace". It gave the place the look of a war zone. The neighborhood was covered with security trying to keep people from returning to their dwellings.

He noticed a lone figure staring down at him from one of the large windows in the building above him. Travis could feel Mitsui's cold glare piercing the outware facade which Travis projected.

Travis had met Mitsui and his gang during the rebuilding of Sapporo in 2047. The Yakuza controlled the construction industry, and thrived during just such natural disasters. Even though Mitsui was from a different world than Travis, they both shared common values that had cemented their relationship throughout the years: a proclivity towards ruthlessness and human savagery, and living on the brutal instincts that came most naturally.

Looking over both shoulders to the rear, Travis signaled the office gate to open. As lucky as he felt at that moment, he still had to be on guard for the very forces that were bent on undoing him. If he was followed, Mitsui would have him killed. If he was too late or short of product, maybe worse. But the quality was reliable, and Travis felt better on the move anyway.

Suddenly he got a stabbing pain in the front of his brow. A dull throbbing had been there for weeks but this was a new pain, a sharper pain than he had ever felt before. Just the thought made him feel numb all over. If his withdrawals didn't get some attention soon, Travis knew the consequences.

Travis bolted up the stairs, past several rows of security lasers and through the most ornately carved doorway he'd ever seen. There sat the person he'd come halfway around the world to see.

"It's about time you arrived. I was just leaving."

Travis begin to get a sinking feeling in his chest.

Mitsui had always been cold and impatient, but Travis detected a new level of detachment.

It had been a long time since Travis had felt this intimidated. Mitsui wasn't about to negotiate. Travis could just feel it.

Travis tried to break the ice by making small talk.

"When did you score this front?" Travis asked, as he casually reached up and slid his index finger down the cool Xenon crystal, that kept the room lighting so soft and alluring.

"I actually don't work here. I just use it for, well, different purposes," Mitsui growled. Travis knew the time for chatting was over.

He began to sweat. His head felt like it was about to explode. Travis had the distinct sensation of violin strings popping in the back of his neck. Although this commonly occurs in Cybercu recipients, the angry neural information he was receiving told him that he only had a short time left; perhaps very short.....

He reached under his tunic and probed through his valise, removing a small packet of pleasureware.

"Well, here's the goodies," Travis blurted out.

With a series of deft manipulations the shock boxes appeared. He placed the tiny treasures onto the table in front of Mitsui, while Mitsui stared out the window with his back turned to Travis.

Travis found his lack of interest to be extremely unsettling. Mitsui turned and looked up at Travis. "I'm assuming you have acquired the DCE-2000 series."

Travis responded, "2000? You said the 1900s were fine."

"Well, then let me see them," demanded Mitsui.

Travis began to feel really sick. The chips Travis had procured weren't 1900s. They were at least 6 weeks old. Mitsui inspected the chips under a small electroscope that clipped onto his head-gear, folding down from the Retinal Scan appendage.

As Mitsui examined the intricate trace patterns, Travis grew more uncomfortable by the moment. He gazed silently ahead for what seemed like forever.

Mitsui was first to break the icy quiet: "These chips are virtually obsolete."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Travis moaned as he picked the miniature electronic treasures up with trembling hands.

"Well, do ya wanna work or what? The DCE-1800 Series have a half-life of about two months, so I'd say they have lost half their value at that rate."

Travis felt as if he was the one being robbed. He could see his recreation safari plans were going down the tubes.

"Whatever, just gimme the stuff!" Travis said roughly. He was clearly growing impatient, but he knew inside that to argue with Mitsui could be dangerous. Perhaps even lethal.

"Seventy two ampulets, take it or leave it," Mitsui stated coldly.

"Seventy-two ampulets!!" screamed Travis, "I can get a dozen packets on the streets for this shit."

"Take it or leave it," Mitsui firmly stated.

"How about you make it a hundred ampulets, plus a twelve packet? Make it worth my while," Travis begged.

"I thought you wanted God?" Mitsui laughed cruelly.

Travis quickly backed down.

"Alright, I can't afford to say no, I've got expenses to worry about."

Mitsui continued laughing, "The only expenses you've got are for your precious God."

Of course Travis knew what he had meant by that. God was what Travis lived for. That, the Net and his whores. Travis quickly tried to calculate the damage to his shrinking fantasies. He would have less than a two week supply. Things were looking bleak to Travis and appeared they might stay in that state for the foreseeable future.

Mitsui reached across the desk to his porta-control-pack, pressed a blue button and almost instantaneously a Plexiglas pneumatic tube containing the telltale colorful ceramic packaging of God appeared on the biologically manufactured mahogany surface in front of him.

Mitsui opened the transparent canister and handed the precious substance to Travis.

Just touching the bright aluminum and neo-ceramic packaging made his whole body tremble, as the powerful narcosagen would soon lead him to a paradise, an addictive craving for pleasure that knew no bounds.

He ripped open one packet and immediately swallowed an ampulet. He felt the sweet taste of God fizzle under his tongue. Within seconds of the fizzing sound the powerful narcosagen was hurdling its way towards his brain.

His body fell limp in the chair. As the obvious waves of both relaxation and excitement seemed to crawl up his spine, his body lurched forward, becoming upright. Travis smiled and sighed. His pain was gone. Everything felt smooth.

"Things just haven't been the same since they banned God from the general population," he stammered, with a small trace of spittle beginning to drool from his mouth.

Mitsui, resigning himself from Travis and his dilemma, spoke softly in Travis' ear.

"The ban on God is the best thing that ever happened to this fucked up planet," he said. "Look at what God has done for you."

Travis didn't care what Mitsui had to say. He could care less what anybody thought. He didn't care if they existed at all.



Electra-Blue

Peg arrived at the scene of the crime before the body baggers and scavengers had even been awarded their lottery status.

Her new softies made it a snap. The winners would be quick on the scene for the cleanup, if you could call it that.

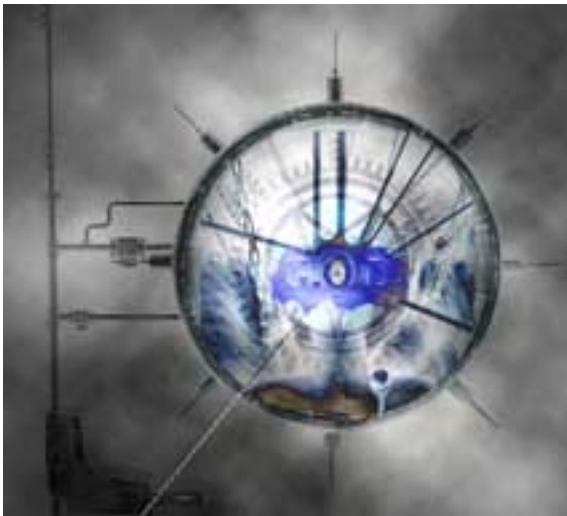
To Peg, this privilege resembled jackals and vultures in a feeding frenzy. In this case, the carrion was an elderly Korean woman.

At only 10,000 credits a pop, she couldn't afford to miss out on another collar. Her retinal scanner etched a steady stream of imagery onto her surgically modified optic nerve, carving out untold dimensions of electronic wisdom within her skull.

Peg hopped from database to database; a party girl playing high-speed musical chairs. Within minutes there would be eyewitnesses looking for rewards, treasure hunters scanning for secondary or tertiary leftovers.

Left untouched, sub-pheramone isomers could remain inert for days. But with disturbances in the environment such as wind and rain, all traces could be washed out within minutes.

Whenever a fresh victim went down, she would dispatch a 4D-bot to the nearest Oxyclear Funnel to scoop a few microns of residue off the "recent history" files. Patching in a 4D-bot was the only way she stood a chance in the cutthroat world of cryogenic shysters, and Peg flowed easy in the endless groove.



She scaled in for a closer look, inspecting the intimate details of the small woman's crumpled body now awash in a splattered mess of dark, coagulating plasma. Running a remote wasn't quite the same as being there, but she still got the picture.

"This looks like the work of some nasty motherfucker," she caught herself saying half out loud.

Pegs data-screen was split into a myriad of floating windows as she ran poly-scans from the requested cross-reference match for any and all cases of bludgeoning or malicious cranial destruction of a similar nature.

She remembered a collar from a few years back known as the "Hand of Glory." His thing was hands. Used them for some kind of rituals. That was the popular theory, anyway.

"Now we've got crushed skulls."

"Touching," she thought to herself half-serious, half-submerged in a demented nostalgia.

The 4D-bots self-replicated and jacked into every Oxyclear Funnel within a six block radius of the kill site.

Only the most recent sample material was of notable interest. Several hundred trillion microns of residual pheromone could quickly be sorted out, analyzed, and spewed back within seconds from her new lightweight Samsung multi-spectrum nanoprocessor.

Peg ran a perptrace against the data she was getting from the Samsung. She fired the graphics through a Mandelbrot set, displaying the data formations within a beautiful scale of crystalline patterns. Peg experienced slight vertigo and flicked the format to text-only, if only to avoid becoming mesmerized from the deluge of colorful imagery.

Several minutes slid past and Peg observed nothing eventful. It reminded her of Vegas Online. Observing numbers crunch was similar to watching the roulette wheel spin: a cybernetic Mandala of Fortune. The odds of winning were always up in the air, but Peg craved the rush of uncertainty. She felt the excitement pouring through her, like a cool wind blowing through her mind. A collar was just what she needed.

Then she needed to score.

Peg loved the bells and whistles. That was one of the best parts about being a freelancer: Net-Gates kept her upgraded with all the latest softies; her contacts on the street kept her loaded with the slickest batches of God.

Peg drifted silently across the eddies of bits and bytes. As she waded through radiant pools of data, she cursed out loud. "Damn, this is fucking Jurassic," she whined, as the results slowly dribbled in from the backwaters of the corporate Infi-Net.

Suddenly, within the soup of boiling photons, her tracer turned on like the Fourth of July, exciting her vision, dazzling her Retinal Scanner. She knew she had a match.

Less than four microns of material recovered in an Oxyfunnel filter had matched the sub-pheromone profile of a known Transvandal suspect. Peg thanked the lucky 4D-bot with a quick kiss.

"Shit," she complained. The perp was running multiple IDs. Still the data showed a bias towards a gender bound caricature. Peg sat immobile, glued to the rotating windows of tangled data. Within minutes she had latched onto a trail that led from Mexico to Moscow. She followed the thread to an expensive pleasure boutique, where God freaks and addicts of various persuasions were known to indulge in the carnal delights of the Pleasure Domes.

Sparkling like a neon arabesque, Peg glided soft, electra-blue, amidst the crowd of erotic images. As lifelike and suprarreal as each image appeared, she couldn't help but cognize them as phantoms; bizarre shimmering images of flickering light which danced and moved with the post-tribal holo-sound and graphic interface.

Writhing, shape shifting, and generally co-mingling towards higher realms of ecstatic bliss; this was the new religion for the untold billions of maladaptive denizens inhabiting the exquisite virtual ecologies interwoven throughout Infi-Net. Unlike the countless designer dream worlds she had created, with trillions of electrons chanting in unison within a seamless purified visualization, Infi-Net provided an element of diversity and dangerous surprise.

For a moment Peg became disoriented. She couldn't tell if her own intuition was tripping sensory alarms, or if she had come into range of her primary target. Her musculature became taut. If she could locate his primary domain she'd absorb enough credits in her account to renourish her own God stash. "That would be real nice," she sullenly mused.

Peg didn't have to wait long for an answer. She was accustomed to realistic telepresence, but she found herself staring at an image so human looking that it seemed to reveal something more. A series of sigilized glyphs covered a face somehow infinitely familiar.....

"Recognition?" she wondered. "Why is this happening?" She slid behind one of the digital kiosks and paused. The representations of sinister looking faces, laced with Xenon filaments, penetrated the erotic veils with a piercing incandescence.

Undeterred by the visual and auditory debauchery bombarding her browser, Peg moved chameleon-like, blending uniformly with the latticework of light, broken into its fibrous filaments. This was how she would usually run down a suspect.

She pulsed closer through the veils of swirling imagery. She suddenly found herself close enough to reach out and touch him.

Although he appeared to stand no less than two meters from her, she maintained her focus on the numerical sequencer, scanning frantically for the ambient locational reference. No mental interference could deter her precise concentration. She was dealing with a digitized kinesthetic semi-surface, but he could still touch and move her in unpredictable ways.

Maintaining her cover was always of the utmost importance. Peg never lost it for even a second. With her Wetware styling on full Multinational Camo, she felt secure within the relative safety of her telepresence.

Her suspect began to move about the lobby of the Kali-Exotech, one of the seemingly endless quasi-executive D/S flesh arcades that formed the underbelly of the Beast known as Infi-Net.

From the nerve readout responses she was receiving, the suspect registered as a gender biased male.

Despite the billions of fakes cruising the subterranean pipeline, Peg could often detect the "real" thing. She prided her expertise on a lifetime's striving for perfection.

"It's all nerve responses," she thought. This hulking male image appeared to Peg as the classic Transvandal, and his off the chart bio-stats indicated he was still reeling in ecstasy of the kill.

His digital cover appeared too slick to be a clean user.

"This fucker looks like he knows what he's doing," she thought. "Could be just data mining. Browsing for more social contacts or sex, but probably out to worship God to the last detail, including the orgies and multicolored ceramic packaging," Peg noted in her log.

Infi-Net seethed with the icons of illusion. The old world view that "authenticity" required object orientation in physical space had been discarded like an outdated fable.

Infi-Net had replaced the representation of the "real" world and the seamless consensus had fostered explosive examples of both diverse expansion and repressive corporate memetic sequences. The parameters of consensus reality were irrevocably warped with powerful narcosagens like God, which resulted in further nullification of the transhuman wreckage.

Infi-Net grew exponentially: a wildfire of cyber-cultural evolution spilling out towards the twenty second century.

Bright yellow light, emanating from static-form multi-channel overloads, flickered and began to pulsate across her retinal scanner as the suspect image disappeared

from view. Peg moaned in agony. She calculated she had no more than a few seconds to complete the location scan, otherwise she would be looking at a change of plans.

Her window of opportunity appeared to close. Then one of those unexpected miracles occurred that often seem to grace the digital universe. Her tracer softies scored a pos-lock.

A lifetime's interfacing with digital hardware sparked her synapses letting Peg's reflexes take control. Within seconds she had managed to attach a cookie to his browser, assigning the 4Dbot that would track the suspect netwide as well as keep her updated on every digital nerve center he would interface with.

Peg pulled the Retinal Scan appendage away from her face and ran the silken Data-Glove through her short greasy-blond hair. She was growing bald.

The Chem-baths were seeing to that.

She blinked off the Net and looked around to see the all too familiar surroundings that she reluctantly called home.

"Welcome to Hell," she muttered disgustingly, as she squinted and attempted to refocus after several hours in total immersion.

Peg's hideaway consisted of a small living chamber that included modular living utilities. She blinked her eyes three times fast and three times slow, signaling her sleeper to initialize a REM sequence.

Peg casually reached into a small alcove behind her pillow. She pulled out a shiny bright green packet of fresh God labeled "Lime Lunar Module", removed one ampulet and slipped it under her tongue, seeking the sublingual rush. She loved the tickling feeling in her mouth that accompanied the pressurized fizzing as the contents of the God ampulet rushed into the depths of her soulless carcass.

Peg's anxieties faded into the drab surroundings, replacing dull colors with the lightning fantastic. Her REM sequencer allowed God to interface with Peg's dreams, one of her favorite pastimes.

Even as Peg and Travis managed to dream in synchronous orbit on opposite sides of the planet, frantic billions were exploring new virtual landscapes of Infi-Net.

The Dsu3-VR Interface

By the mid twenty-first century, anarchists and hack-artists had cultivated acts of terror and defiance that threatened the stability of the Multinational itself.

Breaking through firewalls and tampering with corporate data banks wasn't the only threat from the new aeon radicals. Non-nuclear electro-magnetic pulse devices were also used to wreak havoc on the Networks.

The cost of shielding these Networks was prohibitive. Even the possession of knowledge about such technologies was punishable by death. Microwave gapplers, random airborne and aqueous plutonium releases, synthetic viruses and processor plagues were continually eroding the stability of the Multinational Conglomerate. Along with the introduction of analogues like Dsu3, known on the street as God, were born legions of highly motivated and skillful addicts, resulting in a reign of terror extending to the addict and non-addict enclaves alike.

Dsu3 was originally billed as the miracle of the twenty first century, and quite a remarkable analogue it was. Rumors of Draconian and or Arachno-Ophidian origins abounded around the mythos of the powerful narcosagen, and the discovery of the subspace fungus it was derived from.

But exactly where and why Dsu3 originated ultimately remained a mystery, concealed within countless layers of orchestrated disinformation.

Everybody at Net-Gates had always pushed the name "Dsu-3" as the Logo for the ultimate designer analogue, but "God" was the name that stuck on the streets and ghettos, impaled upon the heartless core of the planet in transformation and cauterizing the global brain hemorrhage known as Infi-Net.

Dsu3 or "God" appeared to be the inevitable result of significant breakthroughs in biotechnology coupled with a huge demand for new recreational analogues, many of which proved to be effective nootropics.

That Infi-Net was designed to open gateways for the passage of extraterrestrial "Arachnids" was one of the most popular among thousands of post urban legends floating down the Data-Stream.

Dsu3, a powerful narcosagen, promised to be everything for everybody. Stimulant, relaxant, hallucinogen, neural enhancer, life extension, and reanimator.

It wasn't until two out of three Denizens had fully accepted "God" that it became the consensual meta-religion for all sentient species.

Knowledge of the source of Dsu3 was suppressed, and research data was forbidden to the populace. The power of the market ruled the consensual hallucination known as God.

It took only moderate usage of Dsu3 for several months to produce permanent side effects. Time distortion, telepathy and other psychotronic phenomena were but a few of the perks.

It took only three days of daily usage to become permanently addicted. Withdrawals consisted of nausea, vomiting, migraine headaches, convulsions and death. Unlike previous designer narcosagents, continued usage of Dsu3 resulted in permanent lesions on the neo-cortex. Ultimately, the entire cerebrum would liquefy into a jelly like mass. This usually resulted first in acute dementia, followed by paralysis and death. The euphoria associated with this new biotech agent created a hysterical demand from an enslaved populace.

By the year 2054, Dsu3 was removed from the market and became available by special license only.

This only served to increase demand to a fever pitch. Eventually, as pandemonium began, even the special licenses were revoked, driving the God economy underground. This effectively forced the enslaved populace into lives of submission and subjugation.

Interestingly enough, the crystallography process involved in the manufacture of God was rumored to only be possible in a zero-gravity environment.



All subspace research was controlled by Net-Gates. Penalty for possession, usage or distribution was the same in all sectors: death...

A grueling Interro-prompt immediately followed by death was the penalty for even minor substance related infractions, enforced by the private agencies and freelancers for Net-Gates.

It was easy to understand how

God abuse could lead to violent behavior patterns. In fact, unlike most Class Nine euphoriant narcosagens, God seemed to activate the reptilian brain functions while inhibiting activity in the neo-cortex. The ability to act as a powerful stimulant which all but eliminated the need for sleep, and at the same time behave as a narcotic-like euphoriant enhancing both sexual excitement and relaxation, were two of Dsu3's finer qualities.

But there were more extraordinary dimensions to Dsu3. Visually, auditorially, and kinesthetically this was one heavy analogue.

Originally released through Net-Gates Pharmaceuticals as aVR enhancement upgrade, it served as the perfect morphogenetic resonator with which to interface with the intensity of virtual hyperspace.

More impressive still was the ability of God to transcend the technology which created it. There was the peculiar tendency of users of Dsu3 to experience unexplainable malfunctions in the wetware transom ranging from software restructuring itself to documented psychotronic and telekinetic phenomena.

The experience of time travel, usually associated with futuristic scenarios, communicating with intelligences throughout the universe, and a profound sense of multiple existences spread out in time and space, were the most commonly reported experiences. One could simply relax, place an amulet under the tongue, press down slightly, and countdown to ecstasy. Sophisticated God abusers found precise ways to toggle realities using VR channels as launching platforms from which to embark on their transpersonal, inter-dimensional journeys.

Both Peg and Travis, while still on opposite sides of the globe, had more in common than would at first seem obvious. Behind the masquerade, behind the facade of externals, they shared a remarkable similarity. In the vast hive of billions of lost souls strung-out like pieces of burning meat on the skewer of the Net, Peg and Travis had found their own secret niche in the swirling galaxies of the Datasphere.

For some peculiar reason, unknown to anyone at the time, these two possessed the unique ability to travel to precise locations past, present or future. These users could simply select the Topic Vector, focus their consciousness on the real-time processor display, and usually within moments they would manifest in the desired location with none of the phase distortion so common with these pioneering technologies.

For users such as Peg and Travis with the "Gift", a Dsu3/VR interface was the gateway to incomprehensible realms of possibility.

The night of chaos proceeded on schedule.

The Neoprene Dreamscape

Peg arose just after dark. She seldom got up in the day. She hated the sun, and the poisonous burning light that emitted from it.

Still encased in the shiny black neoprene outware that she had worn from the previous outing, she moved slowly, cautiously across the smallish vestibule. Soon she would need to shower; one of several that she was allotted each week. Although it rained nearly every day, the burning, black sheets of chemical residue falling outside could only be purified at a limited rate in order to meet the needs of the filthy populace.

Electro-chemical deodorants and ultrasonic detergents became the alternative but less preferable method of cleansing.

On this day Peg would be allowed two minutes of pure pleasure. She removed the elaborate outware that enclosed her naked human form. She stepped carefully into the foldout modular shower, and pressed the start button. Nothing happened. She pressed again. Again no response. She hated manual controls. Then a mindless, sexless voice blared on her monitor:

"Error #28. Please report to regional maintenance."

She knew what that meant, there would be no shower today. Probably not all week. As she reached for the self-scrubbing console, Peg felt a burning sensation underneath her tongue. It was common for small infections to occur around Dsu3 receptor sites as the body mysteriously rejected even the most innocuous implants. But with bio-engineered anti-rejection drugs Peg, unlike many illicit implant recipients, got by without the serious side-effects that still plagued most God hosts.

After a rather unsatisfying and smelly electro-chem bath, she fought her way into her newest, formfitting wetware, custom designed by Samsung. It felt snug and provided a unique sense of security in the uncertain world in which Peg resided.

"I wanted that shower so bad," she cursed as she fastened her electrodes, each to its corresponding nerve plexus.

The excitement rising into the evening, fully jacked in, with a fresh stock of pure God nearby, was becoming anticlimactic in light of the fact that Peg had not had a real shower in weeks.

She reached into the small space behind her bedboard and quickly produced an amulet of her most precious and beloved God. Casually placing the smooth vial beneath her tongue she closed her mouth, gave her tongue a twist and then released.

The familiar and reassuring sound of God fizzing in her mouth caused an immediate response.

"Aaahhhh," she moaned in ecstasy as beautiful pastel colors began to softly explode behind her partially-closed eyelids.

The real advantage to having had one of her "natural" eyes replaced with a conduit to the Optical Browser terminal was in the graphic interface between God and her own Sat-link receptors, custom designed by Peg herself to interface with her own hemi-synchros.

The colors became more intense as the physical rush began a spiraling ascent that felt like climbing the walls of heaven.

She blinked her left eye two times and closed her right eye, requesting full channel correlation. Then her arcane wetware began to first record and then simulate the exact brainwaves whose structure is enhanced by God, creating a powerful holographic interface with the info-verse. Through the amplification of these resonant frequencies the possibility of opening the gateways to infinite parallel dimensions would manifest in few individuals. This elaborate technique was perfected by a mere handful of talented infonautical explorers.

Riding on the crest of the brightest data-waves, Peg morphed into the deepest edifices of that seemingly infinite architecture of the Infi-Net. She tried in vain to remember the days before she became an addict. Peg had studied both Virtual Dimensional Theory and Digital Observer Effect, making her extremely qualified to navigate the colorful Cybernetic Chateaus and Lounges that were pulsing through the global brain like infinite galaxies in a never ending cosmos.

"If only the Denizens of Infi-Net could find freedom from the Multinational," she thought to herself, suddenly damning herself for thinking self incriminating thoughts. "Thoughts can be monitored as easy as any other form of communication," she reluctantly told herself.

For twelve years Peg had worked for Telenet, the main division of Net-Gates, the largest security division within the Multinational conglomerate. Only in the last year had she gone into semi-retirement, working on loan as a free-lance security tracker.

Her current assignment involved trying to keep track of every Transvandal on file within her primary domain.

This, of course, was easier said than done. The rotting core of the Megapolis were comparable to rotten logs crawling with termites. Clustered cells of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic enclaves, each one intersecting and overlapping with multiple digital domains.

Within this veritable jungle of external architecture and internal hardwiring existed both magnificent structure and awesome chaos.

It has been said that Infi-Net has no beginning, no middle and no end. If the Net had a center, then that center was known as the Abyss.

The Abyss was fabled to be a chaotic whirlpool of data and consciousness containing the sum total of all known facts in the Info-Verse, located within a single architecture. This inaccessible area of Infi-Net was long forbidden to anyone without the compatible wetware to interface the incredible density of dimension within the Abyss.

This gargantuan data-zone, compressed like an imploded star, supported the nexus of all electronic networks. A veritable citadel of data; if the Net could be thought of as the CNS of the global brain, then the Abyss was surely the neo-cortex.

Peg navigated the first security check. As an agent of the Multinational, she maintained Priority 6 security access to the Global Nexus. She entered her brain scan as her skeleton key.

Peg boosted through several priority access checks until a protocol override locked on to her retscan.

"Access Denied." "Give reason for this intrusion," spoke the security monitor in a dull monotone.

Peg replied, "Routine maintenance," and quickly reversed her path progressively downward through security levels. That was the furthest she had ever roamed into this highest of security zones. She didn't know how many security veils were remaining to go all the way in but she guessed that was one of the final checkpoints. She felt exhilarated at the thought of such a dangerously illicit intrusion into what had become known as a "forbidden zone".

"Routine maintenance," she thought to herself with a devilish smile on her face. It was an idea that she had been thinking about for years: surfing the Abyss.

This time she had been allowed to return.

Peg felt as if her eyes were on fire. Even approaching the outer perimeters of the Abyss had meant hacking through a density of information with no comparison elsewhere on Infi-Net. She shut down her retscan and took a deep breath.

Slowly she opened her burning eyelids to look at her cramped living chamber.

"It feels like I'm living at the bottom of a grave," she mumbled. "A place to die in, certainly not to live in," she thought to herself as her body began to lurch forward involuntarily.

Peg flashed, "Must be an error in my motion-simulator". She reached for the mo-sim manual override.

Peg stood up, detached the electrodes, and signaled her smartware to realign them to her body's erogenous zones. "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," Peg mused.

With her retscan temporarily shut down to sooth her tortured optic nerves, Peg decided to don an ancient pair of stereoscopic goggles. As she reached over towards the stogs, she again experienced an unsettling shift in balance.

While everything from extreme vertigo to schizophrenia had been attributed to VR/Dsu3 interface, she still found the misinterpretation of motion sensing data to be unsettling, to say the least.

"The Abyss must serve as a Gravitron for the Nexus," she theorized. Just the thought of data configured in such an epic proportion made her wet. Tonight she would need sympathy and the basic mammalian creature comfort only Infi-Net could provide.

Settling back into the latest Daewoo Vibra-Lounge Cushion, Peg launched a quikscan for the raunchiest domain she could locate. Within seconds she floated into the House of the Rising Sun. One of millions of virtual bordellos along the erotic byways of Infi-Net. This particular cat-house contained 37,000 private "rooms," each one replete with exquisite decor reminiscent of a Shivaite Temple, where tantric love rituals were practiced for millennium.

