

“BUBBLEGUM CROSS”

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by

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Prologue - THE CAMERA EYE

Mega Tokyo, 2022

In the dimly lit corridors of the Uizu laboratory, a man's shadow appeared from around a corner, watched closely by a system of electronic eyes that monitored the entire building. The shadow moved slowly, stopping occasionally to look up at a few of the video surveillance cameras to inspect their running status.

"Raven-hakase . . ." the man whispered into a tiny microphone hidden inside his lab coat, "I am at the laboratory. Everything appears to be functioning properly. It is now twelve-thirty a.m. I just spoke with Mason a few hours ago. He has accepted my invitation and will arrive here at one-thirty a.m. I hope everything is functioning at your end, or this will all be for nothing my friend."

Katsuhito Stingray turned away from one of the surveillance cameras and walked toward a large window that opened into what looked like an operating room. A handful of technicians milled about, fussing over a mass of wires and cables connected to a blue metallic torso mounted to a pillar in the center of the room.

Watching the activities from the darkness of the dim hallway, Katsuhito cocked his head again to aim his voice into the pocket of his lab coat. "The work is proceeding slowly on the cybernetic labor model, but it is my sincere belief that the project will come to fruition within the next few days. While this new technology will hopefully evolve into endless applications, as you know it is the *other* project that concerns me at the moment."

Katsuhito paused for a moment to gather his clouded thoughts and then continued his whispered dictation. "Since Mason seized the prototype cyborg "Largo", I have not been able to divulge its present location. No doubt he intends to use the cyborg to further his own ambitions to undermine the chairman. It now appears that our fore-sightedness has served us well. But I still fear that if Mason gets wind of our deception, that he may retaliate against me in a violent manner. That is why it is imperative that you cut this link as soon as Mason has confessed his plans. He is the most dangerous man I have ever met. We must not underestimate his ability to-"

The door to the laboratory suddenly swung open and a young technician's head poked out, his voice calling down the corridor. "Dr. Stingray? We need you in the lab sir."

Katsuhito flushed at being interrupted in his secret dictation and pretended to cough. "I'll be right there," he responded. The young technician nodded, and ducked back into the lab letting the door draw to a close by itself.

Katsuhito watched the door close and then hastily added a last addendum to his running dictation to his distant accomplice Dr. Raven. "Well my friend, work calls. The next time you hear my voice I will be in my office. It will be tricky to get Mason to talk, but I believe the weeks of preparation have convinced him of my loyalty to his cause. Once he has divulged his plans, store this recording in a safe place until our meeting tomorrow. Then we will decide on our next move."

He paused for a moment to consider his next words, that lay heavily upon his conscience. "In the event I do not show up at our arranged meeting site, please follow the instructions I spoke of earlier very carefully. The backups must be sent anonymously, and the two recipients must never- I repeat, *never* find out about each other's existence. Any

contact between them would create a risk to the knowledge they would each be protecting. And please make sure that the video footage that you are recording goes onto the data units as well. If I fail tonight, then someday someone must know the truth. And please take care of my son. I may not be his father by birth, but he is of my blood, and that is enough for me." Katsuhito flicked off the power switch for the microphone's transmitter and moved toward the laboratory doors.

The doctor thought to himself about the events of the last few months while staring through the huge glass panel into the eyes of the blue boomer that waited patiently for its first 'jolt of life'. Because Mason had 'procured' the "Largo" prototype cyborg before its testing was completed, many things were still uncertain about Largo's functionality and performance. Mason had simply walked in when Katsuhito was not at the lab, and taken Largo away, with no explanation afterward.

Powerless to recover the stolen prototype, Katsuhito vowed that this 'procurement' would not happen to his second cyborg. Secret testing had recently been completed, and the being was deemed physically and mentally stable. Then, under the cloak of night, the cyborg was moved to a 'safe' location in an industrial section of town, until Katsuhito could plan his strategy to deal with the ambitious Mason.

Now, the plan was reaching its climax, a confrontation between Brian J. Mason and the finest scientific mind that Genom had ever contracted. Katsuhito knew that his research was valuable, and he was betting that Mason understood this fact; and was planning to pass it off as his own somehow. Katsuhito however, would not be cast aside without a fight.

1:00 a.m.

Sylia stared into her father's face on the screen of the vidphone, listening to his words, as he explained why he wouldn't be home until later. Again.

She was still just a naive young girl, but she thought she detected an overtone of fear in her father's voice. As he said goodnight to her, she wondered why he would be afraid of anything, when he was so smart and so gentle-hearted. Fear would not introduce itself to her in its most extreme form, until later that morning, stealing her father away from her, and a childhood she had barely begun.

Mega Tokyo - 2036

Deep inside the darkened Genom Tower, a faint pulse of artificial life beat in time to the footsteps of three shadowy invaders. Noiseless and graceful in their movements, they made their way quietly through the lightless corridors and hallways of the empty research complex to arrive at a thick, metal door labeled, 'CHAIRMAN'. Across the door, a wide, yellow tape, coated with dust, with the words, 'AD POLICE CRIME SCENE LINE - DO NOT CROSS' on it, vainly attempted to bar the way.

The trio dropped their black canvas enclosed burdens on the floor softly, and began to remove various small, metal items. Working quickly, the smallest of the three shadows placed a gray, palm-sized, rectangular box at each corner of the door's frame and then stepped back, motioning his companions to do the same. Pressing down on a keypad strapped to his forearm, the leader took another step back and covered his eyes as the

door vanished from view in a sharp, silent flash of blue light. The four gray boxes held their position around the three-inch strip of doorframe that remained visible while the three figures scooped up their duffel bags and slipped through the now open doorway like liquid.

Moving in a straight, unerring line across the outer office's length, the leading figure reached into his canvas bag and produced four more of the gray rectangular boxes. Before him was the energy-locked door to the chairman's main office and the route to their prize. He placed the devices around the door's frame as he had with the outer door, and in the space of a few seconds the dark, dusty, inner office beckoned to the three shadows through the open door frame. The intruders passed through as quickly and as gracefully as they had before while the energy lock along the door's edge continued to monitor the door for any attempt to open it by conventional means.

Once inside, the figures shook off their pattern of preparedness and began a frantic, random search of the room's walls. Minutes ticked by as the intruders groped along even the tiniest lines in the wall's surfaces.

The tallest shadow suddenly cried out in triumph as he forced a large, metal panel to slide along the west wall of the office, but before he could turn to his companions and reap their praise, he suddenly felt something burning his lungs. His companions watched as he slowly turned to them, his face twisted in agony, and fell to his knees. Instead of rushing forward to aid their fallen accomplice, the two standing shadows calmly reached into their canvas bags, and each removed a black gas mask. Once they had them fitted over their faces, they marched over the body of the tall, still shadow and entered the misty room beyond.

Inside, they found what amounted to a small TV studio. In front of them, a large, ornately carved, wooden desk faced an array of video monitors mounted along the back wall. Amid the bank of screens, mounted at eye level with anyone seated at the desk, a video camera stared lifelessly. An expensive high-back leather chair lay on the floor beside the desk suggesting that the last occupant of the room had either fallen or made a hasty exit from the room. The entire room and its contents lay under a fine layer of dust. The two shadows shrugged at each other, and moved deeper into the strange inner sanctum.

The shorter shadow moved slowly around the room as if searching for something that was not readily apparent. The other shadow stood in the center of the room and watched his companion carry out the visual search, waiting for a signal.

The scanning figure suddenly stopped, a smile slowly appearing behind his gas mask, as he spotted a crude metal panel underneath the desk that looked like a power outlet. He dropped to his knees and reached into his canvas bag, producing a chrome-plated cube about the size of a man's fist. He crawled underneath the desk and placed the cube on the plush carpet just below the panel. Touching the cube's topmost face triggered a low cyclic hum that both figures could feel in their feet. They became aware of the minutes passing by again as they waited for the device to perform its task.

The humming stopped abruptly, sending the shorter shadow forward to pry at the panel until it popped open, its energy lock little more than iron filings now. He reached into the magnetically shielded enclosure and grasped the smooth, slender metallic box that lay hidden within. Rising to his feet slowly, he stood with the object outstretched in his hand for his companion to see.

Along the top of the surgical-steel box were the letters 'OMS', finely etched in the otherwise flawless face of the container. The shorter shadow's hand trembled slightly as he worked the mechanical latch of the box. As the lid hinged outward the shorter shadow suddenly began to shake violently until he dropped the box from his flexing grip and fell to the floor in a twitching heap.

The remaining shadow casually reached under the desk and popped the chrome cube into his canvas bag. Ignoring his dead companion, he pulled out a small set of plastic, non-conductive tweezers and flipped the steel box into an upright position on the carpet so that he could view its contents. Inside the box was a vaguely heart-shaped metallic object bristling with tiny electrodes and connector pins. Its shiny, black finish gleamed briefly in his eye as he pressed down on the lid and then quickly picked the box up and deposited it in his canvas sack. Without a backward glance the shadow passed through the inner office and set about removing the four gray boxes from the doorframe. As he removed the last one, the inner section of the door reappeared, looking exactly as it did before he and his companions had entered.

Shifting the boxes in his satchel he quickly crossed the floor of the outer office and passed through the metal doorway. He removed the last four matter-displacers attached to the outer door's frame and placed them carefully alongside the others in his bag. With a final mocking glare at the surveillance camera that stared lifelessly down at him, the remaining shadow moved off down the dim corridor and passed out of sight around a corner, leaving the now tomb-like abandoned Genom Tower as it was, but forever more without a pulse.

Chapter 1. ARTIFICIAL INSTINCT

Mega Tokyo - 2038

Dr. Leomund Sholtan pushed his glasses back onto the bridge of his nose and guided the robot-mounted, stainless steel probe deeper into the exposed cerebrum of his conscious patient. The doctor turned and stared at a display screen watching for the results of the probe. Adhesive sensors placed on the patient's limbs and spine relayed a continuous stream of data through multi-colored cables connected to the computer terminal. As the numbers flicked down the screen's length the man's wrinkled face remained void of emotion.

He turned back to the inert form and coaxed the robot probe a few millimeters lower. This time the patient's shoulder shifted ever so slightly. The doctor released the probe and the contracted shoulder muscle relaxed. As the numbers came back he wiped the sweat from his brow and a smile began to form on his thin lips. The doctor attempted to probe once more, but this time a black, metallic arm shot out to grasp the doctor's wrist in a lightning reflex that sent an instrument table crashing into the wall, narrowly missing the scientist's legs.

Ignoring the instruments as they clattered onto the floor, the doctor smiled again and calmly switched off the robot probe with his free hand. In a swift, fluid motion the metallic arm released the scientist's wrist and returned to its owner's side without a sound. The prone figure stared impassively through softly glowing, blue lenses at the laboratory ceiling, as Leomund flexed his freed wrist.

Calling to an assistant to clean up the mess, Leomund removed his white lab coat and hung it up on a hook near the door. Speaking again to the crouching assistant, he advised her that he would return shortly.

Leomund walked the length of the windowed hallway to his office in anxious silence. Outside the mountain research complex a clear evening sky was beginning to darken prematurely. Leaden clouds hovered threateningly on the northwest horizon of the city. Hues of royal blue, violet and amber mixed like vaporous paint streams underneath the cloudbank.

The doctor turned to his left and glanced through the doorways as he passed by the various research labs that lined the corridor. Inside the makeshift departments, scientists peered through welding goggles at thick plates of steel as bright blue beams of energy pierced through the plates in a fraction of a second. In an operating room, a cheetah lay motionless on a steel table as surgeons gathered around it stared up at a micro-camera view of the animal's brain. Behind them along the wall, several refrigerator cabinets held hundreds of labeled vials containing blood, spinal fluid and DNA samples.

Other sealed rooms sheltered technicians who labored over laser welding equipment and gleaming, alloy body parts. The hollow limbs were graceful and curving, not bulky or heavy. The metallic, black, epidermal layer was smooth and sleek with no protruding joints. The technicians hurried about in hygienic uniforms, attempting to assemble the completed sections.

The doctor reflected on the last ten years as he walked the unlit corridor. Started primarily as a military contract, "Project Darkmatter" began as a naive exploration into

DNA mixing. While corporations like Genom focused on the commercial market and the possibilities of social control, the military's goal remained true to its name. Animals, insects, reptiles and fish were all used for research into the possibilities of a superior human-animal soldier. Many strange and horrifying abominations were born inside secluded laboratories. All of them died there as well due to mishandling by amateur geneticists who failed to understand what it was they were tampering with.

Leomund had been doing his own privately funded research on genetic blending when the military approached him. They were desperate to produce results. Too much government funding was at stake. Leomund had been a pioneer in the field of genetic research for twenty years until Genom set up for business. Leomund's private investors lost interest in the benefits of genetic abominations. They wanted results now. And that meant Boomers.

Genom cashed in quick and fast but their short-lived success was based on that very principle. The Boomer style cyborg had become a volatile investment to say the least and now they were all but extinct. The rare domestic model still entertained patrons at nostalgia-theme bars and the odd robotics convention, though they were few and far between. Labor models were still employed for space and construction purposes, but only in "high risk to human" areas. Since Genom's demise, few places could service the surviving Boomer population. Like the cold-ware super-conductor computer chip introduced at the turn of the century they became obsolete.

But a military contract was no guarantee of steady work. With preliminary research complete, the brass pulled the plug on Sholtan when information about Project Darkmatter leaked out to the public. Journalists were willing to die to cover a story these days, and a few did while attempting to flee the military bases with their laser disc evidence. Dr. Sholtan was publicly chastised by his respected colleagues who, for years had thought he had retired. Public outrage over human and animal rights abuses ascended to all time heights, and with his notes securely in hand Leomund hid himself away, to hopefully retire in obscurity.

After a year of inactivity he was contacted by a potential investor who preferred to remain anonymous. Through a simple vidphone conversation that he would never forget, Leomund eventually accepted a contractual agreement from the wealthy and very persuasive benefactor, that allowed him to continue his research with whatever supplies, machinery and human assistance he required. There were no clues given as to what was to be done with the results of the research, only the verbal agreement that upon the contract's completion the new cyborg units would be tested in a fashion of the benefactors choosing. This single point disconcerted Leomund, but the promise of subsequent contracts was too tempting to turn down.

The work was slow but breakthroughs were made, and over the years he had perfected techniques for DNA mixing that could create a stabilized cybergenetic being. The early prototypes surpassed the most agile animals in speed and reflexivity tests and established strategy and reasoning results that challenged human capability. Its alloy enforced 'skin' and skeleton made it nearly indestructible if you managed to hit it in the first place.

By the end of 2038 the only remaining hurdle in Leomund's research was to instill an instinct into the being, the sixth sense that all other creatures possessed. Somehow, the process of DNA blending had suppressed the instinct characteristics of the donor strands,

rendering the cyborg a dependent slave. Tonight had seen the final hurdle struck down in the form of a stainless steel instrument table under a clenched, black, metallic fist.

Leomund entered his office and flicked on his desk lamp, dimly illuminating the room's simple furnishings. Picking up the phone he inserted his telnet card, pressed a single unmarked button, and sank back into the leather padding of his high back chair, waiting for the other end to pick up.

A man's clear, steady voice responded. "Hello."

Leomund sat up. "It's Sholtan."

"Well? Are the modifications complete?"

"Yes Sir. I have a few more minor tests to run but I think we've done it."

"Hah! Well done! And what about the alias modifiers?"

The doctor sat back. "Final testing was completed this afternoon. Matter displacement was one hundred and two percent effective. Migration mapping error for the displaced matter was minimal. Alias reconfiguration was completely stable. There were no side-effects to the subjects whatsoever."

"Excellent. When will the prototypes be ready for their field test?"

"If all goes well tonight then I think we should be ready by tomorrow evening."

"Incredible. Well done Leo. I'll contact you tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night Sir."

Leomund gently placed the hand-unit back down into its cradle and pushed his glasses back up on to the bridge of his hooked nose. He swiveled the chair slowly to gaze out the tinted glass at the flickering lights of Mega Tokyo's downtown core in the distance. Smiling, he looked out further at the horizon and the gray clouds that had now devoured the setting sun. Soon he would know. Soon.

Chapter 2. BLACK RAIN

The rain came down suddenly with a pounding force onto the pavement and awnings as vendors and pedestrians alike scattered for shelter from the tumult. The warm water slowly collected in dark pools and eventually overflowed to be captured in the teeth of a rusting sewer grate somewhere around the corner. The once clamorous street market quickly emptied of activity except for the odd car moving quickly past the row of grimy shops and nightclubs. As the downpour subsided into a steady shower the vendors stood on the doorsteps of their packed shops and waited for the soaked customers to make their way to the checkouts. The rain was good sometimes.

But the rain that had fallen on Mega Tokyo for many years now was also spurious. All you had to do was hold your hand out in the rain for awhile and you came back with a hand covered in wet, black grit; evidence of the city's violent geological past. Buildings had been demolished and resurrected. New buildings had been commissioned. Sewers had been rerouted. Houses were rebuilt. Mega Tokyo had risen once more from the ashes to await the next earthquake. No one disagreed that it could happen again.

Outside the 'Hot Legs' nightclub, a crowd was beginning to shove forward through the single door entrance to avoid the rain. Among the shifting throng, an annoyed brunette dressed in worn, red, biker's leathers, and still wearing her helmet, began to regret this excursion. Standing on her tiptoes, she caught a glimpse of the door and its intimidating attendant. Large crossed arms perched on a barrel chest were usually enough visual warning for most patrons not to get unruly. This night was different. A new band was playing their first show at 'The Legs' and their music was doing well with the underground crowd. A sure indicator that the band would probably not play here many more times before some big-time record company snatched them away. That meant that everyone wanted to see them now, before it was too late.

The brunette was about to yell some motivating words at the attendant but reconsidered. No sense pissing the guy off just yet. "Might as well wait until I'm closer to the door," she thought.

The lineup continued filing in without incident until the still helmeted brunette arrived at the door.

"Let's see some ID," spat the bouncer casually.

The brunette replied in an equally casual tone, "Uh, well . . . hmm. It seems I've left it in my other suit."

The experienced bouncer had heard all the lines before and the look on his face said that this lame line was not going to work either. Chick or no chick. "No ID, no show. Beat it."

As the bouncer reached for the woman's arm to remove her from the line, he was interrupted by an elbow deep in the stomach. The bouncer expelled the contents of his lungs and doubled over in pain. He had not seen the brunette's quick movement but he was definitely feeling its result. The woman removed her helmet and shook her long brown mane as the bouncer sat down on the rain-soaked steps trying to reestablish his breathing pattern. He looked up and gasped his words as he recognized his assailant. "Pr . . . Pris . . . Priss. I shoulda . . . known. Gawd . . . damn bitch."

Priss bent her knees and extended a hand to the bouncer who was beginning to recover. "C'mon Clarence, get up ya big baby."

The bouncer's face flushed red at hearing his real name out loud. Giggles and snickers reverberated throughout the front of the lineup. Clarence's massive fist closed gently around Priss's hand as she helped him to his feet.

Clarence spoke, still having problems breathing, "Where... the hell... have you been? Things... haven't been the same without The Replicants playin' here. This is the first band to draw a crowd... since you disappeared."

People in the back of the line began to push forward. Clarence sensed the surge and turned to the crowd, "Fuck off you assholes in the back! Don't make me come up there!"

Priss could not help but grin, "You haven't changed a bit Clarence."

The bouncer smiled sarcastically at Priss while massaging his sore stomach and shoved her gently through the doorway, "Get in there, you..."

'The Legs' was not one of Mega Tokyo's fanciest nightspots but that was its charm. Worn wooden chairs and tables exuded a comforting warmth that reminded new patrons of a friend's basement at a party that people still talk about. The air inside was about ten degrees higher than outside. Leather and denim clad patrons milled about the bar area shouting their orders to the barkeep, trying to be heard over a disc of The Replicant's first album as it pummeled the smoke-filled interior. The tables and booths that faced the stage were already filled to capacity. Priss plunged into the dim interior and made a beeline for the bathroom to deal with her hair.

The helmet had provided protection from the rain until Clarence got in the way. She could forgive him though. How many times had he rescued her from some overzealous fan in the front row when The Reps used to play here? He wasn't the smartest guy she'd ever met but she'd learned to trust him with her life. As she entered the restroom she wondered where she'd be if he hadn't been there that night. Everybody needed someone to trust.

The band had taken the stage when Priss left the perfume-filled confines of the women's restrooms to find a spot beside the bar in the now packed house. The first guitar chords shot violently from the P.A. like gunfire, but to Priss they were intoxicating.

After wiping her hand on her sleeve, she raised a condensation coated glass of ale to her dry lips and drank in the combination of bitter fluid and distortion laden melody. Closing her eyes for a moment, she was drawn instinctively to the primal growls of the guitar. Each note and chord were executed with conviction and honesty. Although rich with distortion, each note of each chord could be heard clearly. Here was someone who cared about their tone. About their sound. About their music.

Song after song embraced her until the set neared its end. Priss closed her eyes again as the final tune wound down to a tightly focused crescendo of guitar, bass and drums. The singer thanked the audience for their support and the cheering rose momentarily above the instruments. Suddenly the bassist and drummer checked their attack, and the guitar cut through the space like a knife. The guitar player struck a string with the edge of his pick producing an artificial harmonic that soared high and clear. A deft wrist movement produced a soulful vibrato that gave the dying note new life.

When Priss opened her eyes, she found her sight line to the stage was clear. A dark silhouette stood in front of the spotlight shaking his guitar fluidly in an effort to

wring out its last ounces of feedback. For a moment the sound of a single, sustained note penetrated the thick air.

Priss stared hard at the backlit guitar player, in awe of the power he commanded over her at that moment. Finally the note fell and died and the band erupted in a synchronized fit of power chords and cymbal crashes. Priss began to push past the applauding patrons to get closer to the stage. The guitar player was on his knees now, with his axe held high like an offering to the gods of cacophony. His dark eyes were tightly closed, forcing his ears to become the only source of sensory input. With one last slashing motion across the fretboard the song ended, and the guitar player slowly rose to his feet.

Priss continued to press forward through the crowd. She could see the band members wave to the audience, and then make their way to the backstage door. Mild panic began to set in. She had to reach that door. She had to...

What was wrong with her? Why did she feel so anxious? Between her desire to talk to the guitar player and her struggle to reach the door she hadn't really thought about why she was doing this. She just felt drawn... there was something vaguely familiar about him.

Upon reaching the door she was met by a bouncer who had a better memory than Clarence, and was let through to the backstage area. The door slammed shut behind her, and suddenly memories flooded back to her of after-show parties and friends long gone. Why had she quit the music scene anyway? Oh yeah. The record company. Manipulative bastards. If it hadn't been for that one A & R guy maybe. Sure, that's what they all say. The Reps had a good run but their time was up. Someone else had come up the charts hot on their asses. The record company slowly pushed The Replicants aside giving them less and less of their time and money. The hard part wasn't getting there. It was staying there once you'd made it.

