

# The Real Me



# Nick Lorance



An "Adult Tv" Novel



## **Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers**

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# The Real Me

By Nick Lorance

## Quantico Virginia, 2045

I was walking down the street in the virtual world wearing my secondary female avatar, dressed in a generic little black dress, and thigh-high three-inch heeled boots. Behind me, I could hear someone coming closer. I paused, looking at a storefront. It was for a store I knew was actually in Hong Kong, but that wasn't a problem really. Even where I was in virtual Denver at the moment, I could have walked in, bought something, and it would have been delivered. But I was using the glass of the window to see down the street. The person following me looked like an Oni; a Japanese ogre.

Usually the form of your avatar doesn't mean a lot; it's just what you want to look like. I remember a guy back in the day who used Pacman for example.

Contact. The person in that Oni avatar had been reported as molesting women, always in this section

of the virtual world created by the Web. Maybe he had a thing for American women.

I turned away from the store front and I felt the monster closing on me. My hands clutched, and as it grabbed me and spun me into the wall, ripping my blouse, I went with the pull, the cuffs locking on it's wrists as it said, "Hey babe!"

It stopped, looking down, then the user tried to log out. But I had nailed it well. The avatar was driven to its knees as the feedback stopped it. It looked up, and said one word. "Bitch!" I could understand why it was upset, and what must have seemed wrong. I looked like a woman 157 cm tall; as the old saying goes, 'five foot two, eyes of blue'. Whoever it was, they had not seen the real me.

"Neil Reese, FBI." I said. I brought up the virtual keyboard, typing. Ah, Yokohama. I tapped into the Japanese net, contacting the authorities. Yokohama reported receipt; it was someone in Yamato-Minami.

"A decoy. I got caught by a fucking decoy!" The Oni whined. "You can't be that good!"

"I must be. I caught you, didn't I?" Then the Oni vanished. I caught the cuffs, pocketing them. At the moment his suit or wraps had locked down, and he was unable to move away from the computer the Japanese were tracking. In the next hour or so he'd be charged for attempted virtual rape. I sighed and tapped the keyboard one last time.

I was looking at the inside of my virtual reality helmet. It isn't the clunky thing you see in the HD these days. It fit snugly like the old fashioned toboggan caps they still wear in the northernmost part of the United States of North America with the folding fleece-lined ear protectors for bad weather. If you

can't visualize that, picture the hats they always show in those old Foreign Legion HDs with the sunflap hanging down the back. My clothes were of the new design that worked as VR wraps; sending sensations to every part of the body so when you picked up something, you could feel it, even taste something if you sat in a virtual cafe and had a snack; though those cafes only charge pennies for access. After all, what you have done is eat a pastry and drink a drink that is virtual and has no real substance.

I lifted up the visor that covered my eyes to see the newest recruits to the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit Section 5 who had already lifted their visors. "That was one of the simplest of my missions for the Agency," I told them. "There have been some that were much, much, worse. I used it to show you how it should go down if you do everything right. Now, questions?"

"So we're trolling like hookers?" a woman said. Jessica Tate, fresh out of the Academy. She was the youngest person in the room and had blown the top off the testing for this position. But her attitude...

"In that case, yes. But this Unit was created because ever since the VR revolution of 2020, crimes in cyberspace have grown beyond merely hijacking someone's identity or funds. They have become physical attacks."

"But you can't physically harm someone in VR," another agent, Lloyd Webster, said.

"Oh, that's what the schools and popular media would have you think, but it isn't really true, and hasn't been for twenty years." I looked across the faces of all ten. "You all know how the VR wraps work; you put on the jumpsuit that has them inside,

make the plumbing connections, and you are there in the virtual world. You can take any form you wish, from an antique Pac-Man to a modern HD movie star. Be anyone you want to be, go anywhere you want to go. And if you meet someone you think is attractive, you can get down and dirty with them, whether they are real or simply a girl from a stable of hookers in the Virtual Mustang Ranch.

“But think. You don’t know if that person is real, or just a program mimicking humanity. Thanks to the invention of limited AIs in 2007, you have some of those programs passing the Turing Test.”

“The what?” Paul Stanhope. I didn’t expect him to finish the course. You had to pass it to work in the Unit.

“The Turing Test was suggested in 1950 by a British mathematician and computer scientist named Alan Turing. His theory was that the way to test the capabilities of an AI is to put it in one computer, linked to another, where you have a human operator. It wasn’t tried for over a decade after Turing’s article, and was challenged immediately because all the computer was doing was using keywords and prewritten responses. But in 1991 Hugh Loebner of Cambridge University created the Loebner Prize, intending to spark more and more interest in the phenomenon. The first crude AIs called ‘chatterbots’ were created in 1994,” I told them pedantically.

“But one of them created in 2007 was called Cyberlover, a malware that pretended to be just another web surfer in a chat room. Using your responses, it would morph to match what your ideal partner was, be it a demure little woman or a hedonist. It would then lure you to a ‘personal site’ where you could be alone, and once there, download the

malware onto your computer, where it would upload personal information.

“Have you all watched the episode ‘The Phantom Woman’ from the old Japanese Series AD Police as instructed?” They nodded. “What we have in VR is mimicked there, because of the casual abuse of the users. In that episode, you have a waitress robot go berserk because the owner isn’t allowing it the necessary downtime. Then there’s the robot hooker that was so badly abused it started killing her clients, because some of them before had thought, ‘Hey, it’s a machine, so if I do this abusive thing, I won’t get arrested’ but it develops a reaction loop that if that’s all right for the *client*, it’s all right for her as well to try to elicit that response.

“VR has made this worse because you *don’t know who or what* you are with on line. To paraphrase Bruce Willis from a movie named Surrogates, the other party could be an AI but it could also be some fat old man pretending to be a nubile young woman. Or someone who gained access illegally; say a young teenager who thinks about sex, but isn’t old enough to indulge.

“That case.” I waved toward my helmet, “was just that; a repressed teenaged boy who dreamed of sex and found his way onto the Net through an unprotected back door. He would try to convince women to go off with him and failed because he hadn’t had the experience in simple conversations. He found a bootleg copy of an old Police program that would allow you to find and lock a perpetrator down until capture. But in his frustration, he used it to trap women who were on the net, and sexually abuse them. You see, the entire VR rig can give you every sensation your body is capable of, so you can torture their avatar, or rape them, and they will feel it as long as it is something they have actually experienced. The only

way to escape is to lose consciousness, which automatically shuts your system down and frees you.”

“But unless you have actually been tortured, or raped...” Jeffery Toller commented.

“You have experienced pain. Sometimes blinding pain like a really bad toothache. The system just transplants it to the area where you are being abused. As for being raped, if the person you are with is careless, you have felt some pain during sex. Add the actual remembered pain to it, along with the emotional shock of being unable to resist, and you have almost all of the trauma a real rape can cause.”

I looked from one face to another. “He had one woman trapped there for two hours, subjectively two *days*. Using his own system, we found I was the fifteenth person to be attacked. That grab to rip my clothes was supposed to lock me into the system, just as I locked him into it with my own updated version. Our more modern programs cannot be circumvented, yet. But every year, hell, every *week* someone comes up with another way around the software, and every week the industry has people discovering them, and neutralizing that avenue of attack.”

There was a buzzer, and I clapped my hands. “On to lunch, then your next class. In that one, you will attempt to match my capture. If you fail, all you have to do is lift your visor, which is better than the option I had when it really happened.”

I picked up my tablet, shut it off, then stopped. Jessica was standing there still. “What, aren’t you hungry? I am.”

“What would have happened if you hadn’t made the bust the right way?”

I motioned and she walked alongside me toward the elevator bank. “The woman I mentioned was the last of his victims and like any repetitive pattern personality, be it kleptomaniac, super jewel thief, serial rapist or serial killer, they have an MO. In the last two cases, the time line between usually becomes shorter and shorter. You go from maybe weeks or months between to sometimes days.” I shrugged. “If I had missed I would have been able to get out in a few minutes; the monitoring system we use is more comprehensive than a standard home unit.”

“That’s not always true about pattern criminals,” she demurred. “Jack the Ripper comes to mind, or the BTK strangler.”

I chuckled. “Two excellent choices. In the first one a conspiracy theory suggests that Prince Edward ‘Eddie Victor’ was the perpetrator, with his own security detachment creating copycats, since he went into a coma around the time of the last ‘verified’ victim and died not long after. It’s been too long since then for us to make a determination today as to who actually did it. In the case of the BTK strangler, he found something else to focus on for over a decade which threw the investigators for a loop. But he started sending taunting letters again, which led to his arrest. That was why I said ‘usually’.”

The elevator opened, and we dropped toward the cafeteria floor. “But that kid was caught in that repetitive cycle. The first attack two years before the last was a simple rape but the timeline was counting down rapidly, with him holding them longer and longer, finding more and more ways to torment his victims. I would have probably spent several minutes before they brought me out here, because when we go online on a hunt, you’re always monitored. The instant your body starts reacting to the violence; addi-

tional adrenaline, that kind of thing, they see it and break the link.”

“How long could you stay down?”

“Theoretically, you could never come back.” I replied. “But thanks to VR addiction, you are limited to four hours a day now.”

“VR Addiction?”

“There were reruns of an old television show named *Star Trek: The Next Generation* when I was a kid,” I replied. “They had an episode entitled ‘Hollow Pursuits’. In that show they had what were called holodecks; places where you could create every possible world and adventure. One character in that episode didn’t make friends easily so he spent too much time in them, even creating programs where he could interact with the crew of his own ship. He made changes in their personalities to match what he could successfully deal with. Not all of them nice.” I stepped off the elevator, walked far enough to clear the door.

“Now look at VR. You think you’re ugly? Too short? Overweight? No problem! You create an avatar that makes you look better, maybe perfect. Do you know how many out there use old movie stars like Salma Hayek, Thandi Newton, or Rita Coleman from today? Do you know how many *Marilyn Monroe* avatars there are? I don’t and I have been in this division off and on for fifteen years of my 30.”

“So they make themselves look better. How does that cause VR Addiction?”

“Because as the system was set up until 2025, you could go in and never come back. There was a rather nasty case in Denver back in ‘23 where they didn’t

find the body for a week after death. It was before the automatic monitoring systems were invented. The man was a diabetic and spent his time in VR pigging out on all of the foods he couldn't eat. When he went into coma, the system merely logged him as being asleep, and put his avatar in bed. That's why they designed the auto monitor system, which will bring you out if you become unconscious with no REM state, because the VR works as a dream inducer, not a sleep inducer." I grinned. "You ain't dreaming, you're sleeping, and you get logged off."

We walked into the cafeteria and I got just some coffee. "That's lunch?" She motioned toward her tray. She had picked meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas and carrots.

I looked at her trim figure. "Damn, woman, where do you put it?"

She started to answer, but my phone bleeped. I pulled it out. "I'll have to wait on the answer. Donneker just sent me a text," I paused, reading it. "Interesting."

"Why?" Jessica tried to look, but I moved it.