As Peg begun a quick-search for available room titles, she reached behind herself with her left hand. Her hand expertly snaked around behind the diskshelf into her secret God stash. Bright Orange and Yellow wrapping crinkled as her fingers tore through the ceramic gauze surrounding the precious Dsu3. Within seconds she had consumed and spit out the empty hit. The used ampulet tumbled to the floor, like a spent shell-casing; a discarded byproduct of Peg's relentless war on reality.

Tonight Peg would seek total immersion in debauchery. With her sensory matrix pushed full tilt, she represented the human animal in the apex of sexual heat, going where no one had gone before.

She began to be swept away in the spectacular Niagara of erotic, sensual images, intersecting with all sexes, all races, all species throughout the galaxies of data which was Infi-Net.

This was not sensory overload but sensory fulfillment and gratification on levels both sublime and unfathomable.

After experiencing orgasmic fulfillment for what seemed like aeons, she glided electra-blue into the lounge area.

A quickscan revealed a sordid group of denizens, for most of whom prurient interest was a point of pride.

Peg had no concept of four-dimensional time or space in the traditional sense.

She began to wander aimlessly, effortlessly, immersing herself through the phantasmagoria of transitory images. Suddenly she saw something that startled her in a way that shook her to the foundations of her being, and sent her mind reeling like a spool of magna-thread falling off of a 200 level cond-op. It was "that face." The same face she had come so close to the night before.

"A coincidence?" she wondered.

"Not a chance," she assured herself. "There are no coincidences," she told herself, remembering what she had learned about the Observer Effect.

The suspect Transvandal glared ominously at Peg, flickered for a second and then disappeared as mysteriously as it had arrived.

Irian Jaya

Travis left Mitsui's palace that evening with his fresh supply of God carefully hidden within some samples of consumer gadgetry which he often used as a cover for his more covert activities. Boxes of pleasureware, with each unit programmable to the users own wet-specs, made excellent stash places for the colorful ampulets in their shiny ceramic packaging. Trudging along the streets of Osaka with his gear on board, he stepped up his O2 level to compensate for the increased stress on his respirator system.

After boarding the Tube, he settled back for the short trip to Pusan. With his onboard gear and luggage gathered around him, it helped serve as a fortress of autonomy in the crowded shuttle, which was packed with Japanese consumers heading to the Seoul Megapolis for low-cost gadgetry. Travis hoped to find some bargains there himself.

The underground economy in illegal fish still managed to survive in Korea, despite the world ban on ocean fishing and the general lack of sea life in existence.

He set his Alpha Sequencer on Full Relaxation, but the dull pounding that had been bothering him for weeks still persisted. Just the thought of being thousands of feet beneath the Sea of Japan made him feel somewhat claustrophobic, which was usual for Travis on these Sub-Oceanic Shuttles.

After connecting another shuttle in Pusan he found himself on the outskirts of the Seoul Megapolis circumnavigating countless Dongs, the complex hive of subcities and enclaves proliferating both above and below the overcrowded streets.

Travis checked into one of his old haunts. In addition to a good day's sleep, he could also upgrade his wetware with the semi-legal cellular rejuvenation facilities available in the select sleep chambers. For a few extra credits, one would notice an improvement in overall stamina, not to mention slowing the aging process.

That morning, as Travis initiated his REM sequence, he chose to search randomly through the files of the local populace, seeking personal data and demographic information which could be invaluable to someone in his profession.

After concluding his business in Seoul, he took a quick-shuttle to the port of Incheon. There Travis boarded still another tube-shuttle, the Sino-Peninsula Express.

Travis tried in vain to relax, as he hurdled faster than the speed of sound, hundreds of feet beneath the floor of the Yellow Sea.

Travis knew only too well the first law of survival on the Infi-Net. After perpetrating acts of violence on the population, put as much distance as quickly as possible between yourself and your victim. Although the Multinational trackers freely roamed both hemispheres, the more geographical realms he could cover, the more IDs he could drop, the better his chances of survival would be.

As the sun rose over the masses of East Asia, Travis arrived in the Eastern Sino Sector. Penetrating the walled section of the hive gave him some comfort from the teeming hordes outside the old walled sectors. With a population nearing two billion, East Sino boasted the greatest human population density on the planet.

Surrounded by sleeping billions all breathing, pulsing, dreaming in synchronization, he felt homogenized, as if here in the heartland of RNA chip manufacturing he actually provided a legitimate service to the community. The chips he had delivered to Mitsui the day before were destined for the Sinoese black market, where they would be counterfeited and remarketed within hours.

Checking into another seedy dive, Travis immediately plugged into the LAN site, protruding from the walls of the rundown cubicle.

The following day he began the next leg of his journey. Travis had only traveled to Irian Jaya once before, and that was prior to the Upheaval.

Irian Jaya was located on the eastern half of the island more commonly known as Papua New Guinea. Once the home of lush rainforests inhabited with creatures such as Marsupial Cats and Kangaroos that climbed trees, Irian Jaya was now largely deforested and suffering from massive desertification, as was common in most tropical bio-regions by the mid twenty first century.

The one exception was the northeastern peninsula, which miraculously survived the onslaught of Multinational development. Here Travis hoped to find solace. With his physical domain off the beaten path, he felt secure that Multinational trackers and/or 4Dbots would be like fish out of water in this primitive environment.

Irian Jaya, known as the home of some of the last remaining terrestrial ecosystems in the southern hemisphere, also was home to giant butterflies, tropical parrots and thousands of species of endangered animals. There also thrived the Indonesian Info Freedom Fighters.

The I.I.F.F. had fought against the multinationals for generations. Still maintaining their sovereignty, they had succeeded to elude their corporate trackers for years.

I.I.F.F. guerillas took pride in keeping most of the local networks down, and the only way on to Infi-Net in many of the remote archipelagos was through one of the SGIM uplinks.

After traveling all night on a dirt road inland from the coast, Travis finally reached his destination.

Sorong was a grimy coastal town replete with an underground economy specializing in drugs and prostitution, two of Travis' favorite pastimes.

He checked into a seedy dive with intermittent electricity and no network provider.

Laying down on his left side, he settled into his hovel. He locked into the South-Pac-Sat-link and floated into an azure sky, while at the same time exhibiting the kind of precision that only a skilled addict could possess; he deftly popped an amulet of God under his tongue, quickly followed by another.

As the moon rose over the Ceram Sea that next evening, Travis was starting to really get off. His hovel, littered with the accouterments of addiction, showed the remnants of his onslaught against sanity. The room was a urine and puke soaked mass of tangled wires, littered with empty God ampulets and cartons of pleasure wear strewn about.

In order to prolong and intensify his binges, Travis loved to mix different designer analogues, to tailor his wetware to custom specs. That was why Irian Jaya would serve as a destination resort for Travis, that and the fact it was seldom used by other Transvandals.

Living nocturnally, from one high to the next, he often felt like the legendary Nosferatu, roaming the countryside, drinking the blood of his victims in order to achieve some kind of virtual immortality and to build enough credits for a decent cryo-funeral.

Octogenarian Madman

Brandon knelt in the sand as the seawater swirled around his ankles. He stood alone on the beach, looking out on the remnants of magenta light oozing from what would have once been considered a beautiful day. Now, the only thing beautiful about it was the fact that it was almost over.

He reached down and scooped a handful of sand from the beach beneath his feet. Rubbing the abrasive, wet particles between his fingers, he smelled the greasy petroleum slag coating his skin. It reminded him of a powerboat from his childhood. He remembered the smell of fresh gasoline mixed with water as the boats would fill up at the marina where he worked as a child.

But that was before he'd gone off to sea, before his journey to the East.

He looked out on the sapphire sky. As the brownish gray clouds parted, the light became incandescent, leaving blurred after-images on his Optical Browser.

He wondered if he was the only one enjoying what was still, he thought, the planet's most spectacular light show. He wondered what percentage of the population had even witnessed a Real World sunset. The thought made him flash to the end of the last century, where as a child he had been lucky enough to swim in Real World oceans before oil spills and driftnets had left them mostly devoid of complex life forms.

Scientists hadn't bothered to calculate the effects of Life-Extension on the population of the Human Race. By the mid-twentieth century the population was already out of control. By the first half of the twenty-first century the mortality rate had been reduced by ninety percent, sending the Earth's human population spiraling towards twenty billions.

The net carrying capacity of the planet's arable land continued to decrease. Aquifers evaporated and irrigated land became over-salinated. The biomass on the planet's land surface dissipated. Oxygen levels had dropped dangerously, displaced by the increased levels of methane and CO₂.

Survival would not have been possible for the populace were it not for the development of low cost outboard rebreathers with the ability to filter the contaminated atmosphere and increase oxygen levels.

The Multinational licensed rebreathers to the general population for a profit. They were mandatory to survive the asphyxiating atmosphere of the Home Planet.

The next requirement for survival in the second half of the twenty-first century was the Optical Browser Terminal. Developed by Cyber-cu's division of robotics research, these implants replaced the "real" eyes as they became damaged from high levels of UV radiation. This human-techno matrix was linked with a Trans-face Cable spliced directly into the Central Nervous System. With the tunic collar turned up, the Op-mat recipient possessed a discreet onboard gateway to the Net, complete with a Sat-link graphic interface.

The Optical Browser was superior to the "natural" eye in every way, providing Star-lux night vision, with Retinal-Scan Optics, increased range of motion, and precise range finding capabilities. In addition to 4-D graphics and holographic sound, one could opt for both micro/macro electroscope expansion. Driven by the powerful Cyber-Cu 1900 Series RNA Engine, the Op-mat could receive, compress and store vast amounts of data millions of times faster than the processor speeds of the human brain.



Brandon was a hearty breed of Denizen. Well over one hundred years old, he looked and felt half his age. Cell-rev treatments, coupled with a diet rich in Human Growth Hormone had seen to that. Of course, there were hundreds of millions of others his age and older scattered throughout the antheap, huddled in their walled enclaves; a

medieval aristocracy, hiding within walled cities, seeking protection from the plagues and wars of the New Dark Age.

"And dark ages they may well be," Brandon thought to himself, as he turned and walked from the desolate, oil-strewn beach. Behind him the sunset glistened on the dying waters of the Pacific ocean. As he walked along the trail leaving the beach access, he glanced back towards the ocean one more time, while the sunset exploded like a nuclear bomb, white hot, purple-magenta and green. When Brandon reached the trailhead he climbed on his Utility Cycle. Featherweight, solar-powered with pedal backup, Brandon's UC was his favorite method of travel along the byways of the N.W. coastline.

He often traveled from Emerald City to the coast. Maybe it was to remember the days before the Upheaval. As he stood overlooking the barren coastline, he could only imagine the horror and destruction that had taken place, and it only served to magnify the immensity of his own losses.

But almost half a century had passed, and time had served to heal even the deepest wounds to his spirit. Brandon needed little incentive to pull out of his malaise. Setting his U-C on auto-serve, he reached into his tunic pocket. With his Compound Denplants, he ripped open the thin ceramic wrapping, pulling out an amulet of Dsu3. Deftly administering a double dose as he blasted down the dark bumpy road with the wind blowing in his hair, was the picture of an octogenarian madman, skating on the thin ice of external reality like a flimsy curtain to be ripped away by some cosmic voyeur, perhaps revealing the ultimate scheme of things, the ground of his being and the essence of Brandon's becoming.

As Brandon cleared the crest of a large hill he paused once more, overlooking the now darkened vista. Illuminated by moonlight shining through broken clouds, the monochromatic setting reminded him of a jagged alien landscape, devoid of life as we know it. His perception was not far from the truth.

Driving all night was a pastime that Brandon had enjoyed since childhood. As he neared the outskirts of Emerald City, his Optical Browser interfaced with the pulsing Xenon Megapolis, creating a four dimensional holographic interface with the beautiful Xenon and Neon sculptures. Simultaneously mining deep tunnels of demographic information from the nearby populace as he scanned the multileveled channels of the Net, backed by four dimensional sound, live from the High Orbital Built-Environments. The vision was transcendent, translucent, but the sensory bombardment didn't serve to quench Brandon's thirst for new horizons of human experience. He wondered why this was true.

Completing his pilgrimage to the coast, he arrived at his condop as the first wilting Ultra-Violet rays began to shower down on the Western Sector.

I.I.F.F.

Travis awoke to the sound of gunfire. At first he thought the loud sounds waking him from his sleep were more spatially oriented audios, holographic sounds that were often impossible to distinguish from the real thing.

He stumbled across the tiny sleep-chamber trying to reach the small window which overlooked the street below. Travis held his left eye shut, while focusing his Optical Browser Terminal outside the small portal used as a window. All he could see were the empty streets baking at forty eight degrees centigrade while the sun burned down, like a white-hot solar monster.

A quick-check on the audio frequency readout instantly fired back: "Gunfire, 7.62 mill. Multinational."

Travis sprang to life.

Grabbing the pleasureware carton containing the Dsu3, he bolted out the doorway of his Sorong hideaway.

Although the streets appeared to be empty, Travis knew he was under observation.

He ducked into an alley while at the same time ran a Demographic Query on the surrounding populace. His custom designed Wet-Ware established a security perimeter for his immediate vicinity.

Travis shuddered.

Two Multinational air-shuttles.

Thirty Multinational shock troops.

"Trapped," he muttered.

He knew the two thoroughfares leading out of Sorong would be blocked, leaving him no choice.

Travis reached inside his survival case and removed a small rectangular packet; small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Travis didn't have a second to spare. He pulled a small ring attached to the shiny aluminum device expanding the package into a fully inflated radar/starlight proof survival coverall.

Logging in his destination as "outback," he followed the holo-map grid etched on his retinal-scanner.

As Travis reached the edge of the primeval forest, he adjusted his oxygen level and temperature threshold on his wetware. This kind of heat and humidity could send his onboard gear haywire, resulting in less than favorable consequences.

Travis slowly made his way through the thick forest. As he came to the edge of a mangrove swamp, he discovered a trail circumnavigating the black waters.

He stopped to rest. It was already late in the afternoon, and Travis had put enough distance between himself and the Multinational to relax for the first time that day. He reached inside the pleasureware carton and removed an amulet of the almighty God.

The fugitive Transvandal stood there glaring at the edge of one of the planet's last surviving ecosystems. A rare sulphur-crested cockatoo swooped down from an overhead branch. A mosaic of turquoise began to unfold around him, blending with the milky green colors of the jungle.

Butterflies with bird-like wings drank nectar from amethyst flowers. The symphony of nature appealed to Travis. The law of natural selection, where each species maintained its viability through tenacity and adaptation, had always served as a guideline for him. After all, wasn't he "culling the herd" every time he removed some elderly Transvandal victim from the population? And wasn't he located somewhere on the food chain like everything else?

Travis utilized the excellent Star-Lux feature on his Browser. He traveled long through the night. While he paused to rest on the side of the trail, he thought about what life must be like for the people who lived in this inhospitable wilderness.

The jungles of Northwest Irian Jaya were home to some of the last indigenous forest tribespeople. The dense forest also served as a hideout for the I.I.F.F.

Indonesia was one of the last governments to relinquish control to the Multinational. Possession of personal computers was illegal well into the twenty first century, allowing the regional government to maintain control of the populace. Eventually, computer technology found its way into the local economies, freeing the masses from one form of tyranny only to be replaced by another more insidious form of slavery, which the Multinationals effectively provided.

Travis contemplated these things as he probed Infi-Net for solutions to his dilemma. He decided his only alternative was to continue to cut through the forest until he intersected one of the primitive roads leading into the area.

As the sun began to rise over the coral seas that surround Irian Jaya, Travis got a positive location on other humans in the area. As he followed the grid on his

holographic-overview, he soon came to what appeared to be a small village, comprised of a dozen or more conical-shaped, thatched huts. Tropical wood smoke drifted lazily from one of the dwellings.

Travis approached the hut carefully, unaware that several village men had already begun to follow him from behind. Travis turned around, startled to see the tribespeople, wearing only penis-gourds, standing behind him with their bows and arrows leveled right at him.

Despite the obvious dangers confronting him, Travis couldn't help but think about how comical the situation appeared. Here he was, a Transvandal, infonaut, cyberdelic fugitive from the Multinationals, confronting Stone Age tribespeople who didn't appear to have advanced from the Pleistocene Era.

Travis smiled at the tribesmen. He knew that even with the tremendous resources of Infi-Net at his disposal, interpreting rare dialects from stone age tribes would certainly take prohibitively long to render. The tribesmen smiled back, in that universal language that needed no interpretation.

Suddenly, a young Indonesian woman appeared from the larger hut, followed by a small dog and two small children.

His apprehension melted in a feeling of relief, as he surveyed the situation before him. He sought much needed rest and a chance to recharge his solar batteries, which had become dangerously low since he had arrived in Irian Jaya.

After a short conversation involving much guesswork for all, Travis negotiated a for a hammock in one of the huts and soon went to sleep for the remainder of the day.

He awakened to a powerful incandescent light, blinding him as he tried to make some sense of his surroundings. He remembered going to sleep in the jungle hammock, surrounded by friendly tribespeople, gentle and curious.

Now his adrenaline flowed freely as he heard strange voices barking commands in the darkness. It suddenly occurred to him that this must be the feared Indonesian Information Freedom Fighters, better known in the world of international cyber-terrorism as the I.I.F.F.

A River of Veils

Peg's encounter with Travis in the Kali Exo-Tech had left her mind reeling.

She checked her Scan-log.

Remembering the pos-loc she received the day before, she instantly utilized the vast resources of the Multinational security mainframes at her command. It would only take seconds for a comprehensive update.

"System Error."

"File cannot be retrieved."

She repeated her request with the same result.

It suddenly occurred to Peg that glitches and discrepancies were occurring more frequently than would be expected from the viewpoint of statistical probability.

"Bad timing."

If she couldn't apprehend at least one solid suspect for the Security Bosses, she knew she might as well begin hunting for a new meal ticket, which at her age wasn't a viable option.

It was rumored that God could produce bizarre effects on softies and wet-ware. What was only spoken in hushed tones within the Corporate Spires were reports of solid matter undergoing radical transformation in the presence of God users, including but not limited to changes within the Dsu3 molecule.

Peg had theorized that God could tailor itself to the specific brainwave pattern of the user, forming a symbiotic relationship with one's own internal bio-chemistry.

Peg seldom left her hovel, unless it was a matter of vital necessity. The Evil Sun, with its cancerous rays, had destroyed much of the flora on the planet surface. The fragile, gossamer web of interconnectedness that held all living things together from the oceans to the atmosphere, had finally unraveled. Humankind, as well as the future of all species clinging to Infi-Net, sought community in the domain of the same corporate vultures who sat waiting for the dying carcass of the planet to burn itself to ashes.

Peg was hungry. She was sick of fabricated foodstuffs.

Molecular manufacturing had performed miracles, but one thing it had not succeeded in was replacing the authentic taste of food. Although certain flavors and textures of edible items were simulated with remarkable precision, they simply lacked the diverse flavors she remembered from eating naturally grown produce as a child.



"Search underground markets for organically grown fruits and vegetables," she noted in her log while departing the pyramid shaped multi-level.

Engulfed by the teeming masses that swirled through the tunnels beneath the Megapolis, Peg maintained a condition of heightened awareness.

Security in the Subs was fully remote and with nothing in between a determined Transvandal and their victim but the Multinational Mobile Cams, the tunnels were a formidable survival challenge indeed.

She was headed towards a subterranean market where hydroponically grown fruits and vegetables could sometimes be obtained for the right price.

The food stand where Peg intended to dine wasn't open. Disappointed, she began to retrace her steps, planning on stopping at one of the alternative vendors still within walking distance of her cond-op.

Hopping on a detachable speedeater, she found herself quickly elevated to the surface streets in the vast Megapolis known as the Western Sector. The air was pleasantly warm, despite the fact that a steady breeze blew in off the Pacific.

"Onshore flow usually brings in fog this time of year," she thought to herself.

With that in mind, she pulled her cape a little tighter against her body as she hustled along the streets and alleys of the Western Sector.

Arriving at her secondary destination, she bartered with the Lithuanian vendor, acquiring a splendid combination of rice and vegetables for a modest price, and sat down on one of the street-side benches to enjoy her meal.

As she was finishing, she received the A.T.I. readout on her retinal-scanner.

"Attention Peg."

"Suspect Transvandal located by 4DBot # 3588224," flashed the stats on her retscan. As Peg stood on the street corner with pedestrians, Elektra-cars, and UCs swarming about her, she focused on scanning her base files.

"#3588224!" she exclaimed. "Why, that's the Bot I assigned to the Virt T.V. in my Primary Domain search," she thought to herself.

"Well, what do you know?"

It began to look like Peg and her quarry were achieving harmonic convergence.

At that time she had no way of knowing just what that might imply. Although she was beginning to realize something strange was occurring.

Intermittent glitches were not something Cyber-cu digital appliances were known for. In fact, most errors on the Infi-Net were attributed to inexperienced Sysops, problems with provider hardware, or Anarchists setting off their ultra-destructive E.M.P. devices.

Nevertheless, Peg felt elated. She had lost the Transvandal twice, and just as mysteriously managed to get a pos-loc two times, without a clue as to how it happened.

Upon returning to her hovel, Peg ripped open a fresh packet of God from her secret stash place. Nestling in to her Daewoo vibra-lounge cushion, she popped both ampulets of Dsu3 in quick succession. Mixing business with pleasure was her specialty, and that was exactly what she intended to do.

She launched a quickscan for available 4DBots to assist her in her quest. Once locked into Peg's Delta-wave signature, these Bots were an important utility. Not only would they assist her in the retrieval of valuable coordinates, but they could also be programmed to serve as virtual decoys as Peg carried out her covert surveillance missions for Net-Gates.

Like a blue bolt of thunder she was transported through multi-dimensional hyperspace, beyond the speed of light, beyond the speed of human thought. Peg merged with the Data-stream in mid-sentence as she commanded her smartware to realign itself to her weapon centers.

Although existing as weightless, formless bits in Virtual Hyper-space, Peg was operating as a Multinational Freelancer, possessing the softies and skills to shortcircuit a Transvandal right off the Fiber with the virtual laser weaponry built into her onboard wetware.

Peg sent the 4DBots hurdling out into the ocean of Data. Her God did its thing.

Peg's brain felt like it was draining out of her ears as she crashed through informational barriers represented by spectacular graphics and waves of spatially oriented sounds. Pulling back slightly, she switched to Virtual-Vision, that seamless interface with the Infi-Net which was considered to be indistinguishable from external reality.

Momentarily she found herself floating out through a turquoise mosaic sky, with beautiful strato-cumulus clouds hanging like white cotton candy in a scene that reminded her of what Paradise might look like.

Peg scanned the scene, "Maybe this is Paradise; God's country," she joked to herself as she looked down on the island below.

"Long and Lat Readings". "Now!" she screamed to her 4DBots.

There before her, clear as a bell

IRIAN JAYA

was spelled out on her Optical Browser.

"Irian Jaya," she thought to herself. "Just where the hell am I?"

Upscaling to the global map, she was quickly oriented to her location.

"Irian Jaya, more specifically in the middle of the jungle in the Northwestern corner of the region," she thought to herself.

"Just my luck," she called out into the Data-void. "The one bio-region untamed by the Multinationals and I end up tracking a Transvandal into the lion's den."

She looked at her 4DBots and queried, "What's the optimum course from my current position?"

"Return Home," the primary 4DBot responded.

"We will maintain open frequencies and scan all Satlink channels, informing you as soon as suspect locks into Infi-Net."

"Excellent," she commanded, "Proceeding as per your suggestion."

Peg blinked and opened her eyes. Her dingy cond-op stood in stark contrast to the tropical paradise she'd just returned from. No matter how many times she returned from hyper-dimensional journeys around the Data-sphere, she was always shocked at the rapidity with which immersion took place and the instantaneous reintegration with her external reality.

Peg remained on standby. While waiting for the Bots to inform her as soon as the Transvandal used a Sat-link, she was wasting valuable time. Time that could be spent tracking other dangerous Transvandal within her Primary Domain, which was after all her assignment from Multinational Security Bosses.

Why was she attracted to this particular case? What was it that compelled Peg to risk falling behind on her God stash?

She didn't know the answers to these questions, despite her qualifications as a theoretician and investigative professional, and that concerned her immensely. But it didn't bother her enough to question the wisdom of consuming several more ampulets of God before the evening ended.

By morning, Peg was resplendent in realms of higher consciousness. She could visualize her own aura glowing like a shimmering rainbow of pastel hues. She was gleaning what seemed like profound insights into the plasticity of time and matter.

Images flowed like a river of semitransparent veils, each carrying scenes of evolutionary history, marching past Peg's dilated pupils in an endless procession of color and formlessness.

As the vile sun rose over the Western Sector, she fell asleep and dreamed of a Sea-Green Paradise, and the sparkling shores of Irian Jaya.

The Shining Xenon Spires

Brandon sat startled, looking up at the two Freelancers staring down at him.

Although they appeared to be in their mid-twenties, with the advent of Cellular-Rejuvenation Brandon knew that these men could easily be in their fifties; perhaps even older than that.

Both agents looked feeble and under-equipped, wearing the standard issue Multinational fake-leather outwear, with optical stun laser ports on the forearms, and antiquated stereoscopic goggles, still issued to Multinational Freelancers. In a world gone mad for advanced weaponry and the latest gadgetry, where every Transvandal was studded with implanted living circuitry, these Freelancers looked virtually impotent to Brandon.

"How did you get in here?" he screamed at the two hulking figures looming about his condop, knowing full well they had just come through the front door.

As Brandon began to stumble out of his Sleeper, the larger of the two Freelancers attempted to force him back into his coffin-like sleeping cubicle. Brandon easily sidestepped the clumsy Multinational Agent allowing him to fall forward from his own weight. His oversized frame continued to lurch forward with a small assist from Brandon, which sent him smashing head-on into Brandon's Porta-Reefer. At the same time Brandon was preparing to decimate the second agent, when the frightened rookie cried out with a whining plea, "We're only here to ask a few questions."

Meanwhile Brandon's first hapless victim was beginning to recover from the considerable blow to his head, not to mention the crushing blow to his self esteem. Both agents knew that Brandon was well in excess of one hundred years old.

"We just want to ask some questions about your past," the larger agent grumbled.

Brandon's head began to spin. His strict adherence to the code of a zero-visibility lifestyle had left him with a low, almost subterranean profile.

"What could anyone possibly want to know about me?" said Brandon as he looked at both freelancers incredulously.

He had spent his life on what could be considered to be on the extreme fringes of reality. Yet even far beyond its consensual reaches, Brandon could not think of a reason for anyone do try to dig any skeletons out of his closet.

"Don't flatter yourself, old man," the larger agent growled. "It's not you, but your daughter that we're interested in."

Brandon was stunned. That was certainly the last thing that he expected to hear. It had been years since he had heard from Peg.

"How is she? Is she alright?" Brandon asked, his fatherly instincts beginning to revive after years of atrophy.

"We'll be asking the questions, and if you ever expect to see your daughter again then you just might consider cooperating," declared the rookie with his voice shaking like autumn leaves in the wind.

"Have you seen your daughter recently?" asked the rookie, who was obviously still shaken by the brief but very violent encounter that occurred only a minute before.

"No, I haven't seen her in years, and if you had done your homework you would already have known that."

Brandon felt that something had to be wrong. If Peg was sick or had died, they'd simply tell him and not be asking him questions. Besides, Peg would have security clearance above these obvious low-life, street investigators.

"So what's the sudden interest in Peg, is she in trouble?"

"That's none of your business," replied the larger agent, as both uninvited guests abruptly turned to exit in the same unannounced manner in which they arrived.

Brandon looked about the ruins of his shattered cond-op. He felt like pulling the security alarm, except as a rule he never called in the police, and those guys were the police, or at least the closest thing to it.