Priss surveyed the surprisingly smoke-free room and spotted the drummer and bass player talking to two over-made-up groupies in tight leather skirts and matching, red leather jackets. In a darkened corner the singer sat on an old, beat-up couch, hunched over a giggling blonde perched on his lap. Other band leeches wandered the hallways looking for a fix while suited industry types congratulated each other for another great show. Priss peered through the murk to see a black leather-clad figure with wet black hair and a guitar case under his arm push on the exit door.

Street light flooded into the back of the room for a moment revealing the guitar player's face as he stepped into the rear alley. Priss edged past the partiers, stopping only to untangle herself from the overly friendly arms of amorous roadies. As her hand touched the metal exit door, she heard a familiar sound, a muffled thrumming as a bike roared to life in the alley beyond. She pushed the lock bar and heaved on the door.

Exhaust fumes met her first as she stepped into the rain soaked alley. A light drizzle descended from the night sky making the cool outside air a little thick to breathe. Ten feet away a gleaming, black motorcycle idled patiently while its rider adjusted his helmet. Priss stood just inside the doorway still holding the open door, wondering what to do next. The guitar player was busy tightening a strap that held his guitar case in place when he finally noticed her standing there.

They regarded each other silently, neither one sure who would speak first. Priss fought within herself wordlessly, 'Say something stupid. He's gonna think you're some silly tramp.'

The guitar player stared at the woman holding the door and thought for a moment that he recognized her. He was about to speak when he saw her face darken from her internal struggle. It was a look that he had seen many times recently. He shook his head and pulled down his visor. 'Just another annoying groupie,' he thought to himself. Reaching for the throttle, he released the brake and pushed off down the alley.

Priss watched helplessly as the bike bore its rider to the end of the alley and then around the corner, leaving her standing alone amid the evaporating exhaust fumes that rose slowly and vanished into the dark above. Anger seeped into her brain and took control for a moment. The heavy metal door slammed shut. Garbage cans went sprawling across the alleys span. Cardboard and plastic flew aimlessly into the air accompanied by cursing and grunts.

As the unfeeling objects came to rest and the anger let go all that it left behind was frustration. How long had she lived like this? Why did she hesitate? She could stand on a stage in front of hundreds of strangers but she couldn't just walk up and . . . Priss's shoulders felt heavy as she began to walk down the alley to find her own bike. It was getting harder to face each day by herself. She had her friends Nene, Sylia and Linna but they couldn't fill the emptiness. She tried to define what she needed as she ambled through the dark passageway. Her boot heels clicked and echoed off the high brick walls making her suddenly aware of her own feet. And someone else's.

She turned sharply and scanned the alley's shadows for the intruder. At the moment she was more annoyed at having her thoughts interrupted than the path to her bike, that stood waiting not twenty feet away. Seeing no one, she faced forward again and picked up her pace. Straddling the bike she sighed and chided herself for being so emotional. As the excuses emerged for her behavior so did the intruders. With her key half inserted into the ignition the attack came without warning from behind.

The first attacker came at her with arms extended, knocking her off the bike onto the hard, wet pavement. The impact jarred her spine sending her right hand to awkwardly rub the source of the pain. The attackers accomplice stepped around the bike and looked down at Priss with an evil grin. As she pretended to rest for a moment the accomplice began to speak.

"Sorry babe, we need yer bike. Russell and I need a ride home. You don't mind do ya?"

Russell grinned from his perch on the seat of her bike. Anger gripped her brain again at the sight of the piece of shit on her precious motoslave.

She was about to reply when the roar of an approaching motorcycle reached their ears. The attackers turned toward the sound, and Priss seized the opening. Closing her eyes, she stabbed out with her left hand and grabbed the standing man's wet leather boot. The leg came forward as Priss yanked hard, sending the boot's wearer onto his back. She scrambled stiffly to her feet as her opponent rolled on the ground, holding the back of his head and moaning. Before Russell could react he was sent backwards over the bike by a boot heel in the face.

Priss glanced at Russell's slow, swaying movements as he picked himself up off the pavement and shook his head. To Russell's right, she suddenly saw a figure in black

leather stealing up behind the recovering bike thief. She watched Russell turn slowly to meet the figure with a drunken right cross that merely pushed air. The figure reacted quickly with two hard blows to Russell's head that dropped him back to the ground.

With a faint grin on her lips, Priss turned back to see that her own fallen opponent had risen, and to her amazement, her gun was in his fumbling hands. Her hand instinctively reached into her jacket, the empty pocket verifying that she had dropped it as she fell from her bike. As the realization of her situation set in, the man's arm swung clumsily at her head. The metal butt of the gun made only brief contact, but hit hard enough to make her head spin and send her to her knees. Priss fought the surging dizziness for a moment, and then gave in, falling to the pavement on to her stomach.

For a moment her view was clouded with a barrage of blurred images until finally, her vision cleared. She saw four boot-clad feet shuffling in front of her as her attacker fought with the figure in black. Seconds later the bike thief dropped to the ground beside her, blood trickling from his nose and upper lip. She closed her eyes as a sudden surge of pain swept through her head. As the waves subsided she reopened her eyes. A dark form was kneeling over her speaking softly. "Hey, you all right? Ouch, you're gonna feel that in the morning. Okay, don't move. Blackie's gotcha."

She lay there for a few moments and relaxed, concentrating on the sound of the soothing voice. Fatigue swept over her as the pain in her head began to pound. She rolled her eyes, and for a moment her vision clouded over again. When it eventually cleared, her wandering sight revealed a black motorcycle parked at the corner of the alley. The soft voice continued to relax her until her eyes closed once more and darkness took hold.

Chapter 3. BELOW THE SURFACE

Priss woke to a dull throbbing in her head that forced her to close her eyes almost as soon as she had opened them. Lying still for a few minutes, the pain gradually subsided until she could open them again and blink at the bright sunlight streaming in at her. As her eyes adjusted she was able to take in some of her surroundings from her vantagepoint on a scruffy pullout couch.

A tiny makeshift bedroom had been established in a corner of a small bachelor apartment stuffed with modest furniture, appliances and belongings. The gray, sunbleached walls were almost obliterated by dogeared posters of rock bands and motorcycles in various frames of activity. The far corner sheltered a small guitar amplifier and a black electric guitar that was easily the most expensive item in the room. Beside the amplifier, a small stereo system rested on a cheap, wooden shelf, dwarfed by a large, surprisingly dustfree, tapestry with images of ancient Japan sprawled across its width. A single, dustspotted window with open, rusting, venetian blinds let in the sunlight at an angle that revealed it was late afternoon.

Priss looked around her immediate location and saw her helmet and jacket piled neatly on a paintchipped wooden chair close to the couch. On top of her jacket rested her gun.

Her mind began to shake off the sleepiness, the events of the night before rapidly coming into focus. She could remember the bastards who tried to steal her motoslave. She could remember the guitar player suddenly showing up and changing the bike thieves plans, but she could not remember how she got here- wherever here was.

As her memory crystallized and her suspicions began an effort to take hold, she heard the front door open and close, choking the smoke in her brain that struggled to become fire. She glanced over at her gun sitting on top of her jacket ten feet away, and cursed under her breath for not grabbing it when she had the chance. She could hear someone pause for a moment in the enclosed front foyer area, still hidden from her view. She was about to reach for the gun when her presumed host finally rounded the corner and came into view. Seeing her awake, his face lit up and he was about to speak, but she cut him off.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful or anything but you didn't have to bring me here. I hope you're not thinking this is going somewhere."

The guitar player looked at his weary guest for a moment, and then stared at the ground, retreating from the fiery intensity of her brown eyes. He spoke slowly and so softly that Priss had to strain to hear his reply. " I'm sorry if it seems... I was gonna take you to a hospital but I found your gun and I wasn't sure"

Priss glanced at her gun again, and then looked back at her host's downcast face to see the guilt and confusion. She stopped him from continuing and frowned. "Yeah well... I'm just still not sure where I am or what happened after-"

Scanning his apartment for something to look at, Priss's host spied his guitar and studied its curves as he spoke, "You're at my place. It's a couple blocks from the bar. Your bike's okay. I checked on it this morning when I was out. I guess those guys had enough for one night."

Silence answered his statement, his guest lost in thought over the embarrassing encounter with the bike thieves.

"My bike's okay?" she finally asked, absentmindedly.

"Oh yeah. Looks fine. No scratches or nothin'."

Priss looked up to see the guitar player turn to her with his hands in his back pockets and a searching look in his shadowed eyes. She watched his handsome face as it went through contortions trying to think of something to say. Finally he spoke, again in a soft, nervous voice. "So, how do you feel? Do you want something to eat or drink, or anything?"

"I've felt worse. Have you got any tea? I'm not really very hungry, but I could sure use a cup of tea to wake up a bit."

The guitar player's face brightened, "Yeah! Sure, no problem. I'll fix ya a cup of my best brew. I got some stuff this morning from a market downtown that I go to." His voice trailed off into the kitchen as he opened cupboards and poured water into a kettle. His head popped out from the enclosed kitchen area for a moment. "I'm Blackie by the way. It's Priss isn't it? I was gonna say something back behind 'The Legs' there, but I didn't recognize you at first. I was a couple blocks away when I remembered your face from the posters on the wall backstage. But you had blonde hair and I couldn't quite..."

"Yeah I know," Priss replied, feeling a little more relaxed as they talked. "I used to wear a wig. Showbiz, ya know?"

"Yeah. That stuff has its place I guess, but I wish we could just play and leave out that kinda stuff sometimes."

An awkward silence fell for a few minutes before Blackie returned to the room carrying two cups of steaming tea and placed one gently on the battered coffee table beside the couch. Blackie put his cup down on the floor and carefully moved Priss's jacket and gun from the wooden chair to the already cramped coffee table beside his guest. He then sat down in the chair and retrieved his teacup, being careful not to spill any, his hands shaking visibly.

Priss struggled to sit up and found that the throbbing in her head wasn't too painful if she didn't move too quickly. Once upright, she reached slowly for her tea, and then lay back on the soft pillow to rest as the cup warmed her hands. Blackie clasped both hands around his own teacup, thinking of something to say. She seemed so confident and cool, he thought. What to say? His mind soon filled with a hundred thoughts simultaneously until her voice brought him back to the present.

"Listen," Priss began, trying to hide her difficulty with her words. "Thanks for helping me last night. I can handle myself just fine usually, but when that jerk hit me with my gun my mind was somewhere else and... anyway thanks. I appreciate your help and the tea."

Blackie smiled grimly as he looked down at his teacup. "Hey, I'm just glad I decided to come back. When I came around the corner and saw that big guy sittin' on your bike I knew somethin' wasn't right I just saw red I guess."

He looked up and straight into her brown eyes. This time his courage did not elude him. Their eyes focused on each other for a fraction of a second, long enough for buried emotions to stir and begin their instinctive clawing toward a distant, pitching surface. She could finally see past the shadows of his hair and into his clear blue eyes, betraying to her a reassuring innocence and naiveté. He saw her intense glare from moments ago melt into a soft regarding glance that helped to loosen his reserve.

Blackie broke the long silence, uncomfortable under its weight. "That's a really nice bike. Where did you get it? It looks like a custom job."

Priss looked up at Blackie's expectant expression, and the faint smile on her lips faded. "Yeah. A friend of mine built it. He's really good with mechanical things."

"Oh, I thought so."

She looked thoughtful for a moment and then continued to speak, noting the developing ease with which she now spoke to this stranger. "That bike is all I've really got that I can call my own, ya know?"

Blackie nodded and smiled knowingly.

"I've got three really good friends," she continued, "but that bike never argues with me. Kinda sounds weird huh?"

Blackie sat up with renewed interest. "No, I don't think so. I think I know exactly what you mean. I feel that way about my bike and my guitar. I guess other people might think it's dumb, but they don't know the shit that those things take and they never complain."

Priss nodded slowly in understanding and sipped her tea, letting the increasing similarities between them come into focus in her head. She stole another glance at his face and found that she could not look away. There was something about that face that muddled her brain. Something familiar, that she had not felt about anyone in a very, long time. Not since a certain bouncer separated her from a fan with a knife during a show at The Legs. His naive manner and simple directives made her usual suspicion seem unworthy. She looked at him carefully this time, attempting to marshal her rational feelings.

Street born wisdom played its card just then, making her fight for control over her heart with her emotions. Priss was an old hand at battles with her feelings, but this time they were winning, and it scared her. Her fear gave her instinct a new offensive edge, enough to view the situation in a different light. She started, "So... how long have you been playing in your band?"

Blackie looked up from his study of his half-empty teacup at Priss, whose intense stare had returned. "Oh, about five years. Things weren't too great for the first couple of years but we've been doing a lot better lately. We released our first album independently two years ago and it's still selling really well. The second one is just starting to pick up."

He paused, then continued as a related thought struck him, "Money's not really too much of a hassle these days but you wouldn't know it from this place."

Blackie chuckled as he looked around the room at the worn furniture and old appliances. Priss smiled as she thought of her own trailer and its grubby atmosphere.

Blackie began again on a different train of thought as his confidence grew. "It's funny, I think my father wanted me to be a doctor like him. He took me to the hospital where he worked when I was younger, and I used to mess with the bandages and supplies and stuff. He thought that if I had something to do maybe I wouldn't cause any trouble. He showed me how to make a tourniquet, how to put a splint on a broken leg. All kinds of things. Yeah, I guess he thought I was gonna be a doctor someday"

"Huh," came Priss's reply. "So why didn't you become a doctor?"

Blackie grinned. "Ahh, I got into music, ya know? I wasn't in to being a doctor or anything like that. It was fun when I was little but..."

Priss nodded again and pressed her host further, "So what hospital did your father work at anyway?"

"Well he didn't actually work at a real hospital. More like a laboratory I guess. He worked for a company that did medical research."

Priss's eyes narrowed as her instinct suddenly became aroused. "What company was that?"

Blackie drained the remaining contents of his teacup and casually answered, "Genom."

Chapter 4. COLD FIRE

Leomund turned from his patient to answer someone behind him who was calling his name. "Yes? What is it?"

A woman stood in the doorway, suddenly transfixed by the metallic figure that stood behind the doctor like a king's guard.

"Yes Miss Burgess, what is it?"

Dr. Sholtan's assistant continued to stare at the graceful form for a moment longer, halting at the cyborg's glowing blue eyes. She was about to answer when the machine's unblinking gaze suddenly panned to regard her with a cold scrutiny.

"Miss Burgess, can I help you?"

"Um . . . Oh, yes doctor. There's a call for you on line one."

Leomund rose slowly from his chair as Miss Burgess left the room. The stiffness in his knees and back became suddenly apparent as he stood and checked his watch. 5:14 p.m. The moment he had waited ten years for was drawing near.

Leomund sat down slowly at his desk and reached for the phone. A tiny, amber light marked 'NO VIDEO' winked silently beside the vidphone's control panel. His hand hesitated for a moment as he thought about the caller that he knew was waiting on the other end of the line. For several years now he had labored in the mountain laboratory, oblivious to the appearance of the man responsible for his financial well being. He knew nothing about his benefactor except that he was wealthy and patient. Hundreds of thousands of dollars had been wasted on early prototypes of the cybergenetic beings. Failures and dead ends had claimed more money, and still the investor laughed through it all. "Leomund, don't worry about the money," he would respond. "I have plenty more where it came from. Just focus on your research and let me take care of the finances."

He was right. The flow of money to the project had never faltered. Leomund smiled as he thought back to the days of university funding and the delays and red tape that came with the prestige and recognition. Leomund had enjoyed his moments in the spotlight. They had fed an ego that was like a smoldering campfire in the midst of a dry, grassy plain. And now the fire was about to reach a forest. A forest so vast that he wished he could call his colleagues and tell them whom would be responsible for the forests demise. But that was outside the realm of the project. Revenge would have to be bittersweet.

Leomund picked up the vidphone handset and pressed the button marked 'LINE 1 - SECURE'. "Good evening sir. All preparations are complete. We can begin when you're ready."

"Very well Leomund," the familiar, calm, faceless voice replied. " I'm patching through to your console as we speak. I already have the discrete videolink from the surveillance cameras at the target site. You may begin the field test immediately."

"Thankyou sir. We have vidlink as well."

"Oh and Leomund?"

"Yes sir?"

"Good luck my friend."

"Thankyou sir."

Leomund replaced the handset and watched the amber light marked 'LINE 1 - SECURE' blink twice then cease. The time had come for his research to come to life. For better or worse.

Genom. The word had struck Priss like an arrow through her heart. It had been some time since she'd heard that name. She stared hard at Blackie, suddenly on her guard, and buoyed by the fact that her instinct had uncovered something. Something she felt sure was important. Something that she feared was important.

She studied Blackie's face for any sign of deception but saw none. He continued to play with his empty teacup unaware of Priss's glare. She continued staring, stunned and speechless. A different submerged feeling was now scratching and clawing its way to the surface of her memory. A familiar feeling. A feeling of dread and hatred. A feeling that she hoped had died long ago, never to return. A vain hope that she never really believed. Inside her the battle between her evolving emotions and instinctive rational thinking had reached a peak. Probing further could reveal a truth that she didn't want to hear. Dropping the subject would feed the nagging in her brain that would eat at her slowly until she could take it no longer.

Her calm voice finally broke the long silence as she asked the question that she did not want to ask.

"What did your father do at Genom?" she said flatly.

Blackie looked up suddenly at Priss and saw a composed expression on her face that he had not witnessed before. An expression designed to fool the witless.

"I don't know that much about his work really," he began. "He'd work in the office doing computer stuff mostly. We'd have dinner together and then I'd fall asleep in his office. I'd wake up in the morning, we'd have breakfast, then he took me to school."

He stopped for a moment lost in thought and then continued. "We never spent much time at home. He was always way too busy. I never even knew my mother. She died when I was young."

Priss noted his face was calm as he spoke. Relief swept over her momentarily. So far he was telling the truth as far as she could tell. But what was his father working on late at night?

"I didn't know my father that well really," Blackie continued abruptly as if reading her thoughts, "I only spent about a year or two with him at work and then the explosion happened. I don't remember too much before that."

Priss recalled Syla's story about the death of her father in an explosion at a Genom affiliated research building. With her best guess at Blackie's age now and when he was with his father as a child the time frames were close. Blackie's father could have died in the same incident . . . But many fatal accidents had occurred at Genom's various research facilities over the years. The growing number of puzzle pieces flew in circles in Priss's tired mind, just out of reach and in a frustratingly random pattern.

Blackie's blue eyes returned to his empty teacup again, his vague memories of his father replaced by an idle study of the teacups handle. Priss noted his lack of anxiety regarding the subject and felt the tide of her relief trying to wash over her. But the

clawing feeling inside her would not subside. Something was still missing from his story, but what it was eluded her.

Sleep beckoned as she struggled to think of another question and finally she gave up. She would ask him later. Right now she just wanted to rest.

Blackie saw the fatigue in her eyes and took the cue. As he stood to pick up her teacup she reached out suddenly and grasped his hand. Looking up at him, she squeezed firmly for a moment and then let go, watching his eyes all the time. Embarrassed, Blackie smiled nervously and picked up the cup. Through halfclosed eyes Priss watched him disappear into the kitchen to deposit the dishes in the sink.

As the sedating sound of running water lulled her mind even further towards the brink of the dream world her last relieved thoughts were of his strong hand and its warm, human touch.

After his guest had fallen asleep, Blackie sat down on a tiny stool in the corner of his apartment by the window and placed his hands on his knees. He sat motionless for a while, and then finally picked up the shiny, black, electric guitar that leaned silently against the gray wall like a sleeping robot, waiting patiently for someone to plug it in and bring it to life. The guitar slid comfortably onto Blackie's knee and slowly began to pour out its delicate, slightly tinny, acoustic voice as he gently strummed its strings.

His mind began to submerge into a familiar retreat that did not exist outside that corner. A world where nothing else seemed to matter but the notes and the magical feelings they induced. His eyes closed tightly, intensifying the journey's emotional rewards. But before the music could carry him away into the misty world of sensory stimulation, a woman's face penetrated the fog, and then silence brought him back to reality.

He put down the guitar and turned to gaze at the sleeping form on his couch. Inside his head, the fresh afterimages of her fierce brown eyes and elusive smile collided with his desire to shut it all out. It suddenly seemed like more feelings than he could handle. He looked at his guitar again and sighed. His brain felt like it would burst if he thought about her much more.

Standing up abruptly in an effort to search for a distraction, his eyes fell upon the tapestry of ancient Japan that covered a large portion of the wall before him. He turned to check that his guest was still asleep and then grasped the tapestries corner and lifted it back.

Behind the tapestry was a small, wooden door with a tarnished brass ring for a handle. Holding the tapestry aside he grasped the ring and pulled gently, trying not to disturb his sleeping guest. The door opened soundlessly revealing a small dark room beyond. Blackie stepped through the doorway into the darkness and pulled the door shut behind him. The dust free tapestry slid quietly back in place returning to its primary function as a work of art.

Once inside Blackie stood still, and listened intently for the faint hum of idling electronic equipment. He then reached up directly above his head to search for a thin chain hanging from the ceiling. Pulling it firmly, the pitch-black room transformed into a cramped workshop, bathed in an amber glow.

A sturdy wooden workbench lay barely visible under piles of wire and bits of molded ceramic, flat black in color. An incredible assortment of sophisticated, electronic

testing equipment lined the gray walls, as did rolls of foam, styrene and other synthetic materials. At the end of the workbench a tall metal cabinet stood ominously with a large electronic locking device on its frame.

Blackie punched in the code on the lock's tiny keypad and swung the metal doors open into the closet-sized workshop. The light from the single bulb above pierced the depths of the cabinet to fall on a flat-black, ceramic plated suit of armor hanging from a large hook. Vents and ports pitted the surface of the suit along the arms and legs. A black helmet hung on another hook to the right, the visor shining in contrast to the suit's dull finish. Neither item was refined or fancy in its detail. Each bore scratches and loose wiring that identified them as prototypes. And each item also lay under a thin coating of dust.

Hanging on a hook to the left of the suit was an item that did not immediately betray its purpose. On first sight it vaguely resembled the hilt and pommel of a katana, but a steel strut thrusting out of the hilt approximately fifteen inches ending in a metal hinge interrupted the comparisons. Blackie removed the weapon carefully and closed the door of the cabinet.