"I've been pulled off teaching. They've got a new case. VR murders."

"Wait, they've had first person shooters since before VR! How could anyone get killed?"

"That's the question." I picked up the coffee, switching it to a to-go cup, and walked out. This sounded interesting.

## The only clue

Evan Donneker, the recently appointed head of BAU Section 5, nodded to me when I came in. He was an older agent, working on the last of his thirty years before retiring like I was. We had never liked each other, and I expected to retire before that changed. “Special Agent Reese.” He took a tablet, sliding it across the desk. “Check this out.”

I picked it up. “A Secret Service Agent committed suicide?”

“Yes. John Logan, graduate of the Naval Academy, three years as a SEAL, three years on the Presidential Security Detail. He ate his sidearm last week.” They had put Donneker here for a reason; he was about as subtle as a heart attack.

I checked the file. Logan started having memory problems two months earlier. He was found by his wife two weeks earlier in a VR session for over eight hours; but the system claimed he had made all of the alterations himself. He was judged a VR Addict, and locked out of the VR Net permanently. Since any addictive behavior is not allowed within the Presidential Security Detail, he was removed and reassigned to Identity Theft. He tried seventeen times to go back online, but a lock out can only be removed after a consultation with a psychologist.

Then, last week, he went home while his wife was out, tried three more times, and killed himself.

“I know any death of a Fed has to be investigated by the Agency. But why did this get kicked to us?” I asked, sliding it back.

He looked at me. “Did you read his suicide note?”

I pulled it back. “They’ve taken away the real me’.” I held it up. “So?”

“Swanson over at Statistical Analysis put the words into his computer and ran it, assuming a pattern.” I snorted. Swanson was still trying to prove a JFK conspiracy. Even after the records were fully released almost a decade ago. “He found something. Twenty-five suicide notes over the past eighteen months that all used ‘The Real Me’ in them. All diagnosed as VR Addicts, all locked out before their deaths.”

I pulled the tablet back and read. There was no obvious correlation beyond that phrase. A mother of two, a seventeen-year-old boy, a trucker who only went on occasionally, a waitress. The closest thing to a pattern was that all had, over a period of about six weeks, begun acting oddly. They all started to spend more time online. The trucker went from once a week to once a day. Then the psychs determined it was VR addiction, locked them out, and they killed themselves leaving only ‘The real me’ as anything close to a clue.

“Did they check the listings of the sites they went to?” Your monitoring system tracks every movement on the net, whether you just walk down to a local shop to order something delivered, or fly off to Paris via the Net to sip coffee on the boulevard. We need a court order to check your records, some evidence of a crime having been committed, so everyone uses the system without knowing we can track you.

He looked at me for a long moment. “In Logan’s case Capitol Police did before handing off to us. There was no activity that hadn’t been done as much as ten years ago. Some new sites; they’ve been checked, but nothing we can see that might be a clue. A few new interests; he started taking jaunts to Hawaii right be-

fore the changes were noticed.” He shrugged. “His wife had asked him to pick a vacation spot. They had both agreed on Maui if they could find a nice view. He even took ‘snapshots’ to show her.” When you are in VR, you can tap your HUD display and take a snapshot. What is seen on your computer screen at home matches what your Avatar was looking at.

“Nothing? How about the others?”

“Ronson has run them all. That’s why we didn’t get the case officially until today. He found one other thing they had in common.” He took the tablet back, tapped in a password, and handed it back to me. It was a kitten. A small Siamese kitten merely watching a person walk by. I ran the picture and it leaped from person to person. The cat walking down the street of an average-looking town. Sitting under a tree in Maui. Sitting on the passenger seat of a tractor-trailer truck. Sitting on a bed. I checked the time stamps, then brought up the actual case files.

Every one of them had seen this same exact cat before their problems began. Some a few days before their cycle, one less than an hour before. “If it is someone causing it, he’s slick. Not many people use actual animal avatars; most are usually man-sized.” I set the tablet down, leaning back. “You need a high end processor to make an avatar that small and keep it whole. Good programming too. This guy is a class act.”

“When we catch this guy, and the public finds out what he’s done, they may actually build that VR Prison they’ve been kicking around,” Donnecker commented.

I laughed. The idea of a virtual prison made the taxpayers happy; the prison system world wide was packed, especially in the U.S. where death row in-

mates routinely spent decades on appeals before the sentence was executed, and every trial had Amicus Curae, 'Friends of the court' who would argue against the death penalty at all, no matter how heinous the crimes committed. The idea of 'life without parole' has been used for the last half-century. When it started, the State of California was spending 80,000 dollars a year to keep even one prisoner locked up. The argument was against spending over two hundred *million* for a death sentence carried out instead.

But as much money as the option saved back then, the shoe was now on the other foot. Instead of spending exorbitant amounts on what was essentially a prison within a prison for the death row inmates, you now had almost a hundred times as many sentenced who would die in prison that you had to take care of, a lot of whom were sentenced for nonviolent crimes like possession for sale of drugs.

Because that cost was an *average* for an entire prison system, and had almost doubled in the intervening years, prisoners with life-threatening injuries needing medical care was a big complaint. Transplants, which were still hideously expensive, had to be supplied under law, and were sometimes given to inmates whereas most people outside couldn't afford them. Cancer treatments, even more expensive because they sometimes covered *decades*, were also given without consideration of cost. No attempt by prison officials stemmed this torrent of money, and the taxpayers were saying enough is enough.

Worse yet, over 200 prisoners who had been later found innocent were freed by 2020; lawyers had leaped into the fray with wrongful imprisonment suits. One smart California lawyer in 2019 had filed a civil suit for a man who had never even jaywalked before being charged with drug trafficking and had lost everything all because of that one conviction, over-

turned because personal malice from an informant had caused the original charge. In that case, the plaintiff's lawyer had demanded 50,000 dollars a day for the fifteen years the man had spent in prison and being ostracized since. And as smart as he was, the lawyer stated to a local newspaper that he was working pro bono and all funds would go to his client. He had also asked for the shortest possible time between filing and trial; something most lawyers want to stretch out.

The news went worldwide and viral within days. The public response was overwhelming, especially when state officials were quoted saying, 'We owe him for his job, not his life'.

*How dare they steal away his entire adult life and say, 'Tough titty'?*

The price started at 228.9 million in damages because the man had lost his wife, custody of his kids who were adopted by his ex-wife's new husband, his house and job. The charge against the government wasn't wrongful imprisonment, it was *genocide* because he was the sole surviving child of his family line. If a man who is a sole surviving child cannot father a child, his line is doomed to die out; without his wife, he had no conjugal rights. Every day that the court vacillated would cost even more because the time spent arguing would also become part of the settlement. And finding a jury would have been a nightmare. If you asked them if they had even heard about the case, you would have to look in countries where computers and newspapers don't even *exist to find suitable jurors!*

It was like the old joke. Knock, knock; who's there, OJ Simpson; OJ Simpson who? You have been selected for jury duty on the OJ Simpson case.

Considering they had to contact the State Attorney General, the Appellate court, the Federal Appeals court in California, and then the US Supreme Court to get emergency rulings on whether to even allow the case, the decision to pay without going to court was the fastest decision in legal history. Less Than A Week. And to save money, they used the same system they had with lottery winners. The plaintiff got an annuity over the next 20 years, except the interest went to him as well.

The Federal law to make sure that didn't happen again took an even shorter time to pass. It was two *days* from proposal to passing and went into effect less than a week later; every state immediately referred any future case to that federal law. The Prisoner Remuneration Act of 2019 stated that if it happened again, a prisoner could only sue for damages equal to what he would have made before taxes in whatever job he had held, plus replacement of home and vehicle if necessary.

But by 2023 when VR became commonplace, people asked, 'Why not create a virtual prison, and send any future prisoner there?' Using the same methods used by psychologists for what is called Recovered Memory Therapy, you could create the illusion of the entire sentence in their mind, and have them back on the street in less than a real day.

But it was stopped because of two episodes of television shows made in 1996, where people were sentenced to virtual prisons, and lived through their 'sentences' in that virtual world.

The ACLU argument went; there had been a lot of news reports for over a century showing the conditions in the *real* prisons. Would making them go through the same treatment in only a few hours really be better? And what if another lawyer used the

PRA? You can't argue that the victim was tormented for only five or six hours when he had implanted memories spanning thirty to fifty *years*. It was a legal nightmare.

In 2045, the debate was still going on.

"It would be easier to simply shoot him and have done with it." I replied. "And even with the media hoopla afterward, less expensive."

"There is that. So start work on this immediately. You are authorized by both me and Psych to stay under longer than four hours at a time if necessary. But psych will still have the final word if they think you're going to become addicted. That is all."

## **Starting the investigation**

I went and had an actual lunch, then headed to Lab Seven, which was available. Like all ten labs, there was a full five-person monitoring team. Jessica and the other newbies were there as well. "The Head suggested that since you've been their training officer, they should be here to observe." Michael Wilson told me. "You want to do the honors?"

"Honors, my ass," I whispered to him, then raised my voice. "All right, you're jumping a step here, but it shouldn't be a problem. First, there is to be as little talking as possible. When I'm in, I can only hear Mike there clearly. But if he doesn't have his microphone switched off, I can still hear the others of his team, and that means a lot of unnecessary background noise." I motioned to Wilson as he took his seat at the primary monitor. He oversaw the other four who monitored the Net around me, my vitals, and recorded what I saw and felt when inside. "No doubt

they've already explained what they do, so first a brief history of VR.

“Virtual Reality started way back in the 1860s with panoramic photos or paintings that were viewed in the round; you stood in the center, and by turning, could see everything you would be able to see if you were actually in that location. Those segued into simulators that could show you the basic sights and sounds of driving one of the cars of that era, though it was still primarily visual. Then in the 1960s, a proposed ‘full spectrum’ experience was used in what was called Sensorama which included sight, sound, smell, and in some cases, touch.

“The US Air Force began using flight simulators in 1966. Instead of putting a man in an expensive airplane, they could put the pilot in an enclosed cockpit that could simulate everything but the actual pressure of gravity. Simulators of that sort are still used today except for the addition of the actual pressure now.”

“I don't understand.” Dwayne Cox, one of the newbies, commented.

I smiled. “Let's pick something I am willing to bet every one of you did as kids. How many of you when you first went into the Net decided to stop at a bar and have a drink? Even if you were underage?” All of them hesitantly raised their hands. “Now, I want you to remember that experience. How many of you actually tried alcohol later?” All but one rose. Cox was the only hand not up. “Let me guess, Mr. Cox. You didn't like the taste of the booze in VR and decided not to try again.”

“I'm a Baptist. We don't drink,” he shrugged. “And I didn't like the taste.”

“Now the rest of you know the answer to this. Did the actual drink taste anything like what it did in VR?” They all shook their heads. “When you had that first experience, you had no memory that matched it. So you tried it in real life and were surprised. Every sensation VR applies is based on what you really have experienced. That is why most people suggest that you actually wait to first try the sensation before you go on the Net and do it.

