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Crash Space

Everything had rocked and bounced in splendid anonymity. Everything was *fun*, in my world. Then... it was like his face kind of floated toward me across the septic light of the subway car, a greasy white balloon, and just like that, everything changed.

“Hey... Sorry to bother you there, Du. But are those the new Xiaomi *First-persons* you blinkin’?”
You could always tell the Rigged by their eyes.

My attention clicked the Affect Regulation dropdown, and I dialed back my General Anxiety slider. The effect was predictably instant, like someone had laid a chip of ice on my heart. I smiled at the guy—a true-blue *feckless* smile, so unlike the countless thousands I had faked before being Rigged.

“What’s it to you?”

He grinned, and I caught the telltale glimmer of momentary inattention in *his* eyes. That’s how it was when you were Rigged, ‘looking’ at people, all the while tweaking yourself into *who you needed to be*: It was old news in my circle.

“Check out willy-willy-dot-xxx,” he said, smiling and nodding like a joyous old black grandmother. “Check it out, Du.”

“*Porn...*” my girlfriend, Jessica, snorted from beside me.

The guy slapped his thighs laughing. A station whizzed across the window behind him, faces packed like petals on enamel and chrome, flitting by.

“No porn, Chi, at least asides the kind you *make*. I swear it.”

I frowned, a small part of me faintly amazed at my confidence and self-possession. The guy was *nothing* if not scary—snaking red dreads, a flat, fist-proof face, a vast chest puckered with grills of tear-drop scars. Our new friend here was a hardcore Neorasta, the kind of guy who always had me pretending to be drowsy, anything but *alert*, before. Now he was simply another member of the human race, every bit as hapless, as worthy or unworthy of concern...

The thought impressed me as a possible commercial. I tagged a reminder, something I could think down more thoroughly after.

"What is it, then?" I asked mildly.

"Just check the site out," the man gurgled, wagging his head like a baby. "Check it out, Du, and you'll see."

But Jessica already had it. "It's some kind of SM app," she said, her tone low enough to suggest she didn't trust its legal credentials.

Then I saw it, glowing over the Neorasta's great shoulder, a simple string of text,

hititrightthistimedu

"What does it do?" Jess was asking.

The Neorasta grinned, blinked with opiate sloth. "Disables the defaults."

Now *that* was electric.

"What?" Jess asked after a heartbeat, her manner flat affect enough to know she'd dialed back her anxiety slider. "You mean the reset, or the parameters?"

The guy scoffed. "Now *who the hell* would fuck with the *reset*?"

I had heard of some. A great many couldn't stand who they were—perhaps most.

"Nooo..." the red-haired man continued. "The Shackles, Chi. Nothing but the fucking parameters."

The flash of hatred said it all. That's the way it was, for some people. You give them freedom over their *very being*, and they spend all their time raging at the limits. Our friend here saw the parameters as a gulag, an oppression more fundamental than any suffered in any age.

I thought-texted, **TRANSHUMANIST**, to alert Jess, who shot me an Ace in approval. The Neorasta gushed on about *Hitter* (as he called the app) all the while, explaining the way it disabled the scan-driven defaults, let you 'play ball' *hard as you wanted*. No matter how erratic your readings became, no matter how much any function deviated from the infamous 'parameters,' you could, "keep on keeping on," as the Neorasta put it, stack tweak upon tweak. "*Freedom, Du!*" he fairly exploded. "Freedom from the fucking Corpses!"

[**Jessica**] **DOES XIAOMI KNOW ABOUT THIS?** appeared on the left fringe of my visual field. I sent her a Shrug.

Now you need to realize that I am *professional*. I am educated, and I *work*. I could *afford* to be Rigged. Doilies like our Neorasta friend, here, could not, short criminal activity. It was no different back in my pop's day, I suppose: I can remember him ranting about doilies, 'welfare recipients,' owning new PS4s and I-phones and all that ancient shite that we couldn't afford because he was retail monkey.

MALICIOUS? I texted to Jess.

The Intuitive Google pane popped up, and lo and behold, *actually anticipated* my curiosity for a change, reminding me that many Neorastas weren't doilies at all, but the disaffected children of investors. I fixed the man with a Sean Connery peer.

DUNNO, Jess replied, the letters glowing blue on my Fringe.

"Me an' me old lady downed it a couple days back," the giant man was saying. "Primo, Du. *Suuuuuuperb*." He even popped his lips, like a Hell's Angel imitating a maitre-de. "The *real* Cheese, you know? Non-stop double dipping!"

"So where's your 'old lady,' now?" Jessica asked, her voice on the slant. The flattery of being called 'Chi' had escaped her as well, I imagined.

The big man grinned beneath heavy-lidded, leering eyes. "Ooooh she's still playin'... Playin' it *hard*! I'm-I'm just picking up the fu-fucking pizza!" He hacked, overcome by a hilarity too great to force through a human throat.

"*She's playing you now!*" Jess cried in sudden realization. "She's tweaking your sliders? Isn't she? Isn't she?"

He was one of those guys who couldn't laugh without choking, and who couldn't recover without wiping wide-blinking eyes afterward. "It's *intense*," he gasped nodding. "Highly recommended."

That got me laughing—I had tweaked the mirth slider a couple dinks. One of the more frightening things about *First-person* (as opposed to other models, at least) was just how thoughtless—automatic, even—tweaking yourself on the fly became, just days after being Riggged.

"So basically," I said, sharing his conspiratorial smile, "it lets you do all the things the Humanists use to argue that Rigs should be illegal..."

"*Exactly!*" the man gurgled, laughing. "*Freedom, Du!*"

"But *how?*" Jess asked, apparently unaware how much her vehemence betrayed her interest... her *need*, even. I tagged the moment for review later, something we could go through together.