Assuming a fighting stance he pushed down on the weapon's hilt with his thumb then deftly flicked the weapon back with a firm snap of the wrist. The steel strut split in half, the inside radius arcing outward into the air until it extended fully and locked into place with a sharp click. At the tip of the strut was a tiny, polished steel mirror that was parallel to the base of the hilt. No sooner had the 'blade' locked into place than the soft amber glow on the workshop walls was replaced with an intense green aura. Blackie regarded the noiseless beam of emerald energy that rippled and sparked hypnotically along the blade's length.

He quickly looked away, his eyes already squinting from the beam's intensity. His thumb pressed down on the pommel switch again, and with the same fluid motion as before, his wrist snapped back, shutting down the instrument and collapsing the strut into its 'off' position. He placed it back in the cabinet carefully, and closed the metal doors. After replacing the lock he turned to the other end of the workshop.

In the opposite end of the room an impressive looking computer console hummed quietly in its solitude, its single, plasma eye shut tight. Blackie sat down in the clean, black leather chair that guarded the console and began typing. The plasma eye sprang open displaying an image of a motorcycle in a blurry sprint along a deserted mountain road. With a few deft keystrokes the image gave way to a design program displaying a blank workspace.

Blackie stood up from his chair and reached over the console to touch a metal panel on the wall behind. He tapped a combination of keys on the computer console and the panel popped open revealing a small vault. He reached in and retrieved the solitary object that lay hidden within and then shut the panel quietly and sat down in his chair.

The object in his hands was a data cartridge marked "707/HIGH" with a large blue "1" in the top left corner.

Blackie inserted the cartridge into a slot in his computer console and sat back and waited for it to be loaded. After a moment, a line of text that read "For Blackie Only" came up on the screen and then vanished as abruptly as it had appeared. Images began to flash intermittently across the screen, a computerized slide show of motorcycle designs, weapon designs, and finally blueprints for a graceful armored suit. The slide show ended

and a man's mustached face appeared. Blackie sighed and stared at the face that remained on the monitor. On the man's white lab coat was a badge that read "Dr. Katsuhito Stingray."

Chapter 5. A DISTANT WHISPER

Sylia Stingray stood quietly in front of the huge window that overlooked MegaTokyo's downtown core from her apartment. Hundreds of headlights moved haltingly through the main streets as the night took hold of the city. Serpentine files of pedestrians wound their way along the jammed sidewalks to their destinations amid the bright flicker of neon light and constant traffic noise. A media barge moved slowly through the skyscraper canyons just overhead, spewing its neverending loop of announcements and news clips. Bright spears of white light emanating from the barge's belly scanned the streets and buildings below in sweeping, circular patterns. No sudden, abrupt changes. No strange, violent occurrences. Just life as usual. Smooth and uninterrupted. She continued to watch the relatively calm scene as a vague feeling suddenly swept over her. Like someone whispering her name in the distance.

While Priss's instinct had unveiled immediate dangers that usually manifested themselves in the form of Boomers, Sylia's inner vision was focused on the arrival of impending danger. Nene jokingly called it her "women's intuition", but it was more than that. A nagging feeling that something was interfering with the normal flow of things. That feeling had saved the Knight Sabers more than once and now that feeling was resurfacing, almost unrecognizable in the wake of years of inactivity.

She turned away from the window and looked carefully at the faces of her friends assembled in her penthouse living room. Nene sat bolt upright on the couch with her fingers laced in her lap and one foot tucked under the other, staring into space in the direction of Sylia's brother Mackie, who tapped away at a computer console in the corner. Linna sat slouched in her chair, and looked blankly at the TV, which spewed out the evening news. Vandalism, burglary, rape, murder. TPD cars in hot pursuit down the main parkways of the city. The same as the night before and the night before that and the night before that. The surprising fact was the crime rate had plunged to what it had been twenty years ago before Genom showed up.

Sylia regarded her brother at the computer console, noting the similar features that she saw each morning in her own mirror. Brothers could be a pain sometimes, but they could also be extremely loyal and helpful in their own way. Sylia watched him continue to type on the computer's keyboard slowly and erratically, as if searching. Searching for something to happen.

Linna looked up as Sylia approached and then sat down on the couch beside Nene who continued staring at Mackie. Linna sat up, her gaze intensifying until she could stay quiet no longer. "Sylia, is there something on your mind? You look a little worried."

Sylia turned and smiled faintly at Linna. "No, I'm fine. Just wondering where Priss is. Late as usual."

Linna returned the smile and switched her gaze to Nene who was now staring at Sylia with concern in her eyes. Linna caught Nene's eye and they volleyed glances of quiet confusion between each other until Nene spoke up, "Sylia, do you think we'll ever have to fight boomers again?"

Mackie's head snapped around to the middle of the room at the sound of Nene's voice while Linna groaned and fell back into her chair, rolling her eyes.

Sylia paused to think about Nene's question then answered slowly, "I hope not Nene. I really hope that we never have to face another Boomer as long as we live. Genom is long gone and things have been quiet for some time. I really hope it's over."

Nene smiled grimly at the last remark, and looked back at Mackie who was now watching his sister. The worried look on Mackie's face stole Nene's fleeting smile and replaced it with a frown. It was now clear to all that Sylia was bothered by something but what?

Linna, Nene and Mackie watched from the corners of their eyes as Sylia stood restlessly and then returned to her selfimposed post at the window.

Sylia stared thoughtfully after the hypnotic spotlights of the media barge as it slipped between several tall buildings a few blocks away and disappeared. 'If they could see my face now', she thought, continuing to stare out the window at nothing, 'they'd know there was something really wrong. How long has it been since we've had to stop the rampage of an outofcontrol, prototype boomer? Did the people of MegaTokyo still need the protection of the Knight Sabers?'

Genom was officially bankrupt but she felt there was more to their demise than the media reported. Genom's swift rise to power had put scheduling pressure on most of the corporations that Genom relied on for discrete projects. The dissolving of many of those corporations eventually left Genom standing as the lone target amid a growing wave of dissatisfaction with their moral conduct in local and international circles. Coincidental changes in the AD Police hierarchy led to more freedom to investigate the activities of the corporate giant, finally resulting in an intense investigation.

Commenced two years ago on a tip that the Genom Corporation was involved in the kidnapping of lowerincome citizens of Mega Tokyo for horrible human tolerance experiments, the AD Police soon found enough evidence to effectively shut down the cybernetics mogul. As the AD Police began to dig through the thick layers of information that filled Genom's vaults, the charges against the company of human brutality and mistreatment mounted, until there was no use in filing any more charges. They were beyond acquittal, no matter who defended them in the courts. This much was known publicly. The lowdown on the net and in the underground was that before their downfall, Genom had developed some kind of new 'weapon' that would have furthered their cause by tenfold. No one ever offered any suggestions as to what this weapon might be, but Sylia had her suspicions.

Those suspicions were later confirmed by Fargo, that it had something to do with Boomer mind control. And Fargo had added, rather dramatically as she recalled, that the weapon had never been recovered by the police or any of the investigating teams brought in by the government. So, the rumored boomer mind controlling device remained at large, waiting somewhere for someone with the wrong intentions and the right skills to find and misuse.

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the vague feeling that she had experienced a few minutes ago, a distant whisper calling her name. She refocused her eyes to stare into the window, looking at the reflection of the room behind her. Her guests were all quietly engaged in the activities they had been occupied with when last she looked. So where was this voice coming from? Had she really heard something?

Her eyes turned from the reflection of the room to stare at her own image gazing back at her. She smiled at herself weakly and chided herself for her foolishness, 'Voices

right. You're just looking too hard for problems my dear. Maybe you should worry more about the problems closer to home.'

Her conscience was convincing. The Knight Sabers had changed over the years along with the police and Genom. Unfortunately not for the better. They weren't training regularly anymore it was getting harder to convince the others that it was still necessary. She and Linna had kept in shape but Nene was getting good at creating excuses and Priss she sometimes didn't show up at the meetings at all. There was something going on with Priss that she could not fathom, and she refused to talk about it with anyone. That was not a good sign. They were all used to Priss's inner turmoil but sooner or later the source of her problem would surface, whether Priss wanted it to or not. This time the problem lay buried beneath her friend's cool exterior, making for very short and intense appearances at the meetings that she did show up for.

If there was ever a time that a new enemy should strike, it would be now. Of all the things that were on her mind, this troubled her most. They were vulnerable now, the result of complacency. It would not be easy but she thought it might be prudent to change her recent unofficial policy of letting people excuse themselves from basic training and meetings. As long as there was some shred of information existing, that proved that Genom or anyone could still use her father's ideas to further their own greed, then the Knight Sabers must be ready to intercept them.

Across the room, Mackie stopped typing for a moment to consider his sister's mysterious concern. He knew that whatever it was that bothering her, it was something more than Priss not showing up on time. Anything that worried her sister had a habit of showing up in a big way.

No sooner had he finished his thought than the police scanner frequency suddenly erupted to life. "Hey I think we got somethin'!"

"...Central, we've got a break and enter and possible hostage situation at the Matsumi Military research base on Bay Road number one. Four boomers of unknown origin are suspected of entering the base and killing at least a dozen security and base personnel. They are still on the premises and are ignoring all contact to negotiate for the release of the remaining personnel. Rooftop officers report that all attempts to enter the building have been repelled by unknown heavy weapons fire. Please send backup, I repeat please send backup!"

Linna and Nene stared at each other with open mouths, disbelieving what they had just heard. Mackie adjusted the scanning equipment trying to get a better signal. Syla continued looking out the window but cocked her head as the reports of the breakin continued to flood in over the scanner.

She looked down at the street and the heavy traffic as it continued to flow through the intersections, realizing that her wish to get the Knight Sabers back into shape may be too late.

Turning slowly to face the expectant looks of her companions she began issuing instructions, the immediacy of the situation just now solidifying, "Mackie get the van prepped. Linna see if you can locate Priss. Nene see if you can get a better description of

these 'unknown' boomers from someone onscene. I'd like to know more about what we may be dealing with."

Nene's face brightened as she sat down at the now vacant computer console and began her search. At least we don't have to wait around any more, she thought.

Sylia watched the others with concern, as they set about their tasks with new energy. Turning once more to regard the view of the darkening city, she had only one other immediate problem left to deal with. Where was Priss?

Blackie stood in the open doorway of his apartment with his hand on the light panel and stared at the sleeping form on his couch. Her voice was still in his ears as he stood there, wishing she would wake but wanting her to rest. He checked to make sure that the note he'd left on her jacket hadn't fallen on the floor and then closed the door quietly behind him.

Priss awoke to find the apartment dark and herself the only occupant. Her head felt sore but the pain had subsided to a dull throbbing. She fumbled about in the darkness and finally found the switch panel for the lamp beside the couch. Cursing the soreness as she sat up, she noticed a small piece of paper on top of her jacket. Leaning over slowly, she snatched the note and read Blackie's surprisingly neat handwriting:

*Priss,
Hope you're feeling better if you read this before I get back. Gone
to get us some dinner.*

Blackie

She smiled to herself and folded the note in half. After tucking it in her jacket pocket, she turned on the tiny TV at the foot of the couch and sat back gently. The sound of a TV news reporter speaking frantically to a live camera shook her from her pleasant state. Priss stared in growing disbelief as the camera panned around the parking lot of a large military building revealing dozens of AD police vehicles and a few military vehicles as well. Armed officers had positioned themselves behind their vehicles, weapons pointed at the building they had surrounded. Helicopters thundered overhead.

The reporter's voice suddenly broke through the noise of the tense scene:

"So far we can tell you that there are four unknown suspects inside the Matsumi Military research base who are holding approximately thirtytwo people hostage. No demands have been made yet for their release. All attempts by the police and military to move in and end the standoff have been repelled by unknown heavy weapons fire. Police spokespeople have told us that the suspects could be boomers..."

Priss stood up and winced as her head protested the quick movement and reached for the vidphone handset. She fumbled hastily with her jacket and upon finding her telnet card, inserted it into the vidphones console and dialed a number. As she put on her jacket, Nene's face appeared in the viewer. She greeted her with a look of anxiety on her face, "Priss? Is that you?! Are you okay?"

"Yeah Nene it's me. I'm fine. What the hell's going on at the military base?"

Priss watched Nene turn and inform the others that it was Priss that was calling. She heard Syla's voice mutter something in the background, and then Nene came back into view. "Priss, it looks like possible Boomer trouble but nobodies really sure. Where are you?"

"I'm at a friend's place downtown. Can you meet me over at The Legs? I've got to pick up my bike there."

Nene turned away from the viewer again and mumbled something to someone behind her. She turned back abruptly, and nodding vigorously said, "Yes! It's on the way to the base. We'll meet you there in fifteen minutes."

Priss yanked her telnet card out of the vidphone's slot and grabbed her helmet. She then picked up her gun and headed for the door, checking her pockets for her keys. It was then that it struck her that her departure seemed a little hasty.

She looked around the room searching for something to write with, and upon finding a thermalink pen, on the back of Blackie's note she scribbled:

Blackie,

Thanks for the tea. I'm feeling much better thanks to you, but I had to go. I have your number and I'll call you soon. I promise.

Priss

Priss walked gingerly to the door and then took one last look around the room her gaze coming to rest on the tapestry by the window. As the moonlight filtered through the dusty window and illuminated the wall covering, she could see the ancient setting depicted on its surface. Taking a second to absorb the beautiful scene amid the gray shambles of the apartment she smiled briefly to herself, and then locked the door and closed it behind her.

Inside the Matsumi Military research facility, four tall, human figures stood silently in the darkness of the unlit main hall. Standing in a circle, each figure faced a side of the building, watching, listening and waiting. Thirtyone frightened hostages lined the walls of the hall, sitting wordlessly, staring at their strange captors. On the marble floor before them lay the shattered body of the thirtysecond hostage, an example of what to expect if anyone tried to escape.

The intruders had repelled several attempts by the police and military to enter the complex and after each successful defense they returned to the main hall to wait. As the police tiptoed about on the roof, the four figures would communicate the changing

positions of their targets, calmly using a rapid series of sharp, highpitched clicks and whistles. The exchanges were brief and without debate.

The movement on the roof suddenly ceased and now they stood silently once again. Waiting, listening and watching with softly glowing blue eyes.

6. CHILDREN OF A METAL GOD

A lone, plainclothed AD Police officer adjusted his handgun's shoulder holster as he slowly stepped out of his car and surveyed the Matsumi Military Base parking lot. It was a mass of randomly arrayed steel as far as his eye could see. AD Police vehicles were parked at odd angles to the black and green military vehicles that had arrived first. Red and blue flashing lights swept the scene, illuminating the grim faces of officers, soldiers and onlookers alike.

Swearing under his breath, the officer slammed the car door shut, turned, and strode towards a man garbed in fatigues, surrounded by police and military brass. He had heard of General Reeves before but had never met him face to face. From what he'd heard, he was the kind of man who did not like to be kept waiting. But the officer knew that he was coming into this situation as the expert. The only real expert.

The officer broke the group's ring abruptly, and extended his hand towards the general, "General Reeves? AD Police Detective Leon McNichol, BioTechnical Crimes division. I understand you have some unwanted guests?"

The general turned and shook Leon's hand tentatively, acknowledging Leon's question with a restrained anger. "Sorry to tear you away from more important things detective."

Leon smiled in spite of the general's sarcasm and firmed up his grip on the handshake, then abruptly let go.

A whinyvoiced lieutenant standing to the general's left piped up, apparently the general's spokesman. "Yes that's correct detective. Our rooftop team reports four humans, two males and two females. They're holding thirtytwo hostages, most of which are baseemployed, noncombat prepared, administrative assistants. One of the hostages has already been killed along with the thirteen security guards fortyfive minutes ago."

Leon shook his head. "The reports I received on the way over here indicated a possible boomer problem. If the hostagetakers are human than what the hell am I doing here? You've got more than enough people here to deal with these assholes!"

The lieutenant opened his mouth to speak, but the general cut him off impatiently. "Officer McNichol, those four... *things*, in there, may look like humans but they are definitely not human, and we're not even sure they're boomers either! We need you to tell us what the hell we're dealing with because no one else here seems to have a clue! Lieutenant Kent !"

The lieutenant snapped to attention.

"Show officer McNichol the surveillance video footage we gathered earlier."

Leon followed the lieutenant to a black and green van at the back of the parking lot that was topped with a satellite dish and four Lband, digital radio antennas. Once inside, he took a seat in front of a bank of small TV monitors, all displaying the same framefrozen scene. Leon leaned closer as the lieutenant ordered the laser video technician to play back some earlier footage.

On the monitor screens, were the ghostly silhouettes of four, tall, human looking figures, each facing one of the four walls of the unlit main hall. The lack of light in the hall prevented him from making out any detailed features that might help him make an identification. One thing that immediately struck him though the figures were not wandering nervously about the room like he would expect. While this observation had

possible explanations, something else slowly came to the forefront of his memory. Something vaguely familiar about the outline and posture of the four figures. A scene from years ago that he had never forgotten, of a onearmed figure standing amid a searing wall of flame, about to unleash doom on someone he cared very much about.

Leon rose and exited the van before the video had finished. As he made his way across the mazelike parking lot, the four blurry silhouettes on the video screens suddenly broke their circular formation, and struck at a hostage who had ventured away from the wall. Each of the four figures attacked the hostage from rapidly changing angles with a precision and ferocity that resulted in gruesome wounds, and finally decapitation.

As quickly as the attack had commenced, it was over, and the four figures returned swiftly to their previous posts. The remaining hostages buried their faces against the wall in terror while one of them bravely turned, silently reaching out to the unfeeling eye of the surveillance camera to plead for help. A plea that had only been seen by the video technician.

The general turned as Leon approached the hushed ring of soldiers and AD police officers, with a searching look on his face.

"Well officer, what is your opinion of our 'guests'?"

Leon looked into the general's wide face, struggling for a way to begin explaining his improbable theory when a dark blue, unmarked van skidded to a halt at the edge of the parking lot, flanked by two motorcyclering forms wearing battlearmor. Leon sighed in relief as the thought of trying to explain a proof-less theory to the general vanished, only to be replaced with new feelings of anxiety for a certain armorclad woman who was about to risk her life in a war she hadn't fought in years.

Nene watched nervously from the back step of the utility van as Syla and Linna strode towards a ring of soldiers and police officers gathered at the center of the parking lot. Suddenly her suit intercom beeped harshly, jarring her from her apprehensive state. Syla's calm steady voice replaced the abrasive warning signal. "Nene, I want you to run a level 2 scan on the military base for occupant and opponent status. Judging from the hardware sitting out here in the parking lot I'd say we're dealing with at least combat class. Make it level 1 just to be sure."

Nene turned to Mackie, then Priss, now seated inside the van, and studied their faces as they all registered Syla's last comment. While Mackie slowly turned in his seat to face the communications console and ready the vans onboard computer for Nene's datalink, Priss clenched her gloved fist a few times and pulled down her helmet's visor. While she wished she could share her companions "business as usual" attitude, Nene turned back to face the military base, wondering where all the saliva in her mouth had suddenly disappeared to.

After confirming Syla's request, she activated her hardsuit's remote scanning systems, and combed the ultraviolet spectrum for a secure wavelength to piggyback her datalink signal on. As she watched the data coming back from her scans on her visor display screen, she slowly wondered why Syla felt a level 1 scan was warranted.

General Reeves stared in surprise as two, female, armored figures approached him, their heels clicking conspicuously on the asphalt surface.

Leon regarded the armored woman in green with a shaky mix of cool professionalism and smoldering fondness. Linna stole a quick glance through her visor at Leon while her primarily whitehued, armorclad companion addressed the general.

"General Reeves," Sylia began. "As you know, we've assisted the military in these matters in the past"

The general shifted restlessly, making Sylia bite her lip as she continued. "Though it has been some time since our services were required, I offer them now, for a reasonable fee of course."

Behind her visor, Sylia watched the General's face for any signs of distaste at her last statement. As much as she hated boomers, it had been a long time since they'd upgraded the hardsuits, and if things were stirring up again, she knew that upgrading would eat up more money than her other business could afford right now. Tasteless as it may have sounded, it was a necessary tack.

"Thankyou for your offer," the general replied. "When this takeover began my advisors informed me that it would not escalate to this level. We've employed every means presently available to us to remedy the situation. Now, as I'm sure you can tell, we are at a standstill. Any assistance you can provide will be compensated. Name your fee."

"Twenty million," Sylia calmly shot back.

General Reeves flinched slightly, but then nodded affirmatively.

While Linna smiled behind her own visor as the amount of twenty million dollars echoed in her mind, Sylia frowned, wondering what could make the military jump at such an obviously exorbitant amount for what she felt was a standard boomer cleanup. She began to think twice about the adversaries that awaited them inside the military base. She suddenly thought that it might be prudent to find out what her new employer knew about them.

Opening the private channel, Sylia hailed Linna on the suit intercom. "Linna, I think we need to find out more about these boomers before we proceed. See what you can find out from Leon. I'll question General Reeves while Nene finishes her remote scans."

"My pleasure." Linna replied with just a touch of glee in her voice.

Linna's electronically enhanced voice suddenly woke Leon from his troubled thoughts. "Officer McNichol? What can you tell me about the hostagetakers?" Linna repeated sarcastically, a little annoyed at Leon's inattention.

Leon turned sharply. "Huh? Lin uh . . . yes miss, how can I help you?"

Before Linna could reply, Leon suddenly grabbed her arm and tugged her gently away out of earshot from the still assembled ring of now silent officers and troopers.

Linna noted the genuine concern in Leon's eyes as he began to speak in a hushed but excited tone. "Look, this isn't going to be easy to explain but my gut instinct is telling me that those things in there aren't boomers! At least not the kind you're used to dealing with."

Linna stared hard at Leon's eyes as he sought to pierce the dark, glaring exterior of her visor for her reaction. Her instinctual positive outlook tried vainly to suppress the contagious fear in Leon's eyes. "What are you talking about? What kind are they then?"

Leon let go of Linna's arm and exhaled loudly. Turning away from her for a moment, he gathered his thoughts, trying to think of a way to put them into words that

would make sense. Linna took a small step back as Leon turned back to her suddenly with a new fire in his eyes.

"Do you remember when you fought that lunatic who took out half of Genom's Tower sites with that particle beam satellite?"

Linna's helmet remained still for a second then began to nod silently.

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

This time Linna's helmet did not register an affirmative motion. "I never really got a good look at him. My view was obscured by my motoroid when I was targeting the satellite. Priss got a better look at him than anyone, but I know how you feel about talking to her."

Leon's face darkened at the mention of Priss's name. Linna swore under her breath, cursing herself for letting the name slip out. "Look, I'm sorry! Forget I said that, and tell me what you think is going on. My boss isn't going to be much longer with the general."

Leon glanced over at the general as the whitearmored woman, still engaged in conversation, moved a step backward in the direction of the Knight Saber's blue utility van.