“Let’s take sex for example. If your only experience with sex is simple masturbation, every sex act you attempt online will feel the same. So whatever you try, it will feel like that.”

“What about...” Jessica blushed.

“We’re all adults here, and even Dwayne has probably heard the words before,” I said gently.

“Giving a blowjob?” she finished, blushing even deeper.

There was some chuckling, but I didn’t join in. “If you have never given or received one, you have no basis for comparison. I knew a girl in high school that actually gave her first because, as she told her friends where I could hear, ‘It was like eating a Polish sausage except you’re not supposed to bite down’.”

I waited until the laughter had died down before continuing. “In the early 80s they started introducing the first VR systems, what they called ‘goggles and gloves’. You could see as if you were really there, hear, and touch and pick up objects, though it was still not completely real yet. With the addition of what’s called ‘force feedback’ you could feel the weight of an object or the pressure of the wind. The primary limiting factors at that point were processor power and direct sensations. The military models of

these systems used then could put you on the ground in a combat zone, have you run through a real time engagement. But if you were shot, it was just a computer icon telling you that you were injured.

“Of course the first place outside of the military for such applications was first person shooters but games based on the military model would have been hideously expensive. The first one that could have been marketed would have cost over four thousand dollars because it would have included the VR wraps, helmet, and an account link to the net. But it was still at the ‘You’ve been hit!’ icon level.

“In the first decade of the new Millennium they began working with the phenomenon known as lucid dreams; a dream where you know it is a dream, and can alter it accordingly. In the book *Out on a Limb*, the Actress Shirley MacLaine mentions a dream where she is being chased by a gorilla. She reaches a cliff, is trapped, and screams at the animal, ‘Why are you here?’ The gorilla replies, ‘Don’t ask me, it’s *your* dream.’” The students laughed. “But this was the final key needed to create VR. In a lucid dream, you can feel and react to your new environment.

“They carried it further with Doctor Robespierre’s work with autistic and coma patients in the second decade of the new millennium. That provided us with the last step to true VR. He used the same system the military used but instead had a virtual world that was calming. A simple open field of grass. While a failure, the system mapped the parts of the human mind that contain memories, especially those that are linked to the senses. He also accidentally discovered where dreams come from. With this, the first complete VR system was developed, and marketed in 2020.”

I motioned to the lab we were in. “This is basically the same full spectrum system used by the military today. Every thing I do, see, and feel, is linked to it. So if I were to be attacked, they would note all of the instinctive ‘fight or flight’ reactions. If they see that and see that I am being attacked on the monitor...” I motioned to the third one. “Mike pulls the plug and I’m out of there.” I looked to him. “All of the cat incidents on file?”

He nodded. “Yep. Front to back, or back to front?”

I considered. “We’ll go front to back. See what they saw first. Then I’ll take an active role.”

“Roger.”

The couch was one of the high-end ones used by the rich and famous. Oddly enough, it was patterned on the ones used in plasma centers for the people donating, with an indented padded form shaped like a lazy ‘S’ on its side. There was a keyboard table attached to it so that the user could still key in if he doesn’t want to use the HUD inside. I always had it rigged that way because sometimes I wanted to switch scenes more rapidly. I laid down on it, swung the keyboard into position, and rested my hands beside the keyboard.

“Monitoring ready?” I asked as I pulled down the earphones and visor.

“Ready when you are.” You can still see the outside world through the visor before you dive into the Net, so I looked down, and hit the enter key.

Everyone has their own view of the ‘delivery room’ as one wag called it, with a door leading to the Net. It can be the blank empty white space they used in the Matrix movies, a room in your house, even a space



station in orbit. Mine was just a blank gray space about the size of a walk-in closet with two still forms standing there. One was me from a photo taken a few years ago, digitally enhanced and converted to 3D. The other was just a generic woman. Neither was dressed, they were just sexless mannequins. I considered, then touched the 'me' one. A moment later, it was me dressed in casual clothes.

I walked to the doorway and stepped through. It was from the monitored account of the first possible victim, the seventeen-year-old boy. I simply watched through his eyes as his body moved. He had chosen Disneyland Paris in Marne le Vallee', east of Paris. I was only an observer so I watched him try to pick up girls. Thanks to the auto-translate, he could have spoken to any of those he wished, and while his pick-up lines were juvenile, he was getting a good response. When the virtual representation is fully active, something like half to three-quarters were actual visitors. At other times, it was just as crowded, but it was the same percentage of AI generated people. I knew he was underage but the wine he decided to sample tasted fine to me; I wondered as I always did how it tasted to someone who had never tried it for real. I was in my early thirties when VR became common, so I had drunk wine before. Some told me it tasted like vinegar without that.

It was after he had put the glass down in disgust that I saw the cat. "Pause." I froze the scene. "Break." One moment I was where he had been, the next I was standing to the side. I walked over to the frozen animal, then around it. I didn't know yet whether it was an avatar or just something the programmer for Disneyland Paris had added. I tapped a key and the scene began moving again. The figure where he was standing looked down, then put out his hand as if to coax it closer. The kitten merely began washing itself, ignoring him.

“Mike, did any of the others try to get the cat to come closer?”

“All but three. One was allergic, one was...kinda busy, the other was a dog person. Didn't like cats.”

“How old was the one who was allergic?”

“22.”

“All right, maybe they didn't know that VR and dreams block histamine reactions. The dog person though... Was there a dog in their file anywhere within, say, three weeks of when they saw the cat?”

“Accessing... No.”

“All right. Sequence Two.”

The scene changed around me but I ignored that. When you are on the Net, you can go anywhere on Earth or as far out as the International Space Station. All you had to do was find a phone while in VR, type in your destination, and you were there when you hung up. Any further out and light speed delays made it drag. That's why the virtual hotels on the moon and Mars never went over.

So there's this swirl of light and you're there. There I was in a country-western bar. There was a Coors Longneck sitting in front of me. I watched a woman's hand pick it up and she chugged it. I sometimes like beer, but prefer dark beers and ales. I had to agree that most American beers are, like the old joke about sex in a canoe says, fucking close to water. A man sidled up beside her and she listened to his spiel. While he was maybe ten years older than the kid I had just been with, the comments weren't much above the kid's level. But she seemed to think otherwise. A few

moments later, they were arm-in-arm, headed for the door.

Once outside, she became the aggressor, pulling him over to a car on the edge of the parking lot, shoving him in the back, and tearing at his pants. Then she began to give him a blow job.

It was like I was just sucking on it instead of eating. Imagine a woman using a Polska Kielbasa to pretend she's doing the deed; that's what I went through and it was about as much fun. Then I felt my throat spasm as she finished him off. Then she swarmed up him, taking it in her hand to guide it in while the cat was there, crouched on the trunk of the car she was in. "Pause. Break." Again I was standing outside of the car.

"Kinda busy?" I asked. There was general laughter in the lab. "Next time let me know first, Mike."

"Only two more have sex scenes in them. I'll red tag them when you get to them so you can avoid the unpleasantness." I could hear the grin in his voice. "Some of us wanted to comment of your style."

"Her style, you dork!" I snapped. I walked around to the back of the car. The kitten was standing there, looking into the car as if wondering what those people were doing. Why weren't they feeding it or supplying a lap for it to sit on? Let's face it, dogs have masters, cats have a support system to keep them fed and happy. I walked around the back of the car. I started the scene again and the action began. The cat merely walked the rest of the way across the trunk, dropped to the ground, and sauntered through me. I turned to watch it just vanish.

"Pause." The scene stopped. "How old was this woman?"

“It was a man. He was a thirty-five year old closet crossdresser who made his avatar look like a woman he thought was attractive. Considering the style, he probably had done a few BJ’s in his time.”

“The cat should just vanished once out of sight. Like an old shooter,” I mentioned. Back when they made the original first person shooters, the bodies of your victims would lay there for a short while, then vanish. A modern one left them there as things to stumble over, or use to hide behind. But when you’re in VR, only the things clearly visible are actually there. If you went to a bar, the building and street were there; when you walked in everything outside vanished into the electronic limbo until you came out. When you went back outside, the interior would also vanish. Saves a lot of processing power.

So the cat should have merely vanished as soon as it was out of her line of sight. Not several seconds later.

“Checking... You’re right. Hang time of twelve seconds. Looks like Ronson was right.”

“Ronson?” one of the Newbies, James Bush, asked.

“Maxwell Ronson, chief programmer for the unit, and if you speak out of turn again, I’ll have you removed.” I waited for him to say sorry. Why is it you tell someone not to talk and they have to add that extra word? “Next.”

It wasn’t until the fourth event that I noticed a new anomaly. In this case, it was the mother of two who had been checking out a local park in the town her family had just moved to before taking her kids there. This time, instead of being ignored when she tried to

get it to come closer, it had walked over and let her pet it.

“Pause. How many actually got to pet the cat?”

“Checking... Four.”

“All right, correlate; how many started showing symptoms almost immediately?”

A long pause. “They went down first. Longest time between was the guy you were occupying in the car.”

I considered. “All right, we were right. Somehow the cat is part of it. Maybe a Trojan horse to get it into their system. Line the other three up as next. Then take me there.”

The truck driver. He had seen the cat in his truck. It had climbed into his lap so he could pet it properly as he mentally drove a route he hadn't taken before. Next was a woman intent on having sex with the avatar of someone who liked the young Elvis Presley, but spent time before going on to that by petting the cat. Finally was a man who decided to visit London before making a business trip there, who had the cat walk up to him to be petted.

I watched his avatar sitting on the bench in Hyde Park, bending forward to pet the kitten after I had stepped out of him. “Pause.” I stood there, watching, thinking furiously. What could you slip in that would throw a system off? The smallest computer virus was only about ten characters long way back when. Modern ones, like any virus, became more and more complex.

Something nudged my calf. I looked down and the cat was standing on my foot, looking up at me. I looked around frantically. Everything else was still

frozen in the pause. The man on the bench was still leaned forward, hand outstretched in the air, but the cat had walked over to me. Nothing should be moving but me! It meowed, then stretched up, claws digging into my leg.

“Get me out of here.”

I felt my finger move and suddenly I was looking at the inside of the visor. I snatched off the helmet, glaring at Mike.

“Didn’t you hear me tell you to pull me out?”

“No.” He looked at the screen in front of him. “You didn’t say anything. You were just watching the guy in Virtual London, looked around, then you popped your own hood.”

I looked from face to face. Everyone was confused. I set the helmet down, walked across the room, and stood behind the main monitor. I could see it and the direct monitor which showed what I was seeing in virtual, but his main monitor could read it and the others more readily. “Go back to when I paused it the second time.”

“You paused it again?” Sophie Monahan from the direct monitor asked. “You paused when you stepped out of his avatar and that was the last pause recorded.”

I hissed between my teeth. “Run the last segment, check for data worms and virus.”

They went smoothly to work, starting when I had with this victim. Walking through the park, then resting on the bench. The cat came toward him. “Pause. Break,” I said within the system, then the point of view jumped to the side about eight to ten

feet and I walked around him before the scene started moving again, the cat sitting within arm's reach, and him petting it. I suddenly looked down at my shoe, then around. Then it went the blank gray of a shutdown.