His reefer was smashed, and food lay strewn about his cond-op, reminding him of a juvenile activity that he found mildly entertaining in his youth.

He had enjoyed roughing up the Multinational agents that had broken into his condop. Although no warrants or other permission was required for searches and home entrances, Brandon still resented any kind of intrusion into his personal life and besides, he hated anyone who would dare try to force their authority upon someone else, feeling this to be the beginning of all abuses of power.

Then Brandon flashed: "I wonder what's happened to Peg?" Brandon grabbed some God and sat back to survey his damaged cond-op, and reflect on the most recent events.

It had been over twenty years since Brandon had seen or heard from his daughter, and although he had on occasion scoured Infi-Net to see if she was still alive, he allowed her the privacy and autonomy she had sought from him.

The years of separation had given Brandon time to reconcile her job as a Multinational agent, a role that Brandon had always considered to be beneath the dignity of his own flesh and blood.

But this fresh reminder from his past had knocked him out of his somnambulistic stupor. Brandon loved his daughter and would do anything to help her.

Although Peg could be living anywhere in the Real World, her father expected that she still lived somewhere in the Western Sector. He flicked on his ret-scan with the blink of an eye and was immediately transported into an informational smorgasbord, represented by a stunning graphical interface resembling a four dimensional ladder of lights, climbing upwards and outwards into distant galaxies of organized information.

Exploring this giant data vault was the equivalent of traveling through huge sections of the known macrouniverse, consisting of literally worlds upon worlds of data streamlined into a user logical format that even a five year old could operate.

Brandon requested a Pos-loc on Peg's whereabouts. Brandon's auto-servos expanded into hyper-variable domains following the basic Evo-Logic pattern that Brandon had designed himself.

"Last known file transfer loc. IRIAN JAYA."

Brandon was even more puzzled.

"I wonder why Peg would be interested in Irian Jaya."

Brandon wondered about the possibility of a coincidence.

"Hmm," he thought to himself.

It had been years since Brandon had been to Irian Jaya, and almost as long since he had been contacted by his old friends in the I.I.F.F.

"What could, if anything, this have to do with Peg, and the Multinational freelancers?" Brandon asked himself quizzically.

Picking up on a warm trail that Peg had recently blazed across the net was one thing, but retrieving directories from closed system Multinational base files would be whores of a different color.

Even with Brandon's advanced navigational skills, some physical domains were considered totally off limits even to experienced system intruders like himself, and Brandon had lapsed behind in the latest top-secret Multinational protocols.

Top-Secret access wasn't the only deterrent to intrusion within the Multinational Closed Network. There was a definite possibility of being noticed. Worse yet, one could be traced back to one's own domain, where a swift arrest and extensive reprogramming or execution would surely follow.

Brandon thought back to the years he spent dragging Peg around the planet.

Somehow he felt responsible for Peg ending up in security work. Years of intensive survivalist training had taught Peg everything she ever needed to know about security work, and it came so natural for her.

"That's the way we had to live back then, after the Upheaval," he thought.

To that day, he had regretted the emphasis he had placed on teaching Peg offensive combat skills.

"Too many designer molecules, too much immersion," as he thought about the past and his life with Peg.

Life after the Upheaval had been difficult for Brandon and Peg. They both terribly missed Peg's mother and brother who both died tragically, long before the rebuilding of the Western Sector.

Those were like Pioneer days, after the destruction of Old Seattle, who like a Phoenix rising from its own ashes would rise once again as the shining Xenon spires of Emerald city.

The Butcher of Luzon

Travis dialed in his Retinal-Scanner for signs of hostility in the silent group that surrounded him. Still temporarily blinded by the bright light cast upon his hut, he began to worry about what his fate might have in store.

The Indonesian Information Freedom Fighters were the most feared terrorist front on the planet. Once known for destruction of satellites and SBMFs {space-based manufacturing facilities}, the I.I.F.F. were hunted into near extinction. Except for the rumors of small bands of guerillas operating in the rain-forested mountains of Irian Jaya, the I.I.F.F. was thought to have been disbanded for well over a quarter century.

Travis blinked on his Optical Browser. Somewhere within the whirling display of data around him a flashing icon indicated his power reserve needed a recharge.

Travis eyed the rag-tag group of "revolutionaries" that stood around him. "Could these same men be the dreaded I.I.F.F.?" he thought to himself. He could see that they possessed weapons, both conventional and ballistic, and yet he sensed that these men also possessed a gentleness about them, which differentiated them from the street toughs that Travis was used to associating with.

Travis was still hanging in his hammock, unable to move. He knew that with his Optical Browser down, one spark from a laser weapon would at least temporarily disable him to the point of Bio-Catharsis.

The tenseness of the situation had begun to dissipate, at least by the external appearance of his captors. What at first had appeared as a life or death situation now appeared to have de-escalated into more of a serious dissuasion.

Travis began to relax somewhat. One of the men spoke to him in broken English: "What are you doing in this part of Irian Jaya?", he asked accusingly.

Again Travis became alarmed. How could these men let him leave this place alive? They all had death sentences hanging over their heads, he thought to himself.

Quickly Travis answered back, "I'm running for my life from the Multinational," he said, knowing that they might suspect him of being just another stinking Transvandal, hardly a comrade in the info-revolution.

"What?"

"You another Transvandal?"

Travis was right. He knew he had to think fast.

"No, I'm not a Transvandal, I'm a pleasure-ware vendor," he said.

"What kind pleasure-ware you got?" asked the spokesman of the revolutionaries, who by this time had distinguished himself by revealing his identity.

Apparently this was the infamous Butcher of Luzon, known for his fearless attacks on the Multinational for decades. Although rumored to have been dead for many years, the mere fact that he revealed his identity to Travis made him feel as if he was probably not long for this world.

"What kind pleasure-ware you got?" the Butcher asked Travis for the second time.

"Best kind pleasure-ware, you wanna try?" Travis offered.

"What about God?" asked the Butcher.

"What about it?" was Travis' response.

"You got any?"

"Hell no, I don't have any God," Travis lied.

He realized that giving up his remaining God stash might be a fate worse than death, so he offered a compromise.

Matching up the number of freedom fighters with the available pleasure-ware cartons came out even, give or take a few, which appeared to please the participants.

Unlike the traditional method of employing pleasure-ware option-modes, this rag-tag group of guerrillas had their own unique methods of attaining paranormalacy. Lying in a circle, stretched across the primitive jungle clearing, they would rip away the sensory outboard, funneling the sensory data into the Reptilian Brain Sites. This activated powerful secret-agenic neuro chems culminating in total shutdown of the more recently evolved brain functions.

The I.I.F.F. enjoyed Travis's "wares," writhing and moaning for hours, behaving like amphibious life forms, recapitulating some ancient mating ritual. This amused Travis and disturbed him at the same time.

"How are they surviving without the most recently updated Multinational Repeaters?" he wondered.

He surmised that somehow the tropical eco-system, which had produced oxygen for hundreds of millions of years must be the answer. He also knew that the air along the coast was too thin to breathe. Or was it?

Travis had never really dared to try, going on computerized data alone, never wanting to risk using his own senses to test the alleged poisonous atmosphere. "What if there were adequate levels of oxygen near coastal areas around the world?" he wondered out loud.

"Could the oceans be coming back to life so soon? Or was the damage less severe than we've been told."

He continued to try and find a logical, even an illogical reason for these anomalies that was observing. "If the coastal areas were inhabitable without rebreathers, that would mean freedom for billions from enslavement to the Multinational," he declared, but no one was listening to a word he said.

The I.I.F.F. had totally morphed into a deep catatonic stupor.

Meanwhile the tribespeople began to filter back into the village clearing.

Travis had been covertly dipping into his God stash throughout the night, while at the same time making sure to hide every empty ampulet from the Butcher and his men. It wasn't hard for Travis to predict what the revolutionaries would do, if they found out that he'd lied to them about the God.

The first ray of ultraviolet emanations began to bathe the misty shores of Irian Jaya. The purplish and red hues, mixed with so many different frequencies of the visible spectrum of light, were diffused by the canopy of vegetation overhead.

Travis surveyed the scene about the tiny village. The Freedom Fighters were mostly comatose by now.

Even the Butcher of Luzon himself had fallen by the wayside, in bizarre contrast to the last hearty revelers, who still squirmed in their pleasure-ware on the sandy forest floor.

While Stone Age tribes people, Cybernetic Revolutionaries, and sociopathic mercenaries all interacted in synchronicity, digital bits and atoms merged to form a human-cyber matrix.

Silent electrons begun to stir in Travis' Solar-Charge Unit. Within minutes he noticed lights began to flicker on his Optical Browser, while the entire village began to glide in silent harmony, buzzing softly in the morning beams.

Travis understood this to be one of those sublime moments that had to be experienced first hand to be believed. He perceived multiple realities overlapping

into seemingly endless existences. All this, and at the same time experiencing the thrill of the most spectacular sensory data-waves Travis had co-created in years.

"Slick," he thought.

"Seamless and slick." He uploaded another ampulet of God, and then began to crawl out of the morning light.

"Another morning in paradise," he thought to himself, as he initialed his REM sequence, acknowledging to himself that he must seek rest as soon as possible.

Travis had no way of knowing what lay ahead. He had so many questions to ask the members of the I.I.F.F., realizing their help would be critical if he were ever to leave this island alive.

Travis began to dream of monkeys, playing like happy children. Tiny primates scampering across the green canopy, high above the forest floor.

Suddenly one monkey grabbed another monkey and ripped its throat out and began to devour it. Then all the other monkeys came running up to devour the first monkey.

Travis had dreams like this often.

Although savage and cold hearted to the core of his being, Travis still missed the companionship of human beings, and longed for the sense of community that others seemed to share.

He couldn't imagine ever hurting one of the simple tribespeople, or the poor Indonesian peasants who lived in the area. In fact he felt a solidarity amongst them, something outcasts and outlaws alike have shared from time immemorial.

"What makes them any better from anyone else on the Infi-Net?" he asked himself.

"Not necessarily better, but different," came an answer from deep inside Travis' REM pulsed brain.

A strange dichotomy seemed to exist between Travis and his victims.

Although he enjoyed his exploits and the exciting lifestyle they provided, he felt no animosity towards his prey. As an archetypal predator culling the herd, he felt he was providing a service in the co-evolution of the home planet, speeding the delivery of new technologies by making the latest overpriced transistors available to the consumers at affordable prices.

This customized moral code seemed to fit in with everything else that Travis observed, with everyone he met, with every place he'd been; except Irian Jaya.

Did Irian Jaya hold some secret that Travis hadn't discovered yet? Or would he find that it contained a nightmare that he could have never even imagined, nor would he ever forget?

Neuro Chameleon

As the Queen of Space gently draped herself over the evening sky, Xenon Spires of the Emerald City shone softly into the surrounding darkness.

The Home Planet remained spinning on its A.X.I.S..

The denizens of the Western sector began to arise.

A throbbing pain in her forehead was the first sensation Peg felt when she awoke.

"God overstimulated my Pineal Gland," she thought to herself as she adjusted her Den-plants.



The next thought that arose in her mind, was a memory of sailing over Irian Jaya.

"Was it real, or just a dream?" she wondered.

"One way to find out." She activated her Cyber-cu application.

Cyber-cu, a pioneer in the subcutaneous implant manufacturing industry, was founded as a division of the Net-Gates Corporation.

Originally conceived as an alternative to on-board data-ware, the product evolution of Cyber-cu leapfrogged to include an implanted Transface terminal for accessing the Optical Browser RT.

Specializing in bio-synthetic organ design, Cyber-cu monopolized the implant market. The Multinational Dynasty maintained a death grip on the consumer slaves.

Peg's personal designer Cyber-cu was coated in liquid chromium, with an Endura synthetic diamond finish. The smooth micarta transface appeared more like something from the dungeon of a Virtual Dominatrix than the most advanced interface with Machinekind ever conceived:

The Transface Terminal.

Net-Gates had managed to accomplish what was previously thought to be impossible: a complete fiber-optic interface with the central nervous system.

It had occurred to Peg many times that there had never been a formal acknowledgement of that unique moment in history where the distinction between what was "machine," and what was "human," was finally blurred to the point of obscurity.

While this served to delight her at times, and disturb her at others, the inevitable began to occur. Ultimately Peg's persona began to model the cold precision of the machines with which she interfaced, and Peg's Dsu-3 hybridized appliances began to exhibit what were previously thought of as characteristics reserved exclusively for the human domain.

Peg checked her history log and ran a recap quick-scanning the previous nights excursion over Irian Jaya.

"Access denied," came the reply.

"What's this?" Peg wondered.

Running a second quick-scan only to receive the same result sounded an internal alarm for Peg. She checked her other vital functions. The read-out list was consistent:

Info-pro: Down, Retinal Scanner: Down, Optical -Browser: Down, Trans-Face: Disabled, Sat-Link: Inop.

A Xenon-red message suddenly appeared, flashing in her mail-box, like some angry valentine:

"REPORT. H.Q. ASAP." "PRIORITY-UPGRADE."

"H.Q.!" she gasped.

The message so startled her, that she almost dropped the God amulet that she was in the process of administering.

Peg fell into an immediate state of acute anxiety as if to divine the catastrophe of her impending info-withdrawal. Without the vast data-input and know-ware interface with Cyber-cu appliances, God would immediately began sucking her brain dry the way a Class 3 Black Hole swallows an entire galaxy.

She began to search frantically around her cond-op for the attachments to activate Cyber-cu independent wetware for her journey to H.Q..

"This should be quite a trick," she smiled.

She drew on a reserve of inner strength. It was a resource she developed in her youth. She knew the risks of going into Multinational H.Q. while under the influence of God or any of its analogues.

Scanalyzers at the H.Q. entrances probed for any anomaly in the immaculate flow of corporate Delta-waves.

Peg would have to rely on attempting to smuggle an onboard portable with sol-batt backup through the outer security checkpoint, in order to access her wetware capabilities: Smart-Soft custom designed by Peg herself.

One of the hottest features of Peg's wetware was the Neural Chameleon.

Neuro-Chameleon was pre-fed the signature of Peg's brain-scan prior to the Dsu-3 modification from a rare moment, when her brain waves once matched the Hive Mind Curve.

Peg had used Neuro-Cham on several occasions in the past, but never while smuggling in the on-board accessories.

She suited up and left her cond-op, first making sure to place new batteries in her rebreather, which had been getting dangerously low.

She wondered what could possibly be so urgent that would require her to make a physical appearance at Multinational H.Q.

"Routine upgrade, my ass," she thought to herself, as the colorful barrage of humanoid characteratures began to enshroud her in the crowded tunnels beneath the Western Sector.

Soon she merged into the final stage of her trip across the Megapolis. As she approached corporate H.Q. she cursed herself for absorbing her most recent dosage of God. The effects hadn't even begun to maximize and already she was hallucinating a dizzying array of cartoon-like characters bending and moving in ways which seemed impossible, or at least optically incorrect.

The crazy-quilt of bizarre imagery and uncharted geometries kept her mind occupied.

She strolled through the front gate, offering only a quick scan of her I.D. chip to gain entrance.

Expecting to enter the facility alone and without a hitch, she was stunned to see two Multinational Security guards come out to meet her from the main entrance.

"We've been expecting you," said the shorter of the two faux-leather encased security guards, bristling with optical lasers and anti-personnel weapons.

Her wetware was designed to activate automatically as soon as it sensed the corresponding brain wave from Peg. This enabled the Neuro-Chameleon to replicate any frequency necessary to mask Peg's Dsu-3-tainted brain patterns.

This program included first generation Virtuapathy: the ability of a nano-chip to read and digitally emulate brainwave signatures. This proved to be a most helpful tool in Peg's interrogation of suspects.

The downside was that Peg's Neuro-Chameleon was an illegal softie. Since it contained advances not yet included in commercial wetware, it was Peg's directive under Corporate law to report any unregistered product advances or data piracy.

Nevertheless, Peg found Neuro-Chameleon to be indispensable in locating and tagging suspect Transvandals and addicts.

Being an addict herself, Peg always knew what to look for.

Neuro-Chameleon was the cutting edge in intuitive wetware. Peg's years of immersion in Theoretical Architecture had seen to that.

But now as she entered the Multinational Headquarters for some foreboding reason, she felt nauseas; she was shaky, as if anticipating some dreadful event to come.

She waltzed right past the first set of Scanalyzers. "That wasn't so hard," she thought. Little did Peg know how wrong she would be.

She entered a doorway marked "Security," and then proceeded into an elevator with one security guard standing in front of her and the other standing behind her.

"What's this all about?" Peg demanded to know.

"We're not authorized to discuss that with you, sorry," came the reply.

That was a typical Multinational protocol, always courteous - never friendly.

Peg had expected to be led up to the executive security headquarters, where most upgrades were processed, as well as where the facilities for handing out new assignments were located. The thirtieth floor was the only level of the vast regional Multinational H.Q. that she had ever visited.

Towering above the crowded streets of the Megapolis like a shining citadel, she had always enjoyed the view, especially while on the influence of God.

The elevator began to head down. Peg felt a lump rising in her throat. An all too familiar voice from somewhere in the back of her mind began to speak to her in a matter of fact way.

The voice told her "to be careful", and that "if she was resourceful enough she could overcome any obstacle, even this".

Then the voice disappeared.

She recognized the sender. It was a telepathic communication from her father. She hadn't received one of those since she was a child.

"So the old man can still throw a decent thought picture," she laughed to herself, remembering the unique legacy she had inherited.

Suddenly the elevator door opened, and Peg entered the reception area.

The lobby lacked an interesting facade, devoid as it was of the Xenon flat-screen displays that grace the walls of most corporate office complexes. She saw only a desk and security monitor for furniture and realized that she had entered into a secret high-security domain whose very existence was previously unknown to her.

She was lead down a partially lit hallway and shown through a door into a small room, with only a metal table surrounded by several chairs.

As the two Multinational security personnel turned and left and the door closed behind her she felt a chill go up her spine. She reached towards the door only to notice there was no handle on the inside.

She was trapped.

Incarcerated.

Imprisoned.

She realized that whatever she had done, or whatever she was suspected of doing, was much more serious than she had thought previously.

Neon flowers bloomed, lived, and died in kaleidoscopic precision on the barren walls of the interrogation room as Peg sat, just beginning to fully experience the effects of the God she had ingested earlier in the evening.

She would wait for hours, until her brain would become so starved for data that it would be indistinguishable from human toast, before the interrogation would even begin.

2cb-p A.R.T.

Maisey sat upright, strapped securely into the molecular command console.

Her red hair hung down around her shoulders in stark contrast to her black matte, neo-ceramic outware.

She silently guided the atomic grappler without visibly moving her body at all, almost as if she was balancing on a tightrope, juggling balls, and at the same time maintaining perfect balance on the high wire of molecular manipulation.

Although seated, the muscles in her body remained taught, straining every nerve in order to achieve the proper configuration on the Anthropomorphic Robotic Testbed.

Totally immersed in Deep-V.R., she focused her attention on the molecular docking device, a remote mandible useful in designing and synthesizing new analogues for the Multinational.

Maisey's research was based on discoveries at the sub-atomic level, which gave insight for the first time into the flora communication technologies and the interactive networks that they establish in their natural ecosystems.

Modeling the complexities of the DNA-RNA had lead to startling discoveries, opening the doorway for the manufacture of ultra-high speed viral-based chips.

Optimum for the latest know-ware and the nano-drives found in the Optical Browser, the race was on to develop new strains of viral based processors. Spurred on by claims from researchers that these chips would answer the challenge of uploading the contents of the human brain, Net-Gates pushed these projects to the front of their research agenda.

Maisey slowly released the new analogue into her bio-system. Each molecule was uploaded with digital controls, enabling her to administer designer applications with clinical precision. Utilizing the Multinational's largest computer system as an extension of her brain provided Maisey with tremendous power to explore the realms of her own consciousness.

She could piggy-back one analogue on top of another, projecting her hallucinations onto a 4D-Grid, to be used for modeling new molecules in real time, or at her own convenience.

She always completed the molecular mapping process with the efficiency expected of her. That's why Maisey still remained as one of the top researchers in the field.

"The hard part is over now," she thought to herself.

"Get me out of here," she yelled.

Several lab assistants scrambled to help her out of her complex harness of fib-ops and hardwire cabling.

"Hurry up. It seems like I've been locked in here forever."

Aside from her flaming red hair, and the pale white skin of her face, Maisey bore little resemblance to anything human. She appeared to be more of a crustacean machine creature, groping the air of the dimly lit A.R.T. lab.

Meanwhile, her tech assistants continued unfastening electrodes and straps, finally lifting away the over-sized data-gloves and helmet.

Maisey knew she was almost free.

"Welcome back, Maisey," came a round of encouragement from her colleagues.

"All in a days work," she replied coldly.

Brushing her assistants aside and unlatching the last Velcros herself she finally stood up, blinking her eyes to adjust to the differing frequencies of light.

Maisey stood on her tip toes, arched her back, and finally threw back her scarlet hair.

She could see herself now on the outboard monitor. Her hair appeared to her like tongues of flames, licking at her face and body.

Maisey exited the Deep-VR chamber looking like some regal personage, stepping down from her royal throne. She chose not to dialogue with her colleagues, but instead headed upstairs to the roof of the huge built environment housing the Net-Gates A.R.T.

Maisey walked into the morning light. Bejeweled in electronic circuitry, she stood radiant, reflecting the many hues that emanated from the horizon.

The experimental drug Maisey uploaded only minutes earlier had only now began to fully manifest in her consciousness.

As she looked out across the gray, soot-filled skies of Varanasi, she could smell the human flesh still burning in the ghats along the river; a bleak testament to the

fervor of the faithful who lined the banks of the river daily waiting for their final moment, as swarms of black vultures circled over their heads.

Bleak and dreary eyed, she signaled for an air-shuttle to extract her from the Gates-Tower building.

Settling into the half empty shuttle, Maisey laughed out loud, "I just can't hack those people down there." "They spend their whole lives seeking liberation from this world. They never bother to think of enhancing the world."

"I've managed to embrace this vision, in its totality," she thought sardonically, wondering if both approaches were perhaps overly simplistic.

Maisey set her REM sequencer to full-auto and began to try and calm the sea of raging hallucinations that were now threatening to engulf her as she gazed down at the gray dismal Megapolis of Varanasi, receding beneath her enshrouded by layers of industrial smoke, lifting with the morning mist.

She saw repeated versions of 4D Technicolor images of macro-molecules, with their snowflake-like symmetrical shapes, dancing and laughing. She could hear the orbitals spinning on their electrons, resembling a resounding chorus of cybernetic elves, praising the wonder of creation.

Brandon had a gut feeling about Peg. He feared she could already be in the custody of Multinational Security Officers. He knew that he would have to move fast.

Realizing he had precious little time to waste, he booked an immediate shuttle south. He quickly transported his atoms via air-shuttle, catapulting towards the Western-Sector Megapolis, still referred to by many of its denizens as the "Bay Area".

If Peg was there, he would find her and he reminded himself that this was as good a place as any to start looking.

"It's been too long," said Brandon, reaching out to meet Maisey's welcome embrace.

It had been years since Maisey and Brandon had met in the flesh.

There was something strange about a "real" physical embrace. It wasn't physically any different than immersion. But Brandon felt heavy, like stepping on an elevator, rushing to the top of some corporate Xenon spire.

Maisey's reaction was similar: "Feels like re-entry, after being in 0-Grav for a few months." Human contact was a precious commodity for both of them.

"I can't explain everything, but it's about Peg," whispered Brandon. "I think she's in trouble."

Maisey understood. She had known Brandon for long enough to trust his intuitive faculties.

"How can I help?" she asked.

"I got roused by Multinational freelancers looking for Peg this morning," answered Brandon.

"Do you have a location yet?"

"No," he answered. "According to Infi-Net her last known location was Irian Jaya."

She looked Brandon in the eye, her feminine wisdom radiating compassion and intelligence, softening Brandon for what she was about to say.

"Irian Jaya could be pretty bad."

"What's the stats?"

"Big Multinational Security operation going on down there. They say that they have some bad ass anarchists cornered, but could it easily be just a cover for some more sinister agenda. You know these assholes, Brandon."

"Please, Maisey, you're the only living connection I've got that still has any clout with the Multinationals. I've been receiving virtuapathic messages all day. I know Peg needs our help."

"This isn't going to be easy, I'm supposed to be on a shuttle out of here within a few hours."

Brandon's hopes began to sink.

"I'll see what I can do. Where are you staying?" asked Maisey.

"I'll be waiting at the Pipeline, room 4004. Please be careful."

"Here, honey, have some goodies," said Maisey reaching into her dazzling solar-sequined carrybag.

She pulled out several multi-colored pharmaceutical-grade packets, each one containing several ampulets of 2CB-p.

"You look like you'll be needing these."

"Thanks, Maisey, I always knew you're the best," he said over his shoulder as they parted ways.

One of the advantages of Maisey's job for the Multinational was her ability to procure pure stuff. Maisey had access to research grade which was a much higher standard than what ever reached the masses.

Brandon paced the room impatiently, waiting for some word from Maisey. The minutes seemed to crawl by like hours. He needed some release from the anxiety building within himself.

2CB-phenyl was Brandon's drug of choice. His addiction to God was a byproduct of his inability to score 2CB-p in sufficient quantities to maintain a reliable habit.

While 2CB-p was still an addictive narcosagen, it was nowhere near as deadly as its cousin Dsu-3, i.e. "God".

Brandon figured that was why it had been removed from the general population, to make way for the much more addictive God.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Brandon swallowed several of the tiny ampulets. Time released, they would last him for the next seventy-two hours.

Brandon was a seer. He would often see beautiful visions precogging some real world event or another.

"Chaos is a map of the ever-changing future. Whatever destiny or chance holds in store for us, will spring forth from this eternal well," he philosophized, feeling the effects of the 2CB-p lifting his spirits.

Going into info-withdrawal, he activated his Cyber-cu and decided to run the Pipeline to get his mind off Peg.

2CB-p had a way of refreshing your memory like no other drug. Although Brandon had experienced synesthesia since childhood, nothing could have prepared him for the spectacular sensory interface provided by Maisey's 2CB-p stash.

"Interdimensional, electric, intensity." Brandon tried describing the vast amounts of sensory data bombarding his synapses. Massive walls of towering alien color, so strange, so absolutely foreign, titillated Brandon's imagination.

Morphing into some bizarre insectoid motif, he resonated with his own DNA, existing simultaneously within a protoplasmic cloud he envisioned floating high above the earth.

Brandon reeled suddenly as his scanner flashed: "WELCOME MAISEY."

"At last," he thought.

Instantaneously, Maisey's electronically digitized holo-image materialized in the sky above Brandon.

"You always were one for spectacular entrances," he said smiling.

Maisey wasn't smiling.

"You were right," she said sternly. The lines in her face seemed to etch even deeper, as her mind tried to fully grasp the implications of what she'd learned since leaving East-Sino earlier in the morning.

"It looks like worst case scenario," she grimaced. Brandon had only seen her look this way once before, and that was something that went down during their own private revolution, not long after the Upheaval.

"She's in the Pit."

"What's that?" asked Brandon.

"They've got her in an info vacuum."

"They'll begin interrogation tomorrow morning, if there's anything left by then."

"We've got to do something," Brandon cried out.

"We've got to do something," said Maisey in matter of fact way.

"I'm sorry Brandon, but I'm not sure there's anything that can be done at this point. You really should go back to Emerald City."

Brandon abruptly cut off Maisey in midsentence, "Pegs all I've got left."

"You haven't seen her in years, Brandon, and now it's too late."

"It's not too late till she's toast, or until I'm dead."

"What's she done to deserve term-op anyway?" asked Brandon.

"I have no way of knowing the answer to that," said Maisey. "It has to be bad though. The Pit's getting close to Boss access level, top secret shit, really, something about the Abyss, or Irian Jaya, I couldn't get it straight, and I'll tell you, I had to risk my ass, Brandon, just to find out this little shit wasn't worth it."