"Down it, Chi. Just follow the yellow brick road—or not. That's the point. You're *free to choose* whatever Cheese you want." This time his grin was broad enough to reveal a golden tooth behind each of his upper incisors. It made him look more serious, like the fat rich kid he likely was. He stood, his bulk drawn forward by the decelerating car—apparently this was his stop.

I grinned up in flint-eyed salutation, said, "Seize the Cheese, Du."

"Marley, man," he grunted, shuffling past our boney knees. His hairy legs at once sickened me and perturbed me not at all.

Before, you were swallowed, imbibed without knowing. And now?

Now, it's like you hold the cup, you know? You turn the lever. You drink.

You watch it overflow.

Jess and I both downed the thing, of course. You know how it goes—or how it *went* once.

We got off the next stop, the two of us walking with the blank gait that had become the most famous 'tell' of someone Rigged with *First-persons* or any other POV device, what the comedians had leapt on in the early days... that is, until the hecklers became funnier than they were.

For my part, I was simply curious. One of the drawbacks of being Rigged was that it allowed you to take *anything* in stride, no matter how big the chasm. Panic has its uses. Our encounter was nothing if not extraordinary, perhaps even suspicious, but it had raised our hackles not at all. We were far braver than we were, you see, and that made us very difficult to impress.

The origins of my curiosity were clear enough. My dad had always said that his freedom *was his gun*, not because of the power it gave him, but because of the power *he could take*. Though I despised guns almost as much as my father, I guess I was like him that way. My SUV had yet to motor me through anything more than puddles, and my jacket had yet to save me from any flak, but I loved the idea of four-wheel drive and para-aramid fibre all the same. I found *Hitter* exciting for much the same reason; not for the power it actually gave me, but the power *it would let me take*, given the right, *improbable* conditions. So, after a cursory look through the menus, a quick skim of the disclaimer (which was a gag), I stuck to our original game plan for the night. I closed it and opened *Aphrodite* instead, ticked the 'random hottie' feature. Trailing Jessica, I watched the app integrate the visual overlays, progressively improving them until I was following a scantily clad cave girl studiously peering into nowhere as she climbed from the subway. She was bad for reading as she walked—the archetypical 'iZombie.'

"Guess what I'm staring at..." I cooed from below her on the stairs.

No answer. The agitation score spiked in my periphery, and I countered by muting the slider several dinks. Problem solved. Having recovered my good mood, I once again hailed the barefoot, nearly naked nymph that had taken the place of my heavysset girlfriend. "Jess?"

"Huh?" she said, cresting the final step. A gust tousled her silver hair, danced above her bare breasts.

"I'm running *Aphrodite*," I explained as I gained the sidewalk. It was one of those hot autumn nights, where the air huffed for the impropriety of so much humidity and heat so late in the year. Driverless cabs whisked to and fro, creepy as always for the absence of headlights.

Light pollution, don't you know.

"Sorry, Tim..." she said. "Have you checked out *Hitter* yet?"

"Yah-yah. Come on. Turn *Adonis* on. I dare y—"

"Have you seen the Big Show function," she said. "That group sharing feature the Du was talking about..."

"I thought the idea was to party running *Adonis* and *Aphrodite*..." I shrugged helplessly in her blank gaze. "You know... all incognito like."

An add flipped up the virtual HUD, advertising Silver Tongue, an eloquence app that fed you famous Hollywood one-liners the way producers fed intelligent questions to dunces anchors on the news. I thought it away on another flare of irritation, lowered my frustration slider a dink.

There it was. *Happiness*. My dear-dear friend.

Jessica's eyes finally focussed on my face, even as mine fell to her breasts. The fact was I didn't need *Aphrodite* to find her attractive: control of my libido was simply 'one thought away' with *First-person*. But for all the awesome-awesome features of the system, there remained a great many things it *couldn't* do, such as generate the buzz of wandering as a couple naked and obviously aroused in the midst of your friends without your friends being any wiser.

"I want to do *Hitter*."

She said it the way she said she loved me.

Just then, the Swonk towers lit up across an already dazzling city scape, and *there they were*, my two old friends, first one ad then the other, sheets of silken light twirling down the Olympian specimen of masculinity projected across the nearest tower, poetry falling from summit to foundation...

BE
THE
BETTER
MAN

Jessica turned to follow my gaze. Together we watched the second animation slip down the nude goddess sheathing the north tower:

BELIEVE
IN
YOURSELF
*
FOR REAL

I stood agog.

"Yep," Jessica said nodding, "a thousand times bigger *does* mean a thousand times more sexist."

"More like... *a thousand times more awesome!*" I bellowed.

I whooped and swung her around. This happened sometimes, circumstances triggering flushes of dopamine when you were already full dink on euphoria or some such. *I had written those ads*—well,

more like massaged the AI that picked them out of thousands on the basis of neurofeedback polls. Seeing them on the towers—well, that had been as near to heaven as this wimpy little Icarus had ever come, despite Jessica's disapproval. So it was a case of sliders maxed out in maxed out circumstances. I was 'double dipping' *large*, and it was a fucking rush.

"Wooooooo!" I cried, and I *meant* it, blindly, utterly...

The parameters were always there to piss on the parade of course. To oppress.

Jess seized my shoulders, filled my field. "You doubled up there, didn't you?" she cried, smiling, peering into my eyes. "Yes! Yes! And *oops*..." she said, following the sway of my head. "Here come the po-po..." by which she meant the parameters.

Suddenly I was calm. As solid as a rock.

"What was it like?" she demanded, seizing my lapels. "How did it feel?"

I raised an eyebrow a la Spock, shrugged all nonchalant.

"Like my brain just snorted meth off my dick."

