

# 4

KRISTINA'S TINY STUDIO SMELLED OF STALE SWEAT AND INCENSE. A stench of rotting garbage wafted up from the alley below. But she kept the place spotless, had colorful art prints on the walls, and her bed was big enough for four. She was a ferocious lover and rode him with the passion and the fire of a dragon. When he was deep inside her, they came together, and it melted his mind, his sperm jetting into her womb like an electric umbilical that merged his soul and body with hers. From the tunnels of memory came a snatch of poetry his mother had read to him as a child: *Whispers and small laughter between leaves and hurrying feet, under sleep, where all the waters meet.*

Once, during the night, he blinked awake from a soggy dream to find Kristina beaming at him, her face illuminated by moonlight. Her lips brushed his as if she were kissing him in an unknown tongue, her body wrapped around him, scented with musk and woman-sweat and a tang of baked apple. Then he fell into a blue dreamscape, lulled by the sound of breakers foaming on a beach.

Hours later, when he dragged himself up from the swamp of a sake hangover, the sun blinded him from behind a rooftop outside the window. It was morning and stifling. He sweated in a tangle of bedsheets. His jacket and slacks were flung across the back of a chair in a corner next to a vanity table with mirror. He heard clattering from the kitchen, caught the smell of coffee, and something baking. He dragged himself up and dressed, found his shoes and socks and pulled them on. Through a pounding head he realized that his neurofeed was silent. He remembered the director had deactivated it. Then all the details of his meeting with Minsheng struck his mind like a natural catastrophe.

He blundered into the tiny living room and was shocked to find a rail-thin Caucasian woman in her sixties with graying, shoulder-length hair, sitting cross-legged on the couch in jeans and a denim shirt. The woman smoked an old-fashioned tobacco cigarette, which she stubbed out in a brass ashtray. She had a full-function K-Spot over her third eye. Certain he was about to be shaken down, Blaise ducked for the door.

Kristina came in from the kitchen in her blue silk kimono. "Wait. It's OK. It's my mom, Amelia."

Blaise gave the woman a sharp look. "It was consensual. And I've given her all my cash."

The woman flashed a wry smile. "Take a seat. We just want to talk."

"Really, it's OK," Kristina seconded her. "Please sit down. I'll bring coffee and biscuits."

"You look like you could use an aspirin," the woman observed. She reached in her shirt pocket and shook two tablets from a bottle. "Yep, still got aspirin here. No Medco dispensers in this rathole of a building. Take 'em. They're extra strength."

The woman extended her palm.

Blaise's headache pounded too hard to refuse. He settled down in the chair and popped the tablets.

"You'll be amazed how fast those work," Kristina encouraged. "A little trick an exiled biochemist pulled off. She altered the formula."

In fact, Blaise's headache was beginning to ebb.

"Must feel strange to wake up and find me here," Amelia observed. "Actually, it's not. We know about your situation with the director."

Blaise tried to neutralize the shock showing in his face. "How . . . could you possibly . . . know about that?"

"Relax, you're among friends," Amelia said.

"How do you take your coffee?" Kristina put in.

"Huh? Black."

Kristina vanished into the kitchen. Blaise glared at Amelia.

"You're supposed to be Kristina's mother? She's Chinese."

"Her father was Chinese. And back in the day, I was a games planner like you."

"For Mythoplex?"

"One of the first women allowed in the ranks."

"How do you know about me and the director?"

"We've got our own neuro-surveillance network, like the Cloud Monitor, only better."

“So you’re a hacker.”

“Every games planner’s a hacker. We know the neural network cold. Some of the old-timers here helped design it. Not that tough to jack in.”

“Jack in for what?”

“Once we tapped your EEG, we knew we had our man. The Cloud’s AI firewalls stymied us at first. Luckily, we’re perfecting a new psychic ability. We call it curseil. It gave us neural access.”

Blaise struggled to process what was happening to him, but it was impossible. “So what is this curseil?” he demanded.

The question seemed to please Amelia. “We can’t match the neural network’s sophistication, so we researched ancient texts about meditative techniques that can link minds psychically. We’re in the first grade with this stuff, but we’ve made some headway. With the full concentration of our curseil meditators, we can read thoughts.”

“How is that possible?” Blaise asked, incredulous.

“It’s based on Einstein’s universal field theory and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: the idea that sub-atomic waves and particles affect each other from great distances. Turns out people’s minds are connected through a psychic substratum. We tap into that substratum—like cavers shining flashlights into the collective unconscious. With focus and discipline, we can zero in on a person’s thoughts and read them for limited periods.”

Blaise considered what Amelia had revealed. If she was telling the truth, if this wasn’t a VR projection Minsheng had dreamed up to test his loyalty, the implications were staggering. If The Cloud ever co-opted curseil, the regime could achieve a level of mind control lightyears beyond neurofeed and the Cloud Monitor.

“OK, let’s say you can read minds. Why would you want to spy on me?”

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

“Don’t play games with me, lady. Explain yourself!”

“Relax. I told you, you’re among friends.”