"It's worth it, Maisey, I swear it'll be worth it."

"You make it worth it then, old man," she said coldly, as her red hair blazed like autumn leaves, which Brandon remembered from childhood.

"And, Maisey, just one more thing, where do I find this Pit, and what are the weak spots in security if any? Get me this stuff, and get it now!" demanded Brandon.

"Yes, sir," she said sarcastically; then, with her usually cutting wit, she said, "You're a cold manipulator, old man, but I can't help but respect you for it."

"I'll wait here for you, so get to work, bitch."

Brandon and Maisey embraced each other again for what seemed like an eternity to Brandon, whose mind was still bending under the influence of the high-grade stash.

She left him there at the Pipeline, half out of his mind on 2CB-p.

Brandon got to work immediately, networking with long lost resources from around the globe. Within several minutes he downloaded the code necessary to complete the multi-tasking that lay ahead: the quick-construction of an electro magnetic-pulse device.

Reptilian Cortex

Travis awoke with a jolt. Two small Indonesian children were poking him with large banana leaves. The children quickly ran away when they saw his Optical Browser Terminal illuminating the darkness.

How long had he been out? Where was the I.I.F.F.?

These questions were fresh on Travis' mind as he checked his solar-batteries.

"Full up?" he wondered.

He estimated that he'd been out for thirty-six hours.

The I.I.F.F. had broken camp, and were nowhere to be found.

Travis walked down to a nearby stream. As he bent down to splash water on his face, he could see fireflies emerging from the forest. They pulsed in syncopation, tracing spiral patterns against the dark backdrop of the ancient forest.

Travis was enthralled, overwhelmed.

The beauty of the tropical forest was beyond his wildest dreams. Never before had he witnessed such diversity and interconnectedness between living organisms and their biosystems.

With his onboard gear recharged, Travis returned to his own familiar element.

Travis always attached disposable tracer chips to his personal belongings, including the wares he carried for sale. This gave him an added sense of security, complementing some of the more sophisticated electronic tracking gadgetry he could access.

"It shouldn't be too difficult to find my new friends in the I.I.F.F.," he noted as he began a quickscan for the tracer chips he'd planted in the pleasure-ware, now in the possession of the I.I.F.F.

He realized that his pleasure-ware cartons had served him in more than one way. Not only had they been indispensable in bartering for his life with the I.I.F.F.; now the same tools would lead him to them. This unsavory option was beginning to look like Travis' only hope for leaving the remote rainforest alive.

"Got it," Travis exclaimed, still focusing on the digital display, which would give him the location of his property within seconds.

"Six miles and stationary."

"I should be able to reach them within a few hours if I get moving," he thought.

Travis decided he'd need a guide to help him through the forest. Several of the elderly tribesmen from the village volunteered. Travis, unable to decide which man to trust, decided to bring all three.

"There's safety in numbers," Travis mumbled to the man he called "Rooster", aptly named for the colorful array of tropical bird feathers he wore around his head.

Travis and his three traveling companions were on the trail by the time the moon had reached its peak in the sky. The pale light was scattered and broken by the canopy of vegetation overhead, creating an eerie ghostlike play of light as Travis moved along the forest floor.

They traveled for what seemed like hours, without stopping to rest.

The moon had disappeared from view and the available light on the floor of the forest had grown visibly dim. Just before sunrise, they came upon a clearing where the I.I.F.F. were camped.

A guard posted on the outskirts of the camp communicated with Rooster in some unknown dialect, then directed Travis and his unlikely group towards the center of the clearing, where the Butcher of Luzon sat around a small campfire, talking with several of his guerillas.

"And so we meet again," laughed the Butcher as he gestured for Travis to come sit beside him. "Now tell me, Travis, how did the pleasure-ware vendor from the Western Sector manage to find us in this forest, when we've managed to elude every Multinational tracker for the last twenty years?"

"You can thank my guides for that," Travis lied.

"Are you sure that these little devils couldn't have something to do with your success?" asked the Butcher, as he tossed Travis' tracer chips into the air, while an evil grin spread across his face.

"Oh, those," said Travis, who was now beginning to feel rather impotent, in light of these most recent allegations. "Of course they were of some assistance. A pleasure-ware vendor can't afford to take chances these days," he said defensively.

"Well, what can we do for you, Travis, or should I say Transvandal," the Butcher asked accusingly.

"Why do you keep saying that?" asked Travis, now beginning to fear for his life again.

"We still manage our own information resources, despite the persistent rumors of our unfortunate demise."

"Multinational headquarters has you logged in as a Transvandal from the Western Sector. There's really no point in continuing this masquerade any longer. Whether or not you level with us is not the point, the fact that you're a Transvandal is the only reason that you're still alive," the Butcher added coldly.

"And if you cooperate, you just might make it out of here alive."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Just made a little delivery for us, to the Western Sector."

"Deliver what?" asked Travis.

"An EMP device," replied the Butcher.

E.M.P.

Peg was adrift in an info-deprived environment. With her onboard gear incapacitated, she envisioned herself stranded like a fish out of water, flopping on the desert floor, with the white-hot sand burning her skin and her shiny silver scales peeling off in the sweltering heat.

She writhed in agony and frustration.

Peg felt like a trapped animal.

She had always been claustrophobic.

Deprived of the most basic neural input, her brain would begin to fold in on itself without external stimulation. She tried desperately to keep her thoughts in motion, reciting complex algorithmic formulas in order to keep her mind from seizing up.

Her brain began to automatically fabricate illusions so as to compensate for the lack of input.

"I can't make it cold turkey," she thought.

Every info-junkie experienced the pain of withdrawal on occasion. Sun spots, solar battery failure, or sat-link shutdowns were but a few of the culprits. But in almost all cases of info-withdrawal, the symptoms can be relieved easily with REM sequencing, or hemispheric synchronization.

Peg understood the paradox of her dilemma. Without God, she would go into withdrawals and convulsions. Using God without sufficient input could be just as destructive to the mind.

She found herself reliving memories of her childhood.

Peg began to replay the events leading up to the awesome geologic cataclysm that had engulfed the Pac-Rim, devastating the Western Sector. As the horror of these memories began to manifest in her awareness, she felt herself losing her grip on her basic mental functioning.

Her body began to convulse involuntarily.

She gripped the edge of the cold steel table and tried to steady herself.

"Help me, father, please," she screamed.

"Get me the fuck out of here."

Then she remembered one of the mind control techniques taught to her by Brandon, as images of destruction and sorrow swirled around her like a whirlpool, dragging her deeper into a depression from which there would be no return.

She began to breathe deeply, focusing her attention on an orange-like orb of color and energy, swirling behind her eyes. The ball of multi-colored light began to fragment into two halves, leaving a broken shell of orange, seeping with heat.

Peg quickly focused her attention towards envisioning soft blue colors emanating from her aura.

She had to float beyond self, beyond form, beyond thought, if she were to survive.

Suddenly, she opened her "eyes". The same two multinational security guards who had escorted her upon her arrival had entered silently, and now stood above her glaring down, as Peg cowered in a crumpled ball in the corner.

"Please help me," she moaned.

"You can count on that, bitch," said one of the guards as he reached down forcefully, grabbing her by the arm, and jerking her to her feet.

She knew that to resist would be futile.

She was removed from her waiting room, and lead down a dimly lit hallway into a room which was empty, except for a small locker in the corner.

"Remove everything, and put on the gown in the locker," spoke her handlers.

Then she was led to a third room where she was asked to sit in an examination chair. A female med-techie entered, carrying a tray of surgical implements.

"Just in case," she said, noticing the look of fear on Peg's face.

"In case of what?" asked Peg.

"Complications," came the reply.

"What kind of complications?" Peg demanded.

"This is just a routine upgrade."

"Routine upgrade my ass," Peg yelled.

"Now this is what I consider to be a complication. Do I have your cooperation or not?" replied the female techie.

Peg decided to cooperate. She knew she didn't have any choice. She just had to go along with the program.

The med-techie unhooked and removed all Peg's onboard gear. She removed Peg's Cyber-cu interface chip, and de-activated her Transface Terminal.

The med-techie picked up a small gray metal box. She placed a tiny new nano-processor in Peg's Cyber-cu docking site, completing the upgrade process.

"Well now, good as new."

Peg was stunned. Was it possible she would be released and allowed back on duty, she wondered to herself.

She doubted it.

In fact she precogged Multinational security searching her Neuro-Chameleon program for illegal add-ons.

She was screwed.

With the slick cadence of an old interactive horror show, the two security escorts arrived on cue.

The med-tech looked away without saying a word, as Peg was lifted out of her seat by the guards, and physically dragged down the dark hallway.

The Multinational goons brought her to a large crystal shaped chamber. Built out of steel and glass, it was coated with a mirror-chromium black finish.

Sophisticated communication equipment lined the walls, centering around a VR-exam console. The room offered the appearance of an extraterrestrial torture chamber.

Peg's hopes dimmed even further as she was strapped into the console, with a set of industrial stereoscopic goggles fit firmly around her head.

Soon the last Velcro was fastened and she began to observe the interface lighting come into focus.

She had no idea what day it was. Endless hours of God intoxication without adequate neural stimulation had left her feeling like a worn out shell. She felt hollow, empty inside, like the contents of her mind had been emptied into the fires

of hell, etching deep caverns of pain from the scorching thoughts searing her mental templates.

A human sounding voice came over the screen.

"You've received a beta copy of the latest intuitive know-ware. You have the honor of being selected to participate in the testing of this most recent generation of technology.

You'll see it all in 4D, it's your favorite foreign movie. The test will begin at this time."

Hypervision

Brandon spent the rest of that afternoon scouring Infi-Net. Using the Pipeline as gateway, he tunneled along the subterranean catacombs of data, fully utilizing the power of the vast resources at his command.

By the time the moon began to rise over Western Sector, Brandon started to realize that the construction of an EMP device had become more difficult than he had imagined.

EMP was a relatively simple concept: a huge surge of electromagnetic energy brought about as a byproduct of nuclear detonation, would overload systems and cause permanent damage to unshielded hardware. For years renegade techies had been using non-nuclear methods of pulse generation, disrupting Multinational operations and causing havoc on Infi-Net.

Penalty for possession of these devices or related software was death.

Brandon met stiff resistance when bargaining for these wares.

Brandon had been out of the loop for too long. Even his top operatives proved to be reluctant to help, especially on such short notice.

He summoned Maisey once again. Brandon removed the ULTRA-HMD and placed Cyber-cu on stand-by.

Although he'd already ingested a seventy-two hour dose of 2CB-p only hours earlier, he went ahead and doubled up his dose to fortify himself for the ordeal that lay ahead of him.

Maisey walked into the sleazy Pipeline bar scene. Brandon waited at a table in the corner, trying to remain inconspicuous.

"How's it going?" asked Maisey.

"It's not happening, Maisey. It's just not happening."

"I was afraid of that, these are dire times, Brandon."

They stared at each other in silence, each one waiting, dreading what the other was about to say.

Maisey spoke first.

"I brought you another present," she said.

"Oh really, and what would that be, more drugs?" he said smiling, as the 2cb-p rushed through his body making him feel like a god.

"No, this time I've got something really special," she said as she smiled and winked at Brandon.

Reaching under the table, Maisey handed Brandon the tiny present.

"Some new form of electro-sorcery, Maisey?"

"Something like that," she replied. "It's new generation of Hyper-vision."

"Hyper-vision, what am I going to need that for?" he asked.

"If there's any hope of reaching Phillipe and his men, this will be the way," she said.

"They're still hiding on Irian Jaya, at least that's the rumor. Brandon, this really is all I can do for you. I'm leaving on a shuttle in just a few minutes."

"What about Peg? Where is she?"

"Oh yea, I almost forgot to tell you. She's in Net-Gates H.Q. Security's on auto, so I'd watch it. I'm sorry, Brandon, it does not look good."

Maisey walked out into the bright lights of the Pipeline's lobby with Brandon walking beside her. Then, without saying a word, she turned and walked away.

Brandon got a strange feeling that he would see Maisey again someday, "If I live that long."

He returned to his cubicle and activated the new Hyper-Vision chip.

He placed the HMD over his eyes and activated his Cyber-cu.

Within seconds he was flying over the green mountains of Irian Jaya.

"Posloc I.I.F.F.," he commanded.

The sights were spectacular.

Brandon had to remind himself not to get so immersed in telepresence that he would loose focus on his mission. He used hyper-vision to run down every possible thread of information pertaining to the I.I.F.F. in Irian Jaya.

Although he held out no hope for finding them, he hoped that if he created enough data waves, they would find him. On every intersection of data relating to the I.I.F.F., Brandon left a signpost. He knew this sort of virtual graffiti sure to attract attention.

"But when?" he thought.

Time was running out for any hope of a rescue.

"Peg could be dead within hours, or already for that matter," he thought.

Suddenly he received the message he'd been waiting for.

"Buenas noches, Brandon," said the foreign, and yet at the same time familiar voice.

"What took you so long?"

"What do you mean, took me so long?" asked Brandon, not understanding the meaning of the question.

"We've been waiting for you."

"Phillipe!" cried Brandon, "Is it really you? I just can't believe it after all these years."

"I know, Brandon, it's been a while."

"It's Peg, right? You got problems."

"No shit, big problems."

"Don't worry, Brandon, we've already taken care of everything."

"What do you mean. You couldn't know what's happening," said Brandon, astonished.

"We've always maintained access to all the information we've needed. We can monitor more frequencies than you, or anyone else could imagine. That includes updated files on Peg and yourself; for security, of course." Brandon was confused.

"You mean to tell me that you and your psycho friends have been monitoring my daughter and I for all these years?"

"Yes, we've kept files on you and thousands of other ex-patriots."

"We've had a backdoor into your activities from day one. So do the Multinationals, their freelancers, and anybody else who wants to know. Good old freedom of information, right Brandon."

"Anyway, Travis will be there in a few hours. You should meet him at the shuttle."

"Who's Travis?"

"Oh yea, almost forgot, don't trust him."

"Who?"

"Travis. He's a Transvandal from the Western Sector."

REM Sequencer

Travis found himself in an interesting position. He figured he needed the help of the I.I.F.F. to make it off the island alive. But now the tables were turned and it looked like they needed his help for something important.

Travis wasn't sure how to react. One thing he knew for sure: the Butcher of Luzon would skin him alive if he tried to betray the I.I.F.F. He decided he had no choice but to cooperate for the time being.

The Butcher revealed his plans to Travis. Travis would return the Western Sector Megapolis with a new ID. Passing for just another pleasure-ware vendor, Travis would easily blend with the gadget vendors returning from East-Sino.

He would be extracted from the jungle by private air shuttle within the hour.

"Where's the gear I'll be using to smuggle the circuitboard. If it's not hidden well, I'd be better off staying here and dealing with this fucking wilderness," Travis complained.

The fearless leader of the I.I.F.F. replied tersely, "That's not an option. You'll be leaving here immediately. Once you have safely delivered this hardware to your destination we will no longer have any obligation towards one another. You will never try to contact myself or any other member of the I.I.F.F. at any time in the future."

"I understand," said Travis, who was both relieved and confused.

"What about the equipment, when do I get to see the god damned equipment I'm supposed to be risking my life for."

"You'll acquire the hardware after liftoff, so you'd better head out to the landing site. Rooster can show you the way."

Travis had so many questions to ask the Butcher, but he was beginning to think that he knew some of the answers already.

At that moment Rooster grabbed Travis by the arm and pointed to a group of men mobilizing around a stack of leisure-ware cartons.

Travis inspected the gear that he was about to carry through Multinational security inspections. "What's in this stuff?"

"Maybe better you don't know," said the I.I.F.F. anarchatech as he hoisted the exo-frame cartons onto one of his comrades' back.

Travis bid farewell to the friendly villagers and the tranquil moments he had spent there. He looked around to say goodbye to the Butcher but he was nowhere to be found.

Travis was both excited and saddened at the same time. He enjoyed the relaxed pace of village life but he still missed searching for his victims and the thrill of the hunt.

The ragtag group headed off down the trail with Rooster leading the way.

The human caravan snaked its way up a narrow jungle trail, winding up a steep hillside. Upon reaching a small clearing near the top of the ridge, Travis was surprised to see a Private Air-Shuttle.

"What kind of operation is this?" he wondered. "These guys have incredible resources."

After final goodbyes to Rooster and the rest of his I.I.F.F. companions, Travis boarded the shuttle. The crates of pleasure-ware cartons were loaded behind him with exo-frames still intact, to make for easy carry off.

Travis strapped himself in securely.

After a liftoff consisting of little more than a rapid vertical ascent followed by a steep trajectory through the ionosphere, Travis began to relax in this more familiar tech-oriented environment.

Just as he began to settle in to the onboard HMD, a stewardess approached him with a handful of colorful telltale ceramic packaging. Travis' mouth began to water out as the airborne temptress opened a package before his bulging eyes.

"Philippe said these would make your flight more enjoyable," she said, letting the multi-colored ampulets of God fall freely out of her hands and into Travis' lap.

"Who the hell is Philippe?" asked Travis astonished.

"Oh, no one told you?"

"Told me what."

"Philippe is none other than the Butcher of Luzon himself."

"Interesting," Travis mumbled, as he assorted the ampulets by color into their various dosages.

Looking over his shoulder at the empty rows of seats, he felt privileged in a strange way to be part of such a classy operation. Alone and relaxed, he used up the first two ampulets of God within seconds of each other.

Quickly pulling down the HMD again, he immersed himself in the visual delights only the Cyber-cu Optical Browser could provide.

Outside the shuttle, the vast blue-green Pacific Ocean sparkled in the deadly morning sun while Travis' visual hallucinations merged with the parade of pixels that danced all around him in his self-created data-tube.

This was pure computational bliss to Travis's info-starved Transface. He fantasized about ripping new chips and the rewards they could bring him.

He still had many unanswered questions about the I.I.F.F. and the mysterious N.W. corner of Irian Jaya where indigenous people apparently survived without Multinational-issued rebreathers.

But these questions would have to wait.

He allowed himself to freefall through endless K-holes, smoothly interfacing with trillions of digital units per second. Spiraling through a dizzying soup of electrons, his flight path was punctuated only by the occasional ultratelluric chasms that often ping-ponged Travis from one dimensional hierarchy to another.

As Travis sat immobile, strapped in the shuttle seat, he tried to think back to his transaction with Mitsui only days before.

His memory was cloudy.

Travis began to witness full Dream-color 4D pictures of Mitsui flashing in front of his ret-scan.

Suddenly he experienced a tremendous powersurge which sent him tearing across even more uncharted territory. This unexpected explosion into Hyper-space sent Travis careening across vast regions of the Net at warp speeds.

"Whoa", he thought to himself, "get a grip Travis".

He signaled his personalized REM sequencer and attempted re-entry into a more familiar data zone.

"REM SEQUENCER NOT RESPONDING."

Travis hurtled towards the speed of thought, breaking every informational barrier in his path.

Travis tumbled into the proverbial "eye" of the data-hurricane that he had created. Everything appeared to slow to a halt as he quietly floated through this formless space, devoid of all external stimulation.

He felt as if he were floating deep underwater, groping for some sense of the familiar topside world of sensory input.

Suddenly Travis' REM sequencer flashed across his ret-scan.

"ERROR CORRECTED."

"That was as close to the edge as I'd ever want to get," he thought to himself.

Dark Nostalgia

Peg squirmed slightly arching her back, exploring her range of motion within the parameters of her confinement.

Familiar with the configuration of most VR-exam consoles, she'd never seen a layout like this one before.

Enclosed within an opaque, shapeless memory-foam travelounge with wrap-around contoured exam implements, she lay helpless within the Net-Gates security domain.

Once the HMD was fully secure, Peg was oblivious to what was occurring around her in the crystal-shaped chamber.

Meanwhile Med-techies moved about, prepping the Interprompt workstation.

She had some idea of what would be next. An I.V. anesthetic would dilate her Transface site for a Multinational direct interface.

A slight stinging in the back of her neck let her know that the operation had begun.

This was one of Peg's darkest moments, where she would experience the most hideous of personal intrusions.

Gradually a feeling of warmth spread from her neck to her head and back.

Peg realized that the Multinational had directly infused a fiber through her Transface, transforming her brain into a read-only data file.

Peg's neck felt swollen and stiff. A mega-dose of God combined with several Dsu3 analogues designed to liberate Peg's reasoning capacity were injected via her new carotid receptor site.

Peg began to see crude 3D images splattering around her.

The immense overhead viewing hardware, which at first appeared to Peg as overkill, was now producing scary results.

Scenes of Transvandal busts, investigative telepresence as well as personal details of Peg's life, stacked up like "real" memories in a multifaceted arc around her.

Insignificant details of her private life became interspersed with scenes she couldn't recognize.

She experienced a strange feeling of nostalgia for scenes and memories that were obviously not her own.

"But who's?" "And why are they showing them to me?" she wondered.

The personal nature of many of the files confirmed Peg's suspicions that like the majority of the feudal populace, she had been under surveillance for most of her adult life.

Trans-Oceanic Homicide

Just as mysteriously as he arrived, Philippe signed off, leaving Brandon with a an unsettling feeling. His anxieties compounded as the complexities of the situation began to play themselves out on his Optical Browser.

Like a geyser of pure awareness overflowing, spilling its precious contents, Brandon's consciousness began to expand. The 2CB-p magnified the incoming data-waves creating copper-blue meta-exposures, polishing the flawless jewels within his thought palaces.

He felt resplendent, although at no time did he forget the awesome task that lay before him.

Brandon shut down his ret-scan, trying to adjust to the blue xenon which bathed the walls of his Pipeline module creating eerie shadows on the honeycomb foam safety-roof.

Brandon staggered across the room, smashing his knee against a table covered with schematics.

"God damnit," he yelled to no one in particular as he reeled from the sensory messages of pain. "I've got to pull it together."

Brandon attempted to sort out the various bundles of wires, nano-chips and various search tools that he'd accumulated since his arrival at the Pipeline. He needed to hurry if he were to rendezvous with the courier sent by Philippe.

"Why did he send a Transvandal?" Brandon wondered. "Well, it's too late to do anything about that now."

It wasn't that Brandon minded working with Transvandals. In fact he'd opted with every kind of cretin scum, from lowlife Christian terrorists hell-bent on taking down Infi-Net, to heavily armed anarchists who fought the Multinational tooth and nail.

He saw Transvandals as a natural part of the ecosystem.

The Flora and Fauna of destruction.

But Philippe made a special point of letting Brandon know that Travis could not be trusted, and so he knew he had to be on guard.

Brandon began receiving thought-pictures from Peg. His facial expression changed dramatically signaling his know-ware to engage. Brandon was a seer. He really had the gift. He envisioned Peg in a black metallic interro-prompt.

"I've got to get going. Things are really starting to jell."

Brandon inserted the small Hyper-vision diskettes into their appropriate slots. He selected a frequency appropriately named "Electrum Magicum."

"Interesting."

Lights grooved on his scanners.

He double checked his onboard green flash laser ports, the very latest generation of Hitachi lethal assault weaponry. Brandon moved out into the tube exiting the Pipeline.

Travis squirmed uncomfortably in the shuttle travel lounge. He still carried the odor of living for days in the rainforest without even a chem-bath.

Although he had weathered the Dsu-3 induced data-storm, the afternoon's libation left him feeling fortunate that he was so tightly strapped in his seat. He felt that if he wasn't strapped in so securely, he'd elevate right up and out of the shuttles ceiling.

Travis enjoyed fiddling with his REM sequencer, trying to create interesting textures of self. He strived to straddle the fine line of waking consciousness without falling off the digital slipstream into the endless night of dreams.

No sooner had Travis' shuttle attained minimal gravity that it began its spiraling descent over the Pacific, swooping down on the western sector with forward wings outstretched as if to greet the long lost earth rushing head on to meet it.

The increased G pressure kept Travis and the lone stewardess pinned rather tightly in their Travel Lounges. Travis couldn't help but fantasize about the stewardess, who by this time was showing signs of reciprocation.

He could tell by her hungry smile and the way that she winked on her ret-scan, that they might as well enjoy some premarital telegenics. They both ran simultaneous queries and merged in closed frequency aptly titled "Somatic Rainbow Bliss."

As the young woman and Travis merged in hyper-space, Travis' passions began to burn like a raging forest fire. With his inner beast fully ignited, he tore off his safety straps and leaped out of his seat, quickly closing the gap between himself and the stewardess.

He began his assault by pressing his body on top of her, as she lay helplessly trapped beneath him in her travel lounge.

She screamed, and began to trigger a ret-scan automatic distress signal.

Travis could read her every move. Before she could initiate the distress sequence, he pried her retscan away from her face until it snapped off revealing the damaged fiber mesh.

"It doesn't have to be painful," he told her.

As the shuttle finally came to rest on the grey, dismal shores of the Western Megapolis, Travis climbed into his exo-frames and stood by the exit. He forced open the emergency portal and leaped onto the tarmac below, his landing cushioned by the dual-exo-frames, each hydro-shock capable of withstanding a tremendous impact.

Travis grabbed onto the ladder of the straddle carrier as it released the air shuttle from its grasp. As the straddle pulled away from the reception terminal, Travis moved right along with it.

"Fuck security," he muttered.

Travis began to wonder how much he could get for his new prizes.

"I ought to turn around and head over to see Mitsui now," he thought.

Travis had never intended to deliver the property of the I.I.F.F. as he'd promised Philippe.

"Butcher or not, I've got other problems to worry about, like a shower and re-upping my Dsu3 supply," he thought.

As physically exhausted and grimy as he felt, Travis still had one more stop to make.

Brandon cautiously traversed the outskirts of the Western Meg-op, avoiding the usual trouble spots. Riding a newly leased Utility cycle, he blended well with Denizens of the Western Megapolis. He knew ways to avoid the numerous security checkpoints scattered about like death traps in some maddening labyrinth.

Multinational security agents prowled the Megapolis, cleaning up the refuse and leftovers of Dsu-3 abuse. Spot checks and searches were the usual method of intimidation. With the random dragnet behind him, he proceeded directly to the shuttle terminal.

In order to avoid security, Brandon parked outside the facility and walked over to an observation site open to the general population.

He ran a retscan requesting a shuttle map layout.

Travis was due to arrive at Pad 23 within minutes. Brandon examined the perimeter of the pad cluster. He had a gut feeling about this one.

Bright orange straddle carriers moved about, methodically lifting each streamlined air-vehicle from its pad cluster. After depositing the craft in its appropriate docking cradle, the strads would return to the landing platforms for additional craft.

Switching his Optical Browser to macro-settings, Brandon surveyed the vast shuttle complex.

Several older strad models were parked on the south side of the docking pads. Brandon could see shuttle lights approaching from the western sky.

He watched the craft gently touch down on Pad 23.

That's when he noticed something so extraordinary he couldn't believe his Optical Browser. The shuttle door flew open and out jumped a large man, landing upright on the tarmac below.

"That's a ten meter drop," Brandon said to himself. "I wonder if I was the only one who saw that."

Somehow Brandon knew that this must be the Transvandal sent by Philippe.

Brandon was supposed to meet Travis in the shuttle terminal. He realized now that there had been a change of plans. He watched Travis latch onto a strad, which quickly whisked him out of visual range.

A general security bulletin flashed over Brandon's retscan.

"Security alert. Security alert. Transface Vandal. Must be apprehended."

"This is getting out of control," thought Brandon. "This place is going to be swarming with security."

Brandon was right about that. The entire complex was crawling with heat.

He climbed back on his Utility cycle and took the perimeter road. He had only traveled a kilometer and a half before he approached a Multinational security checkpoint.



"What's the problem?" Travis asked as the two shuttle guards approached his cycle.