Jessica had the most wonderful feminine cackle, the product of the Bausch affectation feedback emulator I gave her last Christmas—a great way to accessorize mannerisms. "Let's *dooo* it," she said, kissing me deep, crushing her AR overlay against me. I was as erect as you would expect a fifty year old man would be kissing a near-naked eighteen year-old cave girl—Christ, I could have rented my dick out to guard Windsor Palace—but it felt like a joke compared to what I had just experienced. A persistent reflex, a precursor to some dry spasm.

And *that*, of course, was her point...

[Jessica] **IMAGINE! NO PARAMETERS**, glowed across my margin.

"Okay, Miss Money Penny," I said, grinning like Sean Connery (my go-to affectation guy—so much better than all those too-cool-for-school Clint Eastwoods out there). "But shouldn't we let the others in on our little secret?"

She giggled, swung like a starlet from the crook of my arm.

"You mean before? Or *during*?"

#

My city. Oh my... my city. She deserved it all, I tell you, the scorn, the pious praise, even the bald-faced lies. But there was nothing she deserved more than yokel awe, the gawking exhaustion of the urban virgin, and the coy pride of those sophisticates who bothered to notice. They laughed up their sleeves, sure, but in the manner of reliving childhood joy in the observation of children. Some things knocked you to your knees because you were so small; other things because they were so big. My city

was *big*, let me tell you, architecture become geology for blasphemous scale. Whether uptown or down, it was one of my deepest joys, conjuring that innocence through *First-person* eyes, going five on sensory sensitivity, then full dink on *awe*. (Going old-school with a bowl of bud didn't hurt either). There was already a legend that one couldn't be Rigged without becoming spiritual *somehow*—I knew this because it had figured large for a time in my firm's West Coast marketing plans. The Feng Shui Vir Overlay was the third most popular app in California.

Of course, the fucking Humanists carped on and on about authenticity this and authenticity that. Well I'm here to tell you that ignorance is the only unforgivable arrogance. How could *installing a tap* empty the cup of meaning? No one who's been Rigged has gone back to baseline. Not. One. Soul.

Now *that's* religion, Du.

Real religion.

We ambled down the street, me and my cave-girl, discussing different ways to broach our plan to the others. My ads shone pale and crisp and titanic to our right, punctuating the fanged kaleidoscope of the surrounding city. Everything pulsed in cycles designed to cue attention. The trees of the intervening park were little more than daubs of black across glowing foundations. The effect was more than exhilarating, but with my parameters cued, the chances of *double* double-dipping were less than slim. The euphoria menu was locked, my joy fixed according to Washington's definition of 'normalcy.' I literally could not make myself happy until the world made me miserable once again.

"We should just demand everyone down the thing," Jessica was saying, her heels clicking mechanically across the concrete. "You know, leave the legalities out of it..."

I laughed a la 007. "You know what Sissy's going to say. Full frontal will just tweak her into tweaking reactively."

Sissy was bad for that, a Rigged version of what baselines would call 'neurotic.'

"You think she'd call the cops?"

"Well... not on *Derrick*."

Jessica walked nodding. "So we need to sell *him* first..." She made an *ugh* face. "That sounds like *work*."

"Well..." I said once again, mulling the germ of some insight. "Sissy *is* very situational. Maybe we should be thinking *frames*, not pitches..."

Jessica flipped a *stop-the-presses* hand. "You're right. She *is* situational. We just gotta sell them *nonverbally*. Moira jokes about it all the time, how Sissy shuts up the instant the texts start flying..."

Sissy, in case you were wondering, was my boss's wife. My boss was Derrick—proprietor of the punchbowl my ex-musician girlfriend wanted to spike with *Hitter*. Tonight was the staff party, our little celebration for what was proving to be our most lucrative contract ever. If the advance figures ticking out

on my Fringe were a reliable indication, even my modest shares were going to make me a *billionaire*. And that was what tonight was *really* about...

I was about to become an *investor*.

I didn't care about the prestige, the buzz of occupying the only economic position no machine could replace. I didn't care about any of that Exceptionalism bullshit. You have to understand how near a thing it had been for me. I could have just as easily become another doilie like my buddies from high-school, another parasitic worm, always griping about gifts I didn't deserve, living a perpetually larval life, acting out Vir fantasies as savage as they were pointless. For me, being an investor was more a matter of *escape* than achievement, of becoming someone utterly different than what I was.

Something better, not *for* myself... *of* myself.

Trust me. The distinction matters. More than some people might wish.

"But how to keep it nonverbal..." Jessica mused, her heels clicking at my side.

"Indeed," I said with a highlander burr. "Always a problem with the fairer sex... Maybe we sh—"

[Derrick] **YOU GUYS CLOSE?** glowed white on my Fringe, rendered in a chicken-bone comic book font.

VERY, I thought in reply.

[Derrick] **COOL. GOTTA SURPRISE FOR YOU.**

"Ooops," I told Jessica. "I fear your gallant attempt to make our friends interesting will have to wait, honey. Seems like Derrick's got his *own* surprise."

I tagged the moment for vanity review—man, my accent was coming along!

"No-no, this is *perfect*," she said, shaking her head in thought. "We can *use* this. Reciprocation bias—think about it! He can't surprise us, then turn around and poo-poo *our* surprise. It'll even tweak Sissy our way, I bet. Heaven forbid her precious Derrick do anything *unfair*!"

She frowned at my head-shaking. "What?"

"This is too good," I said grinning. "Half-naked cave-girl *and* evil mastermind!"

"Yeah," she replied, "just remember which one is *real*..."

"Hey..." I caught her hand, tugged her to a stop. "Let's have a Moment."

She grinned at me with the dew-eyed, disbelieving wonder that is every husband's joy—not that we would ever get married. I didn't *need* to look at her profiles to know that she was genuinely happy. She pulled her Woo from her purse, and her eyes went blank as she steered the Swonk Towers into the floating camera's frame. We embraced, jacked our intimacy sliders full dink, and fell in love all over again.