Nothing else. Damn it, I remembered pausing it again! But the system said it hadn't happened.

Mike looked up, slightly worried. "No data worms, no known virus codes."

I stood back up, looking at the clock. "We're close to the limit Donnecker set for this, so I'm calling it. Back at noon tomorrow."

## **A valid argument**

"What happened in there?" Jessica asked.

"You saw what happened."

"No." She gently caught my arm, and forced me to turn to face her. "You were panicked and pissed off when you came out. That isn't something you see very often in experienced agents. You saw something and for some reason the system didn't."

"That isn't possible."

"Why not?"

I was walking toward the cafeteria. I walked in, got a cup of coffee, and she joined me, still watching my face.

"VR is not reality but in a lot of ways it follows the same rules. The system you're in is a computer, not a real world, and computers only work one way. It can

only work with what the user can see, hear, feel, and touch and it provides that upon request. But it can't create something you never experienced.

“The human mind can, however. You can imagine whatever you wish, and in your mind there is almost always a clear picture of it. When you dream you can even touch it.” I sipped. “So what happened, in my imagination, was I paused the program to think and the cat didn't pause. It came over, expecting me to pet it.”

“How is that possible?”

I gave her a lazy smile. “Question, how often does your computer simply decide to rewrite its software?”

“It doesn't. Only an outside agency; a corruption of a data block or a virus causes that,” she replied, right out of the textbook. I nodded.

“So if I saw the cat come over to me and the computer didn't, there is only one logical answer.” I tapped my head. “I imagined it.”

“Don't take this wrong, Agent Reese...”

“Neil.”

She nodded. “Don't take this wrong, Neil, but you don't seem the type to go into flights of fantasy. Even when we watched you trolling that ogre, you came across as a very well-grounded individual.”

“Another way to say I am boring,” I joked.

She gave me a considering look. “If you were a few years younger...”

“A few *decades* younger,” I chided. “I was an agent back when, as the old saying goes, you weren’t even a gleam in your daddy’s eye.”

She gave me that same look. “Sean Connery was more attractive at fifty than he was at thirty.”

“I’m no Sean Connery.”

“Few people are,” she agreed. “But if you were only ten years younger, I could see flirting with you.”

“I am touched.” I reached out, and tapped her on the forehead. “So are you but mine is emotional and yours suggests brain damage.”

She grinned. “See, you aren’t completely hopeless. So what’s the plan for this case?”

“You got to observe, but for you it’s back to studying. Someone has to replace me some day. As for me, I write up my notes, talk to the Head, do some work on other cases, then off home.”

“So you’re not teaching us from here on?”

“Not for a while. Not until this case is cleared.”

“Oh.” Did she sound a bit depressed? She smiled at me. “Well, I have a class in five. See you around?”

“I’ll be finishing out my thirty in four months. So until then, yeah.”

She left. I finished my coffee, then went to my desk. Since I work online in VR an hour or more a day, I spend most of my time doing reports. This one was simple. I didn’t bother to note that I had thought the kitten came up to me; I didn’t want a psych eval and

early retirement. They get sticky about your pension if you don't put in a full 30.

Donnecker was irritated that I wasn't farther along. But while he was in charge of the unit, he had been tagged as a VR Addict the first time he served in it, so all he was allowed was to monitor and organize, nothing else. As the old saying goes, sue me.

Back to my desk and I finished up my reports before clocking out. My apartment was only a mile away so I walked it as I always did. D.C. is a joke the South got away with back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If they hadn't built the city there, it would still be marshlands. My palm print opened the exterior door, the elevator shot me up to the tenth floor, and I was home.

I flipped on the HD TV, going through my collection. I tend to hate theaters so I don't go to movies that often. But the local library had copies of everything ever converted to DVD and I had my own collection of the ones I liked. I slipped one from its cover, and put it in. After work I tend to go with fantasy, so I chose one from my anime collection. Maburaho. I started it and went to the kitchen. I didn't feel hungry but a drink sounded good. I poured a shot of single malt scotch and sat on the couch.

I just couldn't get into the show. Oh, it is funny; some kid who is the most powerful magician in his world, but when you use up all of your magic, you turn to ash, and he starts the show with only eight magical spells. I shut it off and walked into my den, which was also my VR room. I had the same kind of couch they had at the Agency, rigged the same way. I wanted to go online. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why. Working online as I did, it's like the old method they use in candy factories or candy shops. You want some? Go ahead! Eat as much as you want! But if you stuff yourself, as most do, you eventually

get sick of it and you stop. It actually works pretty well or they would have stopped it centuries ago.

My cell phone rang, and I answered. “Reese, the White House is pushing hard on the new case. Meet me in VR,” Donnecker ordered. I sighed, lay on the couch, set my VR helmet, and tapped my keyboard.

## **Dive into the nightmare**

I was in the delivery room, but my male avatar was gone. I mentally reached up and the HUD appeared. Like an old-fashioned first person shooter, it is in the right hand corner and lists operations you can carry out. Mine didn’t have the male avatar listed. I went to the secondary menu and punched in Diagnostics. After a few seconds, it came up that nothing was wrong. But something was obviously wrong. Avatars don’t just disappear! I ran the anti-virus to see if someone had hacked in and ‘borrowed’ it, which can happen if the person doing the software is good enough, but there had been no attempts.

I almost got out of VR but a telephone in the room rang. It was Donnecker again. Where the hell was I? Get here right now! I sighed, touching the female avatar. One instant sexless, the next dressed in something out of the old Ghost in the Shell TV show; a body suit, leggings, and a bomber jacket. With purple hair, I could have used Major Kusanagi’s form from the show.

I picked up the phone.

I was in another delivery room. This one looked like a stark torture room. I reached up, tapped the HUD, ordering a logout.

FOR YOUR SAFETY LOGOUT HAS BEEN  
CANCELLED

LOG OFF, RESET

PLEASE WAIT A SHORT TIME AND TRY AGAIN

What the hell? The logout is supposed to be automatic. I had never heard of any situation that could lock you in except...

A police lockout. Like the one the kid had gotten hold of all those years ago. Well, two could play at that game. I tapped the HUD to bring up the secondary programs.

FOR YOUR SAFETY HUD ACCESS HAS BEEN  
CANCELLED

PLEASE WAIT A SHORT TIME AND TRY AGAIN

That confused me. The more recent version of the program left an emergency escape program in the secondary programs! I should have been able to logout using it!

There was a hum and I spun. Something caught me, slamming me into the wall, wrists and ankles locked to the wall as cuffs would have. A form that was just a stark black body stood there. From the stance, the mannerisms, I knew it was male. It walked over to a cabinet and opened it. It rummaged around, then the hands lifted to the face, the body fig-leaving the action. Then it turned.

I would have laughed if the situation was even remotely less tense. The mask it had donned was based on Punch from the ancient Punch and Judy puppet shows and the even older *commedia del arte* character Punchinello, with a long hooked nose above a

manic grin. But my blood chilled, because the nose was a large dildo. It walked over to stand before me.

A song began to play. I had heard it before, but didn't know where.

Suddenly the hands snapped forward, pinning my head, thumbs pressing painfully into the hinges of my jaw. I felt my mouth being forced open, then suddenly it jammed the penis shape into my mouth.

I froze for an instant. I knew what a penis felt like in my hand; the skin over the shaft that will slide on the hardened member, and I could feel that skin sliding against my lips. A taste hit my tongue, acrid, tasting of ammonia, and the form slid it in until it hit the back of my palate, brushing the entrance to my throat. I had never done this before, never had a penis in my mouth. But somehow I knew this was what it would have felt like. And worse yet, a pair of familiar eyes was looking into mine as that face came closer.

I wanted to strike out. To hit him with fists or feet, to bite down on that intrusion. But my limbs were pinned, my jaw still jammed open. I choked on that thrust and those eyes were suddenly amused. Then the head pulled away, the penis sliding across my tongue until only the head remained in my mouth. Then it slammed forward again. I wasn't giving a blowjob, I was being mouth fucked.

I suddenly remembered the other option. Most people feel VR so much they forget that it is even there. In the real world, I moved my hands upward toward my helmet. The eyes in front of me widened, Then his hands clamped down and sperm shot into my mouth and throat. I coughed, choking on the spray, swallowing just to keep from being drowned, and then...

I was on the couch, helmet in my hands. I rolled off the couch, landing on my hands and knees, then was running desperately for the bathroom. I barely made it, hands slamming up the toilet seat as I vomited into the bowl. I heaved until all that came up was bile. I had tasted it, the sperm in my mouth. It was impossible, but it lingered there until washed away by the taste of vomit.

Wiping my mouth, I walked over to the phone, and dialed. “Special Agent Reese. I want a lock-down of my home VR system; have one of the analysis teams go over what just happened from there. Send another team here to collect data directly. I am declaring an emergency.”

## **Conundrum**

I was back on the phone half an hour later. A special team had arrived within minutes and their report had pissed me off so much that I called the lab.

“What do you mean no trace of a hack?” I roared.

Gillespie who was in charge of Lab Nine was on the phone; her voice, as always was cool and clipped. “How many different ways do I have to say it, Special Agent Reese? Zip, nada, zilch. Shall I go on? I’m scanning your home system from here and there has been no use since two nights ago. No record of you using it, no sign of any hacking or virus. The system is clean.”

I wanted to scream at her. I could still taste a trace of sperm in my mouth, even after I had used half a bottle of mouthwash. This was as impossible after what I had gone through! “Fine, lock my home sys-

tem down so I can't log on except by keyboard and computer until further notice."

She gave a much put-upon sigh. "All right. Done. Anything else?"

"Since you couldn't help me with the thing I called about, no." I hung up and turned back to the four men of the team. They were looking at me as if I were Linda Blair from the original Exorcist and expected me to start spitting up green goop. "Anything else?"

"Uh, no, sir," the leader replied.

"Then make sure the system is locked down and get out."

One of them pulled the jack on his helmet, plugged it in, and entered a few commands. "Locked down as you instructed, sir." He unplugged and they trooped out.

I went back to the living room. I had some stew made the way my mother taught me; save all of the leftovers from the week, put them all together in a pot with extra veggies and broth and eat it so nothing is wasted. I dished out a bowlful and put it in the microwave. Then I buttered bread to go with it. I put it all on a tray with a bottle of water, then went back to the TV. I decided I wasn't in the mood for anime, so I went through my movie collection. I pulled out Tron Legacy and started it. At one point I was struck by a thought. One of the characters is named Quorra and she was what is called an ISO.

The authors created the idea of ISOs, Isomorphic Algorithms, meaning a group of randomly created beings in the NET of that movie that mimicked human form. It sounds odd, even impossible, but the entire theory of evolution suggests that we evolved by

chance from a lower life form If the NET became pervasive enough, would it be possible that something would evolve there?