"Alright", he began again impatiently. "I think that superboomer that you destroyed with the satellite particle beam has somehow survived. Or at least the technology that created him has."

Leon let his words sink in before he continued, though he had no way of reading how Linna was taking his theory with her face hidden behind her visor. "I saw some surveillance video they had. I couldn't I.D. them positively it was too dark, but there was something about them that just reminded me of that superboomer. I don't know what exactly . . . the way they stood you know, their posture."

Linna stared incredulously at Leon. "The way they stood? Are you sure? That doesn't sound like much to go on."

"I know, but you've got to trust me on this. Look at this way it can't hurt to be a little extra careful, can it?"

Linna shook her head slowly and a faint smile appeared on Leon's face.

"Okay, that's all I ask. I'm not gonna tell you how to do your job but be careful. I want you back in one piece, got it?"

Again Linna nodded, and then turned to go. "Don't worry officer, I'll be careful. Thanks for the advice!"

Taking the cue, Leon's voice rose a bit. "No problem miss! Good luck!"

As his words left his lips, Leon scanned the ring of officers who now stared at Leon with looks of wonder on their faces. 'That's right boys,' he thought to himself, 'She's mine and don't you ever find out.'

Sylia thanked the general as Linna rejoined her. Making their way back through the maze of police and military vehicles towards the utility van, Sylia asked Linna what she found out. Linna made an articulated hand gesture that Sylia instantly recognized. Defaulting to the private intercom channel again, Sylia waited for Linna to speak.

"Well, what did you find out?"

Sylia replied coolly. "Not much. No one's really had a good look at them. And you?"

"Leon seems to think we may have our hands full with an older type of boomer."
Sylia's stride faulted a bit. "An older boomer? That doesn't make sense. What model?"

Linna answered hesitantly, "He didn't really specify a model."

"Then what class?" Sylia spat out a little impatiently.

"He didn't say what class either."

Sylia halted in midstep. "Then why does he think we're dealing with older boomers?"

Linna shook her head. "He has a hunch. It has something to do with the boomer that used the OPB satellite to take out all those Genom towers a few years back."

The whitearmored figure quickly scanned the parking lot for Leon, and upon spotting him, stared thoughtfully at his armsfolded outline.

"I see," Sylia said, considering the detective's theory, as well as the "voices" she'd heard earlier that night. "Well, we'll have to be careful then, won't we?"

Linna nodded, and began her hardsuit's preliminary diagnostic check.

7. FIELD TEST

Nene broke the tense silence that had fallen on the interior of the Knight Saber's van, as they completed their final preparations. "Sylia, I've finished the remote scan of the base. There's something really strange about these boomers, if that's what they are."

Mackie chimed in. "She's right Sis. I'm not seeing anything in Nene's scans that indicate there are boomers inside that building."

Sylia shifted slightly in her hardsuit, its snugness feeling strangely unfamiliar as she moved to the doorway. "Run another check on the data and fill me in as we go. We've kept those hostages waiting long enough. Knight Sabers it's show time."

Blackie pocketed his keys and stared into the gloom of his darkened kitchen. Upon closing the front door, his hand reached for the light panel beside the doorframe and flicked it on. His heart fell as he entered the front room and spotted the vacant couch. A quick scan of the room revealed that his guest was gone. He stood silently in the middle of the room for a moment, remembering the sound of her voice. His gaze fell on the small wooden chair beside the couch and a scrap of white paper that lay in the center of it. Blackie snatched up the paper and flipped it over.

The words on the paper suddenly began to spin around in his mind, clashing with the vivid images of her face that would not fade. He sat down heavily on the couch and held his head in his hands, trying to convince himself that she wouldn't lie. Not her! Maybe she was a bit withdrawn sometimes, but she was like him. She wouldn't lie! She was *just* like him. Wasn't she?

He looked up slowly, his ears suddenly picking up a faint noise. The little TV at the foot of the couch had been left on, and the images on the screen slowly drew Blackie's attention from thoughts of his guest's disappearance. A shaky, helicoptermounted, video camera was transmitting live pictures of a floodlit building, its parking lot filled with AD Police and military vehicles. Blackie reached for the volume and listened intently as the onscene reporter finished interviewing an important looking police officer, and began a recap of the crisis at the Matsumi Military Base.

As he listened to the reporter's account, his eyes narrowed when he spotted the Knight Saber's armored forms, as they embarked from a dark blue van and approached the building. Their figures cut in front of the floodlights at the building's edge, casting four distended shadows on the buildings front wall.

The helicopter's camera suddenly zoomed out as the Knight Sabers shot into the night sky, disappearing for a moment, and then zoomed in again to show the four figures kneeling around a skylight on the building's roof. The view then switched back to the reporter and then to a slow pan of the jammed parking lot.

Blackie turned off the TV and sat still for a few minutes, staring up at the large, Japanese tapestry that almost completely covered the wall facing him. Every so often, his face would contort and his eyes would narrow to little more than slits, while his thoughts would suddenly voice themselves. Barely rising above a whisper, the words that escaped his lips were sharp,

quick and forceful, rising and falling in pitch, as if engaging their creator in some sort of silent debate.

Looking once more at the ancient setting depicted on the tapestry, he focused on the individual figures that dotted the embroidered landscape. A group of colorfully armored samurai warriors on horseback charged headlong into a phalanx of spearwielding infantry while samurai on the ground stood toetoe with wouldbe opponents, their katanas raised behind their heads in an awkwardlooking sideways manner. At each end of the tapestry, a shogun sat upon an ornate, wooden throne, perched high above the battlefield on a hill. The shogun's faces were stern and focused, almost robotic in their concentration.

Behind each throne, colorful banners flew in the wind, upon them the symbols of each army's family clan. At the end of the wall hanging closest to the window, the name Minamoto flew proudly while at the other, the kanji symbols trumpeted the Taira clan's lineage. Blackie stared hard at the figures, speaking softly to himself until his whispers finally diminished to silence.

Abruptly he rose, and crossed the room in a quick even stride. He swung the tapestry back carefully, and heaved on the inset brass ring attached to the battered closet door. After pausing to look into the pitch-black tunnel ahead of him, he disappeared into its murk.

In the mountain laboratory, high above the unfolding scenario at the Matsumi military base, Dr. Leomund Sholtan finished his last set of preliminary tests. Staring up at the glowing multivision TV screens in the dim confines of the main operations room, Leomund blinked a few times, and then closed his tired eyes tightly. Slowly, the pain surged in his strained eyes and then ebbed away, a few drops of salty moisture forming at the corners of his eyelids. He wiped them away with the edge of his hand and then looked back up at the screens.

The image of four, tall, human figures standing stoically in a large hall, surrounded on all four sides by military personnel crouched against the four walls, flickered erratically. Static and snowy interference distorted the image, combining with the silence in the control room to create a haunting view. "Well at least the alias modifiers are functioning stably," he thought to himself. If those ever failed the whole project would be a disaster.

Leomund quietly urged a frustrated looking technician to boost the amplitude of the video signal coming from the military base's digital link. The technician threw up his hands and then returned to his work on a wiring panel at the end of a large console. Leomund cursed at the man's back and turned sharply on his heels.

Leaving the control room he crossed the corridor and shoved hard on his office door. The vidphone's console was blinking for attention as he sat down in his chair to rest. He grabbed the handset and stabbed at the illuminated button.

"Leomund, the video signal from the base is not what I had hoped for. You know that the signal is going to have to improve if I am to make my demands clearly."

Leomund listened to the anonymous investor's confident tones and

fumbled for a reply. "Sir, we're doing all we can at this end. I assure you that nothing will interfere with your connection to the base. We await your signal for the video lockout."

The voice on the other end of the phone suddenly grew cold. "Leomund, I haven't asked for much, have I? Human error is not acceptable at this stage. Please inspire your people to improve the image clarity or I may be forced to come up there myself. And that's not something that you want to happen at this stage, is it?"

Leomund hesitated, as he digested the implications of the investor's words.

"No Sir. We'll repair it right away sir."

"Thank you Leomund. Lockout will begin in five minutes."

"Very well sir."

"<click>"

Leomund set the handset back down and settled back into his chair for a moment, listening to his heart pound in his ears. It was becoming apparent that the project had a few bugs. He only hoped that they didn't show up during the field test or he suspected that he might actually meet his unseen benefactor. And that meeting he felt sure, would not be one that he would ever get to talk about with any of his colleagues. Ever.

Priss's eyes strained to cut through the blackness for a moment, as she stared down into the dusty skylight to the main hall below her. Suddenly her nightvision display cut in, transforming the view below to a shimmering green arena. She immediately spotted the four boomers, standing stockstill in the center of the room, unmoving, and unaware of their presence. Until someone could prove to her different, she would continue to think of them as boomers. It would make it a lot easier to do her job.

Sylia's whispering voice came through everyone's intercom abruptly, causing the other members to start. "Mackie, have you confirmed Nene's earlier opp status check?"

Mackie's distorted voice replied. "Sis, it's still coming back the same. Everything we send at them bounces back as flesh and blood. I've already run a wide diagnostic of the system and it's telling me everything's fine. The good news is, I've got a video link to the base's security channel. Nothing much to report though. It's not a very strong signal."

Sylia gently sighed, the sound being carried to her companion's ears through the intercom.

"What are we waiting for?" Priss hissed, causing her still throbbing head to pound a little more. "We just drop in and take 'em out! They won't know what hit 'em!"

In the mountain laboratory's control room, a stony voice emanated from the loudspeaker system, interrupting the silence.

"Video lockout in three minutes."

Leon shifted uneasily inside the cramped interior of the military's video truck, jockeying for a better view of the monitor bank. He didn't think he would feel this helpless. His instincts gnawed at him, telling him he was right about his theory. Linna's

questioning tones flashed through his mind, attacking his gut feeling and boosting his selfdoubt. "Damn! If only I had some proof," he thought.

Glancing at the monitor in the bottom left hand corner of the grid, he spotted a shadow he hadn't noticed before. Inching forward through the hushed group of a dozen or so soldiers, he strained his eyes to pick out details of the shadow. Small, circular in shape with an oblong shadow stemming from its edge. His eyes suddenly widened, as the shadow's source became recognizable.

At the edge of the camera's field of view, lying face up, in full view of the other hostages, was the severed human head of the dead, thirtysecond hostage.

Sylia's helmet swung up sharply to face Priss. "It's not that simple! This is a trap if I've ever seen one, and we don't need any crazy stunts right now!"

Nene interjected, "Then what are we going to do? What if they get impatient and decide to kill another hostage?!"

"Relax Nene. That won't happen. Look both the military and the police have tried negotiating with them, and from what the general told me, that term isn't even in their vocabulary. They've killed one hostage, but that was some time ago. It's our job to see if we can first get them to release the rest of the hostages, and then we deal with them. Does everyone understand?"

Priss let an exasperated sigh escape. "Oh, right! So we drop down in there and ask them to politely let the hostages go! They'll cut us to pieces!"

"No they won't," Sylia countered. "They've been waiting for us to show up here. It's the Knight Sabers they really want."

Three helmets suddenly swung over to stare at Sylia. Priss responded first. "How the hell?"

Sylia's hand gesture cut her off. "It doesn't matter now. But it would be wise to keep your head up this time Priss. We all know by now that this is not a routine boomer retirement."

As the word "retirement" rolled off her tongue, the whispers she thought she'd heard earlier came to mind, and then vanished, shoved out by the matter at hand.

"Enough discussion. Remember to use your pitch jets so that we don't land on top of them. Ready? We go in on my mark."

The four figures on the rooftop rose to their feet and readied themselves to descend. Sylia took one last look at the positions of the four 'boomers', some fifteen feet below.

"Now!"

Throughout the main hall, a single, short, highpitched whistle pierced the silence, followed immediately by the earsplitting din of descending shards of glass.

Sylia hit the ground hard, but her suit absorbed the majority of the impact and she found herself standing on her feet. With a lightning fast maneuver, her right arm swung upwards as she locked her visor's sights on one of the four figures in the center of the room. Tiny crystals of glass continued to descend from the shattered skylight, glittering like emeralds in her visor's green, nightvision display. Amid the shower of glass, the four silhouetted figures remained motionless.

"Targets locked!" came a trio of voices over the intercom. Sylia took a quick breath, visually checked her target's still motionless form, and then switched her intercom over to speaker mode.

"Stay right where you are. We know what you want. Let these people go first and then we'll talk."

"Video lockout in two minutes."

The figure in Sylia's sights suddenly raised its arm, the motion itself a sharp, almost imperceptible jerk. Her suit systems cried out in alarm, sending commands to its powercore for a buildup. Amazingly, none of her companions fired, but the reason quickly became clear. The figure was pointing at the nearest hallway that connected to the building's front exit. Sylia felt her own heartbeat pound, the strangeness of these cybernetic creations rekindling an almost forgotten, smoldering, hatred inside her. Her opponents were living up to her fears.

Linna watched in surprise from her vantagepoint across the room as the hostages hesitated to rise, not knowing of their fear of their captor's horrible reprisal, demonstrated earlier that night. Slowly though, they stood, testing even the patience of the Knight Saber's leader. "Let's go, move it!" Sylia commanded through her suit's speaker.

The hostages stared at her with widened eyes and then began to accelerate their flight. Some dared to look back for a glance at their liberators, while most just shuffled out, exhilarating that they would not share the fate of their beheaded coworker.

Nene cried out suddenly, "Sylia! I'm detecting some kind of power surge. It's definitely coming from the whatever they are!"

Priss flexed her knees and tensed her right arm. "Let's rock!"

Sylia turned back to face her opponent, just as it finished tapping a few delicate commands into a keypad attached to its arm. "Wait Priss! The hostages aren't all out yet and we're in a crossfire!"

No sooner had her words left her lips, then the dark room erupted into a wash of blue light. Each Knight Saber reached up to cover her eyes as their visor's NV displays suddenly flared into a blinding mask of bright green.

"Video lockout commencing."

Leon suddenly pushed forward through the stunned group of soldiers to reach the control desk. "Whaddya mean you've lost the video!!? Get it back pronto, or you'll be back in boot camp!"

The soldier wrestled with the video truck's controls while he wondered how the AD Police detective could make good on his threat. The monitor bank continued to defy his frantic efforts, remaining a grid of staticfilled squares.

Leon slammed his fist on the edge of the control desk and then quickly turned to shove his way back to the truck's exit. As soon as he emerged, his eyes locked on the dark, blue utility van on the edge of the parking lot. To his left, a line of soldiers and police officers was helping the emerging hostages to a waiting bus at the back of the lot. To his right the general stood with his arms folded across his chest and a slight smile on his face as he watched the hostages board the bus. "You won't be smiling for too long,"

Leon thought to himself. "Especially when you remember how much you owe somebody for pulling this off."

Leon began to walk towards the blue van, picking up his pace as he neared the edge of the parking lot.

Mackie jumped in his seat as several loud thumps woke him from his own intense struggle with the lost video feed. On the monitor screen marked "EXTERNAL REAR", a figure wearing dark sunglasses stood tapping his foot impatiently on the pavement. He slid the back door open to reveal Leon's smiling face. "Got room for one more?"

Mackie sighed and motioned Leon to enter.

Leon climbed the metal steps and stole a quick glance back at where the smiling general still stood. "This ain't over yet you sonofabitch."

The blue metal door slid shut firmly, followed by a metallic 'click'.

8. AVATAR

Priss let her arm fall from in front of her visor as her eyes adjusted to the rapidly fading green glow. Standing in the center of the room where the four human hostagetakers had stood moments ago, were four, darkly shaded boomers. Looking somewhat sleeker when compared to their predecessors that Priss was used to fighting, the smooth, muscular figures stood ramrod straight, their broad shoulders thrown back proudly, as if at attention. While two of the boomers had displayed obvious feminine physical attributes in their earlier guise, they were nowhere to be seen now. From her vantagepoint all four boomers appeared identical. Emotionless, unflinching faces were wrought with a steely glare, locked onto their human opponents before them.

Their most prominent feature were the glowing eyes that pierced the gloom of the dark hall. Each pair of eyes emitted parallel beams of blue energy that if observed from overhead, sectioned the room in a crosslike pattern, converging at the center of the room. Priss sighted down the ray's length, to find her opponent's gaze trained just below her chin. Suddenly she was very aware of the lack of protection around her neck.

She began to raise her arm to reestablish a target lock when Sylia's voice crackled through the intercom and then burst into clarity.

"Priss stop. I need to know why"

"What?! Sylia, let's take them now!"

"Priss don't."

"Syl !!"

Priss heard a faint click in her ear as Sylia cut her off.

"Now," Sylia's calm voice echoed hauntingly in the massive hall. "Why do you *really* want us here?"

The boomer that had pointed earlier to the exit, emitted a short, high pitched whistling sound that was instantly echoed by the other three central figures.

Nene and Linna shifted uncomfortably where they stood, wondering what Sylia could be thinking, and what the boomers may have just said. Each Knight Saber soon noticed their opponent's laserlike eyebeams following their minute movements. Nene gulped hard, thinking that her mouth had been relatively moist before, compared to the dryness that was making her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth now.

Linna visually scanned the room for exits and found only two. One led out to the front entrance of the building while the other was obscured by a door boldly labeled "OFFICES". As her own eyes completed their readjustment to the nightvision's shimmering green view, a circular shadow in the corner of the room came into focus. The grisly remains of the thirtysecond hostage lay in a heap, its detached head a few feet away. Linna turned away quickly and focused on Sylia's silhouette across the room, pushing out the grim image that fought to remain in her mind's eye. Sylia's name came to the tip of her tongue, but would travel no further.

As Linna watched through the darkness in growing apprehension, Sylia's outline staggered suddenly and then steadied. Distorted by the room's cavernous echoes, her leader's voice began to spit out in broken whispers, the words unintelligible to her ears. The boomer in front of Sylia leaned forward slowly, its movements reminding Linna of a

snake about to strike. Its bright eyebeams shifted upwards, now focused on Sylia's visor instead of her neck.

Abruptly the Knight Saber's leader's voice rose to an argumentative pitch and then fell back to silence, her shadowy figure now swaying slightly. Nene tried frantically to hail Sylia on the intercom, unsuccessfully. Linna watched helplessly, wishing she could help her friend but afraid of the consequences. Sylia appeared to be under some kind of mind control, and if she attempted to break it, the results could be devastating. Something about the way she had commanded Priss to back down reassured her, that maybe her boss knew what she was doing. At this point though, it certainly didn't look that way.

Priss cursed silently to herself for obeying Sylia's ridiculous command. What was she thinking? Who knew what the hell that boomer was doing to her? She edged a few inches closer to her own opponent, testing its reactions.

Priss blinked. The boomer had reacted instantaneously, meeting her advance by an equal amount, but its movement had been little more than a blur, almost as if it hadn't moved at all. Priss halted and stared at her opponents glowing eyes. The parallel beams were still targeting her neck. It might be a good idea to wait a little longer after all.

All eyes suddenly turned to Sylia as the boomer in front of her snapped back to attention, its eyebeams locking once more onto its opponent's neck. Dazed, she took a short step back from the ominous metallic figure before her, and then steadied herself.

Slowly, Sylia felt her head recovering from the dizziness she had endured a moment ago. After making her inquiry, the sensation had begun innocently as a weak presence in her mind, whispering her name. Then it ruthlessly invaded her, becoming a seemingly endless torrent of cold, emotionless information that almost overwhelmed her ability to interpret any of it. Most of what she could interpret were flashing images of her father and herself when she was young, as well as fragments of images that she recognized from her data unit. But another image kept recurring in the intense, looping, sequence of information. An image she did not recognize, of a room lit in a crimson aura.

At the room's center, a young boy lay sleeping on an operating table with dozens of hoses and cables hooked up to various input connectors located on his head, torso and limbs. Her mind had grasped at the view, fighting to hold it in her consciousness for a moment longer to study the sleeping boy's face, and then the image vanished along with the dizziness and the weak, whispering presence. But the battle was not lost. She had seen enough.

A quick check revealed that her metallic opponent was still standing motionless before her. Who was the boy she had seen? Where had these images come from? Had this 'boomer' transmitted the information somehow? For what purpose?

The sensation she had just encountered was not entirely new. She had suffered this kind of "mental itching" for years now, ever since she had viewed the contents of the data cartridge she had received after her father's death. But it had never been this intense, this overwhelming. She could only recall a few times when she had felt it as more than an annoying itch she could not scratch. It was always the same someone calling her name with maliciousness in its utterance. Ever since that day, almost five years ago, that the Knight Sabers had destroyed the superboomer that Priss referred to as "Largo", the itch had almost faded away to nothing more than a whisper...

Sylia quickly pushed aside the nagging questions, her instincts suddenly telling her that the information she had received and the images she had seen were a test and that she had failed. Now the Knight Sabers were in real danger.

Priss started a bit as Sylia's noticeably anxious voice filled her helmet's earphones. "Linna Neneon my signal, each of you take a side-step towards each other. Priss, when they start moving open fire. Got it?"

Three relieved, affirmative responses came back to Sylia as she thought quickly about her own first strike.

After a final glance at the arrogant, statuesque stance of the ebony cyborgs that waited patiently for any provoking movement, Sylia tightened her jaw muscles involuntarily, and drew her trembling fingers into a fist.

"Go."

The sound of highpowered weapons fire echoed from the open skylight and open front entrance of the Matsumi Military Base. Soldiers and AD Police officers scrambled to crouch down behind their vehicles, scanning the building for any signs of the firefight spilling outside. General Reeves' smile quickly vanished.

"Sis! Sis! Can you hear me?!"

Mackie stared at the static filled monitors and then tore off the intercom headset in disgust. "Leon We've got to do something! I lost the video feed and now I've got no intercom signal! They're cut off in there!"

Leon stood up from his seat with a grim look in his eyes, and moved quickly to the rear of the van. "Kid, keep working on the intercom and the video feed. I'll see what I can do out there."

Mackie watched as Leon peeked out of the van's back door and then jumped out, lowering his dark sunglasses over his eyes and sliding the door shut quickly behind him.

He turned back to the video controls and stared blankly at them for a moment, his mind working feverishly to troubleshoot the lost satellite link. He ran his finger down a list of other geosynchronous satellites, their coordinates displayed on a computer screen in front of him. Mackie traced the video link in his mind from the source at the military base, to the satellite above, to the dish atop the van he now sat in. It was a simple surveillance channel, but it was probably being fed to an external military receiver as a precaution. The nearest military site to Matsumi was the air base near the bay mouth. Maybe they were still getting the feed somehow.

Mackie scratched his head in frustration, wondering how he could check if the air base was getting the precious video signal when the question hit him 'Who was blocking the signal and how?'