When you're Rigged, no one need to say, 'Cheese.'

Smiles are *real* now, Du.

#

Snapshot. Shoes pacing weed-riddled cracks, like two scarabs on sticks.

Snapshot. A lover's laugh, eyes bright, and beaming more than approval—gratitude.

Snapshots, not of anything so hollow as scenes, but of *life*, the whole bandwidth of being *utilized*, shaped, molded. Moments, instants as dense as this very instant now... *experience*... or as it had come to be called on the web—Cheese.

We were the blessed artisans of ourselves.

Just like the ad says.

#

Derrick lived in one of those posh 'Omit Clause Communities' they now airbrush from satellite photos and exclude from free online searches. Wealth had always been the great bulwark of privacy, and now was no different. The walls were still there—only the building materials differed.

The gate had been left open, and we passed beneath the seashell roar of the maples, and I marvelled as I always did, at the spare, marmoreal glamour of Derrick's house. A drone picked us up, and followed us in.

[*Jessica*] **ASK HIM FOR A RAISE!** gleamed across my Margin—Jessica, being Jessica. I would have tagged the moment as something to consider during our weakly personality audits, but envy famously lay on the far side of the parameters. It was too risky to the economy, the original industry panel had determined, to give consumers control over consumer impulses.

"I'm past that now, honey," I said with an eye-twinkling flourish of my eyebrows. I was saving the billionaire bit for a surprise, later. I rapped the oak door with authority.

The portal cracked open on cries of, "Tim! Jess!" Derrick seized my hand, winked before clasping my cave girl in a molester's hug. Clapping my shoulder, he hustled us from the porch gloom into warm interior light and the iron-hoop of Sissy's embrace. "Can you believe the *numbers*, Tim!" Derrick cried, taking me in his arms, then pushing me back in disbelief. "I won't be able to *afford* you after this!" Moira and her wife Kara had joined the reception by this point, and together, they all laughed at my sheepish *I-dunno* shrug. And because they were Rigged I knew that they were *truly* happy for me, as opposed to merely wanting to be.

And to prove as much, Aces began lighting up across my Margin.

That was when I glimpsed *him* sitting alone in the sunken living-room several yards away, just the back and side of his head, but enough for me to be certain that I didn't know him. Luckily my euphoria slider had unlocked, and I jammed it full dink, and so effortlessly recaptured the glory of being beloved by beloved friends.

[Jessica] WHAT DID HE MEAN BY 'NUMBERS'? flashed across my margin.

Derrick was already pulling me in by the arm, saying, "Come! Come! I have someone I want to introduce to you."

[Jessica] WHAT DID YOU MEAN?

And so I met Glenn. Every step I took toward the living-room confirmed my initial impressions. He wore ancient jeans and a pit-stained Jean Lebris T-shirt that shouted doilie. The fact that he wore a wedding band would have shouted religious nut, were it not for a certain Trotsky air, spectacles, long bangs, and adolescent beard—that identified him as an intellectual... which was to say, *Humanist*. They all belonged to the same ghetto now. Nature.

With a showman's gift for commanding attention, Derrick explained how he had found Glenn sitting alone on the curb outside his gate, despondent for being the only member of his protest group to show up. Glenn was not pleased: It was kind of alarming, seeing a human blush in spontaneous embarrassment and defensive anger. He even opened his mouth in abortive retort. It reminded me how long it had been since I had rubbed elbows with the unaugmented. Lord knows I had *researched* them enough, but engage with them in social circumstances? It had to be two years at least.

"He looked so dejected we thought we should invite him in," Sissy said, "show him the way the Rigged *really live*."

I frowned at Derrick, until I recalled that Sissy had recently purchased the *Karma VO*, and now, for all intents and purposes, *really did* have a little voice in her head telling her what she should do. According to Derrick, the app had managed to transform a typical bitch into a pious bitch, which he was okay with, if it meant he had a better shot at getting into heaven. Having read a little about the difficulties engineers face modelling moral contexts, I personally thought the whole thing was a scam. Assisted decision-making was pretty much the only app market that gave me any qualms about the technology... before downing *Hitter*, that is. I mean, think about it: what happened when these 'virtual observers' became smarter than we were?

"And more importantly," Derrick said, shooting a smiling frown at his wife, "I wanted to see if you, my dear boy, could sell him on *First-person*."

"Derrick!" Sissy cried. "You're going to make Tim *work*?"

Derrick shrugged in comedic mea culpa, flashed everyone his trademark upside-down grin. "You do realize some 44% of doilies express Humanist sympathies—at least according to the latest online sentiment analyses. You know the price point is only going to go down, honey. Think of the *market!*"

His younger sister, Moira, began booing and throwing popcorn at him.

Everyone roared, shot her Aces, same as me.

Glenn, who had been watching in horror, suddenly clasped his knees and began shaking his head.

"Sorry. Sorry. I knew this was a bad id—"

"Not a chance, eh, Glenn?" I said, reaching out to shake his hand.

The man leaned back.

"Uh..." he said, hanging out his lower lip. "Let's see... webs of nanowires cultured through your brain, a continuous broad-band feed, a *HUD in my head?*" He scratched the side of his nose. "Yah. I think I'll pass, thanks."

Derrick simply grinned at me, knowing. I shot him a quick Ace.

"No problem," I said. "Self-improvement is serious business..."

[*Jessica*] **HITTER TIME?** surfaced across my left Fringe.

I sent her an Ace without so much as blinking at good ol' Glenn.

"But before you go, can you tell me why you and your friends decided to picket our party?"