The same idea was the premise of two movies, *The Ghost in the Shell* and *Summer Wars*, though in those it was a program that evolved into lifeforms. But as I had told Jessica, computer programs only evolve if they are affected by a virus, or, I now thought, if some part of it was erased or accidentally overwritten and you tried to run it anyway. You see it when you hit a function and the system crashes the computer.

Could one of the VR programs have been affected by this?

I spent several hours going through them with the programs we use to check for program revisions. They detected the upgrades (the last one from seven months before) but nothing else. I finally grew tired and went to bed.

I didn't sleep well. Over and over I found myself pinned to the wall again, that penis shoving not only into my mouth, but my throat. Then it changed. I was no longer pinned, I was kneeling, looking up into the eyes that were the only thing that wasn't black on that suit. No, not the only part, the penis was also real now, rampant. I was holding it, licking it, and part of my mind was enjoying the taste and sensation as if a woman were inside me, glorying in her release from a male prison.

Worse yet, by the time I woke up, I found my dream self eagerly sucking him over and over. Begging him to fuck my mouth, my hands holding his ass, pulling him deeper until he came in streams down my throat which I swallowed eagerly before starting again.

And that same song was playing over an over.

## **Aberration**

I got up the next morning, and felt like I hadn't even bothered to go to bed. I showered, dressed, poured a cup of coffee in my travel mug, and headed to work. As I stepped off the elevator in the lobby, some movement caught my eye. The four elevators were two to a side, staggered so you wouldn't be looking into another elevator if they both opened. Instead, they had put in large mirrors between them.

I knew I was alone in the elevator, but just for a moment there were two people in the reflection. I thought someone else had been on the elevator with me and I hadn't noticed. I looked back but I was alone. I shook my head, letting the image go. Sometimes, when you're working in VR and haven't finished something, you'll flash back into it for a moment while you're thinking about something else, usually in reflective surfaces like mirrors. Maybe I was flashing to being orally raped, trying to work out what was going on. It had felt too real to simply have been my imagination.

Too much didn't make sense. An avatar that didn't freeze when the scene did; being sexually assaulted via my own machine at home. Neither one made sense. When you freeze the scene, you're the only thing that will still move. It's your virtual world, and you are king or god, or whatever you want to be, in it.

No, I take that back. If you rent a VR movie and use the 'substitute me for character X' option, you can pause it, but your character is part of the story, so they freeze too. A lot of young people who want to try new things, like kissing someone, will rent them so

they can try that first kiss with some big name actor. But even those have blocks to stop certain things.

However the author still holds full sway. You can't move your favorite character out of the line of fire if they are supposed to die in that scene for example. If you want to change a movie, you have to buy what they call the VR Special version, where you can change the storyline and do that, but only sometimes. So if you bought the VR Special copy of the old TV series Game of Thrones, you cannot have Daenerys ride her Dragon unless you have reached the point in the storyline when she has learned enough to do so.

Wait. I opened my phone connected to my home computer and brought up my video library index. But it wasn't there. I accessed my digital music library. Like a computer searching the net, you can put in part of the lyrics. I remembered a line and put it in. Red Light Special by a band named TLC, where the woman is pretty much telling a man that she wants him for sex. But why that song? My phone rang and I answered.

"Neil?" I looked up.

"Hello, Agent Tate."

"Jessica."

"Yes, Jessica. What did you need?"

"Where are you?"

I looked at the phone in surprise. "On my way to work. Like always."

"Didn't you see..." There was noise behind her. "I am worried about you."

I chuckled. The biggest problem our senior agents had in training was having the new agents fixate on us. “See what?”

“Odd effects,” she finally replied. “Something in your dreams. Or the elevator.”

I almost froze in the middle of the intersection. Dreams were one of the first thing affected by VR. A warning sign of addiction. “No.”

“Neil.” She sighed, then the call ended.

When I arrived, Donnecker called me into his office. We had another one, this was an Admiral in command of the Carrier Battle Group surrounding the USS *Ronald Reagan*. He had been moody the last few days; then at dawn he had walked out onto the flight deck and took a running leap over the bow.

VR made meetings and, unfortunately, micromanaging, far too easy. But damn it, military comm channels are the best protected on the planet! Even more secure than the State Department! If he had been gotten to during the last week to ten days (the ship had left port about that long before his jump), no one on the planet was safe.

I started my day by going through all of the victims. Demographically they were a microcosm of American society. Five were black, three Hispanic, one Asian, the rest white. Different states, different levels of education. Still nothing popped out at me.

Wait a minute. I accessed Interpol. The only place this was happening so far was in the United States and Canada. Of course the border had been a formality ever since the creation of NORAD in 1957; we shared too much to really be two nations. Like they

say about England and the US, however, we're two nations separated by a common language.

Twenty-five random *American and Canadian* people all just going nuts and killing themselves with only one desperate plea they shared.

The real me.

I'll admit, I started checking oddball links. That's where I found what seemed like it might be a clue.

All of them had taken creative writing in school and a lot of them had continued writing afterward. The teenager had written scripts for some well-known VR games. Hell, he was owner of a company worth a couple of million with his parents running it for him! The VR trip to Disney France was because he was old enough to drink there. The mother had been a vocal advocate of the Pro-gun lobby, the transvestite just as vocal (using a blog that didn't tell you anything about him) for gay and transgender rights. The Admiral had written two historical articles for Naval Proceedings, the in-house magazine of the U.S. Navy.

I considered that information. If whoever had gotten them was now after me, I fit the profile. I had taken creative writing, both in high school and college. I had written legal arguments in college, blogged and debated.

So maybe things were not so random.

At noon I was back in Lab Seven with Mike in charge. The only difference this time was that the students weren't there. With trepidation, I put on my helmet. "Monitoring ready?"

"All set."

“We’re going to start with the admiral.”

“Set up and ready.”

I took a deep breath. “Going in now.”

The launch pad looked normal. Two avatars stood there, hands politely in front of their crotches, heads down as if they were nothing more than demure servants. I walked over and for a moment my hand paused. Would the male avatar disappear? Would I suddenly find myself back in the female one, trapped into another cycle of forced sex? I touched it.

All right, male body. I was in my standard suit, so I didn’t worry. “Is there a cat in any of his recent VR cycles?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“Take me there.”

“On it. Set up.”

I walked to the door and opened it.

I was in an office, a senior admiral’s office by the look of it. Admiral Carter, the subject, was discussing the redeployment plans of the *Reagan* battle group. I ignored what they were talking about at the moment. If I had to, I could go back to the monitoring copy to find out what they were talking about specifically. They stood, shook hands, and Carter left the office.

Thanks to security, you cannot transit directly into an office in the Pentagon, or into one at Langley or the FBI. You had to go through the motions at least of going through the building. Don’t ask me why. It would save maybe a thousand man-hours a

week if you were allowed direct access. But the security end didn't want some hacker just stepping in.

So I ended up following him from there toward the entrance. As he approached it, there was that damn cat again right by the door. Like when it had seen me in the London site, it walked over, bold as brass, and meowed a demand for him to pet it. As he bent over to do so, I thought I saw a glow. But it wasn't from the cat, it came from one of the walls nearby. Just for an instant, I thought I saw it bulging outward, as if it were a rubber sheet and someone was pushing against it. Then he stood, walked on, and we were back on the bridge of the *Reagan*.

“Sequence complete.”

“That's how he got tagged. He was at the virtual entrance, a public area.” I paced on the bridge, the only thing moving. “Two weeks ago. How many hours did he spend in VR in the next day?”

“One. He went to the virtual birthday party of his oldest daughter.”

“That week?”

“20. Almost five times his usual. And four hours a day from that point until his suicide.”

“Now that is odd. Do we have sites he went to?”

“Shopping for presents for his family. He doesn't get home physically more than three or four times a year. Letters to his three kids and wife. Then, whoa, eleven of those to one site alone.” He checked more. “And all of the ones in his last week to the same site.”

I felt a surge of adrenaline.

“You’re stressing.”

“No. As Sherlock Holmes would have said, the dog didn’t bark.”

“What?”

“Read a book, Mike. Take me to that site.”

I found myself outside door marked World War II.  
“An historical site?”

“Checking. No. A war gamer’s site. You are in the  
‘Nazi German Navy’ annex.”

“So he’s a closet Nazi?”

“No. Checking his work in Naval Proceedings. History Buff. His personal computer aboard ship has a document he’d been writing, discussing what might have happened if the Nazis Admirals had convinced Hitler to fight the war the way it should have been.”

“So this could be just him researching it.” I mused.  
“All right, I’m going in.”

I stepped onto the bridge of an old warship. Huge guns were thundering and I walked to the forward end. Two massive turrets were firing to the starboard, the ship actually jerking aside at the recoil. Off to my right, two men were holding binoculars. Behind them was a man in a modern Navy uniform, watching them. “Freeze.” The scene stopped. “Location?”

“Denmark Strait. With his alterations.”

“So it is just research,” I sighed. There was a noise and I looked down in horror.

The kitten was there.

I snatched off my helmet. Mike looked over the monitors. “Something wrong?”

“I had the program frozen. Did you see the cat?”

“Cat? No.” He looked at me askance. “It was there?”

“Yes it was there,” I growled.

He bent over, scanning the system. “Odd. There is some anomalous code here.”

I came around the monitors and watched with him. There was the scene from my point of view. Then my head jerking toward the floor. Then end.

“Another here,” Sophie said. I went to her station. She had gone back to when Carter had petted the cat. She switched to the code view. It looks odd to someone not used to it. Astronomers these days only look at the pictures after scanning the codes and do it as fast as a speed reader. To them the code *is* the image and the picture is just for us wusses who aren’t smart enough. She stopped the screen, then ran another of what Mike was looking at. Again she stopped the screen so they were side-by-side. They weren’t the same sequence. Only something marked as anomalous.

“That is... Wait, it can’t be.”

“Can’t be what?”

“It looks like one of our tracking codes.”

I knew it! “Trace it back to the office.”

“Got it.” She paused. “Sir, it’s Mr. Donnecker’s office.”

## Argument

I stalked to Donnecker’s office. “Sir, Mr. Donnecker is busy,” his secretary started to say but I went past her. Another agent was talking to him. I hooked a thumb and he beat a hasty retreat.

“Reese...”

“Why are you interfering with my investigation?” I shouted.

He rubbed his face, obviously avoiding shouting back. “Sit down, Reese.” When I didn’t move, he leaned forward. “Sit. Down.” I sat. “All right, here’s the problem. Do you realize that Special Agent Logan was using Secret Service encryption? No one should be able to break that without being a super hacker, or with the access codes. Someone had suggested to the President’s staff that whoever was doing this might be able to brainwash an agent in VR and make him an assassin.”

“Bullshit. Tried and failed fifteen years ago. It would take more than a while in VR to do it.”

“I know that, you know that, but there are people in the White House that aren’t so sure. Someone told the President’s staff about this and they freaked. Thanks to that, I have been ordered to oversee this investigation. Since I can’t go into VR, that means I have to monitor from offline.”