While the answer remained illusive, an idea began to take shape. Maybe it was time to start thinking offensively. Mackie found himself cursing his fingers that seemed to drag across the keyboard slower than his brain could command them. After five agonizing minutes, his shoulders suddenly drooped, as his first attempt failed, leaving him even more perplexed than before. He returned to the starting point of his tedious task, muttering under his breath, and wishing Nene was with him now, and not inside the base.

The hall that once resembled a dark murky cavern had now evolved into an ornately decorated square room, illuminated by the stroboscopic flashes of light from the Knight Sabers weapon's energy. Eight figures moved in and out of the center of the hall as the boomers shifted their positions constantly, never letting their opponents get a clear shot. And their speed! Sylia had barely avoided being slammed into the wall when the first shot had been fired. One moment her opponent was in front of her, the next it was behind her, pulling its gleaming metallic arm from the wall. She wondered how Nene and Priss were doing with all this running around.

"Stand still you bastard!" Priss leveled her right arm to fire a railgun spike, but her opponent had already moved out of her sights. She followed its erratic track, firing when it finally came to a wall. The spike went sailing past and tore through the wall into the offices beyond. Her opponent stood staring at her, almost quizzically, its head still tilted away from the railgun spike's previous path. Priss fired again with the same result. She checked her ammo count and swore. Time for a different tactic.

Priss leapt forward, attempting to jam her fist into the boomer's throat but found her own throat being clenched in a metallic grip instead. The boomer cocked its arm back and quickly followed through with a hard punch to Priss's left forearm. Priss screamed out in pain and instinctively backed away. The boomer stood back for a moment to watch her, as if enjoying her suffering, like a cat with an injured mouse.

In a fit of blind rage, Priss pushed the thought of a possibly broken arm out of her head and shoved her right fist into the boomer's face. Three spikes exploded from point blank range, momentarily dazing the cyborg and releasing Priss's neck from its grasp. It took two steps backwards and then straightened up, searching the room for its opponent with only one glowing eye. Priss smiled. 'So you're not invincible eh?' she thought to herself as she checked her arm. Testing her left arm by flexing the fingers, she felt a twinge of pain in the forearm muscle but nothing that would indicate she'd have more than a bruise to deal with later. Checking her ammo count again revealed that finishing this boomer would be no simple matter. Setting her jaw firmly, she resumed her attack.

Nene was doing her best to stay out of the way of her opponent's unarmed attacks, but was having little success. Her left arm was already aching from the hit she had taken when the fight began. As she and Linna had moved a step towards each other in an attempt to negate the crossfire danger, her boomer had bolted from its statuelike pose and pinned her to the wall with a thrusting metallic fist to the shoulder. The attack was so swift she hadn't seen the boomer move, but she had felt the force of its punch very clearly. Now it was becoming obvious to her that it would be a battle on her opponent's terms. A battle of wits and alertness; something Nene was not entirely unfamiliar with. But her body did not want to cooperate.

She continued to dodge the next flurry of attacks until her opponent disappeared before her eyes in a bright flash of light. She checked her visor display for the boomer's location and stared in disbelief at the seven blips on her screen when she suddenly felt an arm close around her neck. As the black metallic arm tightened its grip, Nene fired her jump jet thrusters, sending the boomer backward with a piercing whistle of surprise. She turned to face the boomer, expecting to find it sprawled on the floor and was taken aback by its quick recovery. This was one of those few times that she thought that it would be okay to swear.

Linna was doing a little better than the others, her martial arts and dance training proving to be an important defense from these extremely agile machines. But like the others, her offensive strikes were simply wasting ammo and energy. She tried to get behind her opponent by vaulting off the boomer's shoulders, but the thing was waiting for her when she landed. A metallic hand suddenly spread open and shot forward in Linna's direction. Linna felt the air rush out from her lungs as an unseen force hurtled her body backward into a wall.

As she struggled to rise her opponent was there, grabbing her arm and flinging her towards another wall. Linna held her hand out to stop her flight, but quickly retracted it when she realized her speed. The wall shuddered and crumbled as Linna's back impacted on the flat surface. Slumping a bit, she checked her knucklebomb's charge on her visor's display and waited for her opponent to pick her up again. This time a loud subsonic thump shook the wall next to her as the boomer recoiled from the surprise attack. She withdrew her fist from the boomer's shoulder area and stared in surprise as the boomer resumed its stance and came at her again, unharmed by her attack.

Sylia paused for a moment to gulp a few breaths of air. She had just wriggled free of her opponent's clamping grip, narrowly avoiding a steel fist that had managed to graze the surface of her visor. Now she stood waiting, as the black, metallic, cybernetic being reset for its next attack, pushing Sylia to try to counter at a grueling pace. She was finding it more and more difficult to get her breath back between 'rounds', while her opponent did not appear to be tiring at all.

As she dodged yet another leaping attack, her suit's powerscale readout began to beep a preliminary warning. Eyeing the red warning halo momentarily, she was caught off guard by the boomer's next assault. The last thing she saw, before sailing backward in a smooth, shallow arc, was a gleaming, ebony hand, outstretched in her direction. Her flailing body was deposited unceremoniously in a heap on the floor, some fifteen feet away from where she had originally stood.

A feeble attempt to regain her feet was interrupted by a powerful kick to her shoulder, flipping her over onto her back to land another ten feet further from her original starting point. Sylia's opponent stood towering over her prone form to stare down at its prey, its twin eyebeams locked onto her neck. Raising its right leg, so that its foot hovered just over her neck, the boomer's eye beams flared red for a moment, its artificial instinct signaling its victim's defeat.

The boomer's plunging foot was halted inches away from Sylia's unprotected neck by a long, thin, silvery blade, projecting from a sheath in her suit's right arm covering. Using all her remaining strength, Sylia swept her arm to the side, blocking the crushing attack with the flat of the blade.

Staggering to her feet, she watched the boomer quickly recover its lost balance, and turn to face her. Through her visor, the boomer's eyes always appeared green in the nightvision filter, but outside her helmet, the blue glare had now turned a shade of deep red. A high, earpiercing scream emanated from within the cybernetic being, its rage only now beginning to surface.

Sylia detected the creature's sudden anger in its new, more cautious stance. The two combatants circled each other slowly, oblivious to the other six beings that fought within the hall. Her visor's display screen showed a dangerously low powerlevel. Dim flickers of light from nearby weapons energy bursts illuminated half of her opponent's face, briefly

transforming the creature's emotionless features into a grim mask of focused, deadly intent. A faint crackle in her headset intercom reduced the anxious moment to a wary pause.

"Sylia!" It was Nene's voice, tired and edged with fear.

"Nene are you alright?" Sylia responded anxiously, suddenly remembering that she was not alone.

"No! I've run out of ammo and my main power is just about depleted. I've still got backup power, but it won't be enough to do any good at this rate!"

Sylia sighed, feeling for the first time that maybe they were in over their heads. "Nene, hold on! You can't beat these *things* with our usual mediumrange tactics. You have to"

"No shit!" Priss's intercom signal interjected, "Linna and I (umph!) are getting our butts kicked royally! My weapons are useless unless I get close enough . . . to dance with these bastards!"

Linna's frustrationfilled voice echoed her companion's observations.

"Sylia, I can keep out of their way for a little while longer but we've got to think of some way to knock them down a rung or two or we're done."

"Linna " Sylia started, with a touch of angry defense in her voice, "Don't start thinking that way or we will be done. Understand?"

Linna's reply came back after a noticeable pause, "Yeah. I'm sorry. You're right! So what (unh!) can we do?"

Sylia glanced back to regard her still circling opponent, and the decreasing distance between them. "We have one last chance before we head for the exits; move to the center of the room. So far they've hurt us by splitting us up; maybe we can slow them down by taking their 'divide and conquer' strategy away from them."

Three fatiguedfilled, but hopeful voices responded affirmatively, as the Knight Sabers began to draw their opponents into a tighter battle.

Five miles away, along the MegaTokyo Bay parkway, a black motorcycle screamed past a handful of scattered, commuterfilled cars, making their way out of the city's downtown core. A dull, black, layer of plastic armor plating and a black helmet concealed the rider, the visor tinted a dark gray. Swinging idly at his hip, was a scratched, metallic cylinder, a thin strip of polished steel extending from the free end. The rider shifted gears smoothly, and applied the throttle, propelling the gleaming bike past a knot of slower cars ahead of him with a sudden burst of speed.

The motorbike's shadow flickered on the road beneath its wheels as it passed under the unending row of amber streetlights that extended out over the parkway's width. Almost straight ahead in the distance, the dark outline of the Matsumi Military Research building loomed against the deepening, violet skyline.

Leon crouched down and sighed with relief as he leaned back against the comforting stability of his AD Police car. Above him, two newsmedia helicopters slashed

the cool night air, their searchlights playing over the parking lot in random sweeping patterns. The noise and fluctuating light only succeeded in increasing his tension. He nervously checked his supply of magazines for his pistol, and then caught himself as he paused for a moment to think about Linna. 'No!' he angrily told himself. 'Push her out of your head McNichol or you're gonna screw up! She knows what she's doing and the job comes first. That much you agreed on.'

But they had made their agreement two years ago when they first started dating; a time when boomers were a thing of the recent past. Their agreement had meant a very strong relationship at least symbolically. Now their pact was being put to a real test. A test that was similar to the one which had torn him away from someone else he had once cared very deeply about.

Shaking his head as if to scatter the disconcerting thoughts to the four winds, he breathed out noisily and tightened his grip on his gun.

Poking his head up over the car's hood, he could see the occasional flashes of light coming from just inside the hallway of the main entrance of the military building. Halfway between his position and the building, he saw General Reeves hunkered down behind a black and green allterrain military vehicle, with two soldiers to his sides. Sitting back once more against the car door, he focused his thoughts and then leapt up from his hiding place.

"General!"

General Reeves turned to look behind him and saw the officer that had been called in as the 'boomer expert'. "Looks like they were boomers after all Officer McNichol, or they're human and they had some serious firepower hidden up their"

"General," Leon interrupted anxiously, "Is there anything your troops can do to help the Knight Sabers in there?"

The expression on the general's face did not offer much hope. "Officer, we tried to reason with them earlier. Then we tried a rooftop assault with a projected loss of life of around ten percent. We couldn't even get inside. No one was killed but we just could not get in. I'm still baffled as to how the hell the Knight Sabers succeeded. But it's their ballgame now. I lost thirteen security personnel when this all started and I don't intend to lose anymore."

Leon holstered his gun hesitantly, and looked around him at the one hundred or so troopers that had now relaxed somewhat, as the firefight seemed contained to the building itself. Some were engaged in what looked like idle chitchat while others were sitting against the wheels of their vehicles to rest or enjoy a cigarette. Anger mixed with worry pushed Leon

toward the limit of his patience. For all he knew, Linna and the others could be in serious trouble.

As Leon stared in frustration at the general's face, the mask of hopelessness disappeared, to be replaced by a look of unconcern. Slowly, the reason for the general's reluctance to assist the Knight Sabers began to unfold in Leon's mind. The hostages were freed and now the general just had to wait. No sense wasting any more good men for four women in hardsuits who had made a deal. A deal that didn't require the general to help them if they got in over their heads.

Leon grabbed the general's jacketfront with both hands and exploded.

"You sonofabitch! It's the money isn't it? If the Knight Sabers go down then you're off the hook! Well, that might save you twenty million in the short term but if they die then you'll have to deal with those 'boomers' yourself! And from what you've told me, you're going to end up burying more than thirteen security personnel before this is over! "

The general looked at Leon's hands still clenched tightly around his jacket's lapels with a feigned disinterest. "Officer, are you finished? If you don't mind, I've got a situation to deal with here. Your assistance is no longer necessary."

Leon stared at the general, stunned for a moment at the cold truth in his words. This wasn't his headache and he had no jurisdiction here. He was just an expert advisor and nothing more. Suddenly Leon realized that after five years of inactivity, the Knight Sabers were not only expendable in the general's eyes, but they had become a forgotten urban myth in a city that had moved on with the problems of a new, more peaceful era.

"Damn! Stupid computer!" Mackie reset his satellite transceiver's coordinates for the fifteenth time, and then initiated the whitenoise 'follower' signal for output. His fingers tapped nervously on the edge of the control console, as he waited for a confirmation of a lock from his end of the signal chain.

Like Leon, his thoughts drifted to the welfare of someone he cared about who might be in serious trouble. But there was nothing else he could do about it. The motoroids were too big to get inside the military base to help. Sure they could take out a wall or two, but that was something he couldn't do unless Sylia ordered it. He had to put these thoughts out of his head, and focus on his own "attack" plan.

As questions of when he should disobey his sister's orders continued to bounce around his head, a thin, green, bar of light suddenly began to crawl steadily across a map of the heavens, dotted with tiny red triangles and their coordinate identifiers. His face lit up as the bar reflected off of a second red triangle and made its way off his screen to the unknown target of his signal. Mackie smiled at his success. "An eye for an eye, scumbag."

Leon stood frozen to the spot, seething with a burgeoning anger. As he entertained the crazed notion of driving an allterrain vehicle through the front doors and right down the boomer's throats, the muffled drone of a motorcycle engine briefly overcame the noise coming from the military building. He turned to where he thought he'd heard the sound and saw a figure in black armor sprinting across the floodlit lawn of the base. AD Police officers and soldiers alike rose lazily to their feet to see what some of their fellow troopers and officers were pointing at. Leon watched the swift figure, comparing its appearance to the boomers he'd seen on the videotape.

Before he could warn the general of his suspicions, the armored figure had vanished over a wall and then leapt onto the roof.

"Sylia, I'm losing my main power!"

Sylia turned to look at Nene who was now only a few feet away to her left. "Don't panic Nene. You should have backup power by now."

Nene checked her reserve power scale on her display screen, and sighed with relief, as the scale suddenly rose from zero to one hundred. "Yes! It's online now."

Their migration to the center of the room had been slow and arduous, but now the four Knight Sabers stood in a rough square, defensive formation. At first it appeared to confuse the four boomers, their attacks being reduced to probing slashes and kicks, which prompted Priss to unleash a few more precious railgun spikes. Like the railgun, her laser weapons had proven just as ineffective, putting more holes in the walls than in her opponent. In fact she had not yet succeeded in actually hitting her opponent with her range weapons, other than a few lucky pointblank attacks, which had done little to slow her opponent's attacks.

Linna found it harder and harder as the seconds ticked by, to deal with the impending sense of defeat that ate at her now. Although Sylia had reminded her about thinking negatively, she could not help it anymore. She wondered why her boss did not see this as the time to fall back and regroup. The boomers were no longer testing the Knight Saber's new defense tactic. They were using it to close a four-sided noose around them. It was as if they were playing some giant chess game and their opponents had foreseen their every move. As the boomer in front of her edged forward menacingly, Linna thought of Leon for a brief moment, and then froze, her eye caught on something falling overhead.

Descending from the ceiling directly above, a shard of glass tumbled end over end, dislodged from its tenuous perch in the frame of the shattered skylight by something. For a moment, it looked to her like a single, gleaming emerald in her green, nightvision display.

With only a sharp whistling sound as a warning, all four boomers lunged forward to grapple with their prospective victims. Sylia, Nene, Priss and Linna fought to break the vicelike grip that had suddenly encircled each of their necks, threatening to crush their windpipes.

"Yes Sir. As you can see for yourself, we are about to complete the final phase of the field test as you predicted. Power expenditures were well below the"

"What was that?"

Leomund's confident tone quickly faded into a nervous mumble over the vidphone, as he waited for the anonymous investor to elaborate on his query.

"Sir? What was what?"

"Leomund . . . what was that 'shadow' that just passed in front of there it is again."

On the huge multivision screens in the main control room of the mountain laboratory, a shadowy blob had briefly obscured the second camera view of the military base's hall, where the four cybernetic beings stood poised to claim their victory over the Knight Sabers. Leomund slowly put down the vidphone handset and stared hard at each of the four screens in turn, scanning every dark corner for any sign of movement. Suddenly a static-lined, knife-shaped glow erupted from a point just behind the cybernetic being closest to the second camera view.

Mackie sat nervously on the edge of his seat, as the coordinates on his computer screen continued to climb. After another five seconds, the number halted its ascent, and an audible 'click' was heard from the satellite dish on top of the Knight Sabers utility van. On his screen, two words in bold capitals, began blinking at a steady, pulselike rate; "TRANSMISSION COMMENCING"

A tiny bead of sweat drizzled lazily over the creaselines that furrowed Leomund Sholtan's forehead. His eyes were glued to the dark figure that refused to cooperate by standing at the edge of the security camera's range. Just when Leomund thought he might scream in frustration at the massive video screen, the mysterious figure stepped into the middle of the dim view.

The figure appeared to be wearing a suit of armor, making it difficult to distinguish from the four 'test' subjects', except that it carried a weapon of some kind that emitted a constant, thin, ribbon of laser light, and that its outline distinguished it as a male. The figure took another slow step towards the camera, revealing a little more detail, and then . . . a roar of whitenoise from the multivision's speakers filled the mountain laboratory's control room, as the view on all four screens was suddenly engulfed by rapidly moving pixels of gray, white and black.

From behind her cybernetic opponent, a strange, laserlike glow rose out of the darkness and came straight towards Linna's face. A blinding slash of light separated her from her opponent for a splitsecond, and then suddenly, she was free.

Upon the release of her neck, she began to gasp hungrily for air, while trying to understand what had just happened. She recalled hearing what sounded like a painful squeal, and then her opponent had seemingly disappeared. She checked her backup powerreadout and then turned her head quickly from side to side, searching for the boomer that had come so close to taking her life.

Approximately fifteen feet away and to the left, Linna's eyes came to rest on a shadowy figure, wearing what looked like a dark colored hardsuit. The shape and size of the suit's outline distinguished the wearer as a male, although a long tress of dark hair hung out from the back of the figure's helmet, drawn loosely into what looked like a ponytail. The figure was battling handtohand with what had previously been her attacker, unleashing high, headcentered kicks, and punctuated, fisted thrusts at a rate that defied Linna's ability to follow them all. The boomer was defending itself from the shorrange attack with some difficulty, but was not showing any visible signs of damage or crippling pain. Swinging from the waist of the armored figure was what looked to Linna like a broken sword of some kind.

Linna's appraisal of the unexpected reenforcement was cut short by a hard, jolting impact to her left shoulder blade. Spinning around to confront the source of the painful blow, she came facetoface with one of the three remaining boomers. Over its shoulder she could see Priss wrestling with the third boomer, while Nene and Sylia had ganged up on the fourth. A quick estimate of her companion's attacks revealed that they were fighting with a new energy and verve. Once again, her observation of the battle around her was interrupted, this time by a steely fist into her torso.

At such short range, Linna's instinct took charge, and guided her fists and legs in a flurry of powerful jabs and deft kicks that caught the boomer off guard. Her opponent taken aback for a moment, Linna initiated a charge for a knucklebomb, probably the last that she would get to use considering her rapidly decreasing backup power supply. The boomer recovered its wits and leapt at the green hardsuit, with an angry flare of crimson in its eyes. Its trip through the air was abruptly halted by a greenarmored fist to the chest, followed immediately by a deafening detonation.

Linna stared down searchingly, through the thin haze of dissipating smoke at where she thought her opponent should be. Rising suddenly through the vapors to reset for its attack, her enraged opponent now sported a visible scar from Linna's explosive strike. The once gleaming ebony surface on the boomer's chest had turned a mottled silvery blue, the result of intense heat applied at close range. But the structure of the epidermal layer remained intact, snatching away the brief feeling of victory that Linna had suddenly felt. The tide of the battle had been turned by the shadowy figure's arrival, but as Linna checked her backup power supply again, she began to wonder, 'for whom'?

"Leomund . . . call them back to the lab."

The cold but firm voice on the other end of the line shook Leomund from his stupor. "Call them back sir? But we're just about to"

The anonymous investor increased the amount of resolve in his tone by a notch, "Leomund remember this was just a test. The destruction of the Knight Sabers would have been an added bonus, but as you can see, there is a new factor to the outcome. Without visual contact with the test site, our experiment is of limited value. And this *intruder* has tainted the test results. Call them back immediately, and make sure noone sees them go."

"Yes sir. Right away sir."

"Oh, and one more thing Leomund"

"Sir?"

There was a noticeable pause before the faceless voice continued. "I think it's about time I paid a visit to the laboratory to see how exactly my money is being spent. I'd like to see firsthand how the project is proceeding."

Leomund felt the blood in his veins turn to ice." Are you certain sir? There's so much that still needs to"

"Nonsense Leo. This test has been a success! Not only does this prove the capabilities of our offspring, but it also solidifies the trust that you and I have shared so far. I think a personal visit would take this trust to the next level. Don't you?"

Leomund hesitated with his answer, his eyes glued to the crippling static that still rolled across the four multivision screens. "Yes . . . yes sir. That it would sir. I look forward to meeting you here sir."

"Good! I'm pleased to hear that. You can expect me some time tomorrow afternoon. Goodbye Dr. Sholtan."

Leomund's hand gripped the vidphone handset a little tighter as the line went dead. "Goodbye sir."

Priss balked with her next attack to look over at her companions. She was still puzzling over why the boomers had suddenly released their locking grip on them. On her

neck, she could feel the tingling irritation of a chafing burn, caused by two metallic hands that had nearly choked her to death. She had been struggling vainly to pry the boomer's steel digits away when a sudden flash of light beside her had momentarily fogged her display.

When her visor had cleared her throat had been let go, and her opponent reappeared, standing a few feet in front of her looking dazed from the light itself. It occurred to her now, that this was probably the closest she had come to dying while in the line of duty. Even a superboomer and its three hyperboomer henchmen, hadn't come this close.

Relinquishing the morbid thought, it took only a quick body count to realize that there was one extra hardsuited figure engaged in the fight. The dark, probably male, armored figure was fighting its opponent toe-to-toe, not backing off for a second. The boomer was actually backing up an inch or so after every punch and parry. Then to her surprise, the boomer took two quick steps back and then clasped its hands in front of it. The armored man took one step forward to continue his assault, when he suddenly went flying backwards, landing hard and flat against a wall. The figure slumped to the floor, but quickly began its struggle to get back up.

A bright flash of light brought Priss's attention back to where she had left her own opponent but the boomer was gone. In fact, after another quick survey of the entire room, she realized that all four boomers had suddenly vanished. She was about to question her leader when Sylia's voice ejected an anxious command to Nene. "Nene! Track them! They may still be in the room."

Priss became wary again, her knees bending reflexively to await any surprise attack. But the attack did not come. Several seconds drifted by before Nene replied with her results.

"Sylia, I'm not picking up anything in the room. It's like they've just vanished into thin air!"

"Keep trying Nene, they may have some other trick up their sleeve that we haven't seen yet."

"Okay!"