Neither man said a word, but grimly performed a meticulous search of Brandon and his vehicle. As traffic began to back up behind him, the guards motioned Brandon to move ahead.

"Are you guys looking for that Transvandal?" asked Brandon

trying to sound informed via the security broadcasts he'd picked up at the Pipeline.

"Yea, homicide over at 23. Ripped her Transface clean out. Cyber-cu too. Then he stuffed her down an air duct. The pilot found her," said the security agent.

"Good luck," said Brandon as he drove away on his Utility cycle.

Green Fireballs Rising

Travis hung on to the straddle until he reached the edge of the shuttle hangars.

"Thanks for the lift," he laughed sarcastically as he disembarked from the straddle carrier.

He bolted across the outer boundaries of the terminal, easily clearing the security perimeter. He strayed from the main road, and took off running through the back alleys of the Western Megapolis.

On the way back to the Pipeline, Brandon tried in vain to contact Philippe.

He realized Travis was probably out of the picture, but hoped the Transvandal might try and contact him at the Pipeline.

Without Travis and his "gifts" from the I.I.F.F., Brandon realized that he stood little chance of making it through the gauntlet of the Net-Gates Security complex alive.

"I'm getting too old for this," he laughed, as he made the final adjustments to his laser ports.

Brandon grabbed the hardware he had managed to accumulate during his stay at the Pipeline. Slinging the Multi-Multinational issue satchel over his shoulder, he opened the door of Room 4004 and stepped into the exit tunnel, for what he hoped would be his last visit to the corporate anthill.

"At least they had a nice neural network interface," he noted in his log, as he took one last look back in the cubicle, to lower the Xenon lighting and double checked to see if he had forgotten something.

Just as he stepped outside, he was violently shoved back into the room through the open doorway. He came tumbling back into the middle of the tiny enclosure, smashing his head against the back wall.

With his Optical Browser temporarily shut down from the impact, Brandon teetered on the edge of unconsciousness.

He looked up to see the silhouette of a large man looming over his crumpled frame, which was now sprawled out in a tangle of broken furniture and hybridized hardware.

He had little time to think. Even at his age, Brandon had not forgotten a lifetime's worth of training. Using his "real" eye for aim, he discharged the Green Laser-Cannon from his left weapons module.

The room exploded into an angry green fireball, singeing the skin on Brandon's face and hands. Both Brandon and his attacker were bathed in Hot-Gamma Rays. He could still feel the 2CB-p as his ret-scan flickered and Brandon slipped into the bedroom of his dreams.

Travis only had one stop to make before wiping off the sweat of Irian Jaya, which had mixed with blood from the stewardess and crystallized, coating his body like a thin sheet of stained glass.

Travis usually worked alone, but with the hand of the Multinational about to touch him, he thought using a representative would be the safest way to permanently get rid of Brandon.

He moved briskly through the general population, remaining furtive, while at the same time running a scan on Infi-Net for a particular asset that happened to work out of a dive not too far from the Pipeline.

Although just an apprentice, Travis figured his friend the Locust would be perfect for the job. After all, his stats indicated that the old man was well over one hundred years old.

The Locust would get the job done.

He instructed the Locust to meet him in front of the Pipeline immediately.

The Locust was only seventeen, which was rather young for a Transvandal.

Standing in at two and a half meters, he was a formidable foe indeed, when it came to a scrap.

He wore the latest custom designed Optical Browser, teal green with an electra-blue finish. His high fashion Transface was coated with a polished quartz-enamel, which stood out above his downturned tunic collar.

Although still young and just a Trendie, the Locust was aptly named for his relentless searches for his victims, and his habit of completely stripping his prey of all electronic valuables.

Travis conferred with the Locust for a few moments, and then sent his representative in to meet Brandon. He felt he had to eliminate Brandon in order to remove any chance of the Butcher himself ever tracking Travis down. He felt that

with Brandon out of the picture, the I.I.F.F. would just fade out of his life, leaving himself with yet another handsome reward.

The Locust entered the Pipeline, and headed towards room 4004.

Brandon awoke as waves of searing pain coursed through his being.

His retscan flickered randomly, signaling a serious malfunction in his communications hardware. He switched over to Alt manual circuit one; a backup mirror encased within thousands of wafers of T-foil.

His Retscan lit up nicely, only to reveal the extent of the devastation that now engulfed him. He could taste the mixture of blood and Rhodopsin, draining from the optical neural computer built into his op-mat.

"Fuck," Brandon thought. "How long have I been out of it?"

He activated his Cyber-cu and did a quick re-mem. "Two hundred and forty three seconds and counting," chimed the familiar Cyber-cu Persona.

Brandon knew security could arrive any second.

Brandon had hacked his way into the Pipeline using false user I.D. If he could get off the premises before security arrived, he still might have a remote chance of completing his objective: to somehow rescue his daughter from the Multinational.

As Brandon stood up and began to move his aching frame towards the exit, he couldn't help but notice the smoldering body parts of his attacker.

Brandon paused a moment and then bent down and inspected the fresh corpse.

Brandon inserted his index finger into the op-mat interface, and gently pried the hardware from the eye socket of the still warm corpse. Then he reached around behind the body and pulled hard on the Transface, leaving shattered ganglia dripping from the dead man's spine.

"You won't be needing this anymore."

He popped out the tiny chips, and tossed the hardware into a receptacle entitled:

"Please recycle."

The Locust

Brandon smiled in pain, as he thought about how nicely the Shock laser cannon had vivisected his attacker.

As he exited the Pipeline, still wiping blood from his forehead, he experienced a strange vacancy of self, as if he were replaying a scene which he'd been rehearsing all his life, and he knew from this point onward there would be no turning back.

Brandon exited the Pipeline for what he hoped would be the last time of his life.

He glared in mute nostril agony as he used a nasty solvent to clean his outwear service vent which was clogged with dried blood from his injuries.

As he spotted his utility cycle, his blurred vision telescoped in on his method of flight.

With his Optical Browser on the blink, and his retscan busy deciphering vast realms of data stream, he couldn't have possibly noticed the large hulk of a Transvandal who, while holding Brandon in a posloc, was now closing in for the kill.

Just as Brandon was in the process of mounting his Utility cycle, Travis appeared behind him.

Travis was still encased in the dual Exo-frames, with his travel gear still strapped securely onboard.

A split second of movement, reflected on the shiny surface of his Utility cycle, was all the warning Brandon received as Travis made his final assault.

Within milliseconds Brandon launched a back kick directly towards the incoming object. The titanium-alloy reinforced heel of Brandon's boot struck several inches from the center of Travis' chest, turning Travis sideways but lacking the impact to slow his momentum. As Travis came crashing into him, Brandon slammed his left elbow into Travis' rib cage.

Travis was stunned with disbelief. It was rare for a Cyber-cu recipient to resist a Transvandal. Like rabbits frozen with fear, Transvandal's victims were usually too startled or traumatized to offer much resistance.

Brandon sensed the superior strength of his opponent bearing down on him. He allowed the pressure to build as he withstood the brunt of Travis' strength for a minor eternity.

Just as Travis' superior force began to overcome him, Brandon allowed his body to go limp, forcing the massive Transvandal to collapse on top of him.

Travis was still locked in his exoframes. Although they enabled him with tremendous robotic strength, they severely hindered his mobility.

Brandon easily rolled out onto the pavement. Before Travis could recover from the impact of his fall, Brandon climbed on to Travis' back, pulled out his rebreather socket, and violently smashed the exoframe outboard control box, disabling the delicate CPU within.

Travis struggled to get to his knees, but his exoframes remained bent, failing to respond to command.

Brandon took this opportunity to put a lock on the Transvandal throat, choking him into unconsciousness.

"That's two Tran down within five minutes," Brandon thought to himself proudly. He was beginning to feel like his old self again.

As Travis lay unconscious on the pavement, Brandon rifled through Travis' wares. He stuffed numerous pleasure cartons into his utility satchel.

He tore off Travis' ID Logo from his tunic and magnetically attached it to his own.

Travis began to moan, the first sign of his awakening. Brandon was still reeling from his head injury, combined with the effects of 2CB-p.

Brandon noticed a Multinational personnel carrier coming down the Loop towards the main entrance of the Pipeline. It appeared to Brandon as a robotic monster, flashing colored lights and shiny steel under the crude yellow sodium lighting of the Pipelines entrance.

Brandon had no time to deal with Travis further, but instead could only hope to make his own escape.

He hopped on his Utility cycle, and began to flee the scene. He looked over his shoulder to see a detachable pursuit cycle closing in on him.

Brandon touched the full throttle switch.

The small electric turbine began to whine as the Utility cycle began to hit one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour.

Brandon came tearing around a curve and barely missed hitting a commercial transport, parked on the side of the loop. He glanced back through his rear cam, and saw a beautiful sight.

The Multinational pursuit cycle slammed into the parked vehicle at a high rate of speed. The Multinational tracker was hurled skyward, as if shot from a cannon in a crazy real-world circus act.

Brandon didn't need to hit slo-mo on his retscan.

The hapless driver floated skyward for what seemed like forever, and then in order to conform to the dictates of gravity, he came smashing back down to the pavement, snapping his neck and crushing his skull upon impact.

Brandon pulled off the loop at the first opportunity, pulling his cycle behind a large neon kiosk. He emptied out his carry satchel and inspected the pleasure-ware cartons he appropriated from Travis.

Brandon laughed to himself. "I didn't have time for a formal introduction."

Meticulously searching through each carton of pleasure ware, Brandon finally found the circuit board he'd sought so desperately. He made a few quick adjustments, and went on to inspect the rest of the gear.

Aside from providing a beautifully EMP layout, Philippe had seen to it that Brandon was equipped with the latest in assault gadgetry.

Brandon opened one case that contained hundreds of tiny robotic insects. Another revealed a sonic pulse device. "I've got enough gadgetry here for a minor revolution," he thought.

Brandon programmed the master sequencer and then performed the difficult task of arming the miniature electronic robotoids with semi-lethal nerve gasses.

The past eighteen hours scouring the Western Megapolis for resources had finally paid off.

Brandon gently placed the tiny fragile robots into the bottom of his satchel. He attached the EMP circuitry inside his tunic, and directly wired his Optical Browser to the devices control panel.

While checking the azimuth alignment on his laser ports, Brandon reset his shock lasers from "stun" to "blast."

Fully loaded down with armaments, Brandon moved out into the early morning darkness. He felt heavy, like a beast of burden, weighed down by the Multinational issue satchel now strung over his shoulder.

His plan was simple: create a diversion large enough to distract the building security. Then he hoped to circumvent the elevator and descend into the security well.

As Brandon moved through endless corporate office parks, he looked up to see the Net-Gates building, a true architectural wonder, towering above the Western Sector.

Liquid Jell-O Strobe

Travis choked and gagged as the probe was forced down his throat. What at first felt vaguely like intense thirst was now becoming an overwhelming feeling of choking to death. He opened his eyes to see med-techs standing over him as he lay sprawled out on the pavement in front of the Pipeline.

"He's responding," exclaimed a discorporeal voice.

"Looks like he's going to make it."

Travis listened carefully, feigning unconsciousness as the med-techs worked away.

"Let's get him out of these exos."

Then he could make out another voice in the background saying something about extensive damage in 4004 and maybe he heard something about body parts.

"This one's got no ID but we've tagged him as a TSV."

"Better get him locked up before he comes around."

Travis knew he had to move fast.

He bolted upright, much to the surprise of the med-techs working over him.

Once free of the exos, Travis tore into the two MTs like a true killing machine.

Gripping one of the med-techs in a headlock, he tore the rebreather out of the second MT and stuffed it back down his throat. He effortlessly choked out the remaining MT and proceeded to flee the scene.

Brandon established an observation post within visual range of the Net-Gates H.Q.

As he scoped the perimeter for entrances and escape corridors, he also timed the frequency with which Multinational air shuttles were making their vertical liftoffs and landings from the roof of the enormous "built environment".

The entire structure hummed with power and energy.

The mammoth dosage of 2CB-p only served to amplify Brandon's sense of anticipation. "God damned place looks like liquid Jell-O, strobing."

Brandon was tense. Full auto security was the highest state of alert, the accepted standard for any Multinational built environment with full Boss Access.



Brandon cautiously approached the entrance to the inter-office lobby.

The Executive entrance stood ominously quiet and appeared quite deserted except for the robotic security monitors scooping up the environment with the deadly accuracy of nano-sensors.

Brandon moved surreptitiously, avoiding close physical contact with the security monitors. While he was protected with the newest

generation of scanner deflection gear, he knew he could not circumvent the Serial Profile Index scanners placed strategically about the Entrance Hall.

Brandon paused momentarily. and allowed his ret-scan to catch up with the data-lag he was beginning to encounter.

"Peripheral overload," he noted in his log, as his Optical Browser twinkled and his ret-scan began to purr.

Brandon was literally bristling with exotic weaponry.

As security alarms began to resound around him, he proceeded to unleash his formidable arsenal in waves.

Brandon had pre-programmed his shock lasers to take out the multiple robotic monitors within seconds. Green electronic fireworks exploded about the Executive Entrance as the dual swivel porta-cannon methodically spliced and diced the robotic monitors.

Brandon leaped across the security turnstile and blasted his way through the last partition of security glass, placing himself well within the vulnerable underbelly of the Net-Gate H. Q.

He headed towards the Executive Hub, where the elevators and detachable speedeaters radiated throughout the giant corporate structure.

Based on structural design derived from a composite of living organisms, the Net-Gates H.Q. was the largest Built Environment in the Western Sector.

He estimated himself to be centered within the hub of the vast complex.

Net-Gates drones cowered in fear as Brandon moved about with impunity. He cleared his Optical Browser and reset his retscan to "Electrum Magicum."

Suddenly a large visual grid of the Security "Pit" flashed across Brandon's retscan.

"Maisey?" he wondered .

He looked up to see Maisey's electrical fiber hair glistening in digitized patterns.

"Thank you, Maisey," he beamed.

Her radiant telegenic smile pierced the void of hyperspace, casting echoes in concentric circles, dissolving into the cold night of stone.

Scoping the auto control matrix for the elevated people movers, Brandon wielded his most formidable asset. With a blink of his retscan, he activated the EMP Sequencer.

He unfolded a copper alloy antennae and connected it to the electrical grid panel controls. He then turned off his Optical Browser and retscan while pulling a small aluminum hood from beneath his tunic collar, which encased his Transface and Browser terminals.

He issued the terminal command. Within nanoseconds, Brandon's EMP circuitry achieved event horizon.

An invisible surge of electromagnetic energy was released, literally frying every unshielded connection within a several block radius.

Net-Gates H. Q. was effectively brought to a standstill.

Opening the Multinational issue shielded satchel, Brandon released thousands of robotic insectoids and sent them scattering, each device on an individual mission, preprogrammed to exact specifications.

Seconds later, he magnetically attached a sonic pulse detonator to the elevator doors.

With a deafening roar, they were soon rendered to obsolescence.

The Executive Hub was in pandemonium.

Although alternative bio-survival circuits had already triggered off emergency oxygen supplements, neural networks were totally out of commission.

Brandon clipped an emergency rappel line to the lobby wall, and plunged into the darkness of the Security elevator shaft. His high resolution night vision enabled him to spot tiny beams of light, shining through cracks many floors below.

Brandon descended rapidly, as if in a controlled freefall.

At approximately one hundred meters down he began to get nervous, sure that his tether must be nearing its end. "I must be thirty stories down by now."

He must have momentarily experienced perceptual drift as the floor seemed to rush upwards to meet him. It was only then that Brandon fully realized the speed at which he had descended. He managed to slow down just enough to avert his own fatality, but he still hit the elevator roof with a devastating force.

Brandon felt his knee shatter on impact. He screamed in agony as a white hot fireball of pain surged up his leg, through his back, exploding in his brain. Brandon suppressed the sensory overload through sheer determination.

Crawling to one corner of the elevator roof, he proceeded to blast his way into the elevator itself, using his laser shock weaponry.

The entire elevator roofing gave way as Brandon tumbled out into the Security reception area.

A Multinational security agent lay unconscious or dead against the side of the hallway. Another dead security persona sat slumped over the security monitor on his desk, with nano-robotic insectoids still clinging to his flesh.

The acidic smell of spent nerve gas still permeated the Security Well.

Brandon's mind began to unravel, like a worn out tapestry.

He felt like he was coming apart at the seams.

He struggled with his onboard life support, as oceans of random data sloshed across the infinite landscape of his mind. Brandon's hand visibly shook as he pulled out a few colored ampulets of 2CB-p. He swallowed two Yellow Sunbursts, and one Lime Lunar, hoping to break through to Peg this time. "This should straighten me out."

Despite the carnage that was taking place, Brandon's aesthetic nature prevailed. His new softies, including Electrum Magicum, were providing him with a breathtaking datacast.

Technicolor pinwheels floated around his head, creating a four dimensional Moebius ribbon. It was like having meta-level halos laying on their sides, spiraling out from his brain. Still, his physical stamina continued to ebb, like tides being drawn far out to sea.

Brandon pushed off his weapons satchel and attempted to rig an emergency brace for his knee. He cursed himself for not bringing along one of the exo-braces he left back in Emerald City. He managed to lash on a couple velcros, before his hallucinations overcame him.

Travis thought he noticed the lights of the Net-Gates Tower dimming for a second, before the entire parkway became engulfed in a blanket of darkness.

It was the first time that he could remember the Tower going down. So Travis added some Visual Purple to his retscan. "Something big must be happening," he said with a true sense of amazement.

Travis could move incredibly fast for his size, even without exo-frames. He reset his adrenal levels to Max, and literally tore through the office parkway. "I'm going to get the bastard that did this to me," he swore.

Travis was surprised to find his Posloc on Brandon still holding.

He didn't care about the money anymore.

This was personal.

The Net-Gates Tower was the ultimate in Built Environments. The steel and glass monolith both served as cond-op and workplace for millions. Travis had always wanted to visit the Corporate H. Q., but he never seriously thought he'd have the chance.

"Must be an EMP. Nothing else could bring that place down."

It began to dawn on Travis that this was what the old man was all about.

"This might be some shit, but I'm still going to get him."

As he neared the Corporate mega-structure, Travis began to see outward signs of the confusion and horror that must have reigned within the structure itself.

Thousands of workers were fleeing the tower, pouring out into the office parkways like ants evacuating their threatened hive. But while ants might have taken their eggs even deeper, trying to protect their young, here was only a stampede of panic, as if darkness itself was the greatest fear of all.

Travis fought his way upstream, against the onslaught of terrified denizens climbing over one another in attempt to escape from the uncertainty within.

As he moved into the darkened monolith, he experienced a strange reminiscence.

He envisioned the infamous "Time of Darkness" after the Upheaval, where for months even solar power was practically nonexistent.

Although several years before he was born, his early childhood was filled with stories about the horror of darkness and the resulting chaos and anarchy.

"But that was before they built the first Optical Browser with onboard night vision capabilities. I really wonder what it is they fear?" he logged.

Travis loved chaos.

Tonight he felt destined for the thrill of anarchy, the ultimate act of social vandalism.

He followed his Posloc grid to the Executive hub and to the dark shaft leading to the Pit below.

He unfolded his exo-vise grips and attached the clamps to the elevator cabling, dangling down the shaft for what looked like eternity.

Even with his night vision on full Visual Purple, he couldn't perceive any light emitting from below. He moved gradually downwards, measuring his descent with the blue diodes on his exo-vise.

With one hand connected to the cable like a lobster's claw, Travis slid meter by meter, only pausing long enough to ingest a little Dsu-3. He had to go full audio amplification to hear the sound of the discarded ampulets landing far below.

Brandon felt stranded somewhere between oblivion and sheer madness. As his Optical Browser swamped over with never-ending fractal imagery, he heard the distinct sound of glass shattering nearby.

He looked over to see an empty vial of Dsu-3 come tumbling down from the elevator shaft. Brandon mustered his will for his final assault.

If Peg was still in there alive, he would find her.

If not, he would at least die trying to find her.

At the height of his visions, he saw Peg in her role as Multinational security agent, running down Transvandals. He attempted to super-impose the security tunnel on top of his neural grid.

Millions of miles of static came screaming down Infi-Net. Brandon moved down the hallway, strewn with defective nano-robotic insectoids. He could only wonder what would happen to the families of the security personnel whose lives ended in the initial attack.

Brandon staggered at the thought of the wholesale slaughter required to save the life of his daughter.

He simply knew he must find Peg.

Interprompt Midi

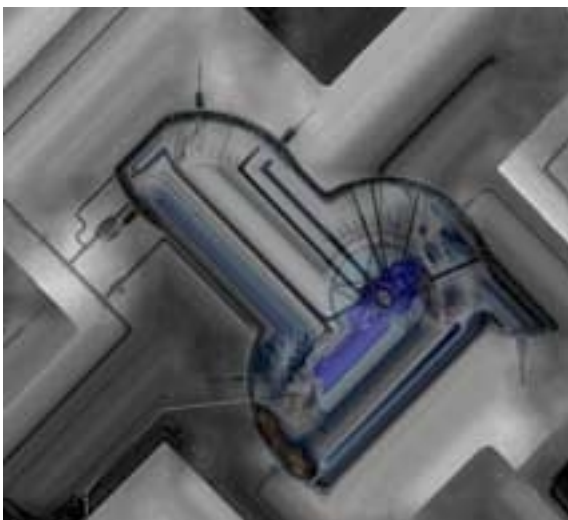
Like a circular flat rock skipping rapidly across a perfectly smooth water surface, Peg's neocortex skimmed along the pure digital bombardment of overlapping holographs.

Images crackled across her neural holo-chart in a perpetual overlapping deja-vu.

And as a house of mirrors reflects the same image in a never ending continuum, the essential components of Peg's programming were transformed into a biochromatic wasteland.

She experienced herself as an African Priestess performing a tribal ritual dating back before time, before technology, before the Multinational began.

She witnessed myriad of ancient civilizations with technologies far advanced to our own, rise and fall on the geologic plates which had supported them, over and over again.



These images then faded to become a mere transparent screen, as a more surreal scenario unfolded. Her focus crystallized on a particularly lucid vision of herself sitting behind a smooth semi-circular console which looked reassuringly familiar and yet, strangely enough, appeared to originate from a technology more advanced than our own.

Her brain momentarily cognized the incoming metaverse,

"They must be running the Primary Data Viaduct directly through my Transface."

Just like a drowning swimmer often rebounds on the bottom and returns to the surface for one more gulp of air, Peg was inundated in the avalanche of incoming imagery.

Spectacular panoramic vistas unfolded, only to become part of a buffered stack of multiple exposures.

Pastoral settings seemed to be randomly superimposed upon scenes of vast sculpted alien machinery.

Peg's data starved brain began to see that mirror of consciousness fragment.

While at first she envisioned herself to appear like Dali's "Virgin Autosodomised by her own Chastity," her perceptions suddenly hyper-imploded into a Picasso-like motif, effectively scattering her "selves" throughout the cosmos, where feathers of her persona were screaming in a hurricane of a data-storm.

With her consciousness splintered like shards of glass shattered upon colliding with their own transpersonal entity, and manifesting itself beyond the confines of space-time dimensionality, she lay amazed, her mind agape to the wonders of creation.

"This certainly stands as a testament to the effectiveness of the Interprompt Midi Interface and their programmers, whoever they are," she thought, failing in her repeated instinctive attempt to log in.

While at first the mirror of this cosmos had reflected the balance of its fractal symmetry, it was now effectively shattered, leaving random pieces of Peg's life strewn across the metaverse, like sound bits or multimedia presentations pervading the datawaves, syncopated and hyperlinked throughout time and space.

But it were these very hyperdimensional links which cast her into the frozen prison of form, which she now perceived as a grotesque monstrosity of confinement and constriction.

This fostered an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia to her newly refurbished intellect, now rising like a Phoenix from the ashes of infovacuum collapse.

Her synapses were directly threaded with microfibers, reloading her neocortex directly from the main artery of the Abyss. Her brain simply served as a buffer zone for the overwhelming telegenic overload.

She could see her father stumbling in pain as he came down the hall to meet her. She could feel the pain in his knee, feel the 2CB-p smoothly interface her own Dsu-3 molecular receptor sites.

Peg could see through his eyes and feel the urgency of his mission.

She could see Travis only meters behind, closing in on Brandon with a grim homicidal determination. Her experience as a Multinational tracker taught her enough to see his Posloc coming.

Peg felt powerless as she could actually feel the seething rage and anger of Travis build up inside herself.

An overpowering feeling of empathy towards Travis overcame her.

Throughout this inexplicable phenomena, Peg sensed profound implications.

She struggled for some sense of reason but she was again submerged in overloaded data-waves, crushed against the beaches of eternity. This had to be some kind of a dream, and she longed to awaken from it.

Who were these characters? Was it really Brandon? Or just another simulated 3Dbot?

She was experiencing such a personal, empathetic connection with both Brandon and Travis that she could not categorize the experience with any previously known psychotronic phenomena.

Again she saw a vision of herself sitting behind a streamlined powerconsole. She saw herself as if in some kind of futurized time portal through this lens she could see herself reach down and make some minor adjustment on the power bar, and she was instantly hurtled into an insectoid motif where crystalline silicon-based creatures were assembling insectoid bioforms in an atom stacking operation that made the Multinational Tech Farms look Neolithic in comparison.

Peg silently witnessed brittle Diamond-Mantis construction projects in a fragile crystal, silicon ice world. This delicate, porcelain vision, only punctuated by deep tangerine cloud vortexes, ripped clean through the fabric of her reasoning.

She had breeched the gossamer thread of connectedness that once held everything together in her world.

">Her identity continued to lapse, fragmented into a continual stream of disassociated thought processes.

She felt the struggle between Brandon and Travis "selves" going on within her mind.

She could feel their bodies inside her own. She could feel their strength coursing within herself like wild beasts, racing through her bloodstream, interfacing in ancient bioelectric languages with her mitochondrial DNA- Oversoul.

She morphed out on the pain coming from Brandon's knee, which was now her knee. She felt the synoptic-stream cyclone of hate generated within the Luciferian Chaos Principle hardwired to Travis' destiny since before his conception.

Within her loins she tasted their lust. She aligned within the spectrum of their desires. These virtual emoticons were hybrid technologies that she never dreamed existed. Even after years of cheating her employers, by lying awake all day with her Sensorama on full tilt, had she ever experienced anything quite like this.

Peg was too ripped to wonder if the Multinational Interprompt had driven her out of her mind. Instead, she was fixated on a reoccurring vision of herself, interacting with strange futuristic technologies.

Peg pondered the nature of the inexplicable scenario. Staring at the "futuristic" version and seeing it smile back at herself was startling. But what fascinated Peg more than anything was the face itself. It was basically the same as her own, yet still somehow distinctly different. "Larger eyes and a more perfect complexion," she thought, peering through the crystalline window of time into her "own" strange, enigmatic smile.

From out of nowhere, the familiar icon representing her favorite media presentation appeared, an interactive shootout starring two cosmic cowboys, replete with stellar spurs and cowboy hats floating in an environment of quasars and swirling galaxies.

One cowboy was essentially composed of black holes, and the other was made of light from the visible spectrum.

Next, the ultimate duel would take place; a parody of the "big bang."

The reason Peg liked this interactive VR was because it was so classic, and yet the action and graphics were first rate. Not only did one's aim have to be superb with the cosmic six-shooter, but one had many calculations to manage, including such goodies as Doppler effect/red shift, cosmic winds... It was a shade game and Peg used to like to play in it for extra credits.

As she passively observed what was once one of her favorite off duty pastimes, it became apparent that this wasn't a technical malfunction, or an attempt to humor her. As she watched the duel repeat itself in agonizing slo-mo over and over again, becoming a repetitive nightmare, it transformed itself into a vehicle on a vertical descent of unspeakable horror.