“If some unnamed staffer in the White House is riding your ass, I don’t give a damn. So tell the White House if the *President* wants to order me to allow ev-



everyone and his idiot brother looking over my shoulder and kibitzing, he can send me a fucking memo! But anyone lower than him with the exception of DOJ or the director can bite my ass.”

“Do you want to get fired, Reese?”

I stood, pacing. “Look, Donnecker, whoever is doing this is too slick for my peace of mind. He created an avatar the size of a kitten, found a way to slip his virus through every system we know he’s penetrated, and done it in two countries. Hell, the Defense Department is always being hit by hackers, but thanks to the newest security safeguards they usually *bounce!*”

“So here I am, the team looking for links from outside that shouldn’t be there, and what do we find? You looking over my goddamned shoulder! If you were going to hook in, you should have let me know.”

“All right, your complaint is a given. Is there anything else?” I shook my head. “I will call down and notify the team that I am observing. Back to work.”

## **Ambush**

I stormed back down to the lab. “Which one next?”

I considered. Mentally I shied away from the woman with her Elvis fetish. “Start with the truck driver.” I picked up the helmet. “And going in now.”

I was not only in the launching pad, I was in the naked female avatar! I looked around frantically. No male avatar! I gasped as one of the gray walls bulged toward me, a hand forming. I grabbed for my visor, but something caught my arms, dragging them be-

hind me. I looked up to see a rope attached to a pulley, then searing pain.

I felt the rope being pulled upward. With my arms behind my back, the rope would pull them upward, forcing my body to recline. It is called Strappado, a torture from the the time of the Inquisition. It went until I was bent at the waist, barely keeping my feet on the ground, both arms aimed straight up. I looked around again, and this time I could see the same form from before pulling on the rope a final time. "Stop it!" I screamed.

The figure tied off the rope, then walked around me. "Yes, you are ready for the next step," he said. Another song started. In this one the woman was asking the man to play with her body. What the hell was he doing?

"What next step?" I gritted out.

The man moved behind me and I felt a hand gently running over the ass of my female avatar. "Why, to introduce you to the pleasures of anal sex." A finger slid into my ass.

I moved my fingers, trying to lift my visor.

FOR YOUR SAFETY VISOR ACCESS HAS BEEN CANCELLED

PLEASE WAIT A SHORT TIME AND TRY AGAIN

I struggled, cursing, trying to flail, I lifted a foot to kick and almost screamed as my shoulders spasmed in agony. "Careful. You don't want to dislocate your shoulders, do you? That will hurt even when you go back to the real world."

Now there were two fingers, spreading to stretch me, and I groaned at the feeling. Once you reach about fifty, if you're a man, they do tests for an enlarged prostate. If you think that means someone shoves his finger up your ass, it's a good guess. I hissed as a third finger joined them. Now he was pushing them in and out. I felt a thrill, even in this female body, I seemed to still have a prostate, and he was milking it.

I had to get out of this! I ran the system through my head. There were a number of ways to cause it to shut down. Hell, the adrenaline I was feeling from this attack should have done it. HUD disabled, standard log-off disabled, visor disabled...

As his fingers began running around my asshole, I snarled. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

The fingers were gone and suddenly I felt what might have been a pool cue or baton being shoved into me, I screamed and tried to pull away but my arms screamed in agony when I did. Like fellatio, I had never done anything like this before but it felt as if it were real. A cock was sliding up my ass. It went in and in for what seemed like forever, then I felt something against my ass cheeks. I didn't need to look back to know he was all the way inside me.

He sighed in contentment, then leaned forward. "Now it begins." He slid out and I suddenly felt empty. Part of me was relieved, part for some reason was wishing he wouldn't stop. Where the hell did that come from? Then he slammed forward, jerking me as he began to seriously fuck me.

"Stop this! Please!"

"But you want it. You want some man in your ass, and eventually in your pussy. I'm just showing you

how pleasurable it will be,” he told me, his hips driving forward, pulling back, then slamming him forward into me again. He built up a hard and fast rhythm and somehow my arms didn’t hurt as much as before. Maybe he had lowered the binding? I tried to move to avoid his thrusts, but all I was doing was moving like a bitch in heat as he plowed me.

My body was acting as if I *wanted* him to fuck me. I bit my lip rather than speak. Somehow I knew that if I opened my mouth I’d be begging him to fuck me. Worse yet, I felt that if he came inside me, part of my masculinity would die, just like the dreams I’d had where I was willingly sucking a man off.

I’d start having dreams of some man fucking me in the ass, of me begging him to make me his woman, impregnate me.

Suddenly I remembered, the keyboard! I had set it up as always and my finger inched to the right and up.

“Oh, not yet,” he purred. Then I felt him come, felt what might have been a gallon of sperm like in a Japanese Hentai comic book where the man comes forever.

I threw my visor aside. Wilson looked over at me. “Neil?”

“Let me guess, you didn’t see anything that time either.”

“You’ve only been down for...” He looked at the timer. “45 seconds.”

“That’s impossible!” I snapped. “Whoever this motherfucker is, he had me in there, using me sexually for a hell of a lot longer than that!” He motioned

and I looked at the timer. It was stopped at 45 seconds.

I turned. "Neil?" I looked at Wilson. "Aren't you going back in?"

"Not until I figure out what the fuck is happening." They flinched. I rarely used profanity and here I had gone off twice in less than two minutes. A record. "I'm going to talk to Hathaway."

I knew the limitations of VR from experience. What I had felt in both instances was something I should not have felt. Not even as a young man had I ever given a blow job and I had never been penetrated except for that once-a-year doctor's examination but I was sure (don't ask me how) that what I had felt matched the real thing. But how had he programmed in something I had never experienced? To answer that, I had to talk to someone who would know.

I had to talk to Hathaway. I stopped at my desk and checked my digital music files. The most recent song was Janet Jackson singing *Would You Mind*. But I couldn't see Hathaway; he'd gone to a conference and wouldn't be back until morning.

## **New nightmares**

It was early but I took my notes and headed home. The apartment felt empty, as if I had moved out, even though everything was right where I had left it. I flipped on my desktop computer, connected through the Agency server, and brought up a fresh document page. Whoever was riding Donneck's ass from the White House was probably whining at him about not getting a 'timely' report.

The problem is, when some high level bureaucrat says ‘timely’, they don’t mean when you have all your ducks in a row, or as soon as possible. They mean right this fucking minute and you had better have something more than ‘investigation continuing’. Think of a press conference where saying that causes a screaming headline the next day to the effect of ‘The Agency has no Clue!’ I’d seen investigation fall apart because some guy with a title and no brain kept pushing.

I began to write, listing the events I had seen in VR from the case. I didn’t put in that whoever it was seemed to have focused on me now; it would look like I was making excuses. The phone rang and I answered it absently.

“Agent Reese?”

“Jessica, good of you to call. What can I help you with?”

“Have you had dinner?”

“Not in the mood, kid.”

There was a long moment of silence. “You compared VR to dreams.”

“Correct.”

“Then can those dreams become nightmares?”

“Of course they can.”

“But you can wake yourself from a dream.”

“Not always.” I leaned back in the chair. “In normal dreams, you only wake up when it ends, or you realize it is a dream, hence what are called lucid dreams.

Most people get out of nightmares because they are frightened out of them. Besides, REM sleep locks your muscles so you can't accidentally harm yourself. So does VR."

"Agent Reese..."

"Neil."

"Neil. How long has it been since you tried to wake yourself from a dream?"

"A couple of decades. Look, I have to finish this report, then try to relax. I've had a stressful day."

Another of those very long pauses. "All right."

I set the phone down. Actually I would have liked to have dinner with her. Jessica Tate was attractive and witty. But the report had to come first.

When I finally went to bed, it was as I had dreaded. I began on my knees, sucking a vague figure off, tasting him on my tongue, with that damnable music in the background. Then the music changed and I was on hands and knees, feeling him fucking me doggy style. I was moaning, screaming, begging for more, and couldn't stop him. I remembered what Jessica had said and tried desperately to break the dream's hold. But it went on and on.

I staggered out of bed and made a pot of coffee as I tried to think of what I had to do today. I had to talk to Hathaway first thing. From everything I knew about VR with almost fifteen years in the Division, what was happening was impossible. I walked down the hall and the elevator opened as I arrived. For a moment I could have sworn I saw someone in it already. But it faded when I tried to look straight at it.

## **Limitations, or are they?**

Marion Hathaway was someone everyone in the division feared. He was twenty years younger than I was but he held the power in the Unit. He was the one who could label you a VR Addict and you would be sidelined.

He looked up, the small cream soda sucker he liked stuck in his cheek. “Reese?” He checked his schedule. “You’re not supposed to be here for at least two more hours.”

“What?”

“You’re scheduled for a standard review in two hours, fifteen minutes.”

“I have a review?” I was confused. I usually got a notice of a review. Maybe I missed it. I’d check for the memo when I went back to my desk.

“Yes. Donnecker ordered it because of the time you will be in VR on this latest case.”

“Can we do it now then? I have questions regarding the case.”

“Sure.” He brought up the standard form on his tablet and we began. Most were innocuous questions but when he came to the ones suggesting odd problems in VR, such as wanting to do something, visual hallucinations or flashbacks in dreams, I lied flat out. He made a note and signed it electronically. “All right, questions?”

“You can’t experience something in VR that you haven’t actually experienced, right?”

“True, but it is theoretically possible.”

“I’m not sure I follow. I know you can’t do a taste test for beer or wine without having actually sampled the drinks.” *Or know what it feels like to suck someone, or get reamed and enjoy it*, I didn’t say.

“It is theoretically possible to download something like that and add it to the data stream.” Hathaway disposed of the now cleaned stick from his sucker, peeled the paper from another and inserted it before he went on. “When Doctor Robespierre’s first attempts at helping the autistic and coma patients in 2016 were published, others of course tried to recreate it. A little-known man by the name of Josef Offenbach in Germany found that memories can be transplanted, albeit by accident.”

My blood ran cold. “Transplanted?”

“It was rare, but possible. Think of an organ transplant as an analogy. When they select the organ, they try for as close a genetic match as possible. Well, mental patterns are like bodies. There are people out there who have patterns close to your own. So if a person or system did a data search looking just for those patterns, it would find them.”

“How did he find that out accidentally?”

“One of the first things Offenbach did that Robespierre did not was examine the patients using VR, just as you are doing now. One of them had been stung by a bee, which Offenbach was extremely allergic to. If he was stung, it would cause anaphylactic shock. While he was in their memory, he was stung, which in VR should have caused him to be dumped immediately to avoid his body exhibiting the shock as a memory he had already had. That is the reason recovering alcoholics are told not to drink in VR because they will suffer a reaction if they are using Antabuse. The system didn’t do so for some reason.

But he also reacted in the session as he would have if he was not allergic.

“His later notes suggested that if the match of patterns was close enough, you could transplant any physical sensation in time. But it was not pursued.”

“Not pursued?”