Sylia let her body relax for the first time in what felt like several hours. Her approximation wasn't that far from the truth. But ever cautious, she called out to each Knight Saber in turn, and received three tired replies. That was when she noticed the *fifth* Knight Saber. She hadn't really taken the time to inspect their unrequested assistance, but now she turned to observe the temporary recruit more closely.

From the overall shape of the armor, the wearer was a male. Not overly tall or bulky, but clearly in good shape, the figure wore a hardsuit that was a patchwork affair of dark plating with a rough overlay. Various, oval-shaped ports, and a bulky, square device on the suit's back, marked the otherwise human-shaped outline. The helmet looked to be a modified motorcycle helmet, that sloped away slightly to the back, giving it an aerodynamic appearance. Strands of wire and a small connector protruded from the lower left edge of the helmet, then snaked under the left shoulder's armor plating, obviously the link between the suit's sensors and the helmet's display if it had one.

The most noticeable difference between this hardsuit and her own design was something that was not a part of the suit at all, but a dull, silvery-colored cylinder,

vaguely resembling a sword handle, that swung from a leather loop at the figure's side. Extending from one end of the cylinder was something she recognized after a slight confusion. It was the folded over blade of a katana, modified with a strange indentation along the entire cutting edge. Aside from the martial weapon, the suit reminded her strongly of the early prototype designs that she and Mackie had worked on, before the Knight Sabers had been assembled. Her suspicions suddenly aroused, she approached the unknown figure, cautiously.

Outside the now silent Matsumi Military base, Leon was still arguing with the general about the mysterious armored figure when four distraught looking hostages suddenly emerged from the front entrance. Two of them were supporting a limping female colleague, while Leon noted that the fourth was holding its left hand in a bloodsoaked wrapping of torn cloth. All were dressed in the uniforms of military administration personnel, identical to the garb of the hostages that had been released earlier. Leon rushed forward to help them to safety, a few of the soldiers and officers following behind to assist.

"Oh god, please get us away from here! We thought they were going to kill us when they found us in the office!"

Leon's face showed grim concern as he helped the frantic group to a nearby ambulance. He turned to stare at the general whose mask of indifference had finally faded into a downcast glare.

"Take them to Ikegaki General," he instructed the ambulance driver after the injured hostages had been seated inside, "I'll be there shortly to question them."

The driver nodded and leapt into the white and redstriped van, which then sped off up the military base's driveway, its rotating red lights casting surreal shadows against the nearby buildings. Leon watched the van disappear, until he could only hear its highpitched siren in the distance.

"Thankyou for your help," Syla offered the black hardsuited individual. "Your assistance is greatly appreciated by all of us."

Priss, Linna and Nene watched as the black hardsuit shifted its stance as if to reply, but Syla had already turned to walk away. "Uh, well you're welcome, but I really "

Syla abruptly turned back to the figure, raising a gloved hand to interrupt him gently. "I'm sorry if you've come a long way, but we are not hiring."

The black hard suit stood still for a moment, as if considering her reply, while Syla turned away once more to ask Nene over the private intercom channel about the progress of her scans for the boomers.

"I'm sorry Syla, I'm still not picking up any sign of the boomers. There was a brief energy pulse just after they disappeared, but no trace of them on my sensors now. And I still can't raise Mackie on the intercom."

Mackie. Syla had forgotten about him after several attempts to reach him when the battle had begun. She tried again to reach him, this time her attempt was successful. "Sis! Are you alright? I tried to reach you but something was jamming the intercom and the video link we were getting from the surveillance cameras!"

Sylia looked up into each corner of the hall and spotted the four video cameras, a red light glowing on top of each one.

"Mackie, have you got video now?"

After a brief pause, Mackie replied affirmatively.

"Have all the hostages been transported away from the base yet?" Sylia queried her brother, with a growing unease in her voice.

"They have now four more hostages just came out of"

Sylia didn't wait to hear the rest of Mackie's reply. She bolted out the front exit way with the other three Knight Sabers close behind. Suddenly the black hardsuited figure was standing alone in the dark hall.

As he began to move towards the hallway where the others had gone, his sharp eye noticed a small pool of dark liquid among the shards of glass in the middle of the floor. Crouching down to investigate, his gloved hand plucked a four-inch long, black metallic finger from a puddle of blood. The finger had been severed just below the handknuckle by a smooth, straight cut. The exposed bone and tissue had been partially cauterized by what looked like a laser scalpel stroke. The black hardsuited figure wrapped the severed finger in his left fist and stood up. His right hand went instinctively to the silver cylinder at his hip, as he broke into a jog to catch up with the Knight Sabers outside.

Leon's overwhelming feelings of relief at Linna's appearance in the front entrance of the military base, were shortlived, as he listened to Sylia and the general exchange angry words. He had initially been a little suspicious of the four humans that had come out of the base a few minutes ago. But their injuries and distressed appearance, as well as their frantic pleas for help, had squashed any doubts that he may have had about their identities, despite original reports of only thirtytwo fulltime base employees. Now, from what he could overhear of Sylia's assertions to the general, it looked like his initial suspicions were correct. The boomers had escaped right under their noses. He took one last glance at Linna as she stood listening to the argument, and then headed for his car.

All eyes in the parking lot suddenly turned towards the sound of screeching tires, only to catch a glimpse of an AD Police car speeding up the driveway of the military base. Two of those eyes, hidden behind a dark, plastic visor, remained locked on the disappearing car, wishing the driver had not left so suddenly.

Sylia finally disengaged from the general in disgust, then spun back on her heels to make a final point. "General, you will be contacted shortly by someone, to collect our fee as we agreed."

After a thoughtful pause, the general nodded affirmatively.

As the media swooped in on the general and the police, the black hardsuited figure, unnoticed by nearly everyone, followed the Knight Sabers to their van as they prepared to chase after the ambulance with its cybernetic cargo. The figure spoke up, momentarily bringing Sylia's discussion of their next move to a halt. "Uh, I know you're not hiring any"

Before anyone else could blink, Sylia reached out and grabbed the black hardsuit by its arms and swung it around to slam hard up against the back of the utility van. Its left hand was balled into a fist, but the figure did not attempt to defend itself. Sylia held the figure's arms flat against the metal panel and spoke in a low, calm voice. "No. We are not hiring any new

members. But that's not why you're really here, is it?"

Linna, Nene and Priss exchanged visorhidden glances as they watched their leader interrogate the newcomer.

"No. It's not," the figure divulged. "I'm looking for Syla Stingray."

Syla's grip on the figure's armored forearms tightened. "Who's Syla Stingray?" she asked calmly, skillfully concealing her alarm.

The black hardsuit shrugged, "I don't really know. I've never met her before."

The obtuse answer was almost more than Syla could take. Why was this person whose voice sounded like a kid's looking for her? And how had he connected her name with the Knight Sabers?

By this time, Mackie had poked his head out the rear door to see what was holding up their departure. Just in front of him he saw Priss, Linna and Nene standing in a semicircle, apparently watching something. He followed their mutual gaze to just beside the rear door, where his sister was holding a figure in a black hardsuit up against the van's rear panel. He glanced at the black suit of armor, admiring its economical use of plating, while maintaining a good overall amount of protection. It looked very similar to something he might build, if he was strapped for funds. His brief evaluation of the stranger's armor suddenly took a back seat, as his sister's voice rose into a range of pitch that he had not heard many times in his life.

"Why do you want to talk to her?! Tell me, and I'll see that she gets the message!" Syla spat.

The stranger simply replied that he couldn't do that. He had to speak with her face to face.

Mackie jumped back away from the door as Syla suddenly hurled the black hardsuit into the back of the van. She climbed in after her questioner, and slammed the door shut.

Mackie slid into the driver's seat of the van, but cocked an ear to the back area, where the figure sprawled on the floor was now clambering to his knees.

Syla was livid. Severely fatigued by a battle that had nearly seen them all killed, angered by the boomers' clever escape; and now this unnerving 'Kid Hero' character wanted to talk to Syla Stingray. She sat down on the narrow bench beside the computer console with a sigh of frustration. Her instinct was telling her that whatever this person knew about her, she could not reveal her identity to him. She had to find out who he was first.

"Tell me who you are, and then maybe I can arrange a meeting," Syla entreated, her voice now returning to a calmer tone.

The black hardsuit remained kneeling on the floor, his helmet turning to look at Syla and then back down at the floor. His hands reached up, one of them still in a fist, to the edges of his helmet, as Mackie leaned out of his seat to get a better look.

Syla gasped as she recognized the face. Mackie felt a shiver run over him, feeling as if he were looking into a mirror five years from now.

The figure sat up and spoke proudly, "I'm Blackie Stingray. I'm looking for my halfsister. And I *know* that you know where she is."

Syla's eyes narrowed sharply behind the dark visor of her helmet. The face of the man sitting across from her, was the grownup visage of the cyborgchild she had seen in her failed 'visiontest'.

Leon turned the steering wheel of his cruiser sharply to the left and slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding a collision with the rearend of an ambulance that lay on its side in the middle of the road. The rear doors were wide open and flames were visible coming out of the engine compartment. There wasn't much time.

Leon swung open the police car's door, and then slid out of the seat. He held his revolver in front of him against his chest, and looked to each side of the road, ready for an ambush. He approached the rear doors of the red and white van, and stood cautiously to one side while peeking in through the window of one of the open doors. Empty. Moving stealthily to the front of the vehicle he brought the gun down to gut level and aimed it straight out in front of him. After a quick breath, he stepped quickly in front of the vehicle's windshield, and sighted down the gun's barrel at the driver's seat.

Through the cracked windshield, Leon saw the ambulance driver and his assistant laying in a heap on the driver's side, both of their heads tilted at an extreme angle that would not be physically possible if they were still alive. Peering closer he could see bright red handprints on their necks where the boomers had grasped their now broken necks. Smelling leaking gasoline, he relaxed his rigid stance, then walked quickly back to his car. As he slumped sideways into the seat of the cruiser, the van exploded, sending a hot breeze to wash over his face.

"AD Central this is Detective McNichol. I'm just off Bay Road number One and Harumi. I've got an ambulance down and two dead attendants. Please send a fire unit and tell the coroners to bring their dental I.D. kits."

Leon fought back an exasperated grin. So much for the new, more peaceful era.

Far to the west of Bay Road number One, the anonymous investor peered out of his penthouse window at the mass of light in the distance that marked MegaTokyo's downtown proper. Night had swallowed the lingering purple hues of the dying sunset, and descended on the city like a thick blanket of sable. He stood for a long moment, considering the height at which he now stood; a height which he had thought he would never descend from. But now his ambition demanded it.

The field test had been a success as far as he was concerned. Although his intended test subject had failed, leaving him with serious doubts about the future of the project, the evening had not been without surprises. The fifth Knight Saber had been entirely unexpected. All of his research over the past five years had concluded that the Knight Saber's leader had not recruited any new members. And that she never would. So who was this new member who had arrived just before the annoying video loss? Could this be the one he had been seeking all along? It was certainly not out of the realm of possibility, as the image on his data unit portrayed a male and not a female. He had clung to the hope that the gender discrepancy between the image on the master data unit and that of the test subject was due to a very clever disguise, but tonight's test had dispelled that notion. Now he was beginning to wonder if the five years of boomerfree existence had given this new

Knight Saber a sense of confidence that he lacked in the past. The anonymous investor began to grin. Had his field test accidentally flushed out his prey?

It was decided. Tomorrow they would begin the next phase of the project, and he would personally oversee its initiation. Sholtan would have to be dealt with sooner or later, but he still had a very important task for him to complete. A task that would insure the project's success.

The anonymous investor walked towards his desk across a large, faded rug that depicted an ancient Japanese setting; two rival armies stood at either end, frozen forever in the moment before their glory. He fell lazily into a black, highback, leather chair and stared at the reflective surface of his massive desk. A smooth piece of smoked glass covered the desk from corner to corner. Just below the glass were hundreds of glowing indicator panels, each accessible by a thermosensitive membrane sandwiched between the layers of polished silicon. The investor placed his palm down flat on the glass over an illuminated square section. A few seconds later, a clicking sound came from across the room.

Rising from his chair, the investor crossed the room again, to confront an inconspicuous looking power outlet panel. The grey fourinch square panel door was slightly ajar. He stooped down and flipped the door wide open, and reached inside.

Withdrawing his hand, he held in his palm an ornately carved wooden box. Inside the wooden box was a metallic object that vaguely resembled a silver cigarette case, its shine slightly tarnished due to frequent handling over the years. On top of the metal case, etched in a delicate script, were the letters "O.M.S".

9. THE ENEMY WITHIN

"That's odd," Sylia replied. "I don't think Sylia has a halfbrother, that I am aware of."

Blackie looked at where he thought the hardsuited woman's eyes would be behind her visor, and smiled grimly. "That's probably because she doesn't even know that I exist. But I can prove it to her, if you could take me to see her."

Sylia glanced at Mackie noting his confused expression, and then paused for a moment to consider the cyborg's possible intentions with this charade. Perhaps it was another part of this whole evening's elaborate 'test' that they had just survived. The phony hostagetaking, the video cameras, and the "visiontest". All of it, she was sure, was part of someone's attempt to find out if the Knight Sabers were still active, and if so, to find out if they were still capable. Sylia thought wishfully that the jury would still be out on that count, but one thing was for sure; if this cyborg had not shown up when it did, they would not be having this conversation. Perhaps a look at this 'proof' that it said it had would be in order.

Sylia's thoughts were interrupted by a trio of thumps on the back door and the sound of Priss's voice in her intercom. "Sylia, the news cameras are headed this way. I think it's time we split. Are you done questioning our 'hero' yet?"

"For the moment Priss. You and Linna load your motoroids into the van. Nene, I need you in here now to see if you can locate our boomers. And keep your hardsuit and helmet on. All of you keep them on. Got it?"

"That's an affirmative boss!"

Suddenly Priss's voice took on a disconnected tone that directed her next statement to her companions with her outside the van. "I'm calling shotgun on the couch! My back is killing me!"

Sylia listened to the goodnatured bickering that followed for a moment, and then switched her intercom off. The muffled sounds of the minicranes loading the motoroids reached her ears and her guests. "Uh, are we going somewhere?" Blackie started with a nervous look on his face. "I gotta get my bike!"

Sylia smiled briefly to herself, thinking about how much this cyborg reminded her of Priss. Then the smile faded. "Your bike will be fine. One of my companions will ride it for you. Keys?"

Blackie balked at the request. "I'm sorry, but noone rides my bike but me. I'll follow you."

Sylia responded negatively. "That is not an option. I can't have you knowing where we are going, so you will ride with us that is, if you're still interested in meeting Ms. Stingray?"

Blackie's face showed a genuine trace of anxiety. The first real display of human emotion that Sylia had seen, and a signal to her better judgement that maybe the cyborg wasn't quite as dangerous as she had initially thought. Sylia decided to use this situation as a test of her own. "She's an excellent driver," she began, "and she'll treat your bike with the same respect that you would. You'll just have to trust us if you want to meet Ms. Stingray and show her this proof of who you say you are. You can't leave your bike here. Someone will trace the license plate, and I can tell you that if they caught you on the road like you are now, the police will want to talk to you about that weapon of yours."

Blackie looked down at his laserkatana, and then back up at the white hardsuit in defeat. He had no choice. He had come this far, farther than he'd ever dared in the past. He held his keys out slowly to her. Sylia took the keys and signaled Priss on the intercom.

"We're just about done Sylia HEY! Get that camera out of my face asshole!!!"

Priss's voice calmed down again after a persistent cameraman had backed away from her, "Sorry Sylia. What is it?"

"Priss, I need you to ride our friend's motorcycle for him. He'll be riding with us in the van. Use the shortcut, and please avoid the THP at all costs."

"What?! The shortcut? But I called the couch! Sylia my back is really killing me and my head is still a little sore. What about security and"

"I'm sorry Priss. But I need *you* to do this for me."

The back door swung open suddenly, flooding the dim confines of the van's 'rest area' with light from a street lamp at the edge of the parking lot. Priss poked her head and an arm inside to receive the keys when she saw the face of the man in the black hardsuit. The keys fell from Sylia's grasp into the center of Priss's open palm, but then slipped through the outstretched gloved fingers onto the floor with a soft clinking sound.

For just a few seconds, Priss could neither move nor speak as she stared wideeyed with shock into Blackie's worried eyes. "Please be careful with it," Blackie begged the blue hardsuited woman, "It's a customized bike and if anything ever happened"

Sylia raised a hand into the air in front of her in a calming gesture. "I assure you Blackie was it?" Blackie nodded while Priss remained immobile, "I assure you that nothing will happen to your bike. She will treat it just like it was her own."

Sylia waited for Priss to snap back at her for the sarcastic remark, or at least respond, but to her surprise neither occurred.

Blackie and Sylia stared at the blue hardsuited figure still standing at the edge of the doorway with its hand outstretched like a statue. Suddenly Priss remembered where she was, and more importantly, *who* she was. Her first instinct had been to climb into the van and grab Blackie by the throat, and ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. But that would also mean revealing her identity to him. And there was no way she was prepared to do that at this time. She would have to wait and see what Sylia was up to by bringing him along to Raven's Garage, otherwise known as "The Shortcut".

Slowly, she picked up the set of keys from the floor and turned away from the van. Inside her, confusion and anger were sparring for supremacy, as the shock began to release her. In a daze she walked to the black motorcycle that had been hidden from her sight behind the Knight Saber's van, and straddled the seat. As she settled onto the bike something about it seemed familiar, almost comforting. The gauges and panels were laid out almost identically to her own bike, with a few minor differences in the tach and speedometer. A few unlabelled indicator lights threw the comparison off for a moment, but the feeling she got as she reached for the handlebars brought on the distinct feeling she'd ridden this bike before.

Looking down at the keys in her gloved hand, Priss saw the name "Blackie" written on the fob in gold script. The puzzle pieces that had tumbled over and over in her mind earlier began to spin more furiously now. Where the hell had he found a hardsuit anyway? And what did he want to talk to Sylia for? He didn't seem to want a job with the

Knight Sabers so what was he trying to prove by getting into the fight back at the military base? Someone had a lot of explaining to do; that much was for sure.

She inserted a key into the ignition and thumbed the starter. The bike roared to life, the sound itself having a familiar calming effect. After a few tests of the throttle, Priss swung the bike away from the utility van, and shot up the driveway into the darkness.

Sylia watched as Nene closed the rear door to the van from inside and locked it, and then signaled to Mackie to drive. The heavy utility van pulled away from the edge of crowded parking lot, forcing the newsmedia crews to scramble to their vehicles to give chase. Unfortunately their exit was blocked by the many AD Police and military vehicles that were attempting to leave as well.

A few miles along Bay Road Number One, Mackie slowed to a stop as he caught sight of an AD Police cruiser's lights in the middle of the road. A little further in front of the cruiser was the burning frame of an ambulance lying on its side. Linna turned her head to gawk at the scene, wondering a little anxiously as to whom the driver of the cruiser was, while Sylia stared at their cyborg passenger, watching its face for any sign of emotion. At the far left edge of Linna's vision, just at the side of the road, she spotted Leon talking to Priss as the two watched the roaring inferno on the road before them. She wondered what they could be talking about after three years of a mutually agreed upon silence.

"What happened?" Priss asked from the seat of Blackie's idling motorcycle. She was looking away from Leon into the hypnotic orange flames that continued to consume the ambulance.

Leon's gaze was focused on the fire as well when he finally replied. "Looks like the boomers got away . . . again. Killed the two attendants and vanished without so much as a footprint. I'd really like to know who's behind all of this."

Priss studied Leon's stern thoughtful look. She'd seen the look a few times before when they'd dated. "Thinking of resurrecting the Boomer Crimes division are you? What good would it do? You saw all those soldiers and cops sitting on their butts back there. That's the way the world is now Leon. We almost got snuffed because we fell into the same trap. Now some asshole's out there who is taking advantage of the situation. By the time the ADP gets its act together it'll be too late anyway."

Leon's head turned sharply to look at Priss, but his response was cut short as he caught sight of his reflection in her mirrored blue visor. The years had changed them all. Five years ago he would have defended the AD Police to the death, but now he wasn't sure. After Genom's downfall, the Boomer Crimes division remained in place for a year to deal with the odd construction boomer that got out of hand, but was then restructured to meet aggressive budget cuts. Leon had argued for the division's survival in a standby reserve status, but the brass didn't bite. Boomer crimes had dropped to almost nonexistent.

Shortly thereafter he was assigned to the relatively new BioTechnical Crimes division to deal with a surge in DNA and genetic fraud crimes. There was also a fear that clone trading was becoming a blackmarket priority, and MegaTokyo was in the center of the spotlight as the leader in genetically engineered species as well as a major gateway port to the fast growing European markets. Mechanical human replicas were passé. Human replicas that could equal the old mechanical boomers in speed and productivity were on the horizon. A horizon that Leon wasn't sure he wanted to see.

"Maybe you're right Priss," Leon finally replied with a grim smile. "But I'm not going to sit around while these boomers make us all look bad. Somebody has to take them down once and for all."

Priss was about to reply when Syla's voice in her intercom cut her off. "Priss we don't have time for this. If you've found out all you can about the boomers then get going, and we'll meet you later."

"Okay Syla. See you there."

Priss looked into Leon's eyes, reflections of flames from the ambulance fire flickering in them along with anger and traces of guilt. She knew him well enough to know that he was blaming himself for the boomer's escape. But she also knew it wasn't his fault. She turned away shaking her head, and put Blackie's motorcycle into gear.

Leon's anger still boiled inside him as he watched the blue hardsuit and black motorcycle disappear into the distance. For a moment his feelings of powerlessness were forgotten as he wondered why Priss wasn't riding her own motorcycle.

Syla continued watching her guest, and for the first time noticed a trickle of blood running down the side of its left hand, still clenched tightly into a fist. "You're bleeding," Syla said as she got up to dig out the first aid kit. Blackie looked at where Syla had pointed, and grinned. The tightly clenched fist opened up to reveal a severed metallic finger lying in the center of his palm. Nene and Linna gasped in horror, while Syla stared hard at the digit.

"Mackie! Don't go anywhere just yet!" Syla cried. Mackie had begun to maneuver the truck around Leon's cruiser and the burning ambulance, but suddenly hit the brakes.

"May I?" Syla said, as she gestured to Blackie that she wanted to pick the finger up.

"Oh uh, well I was hoping to give it to the police, but I guess I forgot about it in all the excitement."

Syla studied the cyborg's face as it spoke the words without revulsion or disgust. Now it was acting the way she expected it to behave. "That's exactly what we're going to do," she said with a knowing smile, feeling for the first time that night that she might have found an answer to one of her questions.

"Leon!"