“I don’t need any friends.”

“We think you do. How long do you think Minsheng will let you live after *Gilgamesh V* wraps?”

Blaise had always considered Mitsuko his most dangerous enemy. Minsheng, he had assumed, relied on his talent too much to vaporize him.

“There’s no reason to terminate me,” he blurted. “I’ve won all the awards.”

“Your VR advances make you a huge security risk.”

“Lady, you can’t throw a scare into somebody who’s already terrified. I don’t buy your story.”

“No story. A lethal reality. One you’re creating for a madman who’ll happily exterminate billions with it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You do realize this drug you’re to code is fatal?”

“He just wants to keep the Slags submissive and, and make a mint for Mythoplex and the Cloud.”

“You don’t really believe he’d expend all that time and expense, not to mention his star programmer’s blood and sweat, just to introduce a new sedative. Wake up, Blaise. This is his ticket to the chairmanship of the Cloud board. He’ll take all the credit for this. And you’ll be expendable. He knows you might use Anima to take him out.”

“How can you know all this?”

“We’ve got him under surveillance, too. He’s going to exterminate the entire Slag population. Plus as many of those poor Caliphate army bastards who sample it through black market K-spots.”

Against his better judgment, Blaise considered the possibility that she might be right. How stupid he had been to let vanity and ambition keep him from considering that his promotion, his new office, and status, all of it, was bait to ensure compliance until Minsheng no longer needed him.

“OK. OK. So let’s say there’s a slim chance you’re right about Minsheng. What do you and your daughter want from me?”

“You think Kristina seduced you for some sinister purpose?”

“Yeah, that occurred to me.”

“We knew you frequented that club. Kristina’s worked as a stripper before. Easy to get her hired. And she’s your type.”

Kristina brought in a mug of coffee and a plate of biscuits, took them to a side table near Blaise, and curled up beside Amelia on the couch.

“Dig in, Blaise,” Kristina urged. “You can trust us. We’ve got nothing to do with that lunatic you work for.”

Blaise’s better judgment told him to run, and fast, back to what he knew, horrifying as it was. But something about Kristina and Amelia intrigued him. They had presence, solidity, a scent of real, un-virtual flesh that attracted him. He noticed Kristina’s epicanthic eyes were the same blue as Amelia’s. Her face had the same oval structure, her lips the same shapeliness. She was petite and fine-boned, like Amelia. Definitely her daughter. But that was hardly enough to justify trusting them. How in fact could he know this was reality? Maybe it wasn’t. He traced his movements since his meeting with the director the day before and searched for an ellipsis in time, an entry point into a virtual world.

But everything that had happened to him struck him as real; his years of experience with VR confirmed it. Maybe these two hackers were telling the truth. On the other hand, if this were a loyalty test, and he failed it, he'd know Minsheng's claim that he disconnected his neural monitoring was a bluff, and the Mantis would come. Perhaps, after all, he was already doomed.

"This could all be a VR projection," he blurted. "Some fucked up loyalty test. Minsheng doesn't trust anybody."

"He trusts your vanity, your greed, your need to overcome a violent past," Kristina countered. "Come on. Drink your coffee. It'll clear your head."

Blaise bit into a biscuit, slurped the coffee to wake himself up, and watched the two women cautiously.

"OK. Let's say there's a slim chance you're telling the truth," he countered. "What do you want from me? To help you jack back into the Cloud? So you can hack Anima, take it offline?"

"We don't want to jack back in," Amelia said. "We wanna destroy the Cloud."

Blaise set down his plate and coffee and glared at them in disbelief. "Are you out of your mind?"

Kristina and Amelia studied Blaise intently, then exchanged glances. Kristina smiled.

"You know we're telling the truth," she said. "I sense it. So we're going to tell you our plan. But after we do, you're locked in. You'll have to see it through."

"Whoa, now. I'm not agreeing to anything here."

Kristina leaned toward him. "We've coded a killer worm, called Polyphemus, after the cyclops in *The Odyssey*. After it's uploaded, it'll go viral and take down the global neural network.

"That's impossible!"

"People with nothing to lose specialize in the impossible. We've beta tested Polyphemus. It's coded in micro-modules with cumulative impact. It will work. And you've got a level five security clearance."

"Nobody can hack past Cloud AI defenses."

"There's a coding threshold, a limit to detectable file size. It makes our worm undetectable."

"Their quantum servers can reconfigure firewalls at light speed. Your plan is insane."

"No, Blaise. The Cloud board is insane. We want to restore sanity."

"OK, OK, let's dial this back to reality. Say in some parallel universe I managed to get your worm past the firewalls and fried the servers. Then what? Everything would collapse."

“We’re talking rebirth here, Blaise,” Amelia put in. “Returning to the days when your mother was one of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you remember about her?”

“Very little. I was eight when she died.”

“Please try,” Amelia urged. “The more you remember, the freer you’ll feel.”

The two women fixed Blaise with focused expressions. His body tensed in the grip of some unseen force.

“What are you doing?” he gasped. “What’s happening to me?”