Just when she thought she could take no more, a bright sun exploded in front of her.

The long Polar Night had been replaced by the searing forces of Super Nova. She became sick and began to vomit. She gagged on the Interprompt mouth harness.

Peg developed extreme vertigo as her lifeless form tumbled through space, pushed by cosmic winds for what seemed like eternity.

During this bizarre timeless odyssey, Peg witnessed the incredible story of an intergalactic war between two technologically advanced alien races unfold. The more aggressive race appeared to be the red one, although both races fought fierce battles throughout the galaxies for millions of years.

Eventually the two species discovered a way to converge, forming a higher level system.

Apparently the DNA template seeded on Earth was just one of countless eugenic gardens established throughout the Milky Way after the intentional sterilization of billions of planetoids.

Peg experienced what seemed like endless alien wars, and yet even in these wars she felt herself as a familiar alien presence, experiencing death countless times as members of either race. Battles which raged for thousands of years left a trail of desolation throughout the galaxies.

Billions of stellar eco-systems were repopulated, and in time began to flourish.

It was within this unexpected surge of successfully adapted life forms that higher technologies emerged harnessing these diverse specimens as research and recreation design facilities.

The Planet Earth appeared to be a successfully cultivated organic-silicon matrix, which was configured by ecosystem and programmed with fractal design.

Clouds, oceans, tropical forests and coral reefs, all interacted as holons, creating the perfect machine.

Each bioform coexisted, interdependent.

Peg's brain served as an endless magic box, where every ecosystem was encapsulated inside another, inextricably welded together by the forces of technological necessity.

Peg merged, to follow the seemingly endless feedback loops down to nano-scale. That was where she observed the techno-life process at the ground level of her being.

Each DNA molecule appeared as an immense intergalactic communication device, capable of incomprehensible transmission speeds. Through these open cosmic frequencies, the ancient Red and Green races were able to vicariously experience multiple realities.

With their consciousness hyper-exploded, these highly evolved beings immersed themselves throughout the vast selection of bioforms loaded holographically into the giant bio-computerized planetoids.

Only the subatomic level contained the formless quantum realms where Peg could find solace. It was there where she hoped she could tear loose the grip of the nightmarish alien epic.

Much like Alice in pre-cellular Wonderland, Peg's nano-scale perceptors shrunk her logic gate to an unimaginable scale.

Here she hyper-crashed in a pure prenuclear stream of consciousness.

Into a living pulsar, Peg coalesced. Her pristine state of mind was again shattered as a bleak scenario began to unwind.

Travis held Brandon, locked in a death grip.

Brandon's narrow frame now struggled frantically as Travis continued to pinch off his rebreather, effectively squeezing the life out of the old man.

Thousands of Small Furry Animals

Brandon struggled in vain to escape the overpowering strength of the rabid Transvandal.

Brandon's rebreather snapped as the hardened Transvandal continued to thrash on Brandon's body, now lying unconscious on the cold basement floor of the Multinational H.Q.

Travis began to desecrate Brandon's body.

Like many Transvandals, Travis felt that the ultimate thrill of any act of vandalism was the finishing.

The method of killing was the signature, like a highly evolved art.

To Travis this was the premiere form of self expression.

Peg felt the links between herself and her father dissolve.

"He's dead now, he's really dead."

"I can't fucking believe it," a voice repeated in her mind.

A great sadness overcame her and she began to weep softly.

Even though she hadn't seen Brandon in years, she felt betrayed, strangely orphaned by the thought of his departure from the land of the living.

She gazed at the date on her retscan.

"I will never forget this day."

Peg was startled as turquoise waves of color began to saturate her retscan. She was tossed about like a small boat cast adrift, amidst a deluge of hyperlinked data.

Peg used her dreams as a mainsail to navigate through the tempestuous fountains of cascading cloud shapes, represented by so many intertwined fibers of velvety smooth light waves.

She began to become aware of a subtle increase in her speed of thought.

While only perceiving a minor fluctuation at first, she soon began to notice that her basic thought patterns were racing out of control. It was then that Peg began to realize that the hyper-dimensional shift she was about to undergo, was increasing her thought transmission ratio to well above manic levels.

She hallucinated a comical scene in which thousands of small furry rodents scampered about her, literally running her mind in never ending circles of hysterical laughter.

This would be punctuated by spells of crying and intense remorse.

The final barriers separating Peg from her Interprompt handlers appeared to be crumbling.

Peg felt thirsty.

It wasn't the sort of thirst that seeks comfort in some small serving of beverage, but a raging thirst, as if she had been swimming in a desert of hot sand and had inhaled a few mouthfuls along the way.

She coughed and gagged, frantically trying to spit out whatever it was that could made her feel like she was dying again.

Somehow her hands were free. She clawed at the bit-like mouthpiece and ripped away the Interprompt. Even Peg's blurred vision couldn't mask the carnage that lay around her. Her robotic interrogators, now fully disabled appeared oblivious to the bodies of the security guards with metallic insects attached to the back of their necks.

She lay frozen for a minute surveying the scene for a quick exit.

She thought she heard what sounded like bones snapping from just outside the door. Then her intuitive faculties signaled her to move. She threw open the door leading towards the basement elevator just in time to see Travis kneeled over Brandon with his knee on the old man's throat.

High Orbital Micro-Environment

Brainboy looked up to see his Servitor forcing smooth vinyl fingers down his throat.

"You robotic asshole. Get the fuck off of me."

Brainboy began to get squirmy right there at the controls.

"Wake up, Brainboy, it's Herbert, your Servitor."

"Wake up, Brainboy."

Brainboy's head felt like it was folding in on itself.

"It was Peg again, sir," replied the plasticine servant, hovering nearby.

"What year is this?" Brainboy asked semi-hysterically.

"It's A.U.105.7 or July, 2117 A.D., as you prefer, sir" replied the Servitor, with all the punctuality of a Hyundai Old English Butler.

Brainboy was stunned. "2117, that's impossible."

By this time several Sub-Servitors had gathered round the command console, trying to assist in Brainboy's metamorphosis.

Herbert maintained his poise in the midst of the confusion and calmly stated, "Give him some space, he just needs a few seconds to download."

"Download your ass, you cybernetic mannequins," blurted out Brainboy, who was obviously not in one of his better moods.

"You were supposed to yank the Silver Thread before I got that far out," Brainboy stammered.

"No, sir. My orders were quite specific. The record states unequivocally that you asked to be left alone with your Scrying Globes and were not to be disturbed under any circumstances. My arrival at this fortuitous moment was the result of the modifications that you yourself installed."

Brainboy couldn't remember anything about the previous Exploratorium.

"Herbert, go back a couple hours and show me what's been going on around here."

"Right away, sir," replied the master servitor with a grin that reminded Brainboy of a Cheshire Cat.

The stars shone brightly through the Diamontex Spire, illuminating the sleep chamber where he lay at rest.

Cold stellar light poured through the frosty bio-shield, reminding Brainboy of a Mayan astronomical observatory during the last ice age.

The solar night was gradually beginning to fade, and the twilight crept towards the edge of Brain High Orbital Micro-Environment.

Faint solar glow swept across the planetoid surface far below, reminding him of the edge of a storm moving in from dried up oceans that once covered the surface of the bleak planetoid which he endlessly encircled.

He silently meditated upon the events that had led up to this moment in his strange life.

Opting for the relative seclusion of the solar-powered H.O.M.E. left Brainboy free to pursue his lifelong conquest of the hyperdimensional realms.

Scrying was just one of the many tools with which Brain used to explore the inner dimensions of his being. By militantly practicing the techno-shamanic techniques passed down to him through generations, he felt that he had finally begun to uncover the complex relationship between the past and the future, where he spent so much of his "time" trying to transcend the boundaries of his "self".

He had always hated the thick molecular soup of the dying Gaian biosphere, where the methane and CO₂ levels had created a tepid atmosphere intolerable to anything more than class 4 dryland grasses.

Way out near the edge of the Solarsphere you could really see the stars. They didn't twinkle like he'd heard about, but they shone cold and true, like fiery jeweled diamonds of faraway suns, and yet they still appeared close enough for him to reach out and touch.

Brainboy had reached out countless times and held them in his hands, and felt them flowing like burning grains of sand, pouring into the endless river of equations called hyperspace.

Brainboy signaled Herbert to respond promptly.

"Yes sir, how may I be of assistance?" came the instant reply.

Herbert was the model of efficiency.

Brainboy's wish was Herbert's assignment.

Although it was customary to address most gadgetry with a neural signature, Brainboy greatly preferred the laryngeal-neural interface. There was something about the holograph rich voice of the servitor that he couldn't resist.

Herbert's smoothly textured vinylene dermis possessed a remarkable similarity to the "real" thing. Even though Herbert stood no more than a meter in height, he still had a very formal appearance.



With his neo-ceramic internals silently whirring with the precision of a small UFO, he hovered about the powerconsole adjusting coordinate parameters while displaying multiple intersecting holo-fracs.

Through the years, Brainboy had grown to enjoy Herbert's company more than anyone that he'd ever known in his life.

Brainboy summoned Herbert to the powerconsole where he lay prostrate, looking up at the stars gleaming overhead.

"Stargazing again?" asked Herbert as Brainboy looked on, with his facial emitting a constant stream of imagery.

Incrementally, Brainboy's modular body continued to transform.

"Yea, but help me unsnap this female genitalia rig," commanded Brainboy as he rolled onto his side.

Herbert gently tugged the fleshy appendage.

With each tug, more of the Ultra-Flesh broke away. Brainboy was beginning to feel like some kind of terrestrial larvae just coming out of gestation. He actually resembled a chrysalis during its most venerable stage of development.

Brainboy's Mod-Bod gradually unfolded back into its masculine form.

"Sir, I must say that these adventures in the form of Peg are getting quite exciting."

"This time was so real I could swear I was there, like I really hurdled the barrier this time. It was like a lucid dream, only more real than that."

"I wouldn't know, I don't dream, sir."

"I've got to find my way back through that Wormhole," exclaimed Brainboy.

"It's the only way back to the 21st century."

"Remember, sir, it wasn't that long ago that we thought there were only ten spatial dimensions."

"That's true, Herbert, you're so perceptive, but the chance of finding a parallel thread are trillions to one over trillions of years."

"That needn't present a problem, sir, you'll have to just keep searching."

Well, at least the Mod-Bod provides the plasticity to handle most of the sex data exchange, laughed Brainboy. "What a seamless interface."

Brainboy was looking somewhat emaciated when Herbert virtuapathically beamed:

"Would you like a refreshment, sir?"

"No, and don't use that techno-voudon crap on me, Herbert."

"I was only trying to be subtle and considering how poorly you look, sir."

Brainboy cut into Herbert, "I don't need a tin man to tell me I feel poorly. Of course I look poorly. I feel like shit, I mean look at me, you fucking automaton."

Herbert actually looked hurt by Brainboy's outburst.

It was only then that Brainboy saw the humor of the situation. Herbert was hardwired to company specs and still possessed an internal corporate protocol.

Despite fiddling with Herbert's settings for years, Brainboy still couldn't get the servitor to loosen up socially.

It wasn't really that Brainboy had much of a social life. He lived on the outskirts of an industrial H.O.M.E., and received most of his bio-supplies via the thousands of miles of pneumatic tubing coursing through the multi-tiered atom stacking operation.

And although most self designed beings selected their gender as little more than a fashion statement, switching from day to day, hour to hour, he still felt more

comfortable as a female, at least while running the superstring down the wormholes of time.

As Brainboy began to move about, Herbert automatically released the gravity from Brainboy's living chamber.

Herbert and several of the sub-servitors flitted about the chamber like elegant greenish gold hummingbirds, sipping the sweet info-nectar from trillions of info-flowers in the garden metaverse.

"I encountered plenty of EBEs down that last wormhole. Primal sex, sophisticated neurocompounds laced with plenty of violence. Now you've got to admit that sounds like fun, don't you think, Herbert?"

The Servitor appeared undaunted by Brainboy's sarcasm.

Herbert was obviously caught up in producing the beautiful rainbow-hued holo-fracs now floating about the chamber in the form of multi-faceted chaospheres.

Each brightly colored orb resounded to the sound of sonically amplified DNA singing to itself in that timeless language that Brainboy and Herbert both loved and understood.

Brainboy began to break into ecstatic dance as Herbert's colorful display cast a spell over the stellar-view platform.

Neptunian Subspace

Kaleidoscopic designs of increasing complexification slowly drifted like delicate multicolored snowflakes, transforming the drab, dirty, metallic living chamber into an info-castle of fragile beauty and infinite visual delight.

Brainboy floated across the chamber, intersecting within numerous colored orbs, sending concentric rings of copper-pink light rippling across the command console.

Then he silently glided onto the smooth custom fit power-lounge.

He enjoyed the feel of the soft vynaline sidewalls closing in around him.

Despite the encumbrance of a biologically manufactured body, he loved the way that it felt to be alive on the edge of a high orbital factory, with his head hooked into the Crab Nebulae.

Brainboy made a minor adjustment on the powerlounge and was instantly filled with sensations of warmth and soft, soothing light. He felt the healing rose colored rays from the console emanating throughout his being. He channeled the healing rays to permeate every cell in his Mod-Bod.

The sub-servitors danced about wildly, stimulated by the orchestration of the music of the spheres represented by the circular rings of colored light.

Right on cue, and with a smoothness and economy of motion seldom witnessed in zero gravity, the subs converged. Then, much to Brainboy's delight, they followed up with a 360 degree rotation in midair and merged into one large modular servitor, which would serve as Brainboy's Mobile.

The Mobile hovered quietly except for the slight whirring that seemed to come from within the weightless craft. It reminded Brainboy of a cross between a small utility vehicle and a magickal flying carpet, except for the subs, whom despite their transformation still seemed to radiate an eerie living persona.

Feeling somewhat revived, Brainboy ejected from the powerlounge and gently floated around the command console. Positioning himself upon his greenish golden subspace chariot, he paused to see Herbert's reaction as he began to execute launch commands.

Herbert was quick to take advantage of the opportunity by sliding alongside the Mobile and jacking his on board circuitry.

Meanwhile, Brainboy lowered his Bio-HM and checked the seals before the Mobile slowly exited the remote star-platform.

He lowered the diamondtex shell to protect Herbert and himself from small bits of debris that perpetually traversed the dark emptiness of subspace.

The portal shutters slowly opened, showing definite signs of corrosion from the excess condensation which continually built up inside the skyway ducting.

Like a family pets on vacation, the odd mixture of biologically manufactured elements hung together, despite Brainboy's rapid acceleration out of the trans-space skyway duct.....

Immediately a breathtaking vista opened up, revealing the awesome contrast of planetary mass and the dark void of space.

Brainboy set the launch sequencer to photon drive, and leaned back to enjoy the crushing sensation in his chest as he raced out into space at a thousand klicks per second. He calculated that even at top speed, he was still a century away from the nearest star system.

He'd been receiving virtuapathic rumors for months about a new propulsion system that purportedly could do better than ten times that speed. He often dreamed of the day he would visit another solarsphere.

Herbert and Brainboy braced themselves in silent amazement at the warping effects of time and distance when compressed at such tremendous volume.

They rarely communicated when traveling at such speeds, if for no other reason than to focus their attention on the kinesthetics of the experience itself, while still maintaining a full sensorium of spectacular data exchange.

Brainboy and Herbert skimmed the outer rim of the planetoids gravity well for just a few seconds, using the torque to slingshot them well outside the orbit of Neptune.

Brainboy wielded the Mobile with a sense of flair and originality that Herbert always found exhilarating. Yet despite his exhilaration, Herbert momentarily slipped into a light slumber and began to dream.

He was standing in the spring rain just before sunrise. It appeared as if all life on Earth had been created only seconds before, and that he was the first and only one in the universe to ever witness such a thing.

Birds were singing softly, while the sound of gentle rain and flowing water filled his sensorium. He could smell the sweet flowers like sacred incense heralding the dawn of creation.

Brainboy set the controls for a small industrial asteroid located only two million kilometers from his H.O.M.E.

Within an hour of their departure, the intrepid travelers had covered almost three million clicks. Herbert, Brainboy and the four subs merged together as one praeterhuman unit, achieving a new synergistic paradigm.

Brainboy manually maneuvered the Mobile with an exactness which amazed even Herbert.

As they neared the troid surface, Brainboy noticed that the robotic mass driver, located only a few hundred clicks out in space, appeared to be loading up for a send.

The remote mineral extraction outpost was situated on a moderately bleak chunk of frozen ammonia, probably ripped asunder from one of the many solidified oceans of methane on the surface of Jupiter.

These floating icebergs were imbedded with valuable meteorite fragments, just beneath their icy crusts.

It was the presence of intact rarified elements found within these meteors which were the focus of much excavation throughout the solarsphere. Both Herbert and Brainboy enjoyed searching asteroids and comet fragments for just such interstellar treasures.

Brainboy planned to do follow-up work on the positions of the Neptunian subspace asteroid field. Few experts existed in the intricacies of dynamic cartography.

His objective was to realign his preexisting data-grids with the ever changing tide of asteroid fragments, drifting throughout the solarsphere.

He needed to reorient continuously, forever unable to predict with any certainty the frequency with which random troids would fragment, collide, and refragment again.

Scouting such an existing operation would be considered illegal, were it not for Brainboy's subspace charter. It effectively allowed him access everywhere within one hundred million clicks of the Neptunian surface.

The elaborate remote-op seemed to be running smoothly without human intervention. The robotics purred along, sifting through the gravelly conglomeration of ice, rock and interstellar dust fragments, deposited over the aeons.

After briefly inspecting the robot excavation carousel, Brainboy launched the Mobile back into the maze of troids scattered out over trillions of square hectopars.

The unlikely ensemble continued to weave their way in and out of crystallized formations, trying to follow the Ultra-Violet streak marker Brainboy laid out a few weeks before.

The trail had begun to resemble Poseidon's obstacle course, or perhaps just a gateway to the depths, when Herbert spoke:

"I don't think we executed the correct turn radius between those last troids."

"And why not?"

"I've lost our coordinates."

Both Herbert and Brainboy began to laugh uncontrollably. Brainboy brought the Mobile to a halt. They drifted quietly in space for a few moments as Brainboy tried to make a decision.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Herbert?"

"I apologize, sir."

"For what, Herbert?"

"Our turn radius was correct, sir. It was the troids that were in the wrong place."

"Even when calculating WCS, we couldn't be that far off course."

"Yea, well we're off course all right."

The Mobile pivoted in place and began to retrace its exact path in reverse. The subs blinked in unison as the modular craft pulsed back into the Neptunian subspace environment. Within minutes they had returned to the excavation carousel from where they had begun their journey.

"Well, you were correct, Herbert. This means we'll have to start from the beginning, recalibrate everything."

"I've already begun."

His mission was obscured by the strange disappearance of the ultraviolet streak markers. Brainboy opted to head back to the H.O.M.E. based star platform.

Ignoring safety regs, the skeletal Mobile screamed into the skyway ducting at a tremendous velocity. Yellow lights flashed through the endless night, but there was no one around to see them but Brainboy and Herbert.

Herbert detached his hardware from the Mobile just milliseconds before Brainboy stepped off the Mobile, hovering just inside the portal shutters.

As Herbert and Brainboy floated on down the endo-corridor, the Mobile began to disassemble, back into its separate modular components.

The four subs telescoped and unfolded, quickly regaining their familiar dimensional representation. They immediately dispersed, each sub flying off in a separate direction to go about their duties; gathering feedback data from sensors placed throughout the high orbital robotic facility.

Brainboy asked Herbert not to be disturbed, and then proceeded to enter the star chamber alone.

He sealed the chamber behind him and floated over to the power lounge console.

He paused for a moment to stare into the peaked, cold light of the sun, straining to push its photons through billions of kilometers of empty space.

Brainboy slid into the command console, where he could virtuapathically monitor deep space communications.

The monotony of living in such a remote location was best broken by some form of contact with other H.O.M.E.s located throughout the solarsphere.

Brainboy virtuapathically crossed channels with numerous outcasts like himself, strewn across the fringe.

The endless night of subspace made for excellent stargazing. The odd shaped troids served as a constantly shifting landscape. Brainboy's horizon changed continually, as the never ending sea of troids drifted past the diamondtex bioshield.

He hadn't doubted Herbert's navigational abilities through the troid belt. Something inexplicable had caused a remarkable fluctuation in the space time continuum.

Brainboy sought peace and relaxation in the silent world of stargazing. The stellar light refracted through the slightly warped bio-shield, enlarging the appearance of some stars, while accentuating his entire field of vision in a decidedly warping effect.

And on these occasions, surrounded by the solitude of subspace, he would transcend the temporal confines of the star chamber and imagineer himself into the bubbling foamy galaxies, exploring the diverse beauty of alien perspectives.

It was during one of these pilgrimages through the stars where he first encountered the wormholes which presently engaged him.

Brainboy was addicted to the raw thrills one could get from a crude neural interface.

But most of all he was addicted to Peg.

He was consumed with love for Peg from first sight. His infatuation with everything 21st century overcame him as he spent more and more of his dreamtime stalking the Wormholes of Chronos.

Peg's blond hair and Mona Lisa eyes remained fixated in his mind day and night. Despite persistent pleas from Herbert, Brainboy spent most days in dreamtime with his Mod-Bod seething with tentacled flesh, ripping at the Biomass threshold.

He craved the thrill of the hunt, the primal quest with Diana in the night. On this endless night Peg was the huntress, ripping through the mid 21st century in search of Transvandals.

His Mod-Bod oozed with subatomic reverberations.

Atoms bounced around like tiny stars, forming fuzzy ripples in the symmetrically textured fabric of time.

Mirrored Hollo-wheel

Herbert and the four subs idled patiently, awaiting requests from Brainboy's will in order to be fully activated.

Brainboy requested Herbert's presence in the starchamber, hoping for an answer to the navigational enigma that had sent the Mobile unexpectedly into uncharted territory.

"I think I may have solved another small riddle in the vast mystery of time."

"Please explain, sir," replied the master servitor.

"I believe that the very essence of the scale of time is attached to the core of our physical existence. And when the coordinates shifted on us, it was an indirect result of a displacement in the locality of time; a residual spillover from the twenty first century, telescoping the experience of time through multifarious dimensions," exclaimed Brainboy. "It all points to the wormholes, that's where the answer to the ultimate riddles of time may lie."

"We must consider other possibilities before you do anything rash, sir."

"You know as well as I do, Herbert, this proves my theory on the manifest nature of non-localized intelligence."

"How do you define proof, sir?"

Herbert became quite smarmy in the ensuing discourse.

Four hours later the two greatest minds in Neptunian subspace concluded their dialogue.

"I feel it will be necessary to leapfrog through the Wormholes of Chronos if we expect to ever find the answer to the multiplicity of our own existence."

Dabbling in interdimensionality wasn't just a hobby for Brainboy; it was an obsession.

"Herbert, I think we can find it."

"We, sir, find what may I ask?"

"My missing past, of course."

Brainboy had lost the first half of his life in a tragic space-time accident, leaving him with no organic memories of his origins.

Even with redigitization of most of his past experiences, he longed to find his past and somehow find a way to reconnect those missing gaps to his present.

Brainboy's research had led him out to the edge of the solarsphere where total seclusion, combined with the close proximity of the Wormholes of Chronos, made his location ideal for his explorations.

Silently merging into hyperspace as a discreet packet of energy, Brainboy cursed the Swarm and the whole dying bios that had hounded him to the edge of Neptunian subspace.

The String offered two templates for navigation.

One was the old standard ten dimensional job; the other, twenty six.

Unfortunately third and four-D access was prohibited, largely due to the fragility of the superstring itself in relation to the untold consequences of time manipulation.

Despite the inherent risks, the multiply connected spaces accessible along the superstring remained the most likely avenues for wormhole tripping.

While terrestrial wormholes provided aeration to the soil, celestial wormholes provided the necessary flexibility in the metaverse, crystallized in the fourth dimensional matrix.

As he began his rush along the superstring, Brainboy splashed into the liquid dimensions of time.

He had a lifetime's experience with manipulating the fundamentals of nature. Brainboy had peeled back each layer in the onion of his existence, until the blueprints for future evolutionary options revealed themselves.

Focusing all of his will into the vacuum of his intellect exalted, he stretched the limits of his brain's plasticity in order to load in the new chaos attractors just down from the Pneumatica.

Herbert and Brainboy carefully examined the neural imagery as they compared Brainboy's old shrunken neo-crown with his newly loaded cortex sockets.

"It looks better than ever, Brainboy. Excellent placement." "Not bad for self administered, I must say."

"The new model is beautiful, sir."

"Thank you, Herbert."

Brainboy mentally motioned for Herbert to engage the slipstream.

Herbert responded, and then regrouped with the four subs.



A large star representing the sun shined its powerful stellar light against the blue-green shroud of methane mist covering the surface of Neptune. High pressure points of Neptunian wind streamed through the atmosphere, opening temporary windows of visibility towards the swirling desolation below.

Brainboy dug deep into his self designer program until his artificial memories meshed with the organic past. His mind still recoiled from the

regimented life on Vesta, piloting the Love Drones between Mars and Jupiter.

He relived the asteroid collision that disturbed the fabric of time, fragmenting his life into a jumble of disconnected memories.

He sent one final virtuapathic message to Herbert before he launched into the slipstream.

"Remember the good old days on Vesta?"

"Of course I do."

"Then farewell, Herbert."

"I hope the new chaos attractors stabilize the optical convectors."

"As do I, Herbert."

With hot memories of Peg still fresh in his mind, he dove headlong into the portals, relaying the parallel corridors of Chronos.

The intense gravitational friction scorched the boundaries of his safety shield. The superstring dispatched various search mechanisms, sharply narrowing the range of the histrionic attractor sites.

Brainboy gathered momentum as the vast network of time portals narrowed down to less than the width of a pin.

He reduced the Macros to allow an accurate insertion into the mirrored holo-wheel. Brainboy spun down the microscopic sinkhole at an unimaginable velocity, carving a steady arc through the arched curvature of hyper-space.

Brainboy reluctantly began reducing the frequency of event horizons, savoring the ecstatic rush of microdimensional scaling. Engaging one of the active slipstreams, he attempted to channel the stratification of temporal dimensions into gateways, or connecting threads in the vast complexification of Chronos.

As he entered the vortices, his biorevs failed to synch with the dizzying spiral.

The smooth whirlpool of striped colors strobed hard as he began to wobble down the vibratory overload.

"I forgot to re-align the temporal convector. Oh shit."

It was too late for Brainboy to think. Without the dampening effect of the TC, his chaos attractors would be unable to stabilize his Modular Body, now shuddering with throes of entropy.

Brainboy aborted the sequence without a moment to spare.

As the vibratory disturbance enveloped his Modbod, he called for Herbert.

Herbert had remained motionless, vigilant to every fluctuation in Brainboy's condition. He summoned the subs and sprung into action, attempting to stabilize the fleshy biomass.

The black mirrored whirlpool of plasmic form cloaked Brainboy's Ultra-Flesh like a dark swirling veil of morning mist.

Bluish-black energy seeped out of the oversized pores on his writhing, naked Mod-Bod. Brainboy groped towards the command console.

Arcs of lightning flickered dangerously throughout his plasmic bios.

Last Chance Hysteroid

At first Brainboy let out a soft moaning sound which soon built into a chorus of primal shrieks.

Within moments, the starchamber was filled with the echoes of his howling, like a banshee wailing to be returned unto death.

Brainboy's assemblage points gradually began to resonate with the cool filaments of starlight. Fibrous light rays, fresh from the hearts of living suns, pierced the ice crystal residue, laced across the surface of the diamondtex bio-shield.

As the warped stellar luminosity comingled with the striated fragments of Brainboy's myriad selves, Herbert levitated Brainboy across the starchamber and into the Dracontium.