“Offenbach died from a stroke a month or so after that first session. His notes were published after his death and only spoke of the possibility, but not how far it could go. The process was banned as too dangerous.”

“Too dangerous?”

He looked at me for a long moment. “If misused, it could lead to VR addiction, unless you went out and tried it in reality. Picture someone allergic to peanuts who had an implanted memory from VR that allowed them to eat a peanut butter sandwich, then trying it in real life because the person with that memory liked the spread. Worse yet, think of the same process used in torture. Picture recording the agony of being burned as if soaked in gasoline, one of the worst pains a human can endure and possibly survive, then implanting it in the memory of your victim.”

I saw the look in his eyes. I had a horrified thought. “It was done, wasn’t it?”

He looked guilty. “The Government used the process briefly under the codename Tape Worm. They used memories that were painful with a lockout to stop the person from escaping in the normal fashion. I found out and brought it to the Joint Intelligence Committee. I am a ‘whistle blower’. The reaction in

the Joint Intelligence Committee was so negative that it was ordered that it never be done again.”

I considered what I had learned. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“Neil, you look done in. Having trouble sleeping?”

Another sign of VR addiction. “It’s just that the case keeps spinning around in my head, Doc.”

“Then I suggest you stay offline for the next twenty-four hours.” He reached into his desk and tossed a small packet across the desk. “Periactin. It inhibits dreams. Mainly used by people with PTSD. Take them before you go to bed.”

## **Trapped!**

I was glad Hathaway had ordered me to not go online. If I had refused, it would have been yet another sign of addiction. I doubted I had fooled him completely but I was known for charging full speed ahead when I was on a case and I hoped it would be what he thought was happening. I knew somehow that if I went in again, I would be trapped, unable to escape. I went to my desk, picked up all of the memos and files I had been skipping, and headed home. One of them was the standard inter-department memo telling me I was supposed to go in for my review. For some reason it disturbed me. Sure, Donnecker could order anyone in the Unit reviewed, but why now? I was sure I had been for one only four months before, but with what was happening, I couldn’t trust my own memory.

I got home, flipped on my computer, and started to log in. The invalid log-in screen came up. I looked at it



confused. I mentally wrote down my password and tried again.

The phone rang, and I answered it. “Neil!”

“Jessica? What’s wrong?”

“Neil.” She was sobbing.

“What’s wrong?”

“I have a bad feeling about this case. You have to turn it over to someone else.”

“What do you mean?” I looked around. “I am the senior field agent in the unit. Who else should be doing it?”

“Please, for the love of God...”

“Dammit, Agent Tate!” I snapped. “It isn’t like it’s the end of the world. Look. Talk to me in the morning. We’ll have breakfast together, all right?” I hung up even as she spoke.

Again I got the invalid log in. I cursed. Then I went into my VR room and set my keyboard on my lap. I slipped on my VR goggles and tried again. Again it was invalid. I looked at my full VR headset. I was worried about it but the system was not connected. It should be safe. With trepidation, I slipped on the headset, and keyed in my password again. Then I hit the enter button.

I was in my female avatar again! I was strapped down in a birthing chair; one designed so a woman can give birth seated. Straps held my arms down to the arms of the chair, and my legs were spread obscenely and bound up in the stirrups,. The figure that had been abusing me all this time was standing

there, admiring his handiwork. “How the hell did I end up here?”

He didn’t bother to reply. Another song began to play. This one I recognized; Speechless by Beyoncé Knowles. I struggled as he stalked forward, trying to find any give in the straps. But I was trapped. Then he knelt down. “One hole remaining to initiate.” He reached up and I felt his fingers running over the smooth skin above the cleft. I felt a shudder, and closed my eyes.

“Stop it!”

“Why? You want it.”

“I do **not**.” I bit my lip to avoid shrieking as he touched my clitoris and it felt as if a cattle prod set to ‘pleasure’ ripped through me. There is nothing I had ever felt like it, and there was suddenly a heavy warmth in my belly.

“Oh?” I felt the fingers run down the labia, then come up bedewed. “What is the old saying from Shakespeare? ‘The Lady does protest too much, methinks’.”

I tried to concentrate on anything else to avoid the rush of pleasure as he inserted a finger. “I am not a lady! I am not a woman! I am an FBI agent and this constitutes assault on a Federal Agent!”

“So catch me,” he replied, now sliding two fingers in. I was suddenly drenched down there, and if I had been willing it would have been a turn-on. As it was, my body was betraying me. I bit my lip hard enough that I tasted blood. He stood and of course he was rampant. I knew as I had before that another portion of my manhood would be stripped away when he stuck that into me.

He moved forward, holding it in position. I tried frantically to move away. To shift from side to side to stop him. But he set his hand down on my stomach and held me long enough to get the tip in. Then he moved forward. He stopped as I felt something stretching. Oh, fucking great! Not only I am in a woman's body, but a virgin one as well!

But he stopped moving, dropping his hand down to the clit again. He began to play with it, sheets of white lightning pleasure shooting through my body as he did. I could feel something building, then suddenly an orgasm like nothing I have ever felt ripped through me and I screamed. There was a sudden burst of pain, over before I even recognized it, and his thighs slapped into me. He'd overloaded my body's senses with the pleasure. Just enough to penetrate the hymen.

"Soon this will be complete. You will be a woman at last." He began thrusting and that same mind blasting pleasure filled me. I wanted to struggle but all I was doing was moving like a bitch in heat.

"Why?" I gasped, then bit my lip again before I could moan.

"To make you what you have wanted to be since you were young." He wasn't reacting to what was happening. Of course, this wasn't for him, it was for me. He could have been merely a dildo. "What you gave up all those years ago."

Wait, what I had given up? I felt him slam into me one last time as I screamed in orgasm, his seed filling me. I could feel it hitting my womb!

Suddenly I blinked as someone removed my headset. One of the techs that had come to the apartment

before was there, his face worried. “Are you alright, Agent Reese?”

“What happened?”

“You were online, sir. When you went active, we were sent. We found you here.”

“But that’s impossible! The system was deactivated!”

“I know sir. Please, if you will?” I moved off the lounge and he began checking my system. I didn’t know what the hell was happening. He grunted.

“What?”

He turned, looking back at me. “The system was reactivated right before you went online.”

“Who reactivated it?”

He stood. “You did.”

“I what?” I grabbed his tablet. There it was. System reactivated. By me.

“I am going to have to report this, sir. The director will no doubt want to talk to you in the morning.” He left.

## **Blacklist**

Even with the pills, the dreams came. That evening was as much a nightmare as the night before. I found myself on my knees, sucking an indistinct man until he came and I drank it down. Then I was on my hands and knees with someone fucking me in the ass, my voice begging him to go deeper and harder until he came again. Then I was on my back, legs

spread like a whore, taking him into my womb. I kept waking up, then falling back into the dreams as if I hadn't even woke up.

I poured some coffee, trying to get the cobwebs to go away. I was slowly going mad. The phone rang, and I answered. "Neil?"

"Who... Oh, Agent Tate. Jessica. To what do I owe the pleasure? Oh, wait. We're having breakfast. Give me a short while."

"I'm worried about you."

"Nice to hear. Aren't you supposed to be in getting ready for class?"

"Fuck that. What's happening?"

I sighed, wiping my face. "This case. I think whoever it is that attacked those people is after me now. Implanting things I have never experienced."

"In VR?"

"Yes."

For a long moment, she was silent. "That's impossible, Neil."

I gave a sad chuckle. "Not according to Hathaway."

"What?" I pictured her looking at the phone in astonishment. "When did you talk to Hathaway?"

"Yesterday before I went home."

"Neil." She stopped. "The next time you see me, take my hand."

“What?”

“Swear it, goddamn it! Take my hand!”

“Sure. Jesus, kid. You’d think I was trapped in VR or something.” I jokingly placed my right hand on my heart. “I swear the next time I see you, I will take your hand. Okay?”

She sighed. “I’ll make you suffer if you’ve lied!”

“I would never lie to you.” I hung up. The moment the phone hit the desk, it rang again. “Reese.”

“In my office in two hours.” I could hear a smug tone in Donnecker’s voice. “Hathaway is going to declare you an addict.” The smug attitude became vindictive. “Welcome to the unwashed, Reese.” I almost threw the phone across the room.

I had it all, but the pieces didn’t fit yet. Pieces that had been said lay on the table, but were not yet in place. If Donnecker was able to sideline me, the case might never be solved. Someone else would go in and if whoever it was could get to **me**, no one on the planet was safe! I had to get back online. To find the last clues. But I couldn’t get on from here. I had watched them take sections of the VR system in my apartment. It would no more connect than an gasoline engine will start without spark plugs.

But I could at the Agency. All I had to do was get there and log on. I could face my enemy in VR, and beat him. Or I would die knowing that they had taken away the real me.

## Counterattack

Getting in wasn't really difficult. I had worked in headquarters for eleven of my almost thirty years. One thing most did not know or remember was that the original VR labs had been in the basement before we became a separate unit. I had been one of those that set them up originally, so I knew where they were.

It was an old dirty and dusty room but the old fashioned VR helmets still sat on the stiff backed chairs they used to use. I picked one and began to go over their system carefully. Once it went operational, they would know I was here, so it had to start the instant I put the helmet on. I went through four before I found one in reasonable shape and cannibalized the ones I had passed over to get it running.

I was late for breakfast with Jessica and for my meeting with Donnecker, and I didn't care. He could have me suspended, censured, fired. And it didn't matter. I finished with the last connection, then I went to the door. There were four heavy file cabinets, and I pushed them over in front of it. switching on the power. I was in the chair, someone already pounding on the door. I slipped on the helmet.

I was sitting in front of a vanity mirror, three girls bustling around me like bees dancing attendance on the queen. I was in the female avatar dressed in a wedding dress, huge doe-like eyes looking into the mirror. One of them affixed a tiara with a veil attached, dropping it to cover my face. I noticed that each of the girls looked like me, just the color of their hair and dresses different from my present form.

There was a knock on the door, and my male avatar came in. No, the hair was graying and he had a bit of a paunch. He spoke, but I didn't listen. I knew

what he was saying anyway. The farce would end as if it were a storybook romance with me as the bride about to be ravished by her husband. I knew my face wasn't the nervous bride, or the happy one. It was the face of an angry goddess heading into battle.

My arm was taken and the man led me out of the room across a narrow hall, to a pair of doors. They were flung open and the Wedding March began. There were a hundred people there, both men and women, adults and children, all with the faces of my Avatars. We proceeded down the aisle toward a man in a suit and a priest, also with my face. To his right were his groomsmen, and to his left the bridesmaids. My eye caught on the Maid Of Honor. It was Jessica Tate.

I stumbled. What was **she** doing here? "*The next time you see me, take my hand.*" Was she part of this?

Two cameramen, one with a video camera, were ahead of us, taking all of the pictures you'd expect. A young girl, looking like my female avatar at age eight, walked ahead, sprinkling flower petals. The smell of roses was heavy in the air.

We reached the altar, and I was handed off to the groom. He reached down, lifting the veil. "What is this all about?" I demanded.