“It’s curseil. Trust me, you’ll feel better after you tell us.”

“I—can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Please. What do you remember?”

Memories he had long repressed surged up in Blaise’s mind, and he felt an overwhelming urge to confess everything.

“The Cloud had seized power,” he began. “Neurofeed and the metaverse were in their infancy. The United States had collapsed. Hong Kong had taken over.”

“Good, good,” Amelia encouraged. “What else?”

“Cloud propaganda made my mom furious. Must have depressed her, too. She drank like a fish.”

“And your father?”

“He divorced her about a year before . . . before her stroke.”

Blaise whistled to himself and wiped tears from his eyes.

“It’s OK, Blaise, take your time,” Kristina soothed.

“He’d moved to Hong Kong to help refine the neural network. How I wanted to be with him! But my mom kept me in a shithole Atlanta apartment after we lose our house. Called him a fascist pig.”

“She lost a world, Blaise,” Kristina rejoined. “One she helped to build. Your father was instrumental in destroying it. But he did take you back after she passed.”

“No. He sent me to prep school. Later he bought me a lieutenant’s commission in the army. Then he got me into UCLA. I never saw him after that. He was terminated in one of the purges.”

“And your mother was erased from history,” Amelia put in.

“Erased?”

“She was more than a novelist, Blaise,” Kristina said. “In her twenties she helped women like my mom establish the matriarchy. They eliminated racism, crushed corporate conglomerates, created a compassionate society.”

“Yes! I remember now. She talked about El Dorado. That’s what she called it. When she was drunk.”

“If she had lived, she’d probably have become a hacker, like us,” Kristina answered. “How? She wasn’t a programmer.”

“Women like her who survived the matriarchy’s fall started the hacker movement. She’d have joined us. Anyone that brilliant with words could learn how to code.”

Blaise, seized by sudden emotion, choked back tears. He flashed on a memory of when he was seven or eight. He had lain on a blanket with his head in the lap of his attractive but sad-looking mother, a youngish-looking woman in her late forties. She had worn a white cotton dress, its color stark against fiery pink azalea bushes behind them. Above, in oak branches, squirrels had skittered about, and the calls of many birds had given the afternoon a special ambiance.

“Blaise, honey,” she had told him in a voice like a song, “it’s been devolution since the first Pharaoh gazed out over the first causeway in the first city he ruled. That cold, masculine eye that built empires, designed bridges, split atoms and enslaved the souls and bodies of women. That’s the cost of civilization, darling. Perhaps our matriarchy was an aberration. We lost it all, Blaise. But not our souls. Whatever happens to us, whatever the world is becoming, remember always, in your heart:

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’ ”

Blaise found himself back in the tiny living room with the two women. “Wish to God she had lived,” he declared. “I do. When she wasn’t drunk, she was wonderful. She read to me. Books. Poetry. Taught me how to be a storyteller. Rocked me back to sleep after my nightmares. The scent of her hair—was like cinnamon and cardamon. Like the whole of creation growing inside her. I loved her so.”

“We know, Blaise,” Kristina said. “We think you inherited her rebel spirit, too. You’ve got the chops to hack Cloud servers—and the balls, the killer instinct.”

“You’re wrong,” Blaise groaned. “All the courage drained out of me after I left the army.”

“Yet you kicked the shit out of those SWATs last night,” Amelia put in. “To save a helpless Slag and his daughter.”

“How do you know about that?”

“One of our people trailed you from the bullet station,” Amelia answered.

“OK, you’ve done your homework on me. So what happens after, assuming your worm works? A new stone age?”

Kristina rose from the couch, approached Blaise, knelt, and took his hand. “We’ll rebuild the world, Blaise. There are hacker cells like ours in every major city. Here. In Canada. Europe. Africa. Asia.” She took a tiny box from the sleeve of her kimono and handed it to him. “The microchip. I’ll show you how to upload it to your holodeck. It has a signal code that activates to let us know when it’s online. You upload one module per week, so the servers won’t detect them.”

Blaise hesitated and then took the chip, thinking, *What have I got to lose? Only everything.*

Kristina looked pleased. “When you get your next weekend off, we’ll rendezvous in Reseda, an abandoned town out in the valley. SWAT rarely patrols there. Reseda. Remember the name. We built a community in the ruins. I’ll introduce you to the others. And show you something amazing.”

Blaise trembled at the magnitude of what she was asking of him. Kristina glanced at Amelia.

“Mom, could you?”

Amelia nodded, heaved up, slipped out the door and shut it behind her. Kristina took Blaise’s face in her hands and caressed his hair.

“You haven’t known what’s real for so long. It’s hard to trust it when it comes. But trust this, Blaise. This moment is real. I’m real. You’re real. And your soul is real. More real than you can imagine.”

She slipped his hand inside her kimono and pressed it to her heart.

“You think your heart died? It didn’t.”

She slipped out of her kimono and joined her scented flesh to his, until her caresses relaxed his body. She helped him undress, and coaxed him gently, coyly, back into the primeval pleasures they had shared the night before.