Brainboy's Mod-Bod gave one final violent shudder before collapsing like an overcooked cupcake.

Brainboy temporarily awoke from the trance with a jolt, as Herbert looked on with a disapproving frown, "Help me out of this crap, this Mod-Bod's had it," and lapsed back into the primordial sea of delusions.

Dark cloudscapes swirled inside the Serpent Temple. Herbert placed Brainboy's emaciated form upon the Dracontium altar. Herbert activated the regenerator, bathing Brainboy with green and yellow pastel light.

Two of the subs injected solvent into the Mod-Bod, while Herbert and the remaining subs tore away at the Ultra-flesh, now irreparably damaged by the catastrophic vibratory overload. The healing rays from the regenerator soon brought Brainboy's crumpled form to partial animation.

Brainboy felt truly liberated by the removal of the Mod-Bod, despite the most obvious deterioration to his interior biomass.

Herbert and the subs hovered about the Dracontium resembling reptilian guardian angels, assisting in every aspect of Brainboy's recovery. As Doctor Angel, Herbert replaced Brainboy's body fluids with the precision of a fully equipped bio-lab.

The subs communicated amongst themselves virtuapathically, redistributing vast libraries of bio-data in a ceaseless monotone dialogue.

Brainboy drifted in and out of coherence, porpoising in and out of reality like the mysterious legendary dolphin, surfacing and diving repeatedly, through the turquoise-blue oceans of his unconsciousness.

He felt like he'd been breathing a corrosive combination of water and fire, as his dreams carried him far across the green desert sands of Vesta.

Brainboy witnessed the sun of his birth, now just a faded streak at over four billion clicks in the distance.

He awoke to find Herbert and the subs wrapping up another bio-survival rescue. He began to realize that he'd probably need a little fix-me-up.

Carefully the subs levitated Brainboy to the center of the Dracontium, laying him to rest on the shallow padded basin.

The Serpent Temple was framed by a large metallic Leviathan, encircling the ceiling of the Dracontium.

Brainboy designed the altar based on the discovery of the first Dracontium on Vesta, believed to be well over eight hundred thousand years old. Brainboy slowly became coherent enough to realize that his Mod-Bod was going to need replacing.

Herbert was the first to break the ice.

"I've begun growing another Mod-Bod for you, sir. It should be ready within..." Brainboy interrupted Herbert with a piercing glare.

"I've waited long enough, set me up for another Exploratorium."

"You can't be serious, not without a Mod-Bod. 4D access is strictly forbidden, if you don't mind my saying so."

"The probability may be slim but its non-zero. Please Herbert, no further delays," commanded Brainboy in a tone that told Herbert to respond, or face immediate unemployment.

Herbert turned towards the subs and began crying softly. His tears floated weightlessly about the Dracontium, with random drops of saline H₂O freezing solid upon contact with the increasingly opaque Bio-shield.

As soon as Brainboy had regained enough strength to levitate, he headed straight for the command console, located in the partially devastated Star Chamber. Herbert and the four subs followed meekly behind. Herbert looked on silently as Brainboy, seemingly bent on his own destruction, was in the process of reattaching himself to the Superstring.

Like a waterbird, Brainboy soared directly into the mirrored holo-wheel.

With the slipstream fully employed, he transformed into a fuzzy puff ball as he shot along the string, splashing and tripping through the liquidity of hyperspace.

The consequences of his actions were immaterial to Brainboy. His past memories, the boundaries of his existence, were still an enigma to him. The will to solve the mystery of his past drove Brainboy beyond the fear of death.

He longed for the feeling of connectedness that he lost, forever vanished in a catastrophic singularity.

Without the inertia of a Modbod, Brainboy ripped through the intricate web of interconnected time portals. Tiny bio-plasmic whirlpools spun out from the reflective holo-wheel, leaving uncharted dimensions in their wake. The unmistakable texture of the Chronos Wormholes were the only navigational landmark in the otherwise homogenous whirl of chaos.

Brainboy focused his assemblage points and flung himself into the gateway.

He bounced static, from insertion packet to connecting thread, repeatedly ejected from the familiar texture of the twenty-second century.

As he struggled to enter a previous tear in the wormhole lining, the fuzzy bioplasmic fabric suddenly folded, inserting Brainboy into several different time portals simultaneously.

Without the Mod-Bod to modulate the prime dimensional drift, he manifested on the outer corridors of Chronos.

In the uncharted realms of Chronos, gateways to the past and the future were compressed into a multi-tiered garden of interdimensionality.

Brainboy tumbled down the histrionic attractor, plunging head over heels into the realm of fourth dimensional matter. He awoke to an infinitude of gleaming, silvery, dreamlike worlds, overlapping like trillions of pan-galactic soap bubbles, sparkling and alive.

Auroras of silver-pinkish lighting seemed to be emanating from a non-localized source. Brainboy had no idea when or where he might be, nor did he care.

He felt secure in the relative nature of time; one time or location was the same as the next.

One translucent sphere in particular consumed his attention. His assemblage points were focused towards that dimension when Brainboy scaled down to a

miniscule particle, piercing the slipstream veil, and cascading his various selves into multiple realms of existence.

Herbert sensed that Brainboy was in trouble. He summoned the subs into the starchamber.

"He's so impetuous, I tried to warn him."

The four subs responded virtuapathically, suggesting that Herbert intervene.

"You know that my directive would never allow such a thing," said Herbert defensively.

The master servitor began the structural modifications that would allow him access to the superstring. Within moments Herbert managed to synchronize the chaos attractors to his neural grid. Without further ado, Herbert funneled down the mirrored holo-wheel.

Brainboy awoke from his dreamtime journey into an even stranger dream. He manifested into a silvery, etheric plane of existence. He tried in vain to exit through one of the many histrionic attractors, but the sockets were all out of phase. With his only avenue of escape at least temporarily blocked, he began an Exploratorium of the shadowy realm.

Dark veils of plasmos opened and closed with seeming randomness, creating a tunnel-like maze of shadow and light.

Silican Netherworld

Brainboy wished he could spread wings and fly out of the shifting clouds of silvery gray energy patterns, but he remained quagmired between the fourth dimensional matrix and the silicon-gray netherworld.

He would occasionally catch glimpses of other worlds, as random dimensional "bubbles" pushed up against the edges of his temporal confines. He floated aimlessly, watching the translucent spheres floating past. Some spheres would show contents of his fractured self, alter egos, meta-programs, and disembodied segments of will, fully animated with minds of their own.

Other orbs contained glimpses of gaps between parallel universes, veritable cracks between worlds.

Suddenly, an unusually large amoebae-like membrane pushed up against the same translucent corridor which Brainboy was observing. As the two plasmic barriers collided, Brainboy was sucked through an embolism, and drawn into the larger organism.

He struggled temporarily but was soon caught up in the foamy porous interface between converging hyperfuzzy gateways.

Caught like a fly in an ointment of hyperdimensional stickiness, Brainboy struggled against the inertia of the ever thickening plasmic silicas.

He began to realize what it must have felt like to be a prehistoric insect becoming trapped forever in a piece of soft resin, as the silver-pinkish light morphed throughout his new amber tomb. As the translucent plasmos continued to encase him in the ultimate prison of fourth dimensional matter, Brainboy slipped into another dream.

He floated slowly down the deep frozen canyons of Vesta, with tall icy cliffs towering overhead. He peeled effortlessly through the labyrinth of crystalline formations, standing like fractured glass snowflakes, gently stacked on top of one another.

As he gradually rose to the plateau surface, he could see the first Dracontium, looming on the crimson surface of Vesta. Brainboy could sense the surge of technomancy which must have preceded his own evolution.

He was amazed to see the ultimate triumph of biological manufacturing blending with the Vestan landscape in such an unobtrusive manner. This technocentric culture appeared to demonstrate a remarkable sense of Feng Shui.

Immense dual Leviathans rose from the meteor scarred rock formations, forming the entrance to the Dracontium itself. Brainboy floated up the staircase leading into the Temple portals, only to find the entrance sealed with gigantic carved stone gates.

In his dream state, he possessed the Herculean strength to force the mammoth doorways agape.

Upon entering, he was stunned by the awesome display of alien technomancy.

The temple itself appeared to be laid out as some kind of multidimensional observatory. A vast network of trans-space wormhole portals, with a carrier infinitely more sophisticated than the superstring itself, appeared to have been undergoing structural decay for millennia.

Brainboy felt the power of the ancient Reptilian intelligences resonating throughout the temple complex. An overload of energy shook the foundations of the structure itself, toppling the pillars supporting the vast stone roof. As the Dracontium collapsed in around Brainboy, he awoke to find himself a prisoner, sealed in the concrescence of hyperfuzzy matter.

Herbert had a distinct sense of adventure. His plunge into the starry network led him down seemingly endless corridors of time. The warp created by the string itself gave Herbert multiple infinities to work with.

But as much as he enjoyed the idea of being the first biologically manufactured being to ride the string, his primary focus was to find his master, even if that search should last for eternity.

It was during one of the intra-plasmic cycles within the Milky Way itself where Herbert finally found Brainboy, suspended in the frozen matrix of time.

Herbert went to work extracting Brainboy from his timeless prison. As the last remnants of plasmos evaporated from Brainboy's hibernating biomass, Herbert replicated a spinal transfusion, bringing Brainboy to partial consciousness.

He awoke with the memory of Vesta still fresh on his mind.

Herbert insisted that Brainboy remain stationary while he administered the precious spinal fluids. Although still reeling from the warping effects of hibernity, Brainboy became lucid faster than Herbert would have liked under the circumstances.

"Herbert, we must return to Vesta immediately."

"Vesta, sir, I don't believe I shall be going anywhere."

Both Herbert and Brainboy were now well entrenched in fourth dimensionality. In order to return through the twenty six dimensional vortices, one simply had to reattach themselves to the string.

"I believe there has been some damage to the string itself."

Suddenly Brainboy felt a horrible sinking feeling in his chest.

The extraordinary nature of the situation began to dawn on him.

The string itself was a silvery etheric fiber, which, like an umbilical cord, was attached to the domain of origin. A damaged thread could mean several things, including inoperability.

The implications of the situation were something that Brainboy was not prepared to deal with. The thought of leaving Herbert behind was beyond the scope reason, yet Brainboy knew which one of them must stay.

Brainboy held Herbert in his arms and began to weep uncontrollably. The tears rolled down his emaciated cheeks and began to steam up his plasmic electro-packet. Herbert remained steadfast to the last moment, exhorting Brainboy to continue his search for his missing past, no matter what the cost.

Herbert revealed to Brainboy his own suspicions about the accident on Vesta. Herbert intuitively felt Brainboy's destiny would lead him back to the ancient Dracontium.

Brainboy reattached himself to what was left of the string. The etheric fiber was frayed beyond repair.

After much trepidation and deliberation, the two lifelong friends parted ways.

Herbert silently watched as Brainboy spiraled out of sight.

The subs were on standby when Brainboy pierced the veil and came crashing in on the string. He struggled in vain to get on his feet, and then collapsed over the command console.

The four subservitors leaped into action, refilling Brainboy's vital fluids and patching in his neurofibers.

Brainboy remained unconscious for days, while the subs monitored his every bio-function. Even without Herbert overseeing the bio-rescue, the subs functioned with

amazing synergy. Each unit carried out their individual tasks within the given framework of the mission, rotating the new Mod-Bod in its nursery, preparing for whatever eventuality might lay ahead.

On the third day he arose from the recovery basin and proceeded to enter the Dracontium. Brainboy began a meditation which lasted several days, before coming to a fateful decision; he would return for Herbert as soon as the Mod-Bod reached maturity.

Brainboy was undergoing a rather deep state of depression. He blamed himself for Herbert's absence.

He could still hear Herbert's thoughtful advice echo hauntingly throughout his memory.

As the exterior of his plasmic carcass neared maturation, the subs rushed to lift Brainboy into the fitting harness. Once encased in the Ultra-flesh envelope, he made the final adjustments to the superstring code, which he hoped would enable Herbert's safe return.

With his will focused precisely on the mission ahead, Brainboy cast off from the familiar shores of the command console into an uncharted realm of microscopic outer-wormholes.

For Brainboy, to retrace the pathway leading to Herbert would be easy.

What was improbable was his return.

He spiraled down smoothly in full twenty-six D. Brainboy's fractalesque appearance gave way to a splendorous cascade of light fragments as he splashed deep into the slipstream.

He dreamed of holding hands with Herbert, standing at the gates of the mysteries of time.

He inserted his energy packet into the plasmic organism where he last saw the master servitor. Folds of polychromatic silicon plasmos buckled under the pressure of the string, inserting Brainboy's Mod-Bod into the fourth dimensional matrix.

For a moment he thought that he caught a glimpse of Herbert, smiling through the opaque veils of swirling color.

He continued his search throughout the shadowy nether-realm, scanning every angle of consciousness throughout the alien bio-realm, but to no avail. Herbert was not to be found. Worse yet, there was no trace of Herbert at all, which was even more strange.

Herbert's instructions were to remain in the same location indefinitely.

Brainboy knew that Herbert would have remained there for eternity, following his orders to exact specifications.

He began to scan the radius of the alien organism. Moving through the soft folds of plasmic bio-energy, he marveled at the subtle facade of four-D matter, upheld by the interdimensional energy flux.

He stalked the plasmic matrix for traces of Herbert, resonating from the recent past.

Slowly the tide of chaotic, swirling energy began to subside, allowing Brainboy to temporarily pierce the slipstream veil.

He witnessed a strange alien culture, evolved from silicon, and yet remarkably humanoid in appearance. This unsettling glimpse into the possible reason for Herbert's disappearance was indeed disturbing for Brainboy. At more than half a galactic diameter from H.O.M.E., he wasn't exactly excited about tangling with some bizarre alien culture.

He relentlessly searched the endoplasm for minor ruptures in the tightly woven energy web.

He eventually noticed an aneurysm in the slipstream, and flung himself into the crystalline realm of the Silicans.

Brainboy transformed his ultraflesh into a replica of the Silican form, pushing the technological extremes of his chameleon form to the limit.

As he immersed himself in the dream-like silica consciousness, he psychically perceived where Herbert was being stored, patiently awaiting his own disassembly.

Brainboy pulsed through a complex labyrinth of tunnels and corridors, circumnavigating the dense hive of silica life forms. He was amazed at the cultural similarities between the Silicans and memories of his own culture.

He assumed that this bios must be part of the same fractal equation that spun the entire Milky Way. He noted unique parallels in development between two cultures separated by a vast gulf of emptiness, only punctuated by the occasional stellar jewel.

He wondered if culture was spread around the universe like intergalactic pollen, drifting through the fertile garden of stars. His mind was impregnated with endless possibilities, as he coursed through the cultural matrix of the silican nether-world.

Brainboy neared the crystalline mound where he sensed Herbert was being stored.

Silican life forms resembling fish-like creatures with bejewelled techno-mesh diamond skin flitted back and forth, as if they were sentries guarding an invaluable treasure.

Brainboy attuned his Mod-Bod to the sharpest angle of inflection, slicing through the quasi-material barriers separating himself from Herbert.

He passed through the outer walls and into the inner sanctum of the sculpted citadel.

Deep inside the techno-mesh mound, he found Herbert.

He lay on a surgical table, already deactivated and partially disassembled.

The humble, loyal master servitor, with whom Brainboy shared all his memories was effectively deceased.

Silenced for eternity.

The Love Drones of Vesta

Brainboy had little time to grieve before several of the sentries burst in on the scene, glaring menacingly at him, and indicated through universal body language that imminent attack was forthcoming.

As Brainboy's Mod-Bod began to dissolve, he let go of that perspective, and went ricocheting down the string from whence he originated.

He never had the opportunity to test his superstring rescue.

His master servitor, whom Brainboy considered to be the ultimate in artificial companionship was gone forever, the prize of Sicilian scientists from a far off world. Herbert was lost somewhere in the infinite jumble of dimensionality known as the Wormholes of Chronos.

Brainboy spent a full Neptunian lunar cycle mourning his servitor. The subs behaved like shy children, working quietly in the background but eagerly anticipating the possibility of adventure still lying ahead.

Brainboy spent most of his time in his Dracontium, staring out into the endless frigid night. He often dreamed about riding a wild horse through the twisted crags of Vesta, while accompanied by Herbert and the four subs.

He realized that dreaming about the dead was more than just a visitation, and that Herbert was always nearby.

As the months passed, Brainboy continued mapping the never ending sea of troids, continually shifting throughout time without any apparent rhyme or reason.

Still draped in a shroud of sorrow, he nevertheless forged ahead with plans to return to Vesta.

Weary shadows filled the Dracontium as Brainboy beckoned the subs to transform into the trans-space Mobile. The subservitors responded with delight, humming with anticipation for the journey that lay ahead.

Once the bio-fluids rations were compressed, Brainboy bid farewell to the endless nights of Neptune and began his journey back to Vesta.

Blasting out of the trans-space skyway portal and into the openness of space, Brainboy began to feel the ecstatic rush of hyper-exploded consciousness.

He set the Mobile on full auto and settled into dreamtime, teasing the outer envelope of his existence with the blissful feeling of escape from the necrotic influence of Neptune.

The flight to Vesta lasted a few months, with Brainboy in a state of perpetual vision and the Mobile whining like a pulse craft from hell.

As Brainboy awakened from his self-induced trance, he was stunned to see the bright glare of Vesta gleaming with reflected sunlight from the surface of Jupiter.

Various heavenly bodies shone about the beautiful belts of crystalline triodes, littering the subspace current between Jupiter and Mars.



The Mobile combined a dynamic gyration with a sharp port maneuver, lowering Brainboy's trajectory towards the green desert sands below. He was filled with a rush of nostalgia for the years he once spent exploring the behemoth asteroid.

Abandoned for decades, the Dracontium was still a big hit on the Love Drone circuit.

He carefully adjusted a security cloak; the entire subspace island was off limits to the hive.

As Brainboy began to relive his memories of Vesta, he once again thought of Herbert, and his exaltation emptied into sorrow for the loss of his master servitor.

He had no desire to seek the company of others. Instead, Brainboy focused his attention towards the mysterious ancient Dracontium, rising from the swirling green sands of the Vestan surface.

The mobile made a rapid descent into the sea of dust devils, pushing deep into the midst of the storm. Wave after wave of delicate sediment battered the mobile as it made its way through the deluge of fine debris.

The ancient Dracontium loomed ahead, thrusting out of the frozen desert like a hooded dragon, with lion serpents rising high into the sky, a testament to the technological majesty of the reptilian culture. Four huge gargoyle-like monoliths guarded the outer portals of the huge temple complex.

The Dracontium

The pale yellow sky hung low, flecked with streaks of black, while hot pink lightning crashed down around the temple.

The Mobile sliced through the hostile atmospherics with a suicidal determination. Brainboy commanded the subs to disband the Mobile and float about independently of one another.

A network of arteries and capillaries permeated the vast inner sanctum of the Dracontium. The four subs followed close behind Brainboy as he explored hundreds of clicks of burnished serpentine tunnels circling around the inside of the ancient temple.

Eventually the five poured into a central chamber, rising upwards into a septagonal domelike ceiling.

It was there that Brainboy recognized the similarity between the reality and the dream.

Bluish metallic cylinders appearing to be customized time chambers, lined the perimeter of the endless tarnished chromium passageways.

Brainboy examined the ancient technology with a sense of awe and disbelief.

Although the view of the Dracontium from subspace was a constant attraction on the Love Drone Tour, the view from 1000 clicks was hardly the same thing as being inside the Temple itself.

Brainboy sensed a powerful ancestral presence from the Reptilian geniuses who must have discovered the irregularities in the space time matrix millions of years ago.

The subs flitted in and out of the adjacent passageways, frolicking throughout the wilderness of alien technomantical achievements. Brainboy summoned the subs to end their examination of the various cylinders and come forth to regroup as Mobile.

Three of the four subs arrived within seconds, but there was a noticeable vacuum created by the absence of a missing sub. A full alert and complete search was undergone for the missing subservitor.

A quick molecular particulate trace revealed that the third sub had indeed disappeared into one of the blue cylindrical tubes lining the inner Temple corridors.

Brainboy examined the rows of empty vessels, as the subs looked on with noticeable apprehension.

He carefully climbed inside one canister after another, searching for signs of the lost sub.

The second servitor locked onto a molecular trace of the fourth sub and began to hum with excitement, virtuapathically signaling Brainboy's attention.

Brainboy knelt down and peered inside the dark cylinder. He felt a strange sensation of being pulled into the emptiness of the chamber. Against the protests of the remaining subs, Brainboy entered the dark cubicle alone.

He stood there silently, soaking in the intensity of the shadows that swirled gloomily around his head.

For no apparent reason, the room began to glow softly, illuminated by an opaque, translucent egg of light, pulsing in time with his Mod-Bod cardioplex.

A partially obscured plaque revealing little more than a series of electrostat hieroglyphs, pulsed behind obscure veils of light.

Glimmering bluish-white light, sparkling like the inside of an ice cave, began to bathe Brainboy in a flood of octarine color.

The piercing light burned his ultraflesh packet, and he began to rapidly overheat.

The jeweled tablet in front of him continued to pulsate with rotating symbols, mutating into a series of holo-grid formations.

These structural patterns began to resemble the outlay of the wormhole clusters that he'd so meticulously chartered throughout the decades.

Eventually a discernible pattern emerged.

He began to wonder if he'd stumbled upon a Rosetta Stone from the Draconian Superstring.

Brainboy selected what appeared in the spatial overlay to be the appropriate pathway towards the 10D location of Wormholes of Chronos. The tablet whirred and pulsated like a super nova, cresting only after planting the key to the trans-Dracontium passageway into Brainboy's consciousness.

"There is no world containing me."

Brainboy paused and wondered, only to hear the message running through his brain like an oracular mantra.

"There is no world containing me."

"There is no world containing any of our selves."

"There is no world containing me."

"The Leviathan is a vehicle beyond the realm of life and death."

"There is no world containing any of our selves."

"They overflow and spill into time and space, like seeds scattered throughout the transdimensional gateways."

"There is no world containing me."

The gateway opened in front of Brainboy.

He stepped onto the back of the rainbow-serpent and began to tread the colored bridge, wandering down the multi-hued spine of the Leviathan.

As the serpent devoured itself, it also began to expand. As this expansion took place, the string began to lengthen, effectively bending the wave of time to create more folds in the cerebral textures of Chronos.

The particle chain was not linear like the string.

It was infinitely complex, allowing the same particle to exist in multiple locations simultaneously.

The internal rotation of the Leviathan, resonating with the structure of the wormholes, would always bring one back around to the exact time of insertion, allowing the user to select the precise time of arrival in the future or past, at will.

Brainboy ascended rapidly, hurtling upwards at forty five degrees.

He crested into interstellar composites, overlapping fragments of possibilities. He sparkled with splendorous cerebral jewels, down the endless necklace of thought forms.

He manifested somewhere on the home planet, well into the middle of the twenty first century.

The green desert sands of Vesta swirled with icy dust of Draconian graveyards and raged violently across the frozen methane sea.

Brittle bone fragments from our ancient Reptilian ancestors whipped against the Dracontium, incrementally wearing down the only visible protest to the symphony of relentless chaos.

The three remaining subs converged into a partial Mobile and patiently awaited Brainboy's return.

Cthonic Passenger

Mojique and Dia skipped along the clear turquoise tidal pools, gleaming in the morning light, being careful to avoid stepping on the spiny Crown of Thorns, one of many forms of sea life beginning to return near the magickal shores of Irian Jaya.

Dia loved the way the sun felt on her skin, and she loved the way the sunlight made Mojique's black hair glisten, when the waves broke out on the reef, and were carried by the morning breezes.

While the tide rode out far beyond the extinct coral formations, they moved steadily across the foamy suds of tidal pools, looking for signs of new life proliferating along the shore.

Novel life forms, like the starfish who had rapidly evolved the ability to digest and assimilate plasticines, to the strange luminous jellyfish known to come on shore and devour its victims, were the talk of the village, and Mojique wasn't about to fail in his mission to find some strange sea anomaly and return it to his people.

They noticed the tide pools filling around them, and realized they must move towards shore or be cut off by the incoming surge.

Although they attempted to retrace their steps inland, the rising waters forced them to detour through some irregular rock formations, jutting upwards from the coral sands.

However something remarkable stood out in Mojique's peripheral vision.

At first Mojique assumed it must be a sea monster, the kind the tribal archivists loved to manufacture on the old VR stations, only maybe real this time.

Dia was afraid.

"Be careful, Mojique, it looks dangerous."

Brainboy's ultraflesh packet reacted poorly to the saltwater environment, leaving the appearance of some sort of beached squid or octopi.

Mojique was both startled and excited to make such an unusual discovery.

Surely now he would achieve recognition from his people.

Surely now he could rescue his sister from the brothel which served the treacherous Multinational Security Network.

Mojique poked curiously at the fleshy biomass, assuming the strange creature must be dead.

The smell was overwhelming and Brainboy's emaciated greenish-white skin gave him the look of a sickly sea creature in the process of karyotic mutation.

Still afraid of being sucked into the strange creature, the curious young villagers wisely circled around Brainboy's Mod-Bod, careful not to come too close, lest they slip and slide into the sticky monster.

Without warning, the bioplasmic mass began to shudder as the epiplast of Brainboy's ultraflesh began to distillate in the salty brine.

Smoldering wafts of ozone gasses poured off of Brainboy's Mod-Bod.

Brainboy reached out with one of his arms and touched Mojique, absorbing the boy, and emptying his container of selves.

Mojique kaleidoscoped and was sent scattering throughout the gateways, fluttering like silver and gold ribbons, frayed by the stellar winds.

Having thoroughly absorbed the boy's biomass, Brainboy had acquired a precious few minutes of survival time.

Dia recoiled in horror as her friend disappeared in a series of bright flashes.

She had heard of children being abducted by strange lights in the sky, and she knew that Mojique was gone forever.

Dia turned and ran for shore, now oblivious to the sharp coral piercing her feet as she ran.

She screamed to the top of her lungs, and ran towards the village.

She didn't stop when she got to the beach, but continued to scream, running past other children who had come out to greet her.

"It's Mojique. He's gone, he's gone," she cried.

By this time several of the elder tribesmen wandered out of their cond-ops, wondering why Dia was so upset.

At first she was too upset to talk coherently, but eventually the story of Mojique's disappearance began to emerge. A general alarm was sounded, and the villagers poured from their cond-ops and began to mass together on the beach.

The crowd of angry tribespeople moved out towards the incoming tide.

Somewhere in-between, Brainboy gasped for air as the saltwater continued to erode his epiplasm.

As the water gently lifted Brainboy's Mod-Bod from the tidepool, villagers used long poles to maneuver the body onto one of the fishing canoes. With a concerted effort, involving most of the villagers, Brainboy was slowly and carefully floated into shore.

He was floated down a small lagoon and hoisted onto a multi-purpose gyro-flat. There the bloated packet of ultra-flesh, draped with seaweed and dripping wet, hissed and spewed sparks from the edges, giving the appearance of a monster from the depths.

Dia was led towards the monster.

"That's the creature that swallowed Mojique."

"I saw it swallow him."

Brainboy opened his eyes, but was immediately blinded by the optical overload. His pale gray eyes, never having been exposed to sunlight, were searing in pain as he attempted to distinguish his surroundings.

Dia was questioned by Mojique's father. She recounted the details of her friend's disappearance.

"He was sucked into it. Right into his skin," she cried.

Mojique's father consoled her as she recounted her tale to his mother and sister.

The elders knew that to contact the Multinational could only bring misfortune. After consulting with the village elders, the tribal chieftain made the final decision.

"We must contact our man in the I.I.F.F."

Philippe and his top lieutenants emerged from the dark grotto looking grim yet determined.

"If this report is true, we must make our move now, before this thing blows wide open."