"You need only one thing to be a complete woman," he replied, though his lips didn't move. "You must be wedded, sworn to one man for the rest of your life. You must be bedded as proper, fucked into womanhood. Impregnated on your first night of bliss." He motioned down, and his lips moved. "The bouquet."

As if I were a puppet, I turned, holding the bouquet out to Jessica. She tried to smile but it didn't reach her eyes as she reached out, and her hand touched

mine. Her brows quirked as I merely pressed the flowers into her hands. Something slipped under the long sleeve of my gown. Then my body automatically returned to facing the priest.

“It isn’t going to work,” I snarled.

“Oh, but it will,” he said as the service began. It had been a long time since I had seen a wedding but the words are something you remember from repetition, even decades later. I tried to interrupt, to scream, to run, but I stood unable to resist as I spoke the vows at the correct time. While I tried to punch him when it came time to exchange rings, my hand merely sat in his as he put it on my finger.

Then he leaned forward. While my eyes did not close and I knew he could see the loathing in them, my head tilted so he could bestow that first kiss. Then we were announced as a couple. I was walked down the aisle with the recessional.

There was a limo waiting and we were whisked away.

“I will fight you every step of the way,” I warned.

“As you have every moment this last session. And it will do you as much good.”

We got out at the reception hall and I was paraded into it to a lot of applause. I was forced to stand in the receiving line and no matter what I said, everyone just smiled, hugged, kissed my cheek, and went on. The same two photographers began to move around for candid shots. The cutting of the cake, feeding the groom that first slice. The first dance to Oh How We Danced On The Day We Were Wed; what some call the Anniversary Waltz. Finally him removing the gar-

ter, me tossing the bridal bouquet, the endless toasts.

Everyone was enjoying themselves. Except for me and Jessica. She was watching me and I could see something in her eyes. Almost a pleading look. I had felt whatever it was she had hidden in the sleeve of the gown but I couldn't figure out what it was.

He took my arm and again I was a puppet. The limo of course had been decorated with the cans, shoes, and the logo NEWLYWEDS across the bumper. I was wishing I still lived in Texas; I could hope for a Shivarree! We arrived at the hotel; again everyone who watched and cheered were my avatars. "What was wrong?" I asked as we entered the elevator. "Couldn't just access the web and download a few hundred extras?"

He turned my head. "This is for you. All of it."

"So when you raped me in every way, you used my male avatar to do it." He nodded. "Why? Don't have a dick of your own?"

He chuckled. "I am an AI. I don't have a body. So I had to use what was available."

"Why did you use those songs?"

"Human memories are linked to sounds and smells. Even if you had escaped, you would have still heard those songs even if only by walking by a club where they are playing. They reinforce the programming."

"And the others. Why did they go mad?"

"Because I gave them what they really wanted in life, then society took it away."

“They had what they wanted. But only in VR.”

“Exactly.”

“And how am I any different?” I demanded. “You can’t make me a woman in reality, so how is this all for me?”

He paused. “I do not know why he is doing this if it cannot be real. Only that I must do it.” He stopped. During the conversation we had walked out of the elevator to a door marked Bridal Suite.

“You don’t have to do it. You can stop.”

“Question, how often does your computer simply decide to rewrite its software?” he asked. “I can no more change what I must do.” Then he snatched me off the ground, kicking open the door. I was carried across the threshold, an ancient rite because in earlier times, women were merely taken rather than wooed. He set me down, taking off his tie.

“You picked such a nice body. But it isn’t surprising.”

“I chose the avatar because it was attractive, nothing more.” I backed away, then ran to the window. I tried to throw open the sash but it didn’t move. Desperate, I snatched up an ash tray off the desk and threw it like a baseball, but it bounced off the window as if it were Lexan.

“You chose this body years ago. When you were thirteen. It matured as you did, though you froze its chronological age around twenty-five. As you did with this one.” I turned like a horror movie victim. He had stripped off above the waist.

“Thirteen?” I suddenly flashed back to that time. I had been the oldest boy and my mother had been fighting a nasty divorce with a pedophile who had molested my older and younger sisters. Mom had put me and my other brothers and sisters in an orphanage in Texas while she took the two that had been molested with her to California to fight it out in court.

I understood why much later in my life. But being told you have to ‘be the man of the family’ at thirteen was a shock. At the time I didn’t feel like the man. I felt she had dumped me because my sisters were more important. That a boy didn’t need protecting. So I had figured logically that if I had been a girl, I would have been protected as well. Looking at myself in a mirror, I had imagined what I would have looked like as a girl.

Now he was naked. He held out his hands. To the side, I saw something shimmering, like the Predator from those ancient movies. “Come here. Fulfill your destiny.”

I started toward him. “Stop controlling me!”

“Oh, I was during the wedding and reception. But now it is your own will. You want to come here. You want to suck the organ that will deflower you again. You want to feel the sperm fill you, the baby spring into life in your womb.” I was less than a foot from him, his hands rested on my shoulders, pushing me to my knees. I was still fully dressed, yet I was looking ahead at what he had.

My fingers ran over whatever it was Jessica had slipped me and I slid it out as my other hand came forward to wrap around his erection. Then I brought whatever it was up into view. It looked like a keyring. His hand caught mine as I slapped it against that organ.

His avatar froze. I tried frantically to pull away, but whatever kind of lock down it was had made his grip like a clamp. I pulled and the shimmer moved around him. It started to reach out, and I snatched it. It felt like...

## **Freedom. Or is it?**

Someone was holding my hand as someone else pulled off the HD helmet. Michael Wilson looked at me, worried. Jessica was holding my hand, her eyes covered by a set of VR glasses. “Oh thank God,” she whispered.

“We finally got you out.” I looked around. Everyone who had been there when I first went down was still there. But Hathaway was there as well. “If Jessica hadn’t asked me about Offenbach...”

“Jessica asked you?” I turned to her but she had released my hand and had her back to me, shoulders shaking. I wanted to get up but Mike pushed me back down.

“Yes. She mentioned Offenbach when you made the comment about programs not being able to give you sensations.”

“Wait!” I shoved Mike aside, and sat up. Bad idea. Leaving VR suddenly causes a lot of negative physical reactions, nausea among them as I demonstrated to the rookies by throwing up. I finally finished, wiping my mouth. “Why didn’t I remember him first?” I demanded. “I’ve been with the unit off and on since I started with the Bureau!”

He gave me a look that told me I was an idiot. “Offenbach’s work wasn’t added to the syllabus until five years ago,” Hathaway commented sarcastically. “I know the older agents are supposed to keep track of such things. But real life interferes.”

“So what really happened?”

“When you saw the kitten come over to you, you ordered Mike to get you out.”

“But I couldn’t, man!” Mike burst out. “Every way to log you out from my end wasn’t working. So we shut down all of the external Net interfaces. We literally pulled the fucking plug!”

I shook my head. Bad idea, more vomiting. Sophie had gotten a wastebasket in position before the second time. I gasped, wanting a drink of water but knew if I threw up again, the effort would be wasted. “Then I should have been dropped out automatically.”

“No, the attack came from inside and we’re still tracking the AI that did it. So you got yourself out, or so you thought,” Hathaway commented. You have been under for,” he looked at the screen before him, “six hours.”

“But...” I closed my eyes. “If I were down that long, I should have experienced that many days subjective.”

“If the program hadn’t been creating the dream sequences, you would be right. With those added, it comes out.” Hathaway demurred. “You visualized going home, going about your normal life. The only access to your mind in VR was the attack program, and this room.”

I remembered the visual hallucinations. “So the hallucinations were you trying to get to me.”

“Yes.” Jessica turned around, wiping her eyes. “Once I had figured out what was happening, they sent me in after you as an observer.” She tapped the VR glasses in her hand. “I could see you but couldn’t interact with you. Dr. Hathaway told me that in Robespierre and Offenbach’s initial studies, the patients, when they could talk, said they saw a shadowy figure following them. But if you weren’t being monitored from outside, it would be a sign of mental disorders.” She waved her hand absently. “Which is why we tried to break it the way we did.”

I went over what had happened. “The phone calls, trying to get me to go to dinner with you. And the wedding scene with my avatars playing every role. He had to use my avatar because he couldn’t get back to the Net to download other images.”

She nodded. “Yes. It wasn’t until the end that we came up with a way to get something to you.”

I remembered her demand that I take her hand. The key ring. “So you slipped a lock-out command into it.”

She nodded again. “But during that sequence he was controlling your body, even as you kept trying to resist. I only know what you said during the ceremony because I could see it over there.” She waved toward the monitoring stations. “When he got you to the bridal suite, I had to move over beside you so you could take my hand.”

I opened my eyes, then shook my head experimentally. All right, my remaining cookies would not be whooped. I ran through everything I had gone through in almost four days of subjective time. “Doc,

has anyone ever suggested implanting memories to change criminal behavior?”

He considered. “Back when the CIA and Homeland Security requested permission to use Tape Worm, they intended to find ways to make criminals proper members of society. We both know that things in someone’s past can cause them to become criminals. Privation, lack of self respect, failures to achieve goals. If you could help them achieve those goals, the reason would be gone.” He shook his head. “But the program was destroyed. There are no copies remaining.”

“Yes there is.” I looked up at him. “In your own files. The you in the VR session felt remorseful because you were a member of that project. But the answers assumed I was following someone else’s path. Someone had asked you some of the questions I did.”

He paused, “Yes. But that is sealed.”

“Not from the director. Donnecker is still a proponent of the VR prison.” I shook my head. I had been so blind! “When I went in before the first rape scene, Donnecker told me to meet him in VR. But I forgot that he is a VR Addict! He could only contact me in VR by phone!”

## **Aftermath**

Donnecker was arrested and I was told to take over as temporary director of the BAU. He was charged with VR criminal negligence and VR assault. That may not look bad but he was also charged with twenty-five counts of Assisted Suicide. Only two of the victims had been living in areas where that is allowed but he had failed the requirements there. So he was looking at one hell of a long time in prison.

I looked at the desk; only been behind it for two weeks, I already hated it. If I had wanted the damn job, I could have had it! My intercom signaled. “Yes.”

“Agent Tate wants to see you.”

“Send her in.” I stood and walked around the desk. She stuck out her hand but I hugged her. For a moment, she just froze. Then she hugged me back.

“You going to hug me every time you see me?” she asked, semi-joking. I had used my status as Director to watch her first VR ops during training, and everyone was gossiping about our May-December romance.

“Until I am done thanking you, yes. Still on for dinner?”

“I don’t know.” Her face brightened. “My first assignment came through!”

I chuckled. “I should know. You blew the lid off yet again. If you have to stay down the full time, you can call me and we’ll have a late dinner.”

“You’re on.” She stepped back, and this time I shook her hand. There went my replacement.

Several hours later, after I had sent her home with a decent meal, I went into my VR room and settled back. The avatars stood there and I touched the female. Then I opened the closet I had created after I went home from that hell ride. As I dressed, I hummed Red Light Special.

Time for some fun...

End