Glenn still held his knees, stared up at me through those absurd—and yet curiously cool—spectacles. "I dunno... Maybe 'cause I think *First-person* is the devil?"

"No," I laughed. "I understand *that* part. But we're just the ad men, Glenn. An office of *three*. Why not picket the manufacturer? Or the FDA? Why bother with the guys who make the signage?"

Moira sent me Glenn's credit dossier (which any investor could access). I left the information hanging in my right Fringe, sent her an Ace.

Glenn, meanwhile, glared from the couch, obviously cowed by our numbers, his Bayesian systems struggling for some kind of predictive handle. He wasn't even sure why he'd accepted Derrick's invitation to join their party—and how could he be when he wasn't Rigged, when he had no apps!

I shot a second Ace to Derrick, at last understanding the genius of his little social experiment. Glenn, here, was meant to remind us of *what we once were*. He was nothing less than the prison we had escaped...

The *perfect* way to celebrate Xiaomi's US launch of *First-person EX*.

"Yes, Glenn," Sissy said, obviously on some cue from *Karma*. She knelt to his right, using a saccharine tone that she thought was soothing. "Why picket our *home?*"

Glances were exchanged, as per usual. Radio silence was maintained. I grinned, knowing Derrick was almost certainly tagging the moment for their personality audits. Oh, to be a fly on the wall...

"I'm-I'm not protesting you're *home*. I—"

"So then why come to our home?" Derrick erupted

Glenn flinched in a manner that made Kara titter. Being rigged had moved the bar for physical slapstick for Jerry Lewis to Marcel Proust. Grace had become everything.

It convinced me to push my aggression slider two dinks. There was an *edge* here, one that promised to be very entertaining. Humans were eusocial organisms, exquisitely tuned to one another, especially in circumstances involving intimations of physical violence. It was hard *not* to become an experience junkie wearing a rig. By hacking on Glenn, we were using our environment to tweak *those systems without sliders*, providing an entirely novel baseline from whence to tweak some more.

There were so many ways to make Cheese. So many people to be.

"You don't think we looked?" Glenn cried. He seemed to flutter with nonverbal cues. "*We looked* for Xiaomi... *really looked*, but they're OC... so...

Kara cackled.

I floated a mock-helpless gaze to the ceiling, saying, "*Soooo* we were simply the closest to Xiaomi as you could get... Is that it, Glenn?"

Laughter and more Aces. Glenn shook his head as though trying to sneeze away bees.

"Y-you think that's *funny*?" the wannabe activist sputtered. "You live here, enjoying the bounty of a nation raised on the b-back of popular protest, and you-you think it's... *funny*, that its most powerful institutions *can-can't be found!*"

"No..." I replied. "I just think you're a piss-poor proteste—"

My friends roared, and Aces lined up above the lower limits of my sensorium. I was scoring large, but the remarkable thing—mind-bending for someone like you, I'm sure—was that Jess was pitching the others on *Hitter* the whole time. Augmented multi-tasking was but one of the many little miracles the *First-person EX* made available.

"That's it," Glenn said, sneering and nodding. "*Laugh*. That's all you fuckers do, isn't it? Laugh and party. And you wonder why the masses hate you."

[*Jessica*] **JUST DOWN IT!!** appeared on my Fringe. The nearest I could tell (given my divided attention) was that the new *Karma*-tweaked Sissy had decided to speak out in text after all.

"I don't think they hate us at all," I said to the man, wondering whether my skin had ever crawled the way his was so obviously crawling. "Hate's too simple to describe it."

[*Derrick*] **THE NEW CHEESE IS BETTER, HUH?** glowed across my lower Fringe, just below my focus, which remained pinned on Derrick's Humanist guinea pig.

BRILLIANT DEMO, I thought in reply.

"*Enlighten* me then," Glenn spat.

"Well, I think it's more accurate to say that they *love* to hate us..."

Glenn coughed in hilarity.

"You laugh, but the difference is real."

"How so?"

A Sean Connery wince. "Well... you showed up all *alone*, didn't you?"

My friends boomed with laughter. Moira even cried out, "*Zing!*" Aces were marching like glowing ants along my Margin now. It was but one more perk of being who I was, *my new self*. Now I was always the guy I needed to be, instead of being stranded with the dull ache of a brave face.

"Face it, Glenn," I said, "the problem you face is that the masses don't hate us the way you *want* them to hate us. That's why you're *here*, right? to draw attention to what you think deserves a *different* brand of hate."

I could feel my augmented aggression taking hold, steel creeping through my bones, the sense of perfect self-possession that comes with social domination. Glenn could do nothing but squirm given the implacable signal my body was broadcasting. I could step through him like smoke, such was my density.

"S-sure!" Glenn spat, throwing his voice into the void of his confidence. "That's it. Just keep laughing. They'll figure i—"

"Sounds like we have damn good reason to laugh!" Derrick cried, earning hilarity and Aces because he was, well, Derrick.

[*Sissy*] I'LL DO IT IF WE STOP TEASING GLENN, gleamed across my Fringe.

"And just *what* will they figure out, Glenn?" I asked, even as the others cluttered my periphery with bullshit reassurances for Sissy. I'd been Rigged long enough—three years, four months, and sixteen days—that I could take these space/subspace exchanges for granted. I can read while speaking, think out short texts whenever I pause for breath, that sort of a thing. Derrick himself is something of a prodigy: the man spends his day holding down simultaneous conversations...

"Tell us, Du," I said, my Scottish burr as soft as a cat's belly. "Tell us the horrible truth you hope reveal."

#

You see, in the old days you always had to worry. That was the *real* moral Glenn's presence communicated to me: the degree to which my life had *improved*. I mean this was the Information Age, the time when creativity was king, when you need only shout to be heard, to reach out to be soothed, even loved. Derrick had invited Glenn into his house because he was *open* to novelty, to ideas, to the *sturm und*

strang that was the mother of everything *new*. He was a mischievous prick, sure, but ultimately Derrick had embraced Glenn because *he did not fear*, neither the man nor the dogma.