The still perturbed police officer looked over at the side window of the Knight Saber's van to see Mackie waving in his direction. "Huh?" He pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and walked over to the van.

"I think we've got a clue for you," Mackie said excitedly while waving something in his hand. Leon approached the window and looked at the object Mackie was holding. It was a small, clear, plastic bag with a reddish fluid in it. Leon peered closer at the bag and saw the outline of a metallic finger lying amongst the smear of blood. Leon smiled up at Mackie and took the grisly evidence. "Thanks kid! Nice work! A little calling card eh? We may just figure this one out yet."

Mackie smiled back. "Don't thank me. It was a friend who found it. Sis needs you to run a check on it and let us know what you find. See ya!"

"Wait!" Leon yelled vainly after the rapidly disappearing vehicle. 'Who's the friend?' he wondered to nobody but himself.

Linna looked over at Syla, as an uncharacteristic snicker entered her headset intercom. "Syla?" Linna inquired over the intercom, "Did I just hear you . . . ?"

"I was just thinking," Syla replied hesitantly, a sly tone evident in her voice. "I've never given the finger to a police officer before."

For a second there was utter silence, and then an eruption of laughter from Nene's intercom. Linna stewed angrily by herself, slightly offended at Syla's mocking of her boyfriend, a habit that had somehow survived the years, despite the fact that her present boyfriend was a cop.

The drive to Raven's Garage was a solemn one despite Syla's joke. Aside from their fatigue, each of the Knight Sabers were acutely aware of their 'guest', and their inability to discuss anything in his presence regardless of the privacy of their helmet intercom system. Syla had sequestered Blackie to the back of the van's rest area to prevent him from seeing out the front windows. The cyborg's finding of the metallic finger had eased her anxiety a little, but now she was mentally preparing for any possible trickery on its part when she would call its bluff, and ask to see its proof.

After a twentyminute ride that had seemed to last forever, Blackie began to detect the smell of industrial waste, and the sounds of airpowered tools, drifting in through the driver's open window. The utility van slowed to a halt, and a gloved hand reached out to help him to his feet. One of the hardsuited figures produced some cloth and blindfolded him. He was then led out of the vehicle, through a door, across a smooth, cementlike surface, and then guided to a set of steps leading down. At the edge of the first step his nose registered the smell of gasoline, a unique mixture of which he instantly recognized.

While Mackie hurriedly closed the metal garage doors, Syla watched the cyborg's face as Nene and Linna guided him down the steps to the Knight Saber's underground training facility. Strangely, she thought she saw a knowing grin emerge, just before the cyborg disappeared down the stairs.

From across the garage, Priss, still in her hardsuit, and a grayhaired Dr.Raven, exited from his office. Priss headed straight for the stairs with a can of soda in her hand, intent on questioning Blackie before Syla, but smiled mischievously and turned to call out across the workbays, "Thanks for the soda Pops!"

The doctor clenched his teeth in annoyance, and was about to correct the stairskipping brunette when he noticed Syla standing near the back door, still in her hardsuit. "Syla! It's good to" the doctor began, only to be cut off by a finger placed on Syla's visor just above where her lips were. The two stood quietly, while Mackie locked the last bay door. Syla's eyes followed her brother's trek across the silent garage to where the frame of a motorcycle awaited his attention. The doctor's expression turned to mild concern as Syla grasped him gently by the arm, and began to explain their unexpected arrival.

Dr. Raven's expressions ranged from concern to disbelief as Syla relayed the night's events, beginning with their battle with the strange boomers at the military base. But as she began to relate the Knight Saber's encounter with the cyborg that had foolishly jumped into their midst during the fight, the doctor's face suddenly went pale.

Lifting her visor, Syla halted her story to ask the rapidly whitening mechanic if he was alright, but was answered by a blank stare. She reached out to grab the doctor's arms, as his legs suddenly buckled beneath him. Helping him to a chair in his windowed office,

Sylia closed the door, and that's when the stunned doctor saw the bike that Priss had rode in on.

Dr. Raven stared out the office window at the shiny black motorcycle parked just inside the back door of the garage. He studied the fairing's contours and the layout of the engine, recognizing instantly his own handiwork. He turned to Sylia, who's worried look made the surging memories even harder to keep from overwhelming him. While Mackie had inherited his father's smile, Sylia had her father's eyes. He gathered his composure, and then sadly smiled at his dead friend's daughter. "Sylia . . . I swore to your father that I wouldn't"

Sylia's worried expression shifted quickly to an angry glare. "You mean to tell me you know something about this cyborg?"

The doctor sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair, letting his tensed muscles attempt to relax, as he pondered the best way to say the words.

"Yes . . . Sylia. I do know something about this man," he said, stressing the word 'man', "I've known something about him since he was conceived."

The doctor waited for his statement to register, but Sylia was already ahead of him. "My father created him, didn't he?"

Dr. Raven simply nodded as Sylia's mind raced to understand. "How? When? Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I suppose it's too far gone now," the doctor said resignedly after a slight pause to consider his approach. Choosing the direct one, the doctor continued. "Blackie was created at about the same time as your father was completing the first boomer prototypes. I could not tell you about him because your father forbid it Sylia. If either of you had known of each other's existence, then the security of the data that each of you were protecting would be compromised, and everything that your father had worked so hard for could then be taken away by someone with less than your father's ideals."

"So it has a copy of the contents of my data unit too? And you've known about this all along?"

Dr. Raven nodded again. "Yes. But your father never revealed to me what was on the 'backups' as he called them. If he had, then I would be a risk as well. But he did tell me a bit about his research, and about Blackie of course. When he brought him here, he had no choice."

Sylia looked up from her mindless study of the lightly oilstained floor, struggling for the first time in many years with a deeprooted pain that she had successfully battled into submission since her father's meaningless death. "Is it really my halfbrother like it . . . I mean *he* says?"

The doctor leaned forward to look directly into Sylia's glistening eyes, causing her to sit back a bit. "Let's go find out."

Still blindfolded, Blackie sat patiently on a couch of some kind in a room that resonated with a low humming, suggesting the presence of heavy electrical equipment. He could hear the muffled voices of his captors outside the door, but couldn't make out any of their conversation. As he strained his ears to listen, he noticed his blindfold had worked loose to the point that he could see a little light sneaking in under the bottom of the material.

Tilting his head back, he was able to see a bit of the room around him, but not much before he was startled by the blue hardsuited woman crouching only a foot away, and staring him directly in the face. His acute vision could not pierce the tinted visor however, so the unnerving scrutiny continued with the blue hard-suited figure at a distinct advantage. "Are you Sylia Stingray?" he finally queried.

Priss snickered. "Uh uh. But the big question is who the hell are you really?"

Blackie tilted his head further to get a better look at his questioner. "My name is Blackie Stingray. I'm looking for"

Priss whipped Blackie's blindfold off. "WHAT?! Whaddya mean your name is !"

Priss was interrupted in her interrogation as the door swung open. Dr. Raven and Sylia, now with her helmet off, entered the room. Dr. Raven took a seat to the left of Blackie while Sylia remained standing.

"Hiya Pops," Blackie suddenly ejected with a tone of mischief in his voice. Priss gaped at Dr. Raven, waiting instinctively for him to explode, but the doctor's face registered only a warm smile. "Hello Blackie. Getting your bike chopped somewhere else these days?"

Blackie smiled back at the doctor sheepishly, and shook his head. "Nah. There's only one place in town that can touch my bike."

Priss was about to cut in to the nostalgic exchange to get her own answers when Blackie turned to look up at Sylia. The smile on his face grew even wider as he recognized her face from the old newspaper clipping he'd dug up about the explosion at Uizu laboratories sixteen years ago. One of the yellowing newsprint photos depicted his father standing with a little girl, maybe eleven or twelve years old, but the clear brown eyes that stared back at him now were unmistakably the very same.

"Sylia," he said, his long blueblack hair shaking from side to side, "I should have known. You're as clever as Dad ever was."

Sylia flushed visibly at hearing her father spoken of out loud. She was about to reply, her heart suddenly full of questions about her father when Priss placed her hand on Blackie's chest and pushed him back into the couch. "Alright! That's it! I want some answers now! What the hell are you doing in a hardsuit, how come the doc doesn't get mad when you call him "Pops", and why the hell didn't you tell me who you were this afternoon at your apartment?"

Nene and Linna, who had been observing the unfolding events from the open doorway with growing amazement, swung around to regard each other with looks of surprise, hidden from one another by their helmets.

Blackie stared up at the dark blue mirrored visor, his own distorted reflection staring back at him. "This afternoon? I'm sorry. I don't think I"

Priss let go of Blackie, and ripped her helmet off before Sylia could stop her. "Do I look familiar now *Mr. Stingray*?"

Stunned, Blackie looked at the faces of the assembled group, wondering if this was some elaborate joke. "Pri . . . Priss!" What are you doing here?"

Sylia watched the two wrestle with their questions and answers as it dawned on her that they had already met somehow. Before she could calm them down, a second, more ominous thought occurred to her. Priss didn't know what Blackie *was*, and as she watched her friend interact with the cyborg, it was soon apparent that Priss was attracted to it. The way her face had flushed and her intense glare had softened as she continued to

press the cyborg for answers were convincing enough. But Syla watched with a mixture of fascination and mild revulsion, as Priss sat down in mock annoyance beside the cyborg, her elbow pressing softly into its ribs. Priss never allowed anyone to sit that close to her, and now she was sitting *that* close to it.

Syla watched for a moment longer, until a slight smile flashed across Priss's face in response to Blackie's nervous laughter. In that instant, Syla's decision was made for her; she wouldn't tell her. Considering all the friends that Priss had lost over the years, it was the least Syla could do to help her keep this one. No one had to know besides herself and Dr. Raven, who as far as she could tell, considered Blackie to be as human as any of them. Maybe fate was smiling on Priss this time, in its own twisted way.

10. THE GHOST OF A CHANCE

Finally, a feeling of communal relief pervaded the tense atmosphere of the Knight Saber's training facility, as Priss and Blackie reconciled their confusion. While Linna, Nene and Dr. Raven looked on, the volume and intensity of Priss's voice came down a notch, stimulating a slight sigh of relief from everyone in the room. It was common knowledge to the other Knight Sabers that Priss had a long memory for perceived slights, and keeping secrets from her headed the list. Linna had once commented during one of their meetings that "to forgive and forget" was definitely not Priss's motto. Priss had just smiled grimly.

As Syla listened patiently to the now onesided discussion, she suddenly became aware of the pangs of guilt that gnawed at her as Priss lightheartedly scolded the cyborg for failing to reveal its full name. Syla's common sense and better judgement rose up to join the internal mental fray, beating with an animal ferocity against a strong feeling of duty to her friend. Time after time, Priss had lost people who she had allowed to get close. Syla had watched these relationships from afar, preferring not to offer any advice or comfort. Her distance was more out of a fear that she might make things worse than an awareness of the Knight Saber's code. The code didn't specifically restrict her from discussing relationships with the other members but the rule restricting involvement with men had forced her to lead by example.

Over the years the code had become a source of amusement more than anything. Men had come and gone into all of their lives except Nene's. Syla smiled to herself as she recalled Nene's many subtle attempts at getting Mackie's attention, unsuccessfully. While everyone else had written the whole affair off as hopeless, Syla knew inside that Mackie cared very deeply for the youngest member of the Knight Sabers, but his courage did not equal his affection in quantity.

Linna, on the other hand, had courage to spare, as men entered her life and left with a frequency that left the rest of them in a mix of awe and disdain. That was, until she had asked Leon out. Priss had been very irate over Linna's boldness, the fact that she had broken up with Leon only a few months before being the source of her irritation. But surprisingly, it wasn't too long before Priss became too absorbed in her own life to worry much about who Leon went out with. At least that was the way it seemed on the surface. Closed books weren't easy to read.

Fargo, as always, had continued to pursue Syla romantically, but with growing tenacity. Although their clandestine meetings had become increasingly uninformative as time went by, she continued to meet with him, knowing full well what to expect. Subconsciously, she enjoyed his attentions, and like Priss, the feelings of fear at being alone for the rest of her life quietly consumed her. But Syla's sense of loyalty to a higher cause squelched any urges to act upon those feelings.

And then there was Priss herself. While Syla clung to her lonely vigil, Priss had not been so inclined. As the lead singer of a popular rock band, men had sought her out vigorously, even to the point of fanaticism that resulted in an almost fatal shooting incident five years ago. But her inability to maintain a relationship with those who met her initial approval was distressing to watch from afar.

After several failed relationships that lasted no longer than a few months, it was becoming clear to Syla that her friend was being held back by something. What that

something was she was unsure, but the consistency of the pattern that Priss was establishing, and the inability of Linna or Nene to get her to discuss the matter with them left little doubt that it had to be something deeprooted. Even if she could not break through the ground above those roots, this time Sylia was determined to help Priss break her pattern in whatever way she could, no matter the irony of the circumstances.

Sylia's common sense and better judgement receded into the shadows of her mind's battlefield, while the pangs of guilt withdrew their assault, but continued to taunt her from behind the lines.

The room suddenly fell silent, and expectant stares fell on the leader of the Knight Sabers. Sylia's searching eyes met the audience with a hint of surprise as she withdrew from her daydream. Her eyes then fell on Blackie, prompting her previous cautious approach to regain its footing, the purpose of this gathering quickly refocusing in her mind. "I hate to interrupt such a pleasant reunion," Sylia began, all eyes in the room turning to regard her with mild shock at her firm tone, "but there is still the matter of some *proof* you spoke of?"

Blackie sat stunned for a moment, then flashed a look of understanding. He reached behind him to fidget with a lock of some kind on the bulky, square compartment attached to the back of his hardsuit. Immediately two hardsuits stiffened in alarm. Priss's eyes narrowed at Sylia and Linna's wary reactions. "Slowly," Sylia warned the cyborg.

Blackie turned back to Sylia with an embarrassed look, while Priss focused her curious stare toward Blackie.

"It's okay Sylia. That compartment is clean. I checked back at the base," Nene reported through her suit speaker. Sylia shot the red hardsuit a look that said, 'I wish you'd told me sooner', and then shook her head. Nene shifted slightly in the lounge's doorway, her gloved hands making an apologetic gesture.

Blackie resumed his nervous fidgeting with the lock on the compartment. After finally getting it open, he groped around for a moment, producing a rectangular object that Sylia, Mackie and Dr. Raven immediately recognized. Blackie held up the data unit for Priss to see. It had a large blue "1" on it with the words "707 HIGH" printed next to the digit. "This is where I got my hardsuit," Blackie said, offering the object to Sylia as he looked at Priss. Nene and Linna looked on, their visors hiding their curiosity.

Sylia reached out for the data unit, her hand trembling slightly, as the truth of Blackie's claim hit home. Something inside had held out the hope that it was all a hoax, a ploy by their mysterious new enemy. Even now, lingering doubts were coaxing her to view the data unit's contents to be sure. 'Now you're being foolish,' she thought to herself, while an angry voice inside countered with weak claims of betrayal. 'How much more had her father concealed from her for her protection? Could there be more that she didn't know?' She suddenly found herself thinking of Mackie and wondering . . .

Sylia's fingers clasped around the plastic cartridge mechanically, as Dr. Raven looked on, sentimentally noting to himself that a legacy had finally come around full circle almost. Looking up at the woman's searching eyes, Dr. Raven saw the confusion on her face that revealed her inner struggle to disbelieve. The doctor began, a soothing tone in his voice, "Sylia, I know what you must be feeling now, but your father had good reason to "

Abruptly, Sylia turned away from the group to face a wall, old and buried emotions breaking the surface of their tombs to strike back against her honed instinct to remain calm. She held the data unit tightly in her hand, as emerging memories of her father fought to overtake her thoughts. She could still see her father's face as it appeared on the vid-phone the night he was murdered. She could hear his concerned voice coaxing her to go back to sleep, promising that he'd be home soon. If only he had come home, she thought, things would be very different tonight. She would never have received a data cartridge in the mail, and never have met this *relative* that sat before her now in a basement that would still be a storage area for motorcycle parts. If only he'd come home that night . . .

Sylia looked down at the data unit, the number '1' holding her gaze. Her eyes narrowed, then closed, as an invisible barrier came down mechanically inside her, shutting out the memories of billowing black smoke and a burning laboratory.

Gathering herself, she opened her eyes and turned back to see the group staring at her intently again. For a moment no one spoke, surprised at the fleeting glimpse of emotion that the normally reserved woman had just displayed.

Dr. Raven glanced at Sylia's face, noting her hesitation to speak. He then looked at Priss, Nene and Linna in turn, and stood up, holding his hands in the air in a gesture of resignation. "Okay, ladies. I think it best if we leave these two alone to sort things out. Shall we?" the doctor finished, waving a hand towards the doorway.

The green hard-suited woman spoke up abruptly, while Nene listened to her intently, nodding in agreement. "But what about those boomers we fought tonight? I'd like to know more about what they were doing there."

Priss spun around on the couch and looked at Sylia expectantly, the answer to the question seeming to be, as always, with their leader.

Sylia opened her mouth to speak as her eyes fell on Blackie. She paused, then continued, her words coming out measured. "You can save that question for tomorrow night's meeting. Right now I'd like to ask our guest some more questions about this data unit, among other things. There will also be fitness testing and a training session after the meeting tomorrow. Considering tonight's shaky performance, I expect you all to participate. The next time we might not be so lucky, and I can assure you that there will be a next time." Sylia was pleasantly surprised when neither Priss nor Nene objected. Linna smiled, the tone of authority in Sylia's commands somehow comforting after the evening's confusing sequence of events.

For a moment no one moved, each Knight Saber lost in their thoughts over the battle with the cyborg/boomers. Then the moment was over, and it was clear that any more questions would have to wait until tomorrow night.

Sylia smiled again as Linna placed a comforting hand on her shoulder for a moment, and turned to go, with Nene trailing behind. Priss turned to Blackie, and spoke with a disconcerting tone. "I'll call you tomorrow." Blackie watched Priss head for the door, not sure if the blue hardsuited figure was really still angry or not.

Dr. Raven started to close the door to the lounge, as Linna and Nene made their way up the stairs to the garage while Priss lingered outside in the hall. "I'm going home now. Remind Mackie to lock up when you go."

Sylia nodded, smiling gratefully, "Thankyou doctor. I don't think I'll be too long here. Just a few more questions and"

"Take as long as you like Sylia," the doctor assured her. He turned to the black hardsuited figure sitting on the couch. "Good to see you again Blackie. Maybe we'll be seeing more of you around here?"

"Maybe Pops," Blackie replied with a grin. Dr. Raven smiled, shook his head and shut the door, as Priss looked on.

"Alright doc," Priss began as Dr. Raven ascended the stairs ahead of her. "I gotta know How come you don't blow a gasket when he calls you Pops? Seems a little unfair if you ask me."

Dr. Raven stopped abruptly on the top step and looked back down the stairwell at Priss with one raised eyebrow, and the start of a smile on his lips. "Because he beat you to it Ms. Lazy Rock Star."

Priss paused to contemplate the reply, while Dr. Raven climbed the last step and kept talking, his voice echoing off the walls of the garage as he got further away. "Maybe you should think about more important things young lady, like why you showed up here on someone else's bike. If you've trashed your own bike we may have to go back to the old rules you know. Ah, we'll talk about it tomorrow. I've had enough surprises for one night thankyou very much . . ."

Priss grinned at the empty threat, the tip of her tongue sticking out of her mouth mischievously for a moment. 'Not this time Pops,' she thought to herself as she climbed the last step, and headed for the back door.

Sylia stood for a moment longer, trying to select an appropriate first question while Blackie sat patiently on the couch, his clear blue eyes shifting back and forth between his data unit in Sylia's hand, and the woman standing before him. Where Priss would communicate her emotional state quite clearly, this woman would make an expert poker player, remaining calm and aloof even under the unfamiliar conditions of this unsettling meeting. He watched her pace gracefully to the door and gaze out the window into a wide-open room filled with computer equipment. She remained there for a moment, then returned to where he sat, finally seating herself in the chair in front of him.

Blackie continued staring at the woman, when suddenly he turned his head to look around the empty room, the sound of a whisper tickling the nerves inside his head.

"Is there something wrong?" Sylia said looking up, still wrestling with her many questions.

Blackie turned his head to regard Sylia's questioning look. His eyes locked on hers for a moment, and the whisper suddenly became a weak voice inside his head. '. . . Why is he looking at me like that? . . . '

Blackie's eyes widened, prompting Sylia to sit back a bit. "Are you all right?" she asked, wondering if he was just now feeling the effects of fatigue from the battle at the military base, or maybe something else. "Are you tired? Would you like something to drink?" she offered.

"No . . . no thanks," Blackie smiled meekly. "I'm fine. Just thought I was hearing things, that's all."

Sylia's face remained still, as she absorbed the strange answer while the whispers she'd heard earlier that night rose in her memory. She stood up and moved to the door with the data unit in her hand. "Could you excuse me for just a moment? I'd like to take a quick

look at this if you don't mind." Blackie nodded numbly, as her words rolled over in his mind. Syla opened the door. "Thankyou. I'll be right back."

Blackie watched her shut the door and disappear down the hall. He sat back against the couch and tried to relax when the strange sensation inside his head tickled again, this time "sounding" weaker than before, but still intelligible. '. . . what will I tell Mackie? . . .'

The youngest Knight Saber waited patiently by the back door to the garage for Mackie to lock up the utility van after Priss and Linna had changed into their street clothes. While they had unloaded Priss's bike and Nene's scooter, Nene had changed into a formfitting and somewhat revealing black dress, the skirt's hem well above her knees. It was presently concealed by a bulky pink raincoat preventing Priss and Linna from making any of their obligatory teasing remarks. After her last subtle but failed attempt to get Mackie's attention, Nene had bought the dress and stashed it carefully in her locker in the utility van, waiting for just the right moment to use it. Now she stood in the open back doorway of the garage, trembling nervously in the cool, misty, night air, hoping that this would be the right moment.

Mackie waved back to Linna as she waved good-bye from the back of Priss's disappearing motorcycle. The young mechanic turned to reenter the garage when he saw Nene leaning demurely against the doorway, the overcoat falling open to reveal the stunning black dress beneath. An oilcovered hand landed with a slap on the side of Mackie's face as he halted in his tracks. Nene smiled to herself at the look of shock on his face. "Well, are you going to hang around this greasy garage all night or take me out? The night is still young," Nene purred, a slight tremble in her voice.

Mackie quickly clasped the other oilcovered hand over his mouth, but unable to stifle a nervous snicker before he tasted the engine lubricant. Nene's face clouded over with dismay, then flushed bright red as her anger mounted. Her fists now rested on her hips, destroying the provocative pose that had made Mackie's throat tighten a bit. The red haired woman wrapped the long raincoat around her hastily and knotted the coat's belt with quick, jerky movements. Mackie's eyes frantically searched the garage for a rag to wipe the oil from his mouth so he could speak.