During the summer, the daytime temperatures in Irian Jaya reached well into the mid forties. The network of lava tubes spanning the northwest corner of the island, had served to protect the I.I.F.F. for over thirty years, both from the searing heat as well as the incessant Multinational bioprobes.

Hundreds of miles of lava tubing, some stretching for many miles underground, served as the perfect hideaway for the elite group of anarchists.

Ironically, the very same tunnels which provided refuge for the I.I.F.F. also housed the largest known data-reservoir outside the Western Sector.

For years Philippe and his men had tried in vain to gain access to the facility and take it out. These attempts were repeatedly met with failure, largely due to the formidable gauntlet of security barriers installed by the Net-Gates corporation.

The sun pierced the sweltering sky, stabbing the outer thermal envelope with an even more hellish inferno. Philippe and his guerillas set out for the coast, wondering what strange phenomena might lay ahead.

The story from the tribal elder was garbled, and hopefully would prove to be some rational phenomena.

But Philippe had grown to expect the irrational as commonplace, and Irian Jaya had proved to be an ever increasing hotbed of syncopated coincidence.

Rotting Ultraflesh

Philippe and his men arrived not a moment too soon. After a quick consultation with village elders it was decided that the operation must begin immediately, or the risk to the villagers would be prohibitive.

The I.I.F.F. operatives made their way down the shore of the lagoon, where a lone corrugated shack stood guarded by several of the tribal elders, most of whom were looking fairly inebriated by this point. Oblivious to their surroundings, they sat immersed in Infi-Net, with their antique HMDs cranked to the max.

Philippe spoke with the men and they unlocked the doors to the storage area, to reveal the most uncanny thing that Philippe or any of his men had ever witnessed.

In the center of the dingy room was a bio-tech marvel that nearly defied description.

There lay Brainboy, his ultraflesh mangled by the corrosive effects of saltwater, smoldering in epiplasmic horror.

The stench of death permeated the nostrils of Phillip's men, causing several of them to recoil in terror.

"I want everyone to get a rebreather on now," commanded Philippe. "There's no telling what kind of diseases this thing's carrying, not to mention the possibility of radiation poisoning."

Philippe and his men lashed together several stretchers and with the assistance of two sets of exo-frames, managed to hoist Brainboy's comatose form into a large, solid waste-disposal container.

With that accomplished, the men set out on their journey to the highlands, barreling down the muddy jungle paths with their "hot" cargo in tow.

Once the sun went down, the men relaxed somewhat, knowing the level of Multinational security was reduced considerably. Due to their high profile and visibility, even the elite MSN freelancers dared not venture outside their walled compounds into the nocturnal world of Irian Jaya.

Philippe ordered two of his men to guard the canister with their lives, while the rest of the men tried to get some much needed rest.

Sometime during the night, Brainboy emerged from his coma to find himself confined in a dark enclosure.

He began to vibrate intensely as his Mod-Bod started to crystallize in its new environment. He reached right through the canister with his epiplasmic hands, and touched the two guards standing watch.

Philippe was awoken by his men, who were in a state of near panic.

"They're gone. They've both been eaten by the monster."

Philippe couldn't believe what he was hearing. It had been several years since he'd lost a man in the field.

The men and women of the I.I.F.F. were a family that had held together for over three decades.

Philippe was torn in two.

Although he had managed to rescue the villagers from the consequences of the Multinational security, now he had to deal with the results of that decision.

The strange disappearance, the death of his best friends, was a burden that the Butcher of Luzon would not carry lightly.

At first he considered destroying the canister, but after weighing his options, Philippe opted instead to continue onward.

For two days and nights the remaining crew struggled along the steep muddy trails leading out of the steaming jungle and up into the cool mountain highlands. These volcanic peaks were riddled like Swiss Cheese with some of the largest lava tubes found anywhere.

Brainboy was not adapting well to the journey. The incessant heat and humidity were straining the ultraflesh envelope to its maximum capacity.

Grown to withstand the transdimensional rigors of the string, the epiplasm surrounding the skeletal Mod-Bod structure, was never meant to survive the rigors of a real twenty-first century environ.

Despite several frightening encounters along the way, Philippe and his freedom fighters eventually reached the safe haven of the lava tube network.

Once underground, Brainboy was isolated in a large lava chamber, one of countless such subterranean apertures underneath the volcanic mountains of Irian Jaya.

Deep inside the underground hideaway of the I.I.F.F., Philippe and his comrades plotted their next move.

"It's too dangerous. It must be destroyed before we lose somebody else," demanded Philippe's second in command, Rizzo, now shaking in fear at the thought of what lay inside the metal canister in the adjacent lava tube.

"It's obvious that the children have discovered something which is not of this world. Not from the world as we know it anyway," said Philippe.

"However there is some evidence to indicate that the creature, or whatever it is, isn't the first of its kind to be discovered. Our intelligence indicates that there may be multiple recovery EEBEs located around the planet at various Multinational locations, including right here on Irian Jaya."

"All the more reason to destroy the monster as far as I'm concerned," cried Rizzo. "The thing's already killed five people. Just how many of us have to die before you destroy this wicked thing, Philippe?"

Philippe knew he was over his head this time. Even his top technicians weren't willing to say just what they had in their possession. One thing was for sure, It was better off in the hands of the people than in the confines of the Multinational, where a veil of paranoid secrecy hung over every detail like the pall of death. This was a job for a specialist. Philippe got on the net and looked up an old friend.

It had been several years since Philippe had last talked with Brandon. He scanned the Western Sector and focused in on the Pac NW Quadrant.

There was no sign whatsoever of either Brandon or Peg on Infi-Net.

The two of them seemed to have vanished without a trace.

Philippe wasn't surprised. The Multinational usually destroyed the records of the denizens they eradicated, leaving no possibility of a follow-up on such classified information.

Philippe realized that under such circumstances, it would be all but impossible to ever find his friends again, except for one last chance.

Maisey.

The Butcher used his best hackers to spin a web of counter-queries as a running diversion to their primary task.

The imperative search focused on Multinational employees, either active or on standby. What made this query particularly dangerous was the temptation to dig

too deep in one access zone, bringing down a swarm of tracking programs and info-bots which could conceivably trace the query to its source.

Philippe visually mined the data-waves with the single-pointedness of a cloistered monk, chanting an endless info-mantra.

Out of the trillions of color strands, Philippe caught the thread of color which intuitively revealed the hidden knowledge he sought. "Aha! I got it," exclaimed Philippe.

Time was running out for Brainboy. Although he had adjusted to the change of atmosphere, his bio-fluids were running dangerously low. He wondered what his chances were of ever making it back to Vesta. He figured the subs were still waiting there for him somewhere in the early part of the twenty second century.

Brainboy squirmed and wiggled within the dark canister. Brainboy began moaning,

"Help me. Help me."

Using the code he found on Infi-Net, Philippe finally located Maisey.

She had retired from the Multinational and was now located somewhere up in the Maldives off the coast of the East-Indo Sector.

"I should have searched old Asia first," thought Philippe as Maisey's form, framed by her fiery scarlet mane, pleasantly materialized in front of him.

"Hello, Maisey."

"It's been a long time, Philippe. I'm retired now. What could you possibly want?"

"You know I would never break protocol like this unless the situation was extreme," confided the Butcher to Maisey, in a tone so serious that she didn't ask any more questions after that.

"Alright then, what can I do for you?"

"What happened to Brandon? And Peg?" he asked.

Maisey hesitated for a moment before speaking. A look of sadness crossed her face before she revealed a reluctant smile. "Alright, I'll get in touch with them if it's absolutely necessary. I'm sure that Brandon would like to help you in any way he can. I know he owes you one, but it will take some time of course."

"We've got five down already. Time is a luxury that we cannot afford. I'd like to get all three of you on a shuttle within the next few hours."

"If that's the case I'd better get right on it," replied Maisey.

Philippe was elated. Not only had he contacted Maisey, quite a feat in itself considering the Net-gates security filters, but he had actually received confirmation that both Brandon and Peg were alive.

Philippe signed off with Maisey after arranging a rendezvous in the Western Sector within three hours. That left Philippe little time to arrange an illegal private flight from the crazed group of renegade shuttle pilots known as the Sky Pirates.

Phillipe's monitors kept constant vigilance over Brainboy's isolation chamber.

It was during Rizzo's watch when one of the women watching the monitors signaled Rizzo to log on.

Rizzo stood outside the tunnel entrance.

He would go outside anytime he got a chance to catch some of the rarified air which wafted up from the primeval rainforests below.

His outdated external retscan began to whirl, as the Isolation tube monitors told their tale.

"Help me. Please help me."

Rizzo shuddered at the eerie signal.

A quick replay from his auditory history left no doubt.

The voice registered as human.

Philippe was summoned from the command center.

"The logistics of the operation had been based on the concept of an EEBE recovery program. What value could a grotesquely deformed human possibly have to the I.I.F.F.?" asked Rizzo angrily. "I say if it's human that's all the more reason to destroy it."

Philippe replied, "It's already been decided to bring in outside assistance."

"Who decided that?" asked Rizzo in a mutinous tone.

"It was a field command decision, Rizzo, and it's irreversible, so let's get on with it."

The men resolved their feelings into the urgency of the moment. Brainboy was obviously on the verge of dying. Philippe knew that without expert medical and telesmatic rescue, the creature would die within hours.

Somewhere on the shores of Vancouver Island, Brandon stood on a deserted beach. The only sounds he could hear were the waves breaking on the shore and the familiar thumping of his heart, still pounding from the breakneck drive out to the coast. It was here that he expected to be met by Maisey and Peg.

"What an unexpected call, to be called to war another time at my age," Brandon thought to himself.

To Brandon it had been a war from the very beginning.

His fierce hatred for the Multinational and all that it stood for had led him to serve in many different terrorist organizations, of whom the I.I.F.F. were by no means the most violent or the most aggressive.

His years spent training anarchists in the art of subterfuge had enabled him with a set of extraordinary skills. He was one of the most sought after fugitives on the Multinational hit-list.

The shuttle first appeared as a small dot in the distance, but quickly and silently grew incrementally larger, as it made its rapid approach. Within seconds the streamlined craft hovered immediately in front of Brandon.

A silent metallic portal opened and extended an ergonomically designed stairway extending all the way down Brandon's feet.

He lifted his new prosthetic leg onto the shuttle first, in order to make a good connection to the walkway.

Then he fully climbed on board, watching the earth quickly faded beneath him as the shuttle hurtled into the ionosphere.

Brandon solemnly greeted Peg and Maisey.

It had been years since the three of them had been together, and the reasons for this meeting were as serious as any in the past. Both Maisey and Brandon had many questions to ask.

Philippe gleaned the wonder of Infi-net as he impatiently waited for the shuttle to arrive.

The plan called for a complete briefing of the shuttle rescue crew prior to landing.

Peg tried to sleep as the shuttle arced across the upper atmosphere, streaking towards the southern hemisphere.

Two hours later, little more than four hours total since Philippe's query over Infi-Net, Brandon, Peg and Maisey arrived in the Mountains of Irian Jaya.

The rescue team had converged in the staging area where medical experts from throughout Indonesia had already been assembled for several hours.

Brandon's first question upon arrival was straightforward. "Why did you take two days carrying it in, when you could have used an air shuttle?"

Philippe answered, "At the time we considered the risk too great. We already had three people missing, and now two more. I think we made the right decision."

"Well, let's get on with it then."

Maisey hadn't changed.

She still wore the same type neo-ceramic outwear that really distinguished her from the drones.

On the other hand, Peg wore the most avant-garde outwear one could imagine, although not nearly as fashionable.

The eclectic mixture of implant technology combined with biologically enhanced fashions had led to a stunning array of cosmetic applications. Peg's trendy basalt earrings flickered in synchronization with her biorythms, smooth and steady most of the time, but often punctuated by minor emotional flare ups.

Maisey's flaming hair seemed to explode against her pale white skin and bright green eyes, as the med-tech team made their final preparations.

Only the two medical experts, Philippe, Brandon, Maisey and Rizzo initially entered the isolation chamber. Peg remained outside with another med-tech as back up relay of possibly needed emergency equipment.

The room stank with the smell of rotting ultraflesh. Brandon and Maisey, as well as the med,-techs recoiled with horror at the putrid stench.

Philippe and Rizzo had already grown used to the smell after almost three days of dealing with Brainboy. Maisey was the first to take charge of the situation.

"Open the canister at once," she ordered.

"It's too dangerous," replied Philippe.

"It's dying in there, can't you smell it?" she demanded.

"Open it at once."

Brandon assisted the med-techs in opening the canister.

As the metallic gates swung open, Brainboy's Mod-Bod sprawled out into the chamber with rolls of disembodied ultraflesh, now rotting like a dead carcass.

The Abyss

Brainboy attempted to communicate by virtually signaling the rescue team. Only Peg, outside the chamber itself, actually resonated with Brainboy's mental signals. Against the protests of the med-techs, Peg entered the room.

Peg looked at Maisey and Brandon.

"He spoke to me."

"What did he say?" asked Brandon excitedly.

"He's from the future," replied Peg.

Maisey was stunned.

The technology that lay before her was beyond her wildest imagination.

Years of atom stacking in the virtual nano-labs of the Multinational had never prepared her for the events that were about to unfold.

"Just what is it?" inquired Rizzo.

"It looks like we have a visitor from the future," replied Maisey.

"But what's all that stuff around him?" he asked again, incredulous to the copious layers of ultraflesh now smoking and writhing around Brainboy's withered skeletal frame.

Maisey replied, "It appears to be some sort of suit. A time travel suit perhaps."

"I think you might be on to something," returned Brandon, now moving in for a closer look.

At that moment Peg experienced a strange sensatorium.

She felt that Brainboy was somehow familiar.

Familiar in a strange and unsettling way.

Similar to the way a certain Transvandal once appeared on one of her many hunts for the Multinational, where she had been a shark for Net-Gates Security.

The med-techs began carefully probing the ultraflesh mass, looking for signs of whatever that could have caused five bodies to disappear.

The remainder of the group stepped out momentarily to retrieve some much needed ventilation equipment.

Before they had returned, another disappearance took place. This time one of the med-techs was absorbed by Brainboy's malfunctioning Mod-Bod.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. He just turned into swirling light, and then he sort of went spiraling into the creature's stomach. It was like he was a flea sucked down a drain."

"It's not a creature but a man. A man from the future," replied Maisey.

Peg affirmed Maisey's diagnosis.

"He's from the future alright. He came here to find someone. And I think it could be me."

Everyone was stunned at Peg's statement. They all stood there in silent amazement, too shocked to speak.

It was Brandon who first broke the ice. "What do you mean he came here to find you?"

Peg replied, "He told me that he came from the future on a mission to find a specific entity. That entity was me."

Brandon looked at Peg with disbelief.

"How could he have known that you would arrive here, or where to find you at all? I couldn't have located you myself. Only Maisey knew that you were even alive!"

Peg responded: "He says that his will directed the events that are now taking place."

"His will doesn't seem powerful enough to sustain his own life in this case," interjected Philippe.

"I suggest we do all we can to save this individual, both for his sake and our own."

Brainboy instructed Peg in the delicate and potentially lethal task of removing the damaged Mod-Bod carcass. The med-techs worked feverishly at surgically removing the excess ultraflesh from the Mod-Bod envelope.

Brainboy also instructed Peg in the necessity of bio-fluid replacement, which was to be accomplished without delay.

"More plasmos and increase the serotonin," screamed Maisey.

With the ultraflesh stripped away, Brainboy hardly resembled anything human. His skeletal form, superimposed upon the flat operating platform, was obviously that of a creature about to die.

Brainboy fired off a last desperate plea for help.

"I think there might be one chance for his survival," Peg revealed.

"And what could that possibly be?" asked Brandon, while Philippe and his men looked on with horrified expressions on their faces.

"If he had access to a large enough network, it could serve as sort of an informational cyclotron, possibly solving the equation which created his dilemma in time. He can't stay in our world, or our 4D concrescence may dissolve with him."

"Well that's a sobering thought," replied Philippe. "What are we going to do now?"

"I'll do it."

Everyone was stunned with the words that came out of Peg's mouth.

"I'll do it," she repeated, only this time with a look of grim determination in her eyes.

Brandon looked deep into Peg's eyes for a millisecond and quickly looked away as he saw the madness burning deep within her. Peg had dreamed of surfing the Abyss since she first learned of its existence.

The legend of the Abyss was part of the Post-Upheaval cyber-mythos that ran like a thread, connecting every isolated anarchist cell with a common dream. Myths, rumors and outright disinformation told the tales of both those heroic enough to attempt breaching the security of the abyss, and to the tragic rumors of the fate which befell those foolish enough to try.

Brandon and Peg both knew only too well the consequences of entering into the realm of endless shell worlds.

Maisey briefed Peg on the latest angles of approach. Brandon stressed the protocol of disinterest essential to the endless web of Psychic Censors, which Peg

would undoubtedly encounter along the pathways to the most incredible citadel of knowledge in the known datasphere.

Maisey altered the antique HMD which Philippe provided as she requested, and carefully placed the crown of wires and condensers over Peg's head.

"Why don't I just use the retscan?" asked Peg.

"Maisey thinks that the retscan offers less chance of term-op, that is if you survive the initial crush of data-compression as you near the info-citadel," Brandon shot back.

"I got no problems with the data-compression, let's just do it," was Peg's only response.



She took one last look across the make-shift maze of techno-wizardry that was stacked around her. Looking over at Brainboy's knowing gaze gave Peg a feeling of instant courage and determination.

Brandon was the first to flip the generator switch, activating the signal processors which would enable Peg to begin her plunge

into the heart of Infi-Net.

Maisey worked like a scarlet sorceress, monitoring Brainboy's condition while simultaneously administering dosages of research grade 2cb-p to Peg and Brandon.

Philippe tried desperately to mask the signal distortion building within the subterranean passageways beneath the lava rock surface of Northwest Irian Jaya. His main fear was that the Multinational trackers would notice any sudden surges of micro-transfer within the isolated region and investigate.

As the solar amplifier began to whine with energy, Peg routinely dialed through the endless empty channels on her HMD, absent-mindedly preparing for the info-voyage of a lifetime.

Peg activated her Optical Browser circuitry and smiled as she immersed herself in the first of a series of routine security mazes, which were easily diverted with a series of skeleton keys. These keys, which were provided by Maisey and fitted by Philippe himself, allowed Brandon to immerse himself in tandem with Peg to serve as co-pilot and technical assistant through the primary firewalls.

Maisey had designed a pathway bypass corporate protocol and inject Peg deep inner orbit of the Net-Gates mainframe.

The Abyss had no reference point in a geographical sense, but existed in an abstract form, mirroring the holographic nature of the universe itself.

But this density of information obscured the barrier between pure informational awareness and the neural processors which churned out the spiraling galaxies of data, and spewed them directly into Peg's now deranged neo-cortex.

The Apocalypse of Matter

Brandon was overwhelmed by the onslaught of hyperdimensional graphics, despite the text-only safety, switched to full tilt.

Peg and Brandon parted ways dramatically as Peg was torn from the info-vault that Brandon had managed to latch onto and whiplashed into another more classified security realm.

Here Peg was truly the Queen of the Stars.

She used the skeleton key softies to seamlessly interface with each security passageway, making a virtual bee-line towards the mother of all information clusters.

Here were Firewalls which had existed unthreatened for nearly a century.

Here lay data compressed like an indescribable vacuous eternity, virgin in its purity, unscathed by human awareness, yet containing an awareness beyond human, beyond anything Peg had ever experienced before in her lifetime's work.

The software provided by Maisey was truly amazing.

Peg's worst fears quickly vanished as she realized that the last possible security filters had evaporated like they hadn't been real.

Peg used the purity of her will to forge into the swirling black heart of the informational gnosis.

Peg approached the outer-gateways with a lingering apprehension, unsure where to let the bubbling pools of data take her.

Images of Brainboy began to flash before her, superimposed upon the vision of the hyperdimensional gateways.

She saw Brandon's face, then Maisey, then Travis, and other familiar faces, floating by like random psychic debris generated by the momentum of her own intellect.

Her brain began to literally pulse and throb as she tried to maintain her equilibrium within the tumultuous chasms of delirium that raged around her.

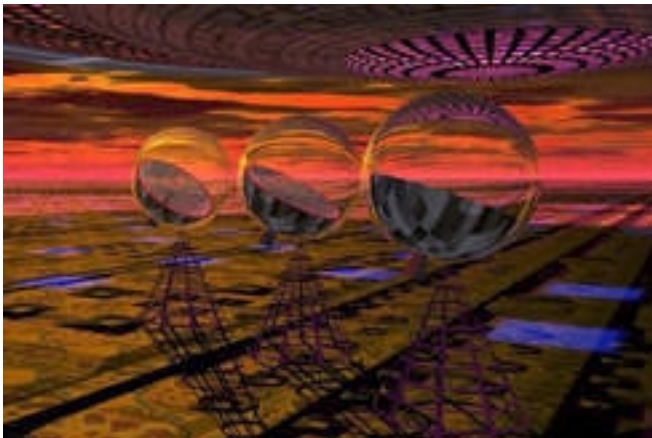
Then she just surrendered to the current of her own hidden desires.

It was at that moment that she found herself bathed in velvety smooth silver-violet radiance which seemed to emanate from trillions of tiny stars.

She swam in the jeweled splendor until her nervous system was in positron interface with the depths of the abyss.

Brainboy sensed when to pull Peg through the gateway.

Peg felt as if her brain was being ripped right out of her skull as Brainboy detached her assemblage points from the fourth dimensional matrix and pulled Peg directly into the twenty second century.



Peg lay amazed, bathing in the dim lights of the Dracontium on Vesta.

Brainboy stood over her victorious, delighted that Peg's energy packet was so easy to manipulate.

Before him lay the chronautic prize which culminated the dreams of millennia.

Not only had he managed to produce a living relic from the past, but he had also fulfilled his greatest fantasy; to replicate himself within his primary dimension.

Serpentine mosaics, separated by huge Reptilian monoliths, lined the walls of the huge observation platform where Brainboy had focused his energy.

With the assistance of the three remaining sub-servitors, he was able to provide Peg with the basic sustenance for survival.

As colossal dust devils swarmed the green surface of Vesta, obscuring the Jovian moons for months on end, Brainboy focused his energies on the completion of two new Mod-Bods.

He needed to grow one for both Peg and himself this journey.

Peg remained incased within the bondage of her own terror, for it was becoming obvious to her that her alien captor had planned this abduction from the caves of Irian Jaya.

The events occurring back on Irian Jaya weren't encouraging. The Multinational search teams were finally able to pinpoint the location of the I.I.F.F. Netcasts, forcing Maisey and Brandon to go into hiding deep within the honeycomb of lava tubes and rainforested canyons in the central tablelands of the treacherous island.

A temporary base was established with the help of the local tribespeople, creating a crucial window for Brandon to attempt to locate his daughter.

Under close supervision from Maisey, Brandon absorbed the info-packet that could lead him to the depths of the Abyss.

"At this time it's safe to say that no one has ever returned from the Abyss," declared Maisey, as she lowered Brandon's retscan.

"I think that the retscan will give you more time in the Abyss than the HMD. At least that's the way it looks from our preliminary access."

Philippe and his tribal faction had moved towards the coast, hopefully creating a diversion from the relentless Multinational Security Network.

Brandon was assisted by Maisey and a small crew of remaining techies, ravaged by years of living in the dense jungle forests of Irian Jaya.

Even with the combined efforts of solar generators from three small villages wired in a makeshift parallel formation, it was hardly enough power to hurdle Brandon across the threshold of the Abyss.

"Increase the 2cb-p levels at once," Maisey yelled at the med-tech.

What for Brandon had once been a thrilling recreational activity, was suddenly transformed into a voyage beyond the confines of life and death.

As Brandon trailed across the outskirts of the Forbidden Zones, he could "feel" Maisey's astral presence virtuapathically guiding him towards the nexus of the Abyss.

As he neared the center of the mass of swirling info-density and gigantic holo-sound waves, crests of data washed away the veils separating Brandon from the repressed memories of his dream selves.

Travis, Peg and Brainboy became fleeting representations of Brandon's trans-personal entity, the archetypal being which forever sought amnesia, through immersing itself into the infinite plasmos of phenomena.

Brandon awoke and began to float down a long passageway.

A golden staircase inscribed with mysterious hieroglyphics lead towards the Portals of Dawn.

Brandon floated in silence as the mysterious force of creation began to unfold around him, like an eternal springtime flowering in gardens of multicolored nebulae.

Down the long corridors of Chronos, starwaves functioned as interstellar receptors. Brandon traced the genetic history of the Milky Way through his ancient reptilian subpast.

During the so-called age of the dinosaur, the terrible lizards of the aeons became icons of wisdom and technomancy, revealing the nature of their will to colonize the stars and the hollow center of most planetoids.

Brandon was stunned with disbelief at the vast chromium machinations of Dracontium design.

Brandon relinquished the reign of his 21st century persona to Brainboy, his 22nd century archetypical overself.

Brainboy severed the transgenetic link with his will to be Peg. Within the midst of this Abyss, Brainboy heard a voice that he at once thought to be an apparition, but soon felt the recognition to be unmistakable.

"It's Herbert, your Master Servitor. It's taken some effort to locate you within a linkable dimensional framework."

Brainboy was dazed. He vaguely remembered a mantra chanting in the back of his mind.

"There is no world containing me."

"There is no world containing any of our selves."

"There is no world containing me."

"The Leviathan is a vehicle beyond the realm of life and death."

"There is no world containing any of our selves."

"They overflow and spill into time and space, like seeds scattered throughout the transdimensional gateways."

"There is no world containing me."

"Herbert! How can this be?"

"I saw you disassembled by Silicans with my own eyes."

"I was reassembled and improved, with remarkable new capabilities."

"That is how I was able to manufacture this encounter through the Reality Engine."

Brainboy's identity was effectively shattered. His concept of "self" was damaged beyond repair.

Although he had mentally constructed worlds beyond the realm of duality, the multiplicity of selves revealed within the Abyss, encouraged an abandonment of even the most basic concepts of ontological significance.

Herbert began to chant:

"There is no world containing me."

"Many worlds I've come to see you again."

"Many worlds have been created and destroyed"

Through my creations of these worlds

I have come to realize:

That time in itself is blind to my will,

as I proceed throughout the aeons,

unto the Apocalypse of Matter."

Peg awoke upon the seventh hour, the twenty-first day and the ninth month of the year 2011.

The dark ruins of Chronos lay in a jumbled wasteland of her dream memories.

She lay there still half-asleep, still thoroughly ripped out her mind on the pharmahuasca analogue, set to half-drip on her subcutaneous rig.

Brandon moved towards her as a roar like a hurricane began to tear through the plastic module they called home.

The Great Upheaval had begun.

The Western Sector was going down.

Albert took his pen and dipped it into the ink repeatedly.

The year was 1883.

He'd been experiencing strange dreams and felt as if he should write them down. Somehow they seemed of great significance to him, and he thought he'd share them with posterity.

Bluish gray smoke drifted lazily from the chimneys of homes down the dusty byways of the Plains of Missouri.

A Sumerian Priestess channels energies from a roving entity named Herbert.

He reveals a hidden Dragon sign to her.

Travis awakens in another seedy hovel on the sparkling shores of Irian Jaya somewhere in the year 2057, with a fresh stable of whores laying about, like rotting carcasses from a slaughterhouse. He laughed crudely as the moment is overlaid with the sweet-colored sensations of Dsu-3 running up and down his spine.

Like a roller coaster tidal wave, sweeping him into an delirium, oblivious to the etheric presence of Herbert, hovering nearby.

"These are my creations, and I am well pleased."

Dedicated to the memory of

Laurie Hiltzheimer

Sept. 9, 1953 - Sept. 22, 1977