And how did Glenn respond? Well, it was plain as a billboard on his face. Worry. Incredulity. Apprehension. Name the affect, and the slider was cranked. That was one of the things that the Humanists could never get straight: *just because you couldn't see the slider didn't mean it wasn't there*. He was every bit as tweaked as any of us, the only difference was that he possessed neither knowledge nor control.

Glenn cleared his throat as if to speak, but looked to his feet instead.

"He's not talking," Derrick said in mock consternation. "Why's he not talking?"

"Because he feels *uncomfortable*, Derrick," Sissy said in sing-song reproof, once again kneeling beside Glenn's knee. "Embarrassed. *Intimidated*... Don't you guys remember what it was like?"

Fucking *Karma*. Why did apps make annoying people *more* annoying?

To think we had thought Sissy was a buzz kill before!

"I'm-I'm *not* intimidated!" Glenn snapped. "I'm... I'm just... *disgusted*."

I'm sure our activist friend thought our subsequent silence was the result of his comment—after all, insults invariably provoked involuntary responses among baselines. Defensiveness. Outrage. But we were Rigged, able to laugh off the most vicious verbal barbs. We could *choose*. His disgust meant as much or as little as we wanted it to. No, we had paused because Jessica had broadcast the *Hitter-sync* invitation the instant Glenn opened his mouth. There icon lay in my POV, a weird, golden ankh-like thing, twinkling just to the left of the man's slovenly expression, beckoning.

Now this was the *real* life of the party. Whatever distraction Glenn afforded could only pale before the fact of the *parameters*, the mad prospect of jumping over the fence we had railed against so many times. A classic *gulp* moment. It was as if we simply needed to breathe together for a bit, you know?

Before the leap.

"Seize the Cheese, folks," Derrick said, his eyes laughing. I popped the icon with merest flexion of thought... suffered a moment of affect vertigo as my sliders synced to Jess's, but nothing more. We all stood blinking, *tasting* the new configuration. I decided I rather liked her settings.

[Moiria] EVERYTHING LOOKS THE SAME TO ME.

[Kara] YEAH? CHECK OUT THE SLIDERS!

She was right. Where the original FPOS graphic presented the sliders as *closed* rectangles, they were now... *open*. It's hard to convey the dizzy proportions of what we could now do... if we wanted.

Glenn, meanwhile, peered from face to face, growing more bewildered. Baselines were often troubled by the presence of the Rigged: apparently it had something to do with the way we violated various nonverbal expectations...

If only he knew what lay behind the shining eyes that pretended to regard him.

[Moira] GROUND RULES?

Not only was Moira Derrick's little sister, she was also our neurocomputational engineer, the brains behind my messaging and Derrick's business moxy. I had long ago learned to read her queries as imperatives, unlike my wild-child companion, Jessica, who texted, **ONLY ONE**, in immediate reply...

THOU SHALT HAVE FUN!

And just like that, I was howling with laughter, screaming really. I staggered from side to side, hands palsied, elbows digging into my abdomen, gaping like a fish in air. And I wasn't alone. Kara had collapsed over the back of the second couch, sending globules of wine bouncing across the cream fabric. Derrick had crashed his face into the cushions just to the right of Glenn, who looked like a cat surrounded by water sprinklers.

I managed to find the mirth slider despite the delirium, saw that Jess had cranked the intensity bar several dinks *beyond* the old graphic. I dialled us back into collective sanity... shot her a worried look. Antics like this explained why she got so few Aces when we went out.

[Moira] HOLY SHIT!

[Derrick] INTENSE! INTENSE!

Glenn watched us gather our wits and wind with something akin to child's horror. Feigning breathlessness, I took a seat next to him, all the while keeping half an eye on the accumulating text chatter. Jessica's stunt had both frightened and *educated* them. Now that they knew how *Hitter* worked—now that they had experienced the kind of Cheese they could 'seize,' they were far more excited than anything.

"Whoa, momma," I said on a long exhalation. "I'm sure that confirmed a couple of things for you, eh, Glenn?"

[Sissy] **TIM, YOU PROMISED!** leapt out from the office tower of glowing text climbing my starboard Fringe. A personal communication.

"You could say that," the man said tautly.

Kara, Moira, Derrick and Jess were too caught up negotiating *Hitter* to pay much attention, but Sissy was gazing at me with those wide, brown eyes of hers. And I wondered, not for the first time, what she was doing here, with Derrick, with the likes us. "*My wife is weak*," my boss had once confided. "*Being Rigged is unkind to the weak.*" This was a truism of sorts, to the degree that, 'Imagine what their

audits are like!' was a staple of gossip everywhere. No one *fought* anymore, but then no audit was 50/50 either! Jess typically tagged six times more things than I did!

But you didn't need to be a psychic to know that Sissy was *never meant* to see herself in the light of more predatory eyes, that all the Virtual Observers she had installed over the years spoke to a kind of despair she would never suffer, thanks to *First-person*, only bear. Endless audits, endless bouts of neurofeedback training, endless apps promising to nip and tuck this or that flaccid pouch of her personality, and none of it ever working, not as well as she needed, at least to swim with sharks like ourselves.

CHECK THE LOG, SISSY. I PROMISED NADA...

I cranked my aggression slider two dinks past the default, telling myself she needed to understand, the flakey bitch. She needed to be bloodthirsty—even if for only a moment—to understand the true lay of the land...

The truth of bigots like Glenn.

"So tell me, Glenn," I said, "what is it you see when you look at the likes of us?"

Again, that pathetic, hunted look. Baselines only *looked* like people, I realized... People on the outside, subhuman within.

He laughed like someone who had forgotten to brush their teeth. "Yah," he said, grimacing for reluctance. "What do I see... Hmm, how should I put it... Well, it's like everywhere I go, I see you walking around like zombies, or... posing, strutting around in some kind of kind of celebrity fantasy land! All of it accessories. All of it... *artificial*. You guys, you gotta realize... look, I know you can't *see* it, and I realize there's no going back, *but you're not people*. Not really. You're credit card bills, walk-in closets where souls should be." He spoke like a steam engine, I was beginning to realize, starting slow and spasmodic, accelerating into a passionate clickety-clack-choo-choooo.

"So we have no *souls*?" Kara asked, frowning. "*Please*."

Her look was nothing short of murderous. Moira reached out to clutch her shoulder. And I realized that this was what made *Hitter's* sync mode so devious, the fact that we all had our own baseline, the bolus of native dispositions that made up our 'personality,' buried beneath innumerable tweaks and training apps, sure, but written into the *human* OS nonetheless. If Kara had a temper before being Rigged, then jacking aggression would press her over the executive threshold far sooner than it would, Sissy, say...

Not all tweaks were equal, here.

"Love!" Glenn blurted, cowed by Kara's imperious scowl. "T-take love. How does someone *decide* to be in love? Huh?"

Kara shrugged, mimed dragging a slider in the air. Laughter spilled from the corners of the room. Someone had bumped up the mirth, again, I realized. Only when viewing the slices afterward, would I realize the viciousness of our grins, the almost comic book malevolence. At the time they had merely confirmed a glorious identity, a unity of will unlike anything someone like you could fathom.

I sent Kara an Ace. Glenn rubbed his face, hands beneath glasses. Either he needed to breathe, or he needed to scream. The manifestations of anxiousness, the cringing defiance, it all hung from him like deformities. It was gross, unsightly. And I thought, what *were* these blind, mewling things, these creatures I had once been? What did you call something so comically deluded, so duped by its own limitations.

Derrick was right. Doilies *were* filthy fucking animals. There were those nights when me and him broke out the whiskey and ruminated on the 'Dark Side,' as we called it. Derrick always said there would come a time, sooner or later, when something *had to be done*. And how could it be otherwise with *chimps* that deemed themselves your spiritual superior?

"So love for you," I drawled, "is real to the degree it approximates... what? a *gorrilla*?" I felt like a blast furnace, gazing at him. "Or a capuchin, maybe?"

He could feel it, now, oh my. One big Cheese.

I thought, *Fuck it*, and jacked up the libido.

#

I cuffed Glenn hard on the side of the face.

#

Sissy was obviously climaxing. As was I.

#

This... Du. *This* is freedom, fuck. Check out the Cheese.

Glenn's glasses whipping across the couch as if flung from a pinky. Derrick reaching deep between my cave girl's thighs. Jess convulsing, blank-eyed, likely still fucking reading! Moira catching Kara, who had lunged toward Glenn, who turtled on the couch like a twelve year old asthmatic, literally *twitching*.

"Hit him..." Sissy gasped, her gaze welded to my own. "Hit him again."

"Please!" Glenn wailed from beneath fluttering fingers. "Puh-please! I just wanna go! I j-just—"

I obliged my boss's wife. The chimp made a noise like a hooting whimper—disgusting, pathetic!

"Look at you!" I raved, "*Look! At! You!*" I struck him with alternate palms each fucking note. "You're my *judge? My keeper?* How is it supposed to work, Glenn? How is it that *you* are better than *me?*"

"I wan-wanna go, now. You sai—"

I hammered his left orbital, roared "***Tell me how the fuck it is!***"

(You know I took a slice of that Cheese).

Sissy sat next to him, upright, her head dipping, chest heaving, illuminated in what seemed a cathedral light.

"*Because we're real!*" he screeched, shrill and volcanic. His arms lashed out like dumb ropes. "You're just muh-m-mangled abominations! Empty... empty things! You-you have no *personalities*, no no *core*... there's literally *nothing—nothing!* Only bullshit p-p-purchased in some Vir boutique!"

Weeping. The man actually *wept*, at once abject and unashamed for fury. Even as deep in the extremis of hate and passion as I was, I was stupefied, so much time had passed since I had seen it last, someone genuinely *crying*.

It made me nauseous.

"You're! Not! Human!" glassless Glenn cried squinting. "You're *ghouls!* Fucking shoeboxes!"

"What?" Derrick grated, his voice somewhere high on my periphery. "Because we *choose* who we are? *Unfuckingbelievable!*" he gurgled, asphyxiating for wrath.

"Because you choose!" Glenn cried. "Yep! Yep! Because you *fucking* choose! You think you're building things on the ground, *when you're a hundred floors up!*"

"The whole fucking world's rigged to soak chimps like you!" I howled. "*Adapt or die!* That's *nature*, Glenn, not locking potential in a wildlife preserve!"

"Adapt to *what?* J-Crew? Ace counts? You're chuh-choosing things humans were *never designed to choose!* Never! Designed! And the d-d-disaster that sorts you will be the d-d-disaster that sor—!"

"*So you gotta be chained to be free?*" Derrick roared, wagging with indignation as he boomed, his finger dancing a la Fuhrer. "You people are fu—!"

"Yep! You said it! You gotta be chained to be—"

"***Fucking insane!***" Derrick roared, smashing his vodka and tonic across the side of Glenn's face.

The rush of blood was preposterously crimson, and ludicrously instant. I whooped. Derrick simply turned and walked away—scooting to get some paper towels. I howled with laughter. *Everything* howled, and leapt and *rubbed*... I leaned in to seize Glenn's throat, but skinny as he was, he had at least 15 kilos on me. He was wailing something I couldn't understand, but sounded insanely funny. Aces lined up along my Margin.

Sissy gawked, staring at the blood-greasy worm that was our Humanist friend. Everything about her seemed to arc in multiple directions—as if she were a gusher of popcorn.

Then Derrick strode directly to the centre of the living-room, raised his revolver, and shot his wife in the head.

#

We didn't stop laughing. Sissy's face just hung pale and punctured, then wagged as if tugged on a clothesline. And it was just... so... fucking... funny... and *amazing*, you know, actually seeing the shockwave wobble inside her skull... beautiful, even! I know how that must make you feel... at least so far as I can remember how it would have once made me feel... back when I was blind like you.

What can I say? Everybody was bumping sliders by this point, pressing them clear off the Fringe to the very Margin. I mean, the horror was there, you know? but more as a *goad* than any kind of obstacle. A kind of fuel. To this very day Sissy's murder remains one of the most *spiritual* experiences of my life—the biggest slice of Cheese I've ever cut. Not the sweetest, Du, but the *meatiest* by far.

The whole thing unfolded... immaculately after that, as if we were witnessing *cosmic* comedy, a skit materializing out of vacuum. I watched, screaming with laughter, as Derrick stood, his chin to his breastbone, his jowls crowded into a scarf of flab, looking down as if trying to count money without emptying his pockets, smiling as if pleasantly surprised by the sum. I sent him an Ace, and he looked up beaming, glanced to his wife's puppet body, gushing and kicking—flopping even. He raised the gun to his own head, his eyes shining with rage and wisdom, and he looked to *me*, his surrogate son, asking how such a thing could be sane. I shrugged and mouthed, *It is what it is*, like blowing a kiss. Jess wrapped her nubile limbs around him, began grinding her pubis against his hip.

Glenn was screaming inconsolably, a child abandoned for retardation.

[Derrick] **SO INTENSE!** glowed across my Fringe, surreal for the image of my boss, best friend, and spiritual father sucking on the barrel of his Colt.

SEIZE THE CHEESE.

I waited for him to pull the trigger...

Then I dialled us all back to a more manageable place.

We stood, smiling and clearing our throats, while Glenn continued to scream. The air crackled. The smells, cordite and bowel, were like perfume. Jess straightened her animal pelt bikini. I untucked my shirt to cover the stain blooming chill across my crotch.

We exchanged a flurry of texts. We weren't idiots. We knew full well the gravity of what had happened. But we also knew we had nothing to fear, and very little to cover up. From the look of Glenn's

credit file, his cooperation would come cheap. That just meant doing what we did all the time, only with the police. There was no use crying over spilt milk, now, was there? Might as well just chill, talk to the chimp for a bit.

Then call the po-po.

Besides, it was kind of *cool*, you know. We had all cut our slices, even if we claimed otherwise.

On an absent whim, I checked the latest numbers on my omnipresent Bloomberg feed, faintly amazed that in all this time, I had not once thought to look in.

And it was *there*, Du—the total I needed.

I'M A BILLIONAIRE, BABY, I texted to Jess.

"You're what?" she gasped aloud.

We ran all the way back to my soon-to-be-abandoned home, me and my paleolithic temptress, stopped to make love twice—the mad, jungle love that magazines could only promise back in my Dad's day. This! This is my world, Du—a world where *selves are made*, and where each and every moment pulses with exact proportions of love and joy and glory.

It wasn't until the following morning that I decided to cry.

Postscript

Reverse engineering brains is a prelude to engineering brains, plain and simple. Since we are our brains, and since we all want to be better than what we are, a great many of us celebrate the eventuality. The problem is that we happen to be a certain biological solution to an indeterminate range of *ancestral* environments, an adventitious bundle of fixes to the kinds of problems that selected our forebears. This means that we are designed *to take as much of our environment for granted as possible*—to neglect. This means that human cognition, like animal cognition more generally, is profoundly ecological. And this suggests that the efficacy of human cognition depends on its environments.

We neglect all those things our ancestors had no need to know on the road to becoming us. So for instance, we're blind to our brains *as brains* simply because our ancestors had no need to know their brains for what they were in the process of becoming us. This is why our means of solving ourselves and others almost certainly consists of 'fast and frugal heuristics,' ways to generate solutions to complicated problems absent knowledge of the systems involved. So long as the cues exploited remain reliably linked

to the systems solving and the systems to be solved, we can reliably predict, explain, and manipulate one another absent any knowledge of brain or brain function.

Herein lies the ecological rub. The reliability of our heuristic cues utterly depends on the *stability of the systems involved*. Anyone who has witnessed psychotic episodes has firsthand experience of consequences of finding themselves with no reliable connection to the hidden systems involved. Any time our heuristic systems are miscued, we very quickly find ourselves in 'crash space,' a problem solving domain where our tools seem to fit the description, but cannot seem to get the job done.

And now we're set to begin engineering our brains in earnest. Engineering environments has the effect of transforming the ancestral context of our cognitive capacities, changing the structure of the *problems to be solved* such that we gradually accumulate local crash spaces, domains where our intuitions have become maladaptive. Everything from irrational fears to the 'modern malaise' comes to mind here. Engineering *ourselves*, on the other hand, has the effect of transforming our relationship to all contexts, in ways large or small, simultaneously. It very well *could* be the case that something as apparently innocuous as the mass ability to wipe painful memories will precipitate our destruction. Who knows? The only thing we can say in advance is that it will be globally disruptive *somehow*, as will every other 'improvement' that finds its way to market.

Human cognition is about to be tested by an unparalleled age of 'habitat destruction.' The more we change ourselves, the more we change the nature of the job, the less reliable our ancestral tools become, the deeper we wade into crash space.