"Fine then! Stay here for all I care. I'm going out on the town, and if I meet Mr. Right then we'll see how funny you think I look!" Nene turned sharply on her heels and disappeared out the back, the door closing behind her with a slam.

Mackie stood frozen to the spot, a stab of fear piercing him in the gut. 'Mr. Right? What the hell was she talking about? She was only . . . how old was she now anyway?'

The sound of Nene's scooter starting up met his ears as he stood dumb-founded in the cavernous garage. Suddenly he was rushing through the back doorway yelling Nene's name, his mind finally grasping the woman's intent.

Mackie burst into the alley to see the dim silhouette of a scooter and its rider vanishing into a thin fog down the road. He yelled her name once more, then stood silently for a moment, hoping that the scooter rider would come back. But the rhythmic churning and hissing sounds of the factories in the industrial zone around him swallowed up the sound of the scooter's distant muffler.

Beneath the visor of Nene's helmet a stream of tears began its trek down her right cheek as she steered her scooter onto the highway and headed for home. Above her a thin

cloudbank moved slowly across the night sky, steadily devouring a shining full moon and a field of sparkling stars. As she pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building, fat drops of rain began to fall, making wide splashes on the pavement and wet splotches on the inch or so of exposed fringe on her black dress.

Nene dismounted from the scooter hastily, not noticing the belt of her raincoat as it became caught on the scooter's handlebars in the process. She began to sprint towards the entrance of her apartment in an effort to avoid the rain, jerking the belt's knot loose. Before she could stop her flight, the tangled belt wedged tightly under the scooter's hand brake, and her momentum pulled the coat from her body.

The confused redhaired woman turned to her scooter in surprise, and then despair, to see her raincoat laying on the ground beside her bike. Suddenly the fate of every hope in her heart seemed to be symbolized by the slowly saturating garment as she remained standing in the rain, ignoring its cold and uncomfortable caress as it soaked into her black dress. The streams of tears on her cheeks turned to rivers as the rain splashed on her face and dripped from her sagging red locks, joining the salty eye moisture in a journey towards the sobbing woman's trembling lower lip.

11. AFTER IMAGES

PASSWORD: Blackie

Access Denied

PASSWORD: Mackie

Access Denied

PASSWORD: Sylia

Access Denied

PASSWORD:

"Hmmm."

While Blackie continued to wait in the lounge, Sylia stared blankly at her computer's monitor screen and drummed her fingers on the edge of the desk. After five minutes of scanning through Blackie's data unit visually she had located a nested file, something she had not encountered in her own data unit. Feeling as if she had located something of importance she continued to probe further, the uncomfortable feeling that she was prying crossing her mind more than once. In the instant that Blackie had revealed his "proof", Sylia promised herself not to break her father's wishes that the two data units remain separate. But that promise had been broken by a gut instinct that ate at her, telling her there was something important about this hidden file; something specifically for her. Now, as she sat quietly in the training facility's data-bank room, staring at the puzzle before her, she was convinced that she was right.

The initial menu had led her through a maze of layered protection scripts, all easily traversable, until now. The methods she had used for cracking the password-oriented protection program had suddenly hit a brick wall. The blinking word "PASSWORD:" stared back at her passively, unaware and uncaring as to the frustration it was causing.

Sylia sat back in her chair, wondering how long she could keep her guest waiting before he came looking for her. Glancing up at a small bank of video-security monitor screens, she watched the handsome black-haired man stand up in the rest-area and wander over to the large window that looked out into the basement training facilities. He stood there for a long moment, studying the room and the various testing stations. Sylia watched his face carefully, as the cyborg's blue eyes scanned the room, almost as if receiving input.

That wasn't fair, Sylia thought. So far he had done little to make her believe that he was simply some unfeeling machine. Except for a somewhat naive manner he seemed human enough to her. But why the strange looks before she had left the lounge? It was unsettling, to say the least. He had looked at her as if he were about to respond to something she said, but she hadn't said anything. Truth was, he hadn't looked sick or tired

at all. He had looked a little stunned. But by what? As much as she respected Dr. Raven's opinion, trusting this new relative would not come easily.

The black hard-suited figure on the security monitor screen continued its survey of the training center as Syla turned back to the task at hand. She had to find out what this protected file contained. Her instincts were telling her that it was important to find out *now*. It didn't look like a particularly complex password system, but even entering passwords with a "hunter app" would take far more time than she could afford at the moment. She still had many questions for her waiting guest, and the encounter with the cyborg-boomers had taken a heavy toll on her and the others. Sleep would come easily tonight if she could push all of the day's strange events out of her mind.

Leaning forward in her chair, Syla stared again at the computer's screen, as if she were hoping it might bow under the pressure of her steady gaze and divulge its secret. The blinking word on the screen defied her, becoming a blurry patch of white. Syla sat back and rubbed her bleary eyes. As her vision cleared, her gaze fell upon the data unit sticking out of the slot on the computer's console. The labeling was partially visible, exposing the section that read "707 HIGH". The word and numbers bounced around meaninglessly in her mind for a moment, the digits being instinctually manipulated this way and that. Soon it became a game for her, a challenge she could not ignore.

Syla suddenly smiled as the memory of her father playing cards entered her head, reminding her of his skill with games. Backgammon, Chess, Poker; he loved all kinds of games that involved . . .

Suddenly Syla's fingers flew over the computer keyboard, as a feeble and improbable solution to the password puzzle formed in her mind. She multiplied the number "707" by 2, representing the number of data units, and entered the result. 1414. Syla frowned. The number seemed insignificant. Could there be a third unit? Syla didn't wait for the answer to her own question, her fingers typing swiftly again;

707 x 3= 2121 . . . 21 . . . Blackjack . . . Blackie . . .

PASSWORD: b l a c k j a c k

(Enter)

Access Granted

Loading ...

MENU

1. Cyberoid Development Contract
2. "Mind Bank" Project & Research Diary

Type Selection =

1

Cyberoid Development Contract

Uizu Labs.
BioEscape Corporation
Information copyright protected under the Information Act of 2005.
Last Entry: 05.21.2022
File: KD/508472261-1
Project: Cyberoid Prototype
Contractor: Genom Corporation.
Project Director: Brian J. Mason
Project Coordinator: Katsuhito Stingray
Subject/Models: 1) "Largo"/33-T
 2) "Blackie"/33-T

Sylia stared at the names of the Subject/Models, her tired eyes suddenly wide with shock, riveted to the word "Largo". She looked up at the security monitor at the black-haired man who was still looking out the window at the training equipment, a curious and innocent look still on his face. Suddenly Sylia found it difficult to think of Blackie as "human enough" any more.

The light from an approaching motorcycle headlight flashed briefly over a tiny, rusted-out trailer, permanently immobilized amid a vast, tangled pile of rusting and decaying junk. A frightened rat scurried beneath the trailer, attempting to get away from the sudden roaring noise. The motorcycle's engine revs leveled off for a moment, rose quickly to a fevered pitch, then fell silent as Priss dismounted from her bike and began pushing it towards the trailer through the fresh mud.

After dropping Linna off at her apartment's front entrance, Priss's passenger had offered to make some tea, but Priss had declined, her mood turning sour as she mulled over the night's string of events. Linna just smiled the way she always did, and ascended the steps to her apartment with a spring in her step that had always secretly annoyed Priss. Pulling away from Linna's apartment complex, Priss found herself wondering about the lack of spring in her own sluggish steps as a steady rain began to fall.

The ride back to her trailer was a little too long for her liking, her thoughts clouded with many new feelings that unsettled her. Feelings that seemed to get clouded even further when she saw her beat-up trailer for the millionth time.

After unlocking an array of deadbolts, the door to her trailer swung open under a gentle kick, allowing the moody singer to push her bike up a worn wooden plank and into its "parking space" along one wall. She gave the door another kick, and then locked it carefully, the tedious procedure taking more than a moment. An anxious look out the window overlooking the dimly lit lot satisfied a five-year old habit, followed by the removal of her muddy boots and their deposit in a heap by the door. With the knowledge of one who has lived somewhere for a long time, she reached out to the wall switch without looking and flicked on the overhead light. To her disgust, the light bulb flashed brilliantly for a brief moment, and then winked out.

Too tired to even curse, Priss picked her way through the darkened trailer and sat down on a scruffy gray couch, removing her jacket, gloves, and helmet, and shaking the moisture out of the length of her hair. Soon, she had shed the wet outer layer of her clothes onto the floor and flopped down onto the couch, relaxing her aching back and head.

The rain pattered gently on the trailer's thin metal roof, while the rhythmic dripping of leaking rain into a bucket could be heard from somewhere inside the cluttered trailer. She lay awhile without moving as she listened to the pacifying sounds, trying to clear the fog in her head, but soon the events of the night before began to wander through her mind again.

Rising restlessly from the couch, Priss got up to search the brightly lit interior of her refrigerator for something to drink, the cramped, dim surroundings of her trailer becoming illuminated momentarily. On the wall behind her, a tattered poster advertising The Replicant's final show had captured Priss in mid-song, her eyes closed tightly, and a satisfied smile on her lips.

Spying a can of dietsoda left behind from one of Linna's visits, Priss fished it out and held the cold metal against her cheek to wake her up. 'Diet. Hmm. Better than nothing.' She let the fridge door close on its own, and the image on the tattered poster receded back into the shadows.

Priss turned back towards the couch, where her beatup guitar leaned diligently against the arm, illuminated by the weak light from the city coming in through a tiny window. After setting her drink on a worn plastic milk crate, she sat back down on the couch and reached for the lonely looking instrument. Holding it in her lap, she picked a few experimental chord strums through a particularly sad sounding minor chord, listening to each string as it sounded, and noting the beautiful melody that the combined notes created.

Her hands became still as she made the mental observation that the Knight Sabers were like the chord she had just played. The strings themselves each made strong impressions on the ear, but when combined together, made for an infinitely more stirring force. Take away one string and the chord might not be as potent...

Priss cradled the guitar limply in her arms as she scanned the scruffy interior of her little trailer. A sinking feeling that she'd experienced many times over the years began to wrap itself around her once more. A feeling that there had to be something more and that she was wasting time.

Many observations seemed to contribute to this feeling. The strongest of which was that she had always thought that she was destined for something better, something big. While the Knight Sabers were an outlet for her "extra energy", it wasn't the way she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Her "secret" life was beginning to feel more like a burden. While these new boomers had certainly provided a new challenge to her fighting skills, she wished that they had never shown up. The last few years had been peaceful; something she thought that she would never enjoy. But that peace and quiet had once made her successful on the rock music scene, and now she longed for that success again.

She had felt the need to make some changes in her life ever since Nezumi Records had dropped The Replicant's record contract with no interest in renegotiating. Two albums and that was it. Both discs had done well, the second one selling ten million copies in Japan alone, but it wasn't enough to keep them on top in the highly competitive world of

the record industry. If you hadn't sold twentyfive million by your second disc, you didn't have a prayer. Part of the band's lack of success she could easily blame on the record company. With a name like "Nezumi Records", you were already held up at the starting line.

But her new band had stuck it out through all the difficulties. Patience sometimes wore thin, but the spats always seemed to blow over soon enough. Until they were let go by the record company. Mr. Andrue, Nezumi's new A&R exec, had suddenly demanded changes to the contract. Changes that signaled a lack of confidence in the band's future. That was when some words were spoken that could never be taken back. And surprisingly, not one of those words had been hers. After two years of a grueling recording and touring schedule she was just plain fed up, and tired of all the bickering. Forced to submit to demeaning contract changes or pack it in, she chose the latter, her heart telling her not to, but her pride had already swollen up making it impossible to swallow.

Now, she had begun to think more and more about what lay beyond MegaTokyo for her. Was there a band out there somewhere looking for a singer like her? Could she still sing and perform as well as she used to? It was only a few years ago that the band had broken up. She might be a little rusty now, but she could fix that with practice. What if there was a band out there looking for someone like her and she was invisible to them, hidden away in this cozy but rundown trailer?

Priss looked up at the silhouette of the dead light bulb, and then at the shadowed poster depicting her final show. Was she just kidding herself? Priss set the guitar down and settled back onto the couch. The light from the city cast snake-like shadows on the trailer's walls as it streamed past the trickles of rain that made their way down the window's dusty pane.

And what about Blackie? Or "Blackie Stingray" Priss thought to herself amusedly. She was not one to make too many plans for the future, but she couldn't help wondering what road their awkward beginning might take them down. She smiled as she thought back to the night before, of her uncharacteristic 'pursuit' of the black-maned guitar player. Smirking at her childishness, she suddenly thought that she hadn't felt this way about anyone since... since Jesse...

Priss's smirk suddenly vanished, her face becoming like stone as the distant memories of the 'accident' came rushing back to her, shrouding the warm thoughts of the present in a dark haze. The years had taken the edge off of the gruesome images that flashed through her mind, but the result was still the same. She could see herself standing numbly in the middle of a road, a police officer at her side. Several police cruiser's flashing red lights swept the surreal setting. Fifty feet from her, twisted metal and a dried bloodstain drew her eyes mercilessly toward the truth. Jesse's burned and broken body lay under a smoking motorcycle frame, the cause of the accident a single gunshot wound to the head the police had told her. No one moved. They all just stood and stared, the officers telling her there was nothing more they could do. It was a gang-related incident, and as far as they were concerned the gangs were best left to deal with their own problems. But something in the officer's voice told her that there was more to the incident; something they didn't think she needed to know. Maybe something they were afraid of.

Priss didn't hear what the officer said to her after that. His voice faded into the background. She looked past the horror on the road before her and stared at the glow of

the city in the distance with her fists clenched, and began to cry against her will. Her parents had both died in the earthquake, and now the only man she had ever given her heart to was gone. She was old enough to know that life wasn't fair, but it still seemed so... unfair.

Turning suddenly to face the dozen or so police officers that stood milling about discussing the contents of the victim's wallet, Priss wiped the tears from her cheek angrily, and stammered for the right words to convey her pain and frustration upon them. But they wouldn't come. Never one to hold back her thoughts before, Priss endured the puzzled looks of the officers as she shook with impotent rage. One of the officers stepped towards her, but quickly stepped back, as the sobbing brunette drew a long knife from her black and yellow striped biker's suit. The officers watched silently as the angry woman backed away from them slowly, her anger-filled eyes never leaving their faces.

Reaching her bike where it waited in the shadows at the edge of the accident scene, Priss sat down on the padded seat and looked at the knife. The tears came again as she ran her fingers along the blade, the word "Jesse" etched into the blackened metal in graceful script. It was the only item besides Jesse's wallet and helmet that had not been destroyed in the crash . . .

Priss shook herself and looked around the dark trailer, suddenly realizing that she had drifted into a daydream. Using the side of her index finger, she wiped away some moisture that had gathered at the corner of her left eye. She stared at the finger, and watched the moisture evaporate as her thoughts wandered to the knife hidden in her jacket's left pocket and then returned to the present.

She thought of Sylia and the rest of the Knight Sabers. They had become like sisters over the years, Sylia more so than the others. The four boomers they'd faced last night meant fresh trouble for the Knight Sabers to deal with. She couldn't leave now. She had quit once before and regretted the decision afterwards. Even now, the pangs of guilt at letting Sylia down back then could be felt. Now she just wasn't sure. Maybe after all this was over she could talk to Sylia about quitting, but not right now, not when Sylia needed her the most.

It had been a different battle last night, that was for sure. There had been only four boomers at the military base. Could there be more? Genom was little more than a memory now, so who was making them? And why? Sylia had said, just before they crashed through the skylight, that the boomers had been waiting for them. Was it some kind of test? Did another whacko like Miriam think that he'd found some way to defeat them? Whoever it was, they had come pretty damn close to pulling it off.

Priss sighed and stared out the tiny window that looked out over the empty lot outside, as the rain trickled down the glass in rapidly deviating courses. So much to deal with in such a short time. Life had been pretty quiet a few days ago. And pretty boring. Nights like last night suited Priss just fine, but what about tomorrow? Would the boomers return? And if they did, what could the Knight Sabers do to stop them this time?

Priss sighed again, reached over to the table beside the couch and grabbed her portable laser-disc player. Setting the device in her lap, she placed the headphones over her ears and pressed "play". A tiny window on the player displayed the name "Nexus" in bold letters on the disc's surface just before it began to spin. Priss closed her eyes as Blackie's opening guitar chords played a quiet melody, and the words she had memorized echoed softly from her lips...

When I was young I would dream at night
Of the stars and the moon and their magic light
No one could take my dreams from me
'Til I woke up
I woke up

When I became a man I would dream at night
I was standing on the stage in the golden light
No one could take my dream from me
'Til I woke up
I woke up . . .

Priss's eyes opened slowly as a passing car's headlights streamed in the window of her trailer, briefly illuminating the poster on the wall by the fridge. A faint afterimage of her smiling face had been burned into her retinas, and refused to fade. Even as she closed her eyes again to melt into her aural escape, the image of herself on stage during that final show remained visible to her mind's eye.

Outside, the rain continued to fall, pooling into deep potholes until the silty water finally rose and spilled over the edges, trickling through and around the scattered refuse until it found another pothole to fill. Every so often a car would drive by, its occupants oblivious to the tiny trailer and its tenant. A tenant who stubbornly refused to go to sleep.

Sylia quickly scanned her father's journallike notes on the cyberdroid development project. Scattered throughout were detailed schematics showing the 33T's innermost workings. Filename KD/5084722611, or what became known among the Uizu lab workers as the "Killer Doll" project, was a direct contract with Brian J. Mason for the research and development of a cyborg based lifeform that could look and act as human as possible. The contract called for half a dozen units to be made, ranging from several adult males to a very young girl: Cynthia.

While it was easy for Sylia to see to look at these schematics now and know what the "Black Box" was for, Mason's instruction requirements at the time made the deadly satellite targeting system look like a safe and convenient mobile device. Convenient and safe in the confines of a controlled environment perhaps, but catastrophically lethal when interfaced with the mind of a deranged superboomer.

Sylia continued to scan through the notes quickly, made aware by her guest's more frequent movements in the lounge that time was running out.

Returning to the main menu she jabbed at the "2" key.

MENU

1. Cyberoid Development Contract
2. "Mind Bank" Project & Research Diary

Type Selection =

Mind Bank Diary

Loading . . .

Instead of a scrolling text on her screen, the speakers connected to Sylia's computer console crackled, and abruptly came to life.

"Hello Sylia."

Sylia jerked her head around at the sound of her father's voice, wondering for a moment if the cyborg down the hall was playing tricks with her mind. Seeing the black hardsuited figure still walking about the lounge on the security monitors, she turned back to the blank monitor screen; or what once was a blank screen. The plasma eye now displayed a moving image of Katsuhito Stingray, seated at his desk in the Uizu laboratory, as Sylia remembered seeing him whenever she called him at work.

"I'm very proud of you for remembering our favorite game," the ghostly voice continued, "And for getting past the password protection. If you are viewing this, then I suppose you've met Blackie, or have at least found his data unit. I hope all is well with you both, and with Mackie. I wasn't sure how you would handle growing up knowing you had another brother who wasn't completely human, and the risk was too great to you and Mackie if Mason ever found Blackie. So I decided to put the information you are viewing now on Blackie's data unit, with the hope that maybe someday, when you were older, that you would run into each other and be better able to handle the shock.

"If you are viewing this now, it must also mean that my effort to expose Mason as the ambitious crook that he is has ended in my death." Sylia stiffened, the ghosts of her emotional youth surging against the "wall" she fought to keep in place.

"While it is difficult for me to talk about this, I ask that you not be too sad. Think about the many wonderful things we did together, and the wonderful times we had. And above all, don't let whatever happens after my death change your view of me." Sylia's trembling hand was resting on her neck now, the "wall" inside her weakening upon every word.

"It was always my intention to use this technology to help the world, but people like Mason have other ideas. If you can, use the information in the two data units to expose Mason and keep this technology from falling into the wrong hands. The results could be dangerous to the entire world."

The words continued to roll over the Knight Saber's leader, her father's intensity and firmness making an impression even after sixteen years.

"I'm sorry Sylia, but I haven't much more time. Mason is on his way here now. I have already downloaded the data on some experiments I've been doing in the field of telepathy. I know, that sounds crazy, but as a side effect of viewing some data using a neural headset, I was endowed with what I believe to be very weak telepathy. I have since tried to discover how this happened, but have not been very successful in reproducing the results. If you ever obtain the means to view your data unit using a neural headset, please

don't before you understand the risk. I have no idea how long this sideeffect will last, but for now I am using this opportunity to learn all I can about it. So far I can perceive general feelings and moods if I concentrate very hard on someone near me. It doesn't seem to work over any great distance, and the clarity of the 'transmission', if you will, is very erratic." Sylia lifted her entranced gaze to the bank of monitors that showed Blackie sitting on the couch staring at his right thumb. Could this have something to do with the "voices" she thought she was hearing?

Sylia turned back to the screen as her father continued, his voice becoming more and more anxious. "I have been wondering how this weak telepathy might work within the neural network of semi- and completely artificial life forms. If the indications from my research so far are correct, the brain of someone like Blackie could be capable of developing this ability to a much greater degree than a completely human brain could. As of this moment I am considering an experiment that could reproduce this side effect into a cybernetic life form, but that will have to wait until after my confrontation with Mason. I hope that my first statements are wrong, and that the reason you are viewing this is not because I am dead but because we are all alive and well and watching it together." Katsuhito smiled, a smile made sad by his thick drooping moustache. "I'll be home soon honey. Don't worry, everything will be fine. I love you."

With that, the audio portion cut out, and all that remained on the screen were the final notes written by Katsuhito Stingray and in the room the sound of a woman gently crying as her childhood "wall" came crashing down.

12. FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Mackie sighed and shook his head as he mulled over Nene's hasty departure. "You could have handled that better Stingray," he said to himself, tossing the rag in his hand in disgust at the oil-covered face that stared back at him from the mirror over the sink.

After locking the back door to the garage, the young mechanic looked at the motorcycle frame that waited patiently to be completed. As much as he loved working on motorcycles, he didn't feel like working on this one at the moment. Strangely, he didn't feel much like doing anything constructive. Angry with himself, and feeling a little overwhelmed by the night's events, he decided to check on his sister's progress with their "new relative". Who knew who this guy really was...

As sudden, horrible thoughts about the stranger's motives swept through his head, he descended the stairs to the basement in 3 quick bounds and landed in front of the thick, steel door that barred the way to the training facilities. After tapping in the key code, Mackie double-stepped down a short flight of stairs and landed in front of the databank room. A quick glance through the window into the room's interior stopped him in his tracks. A second glance revealed his sister, seated in front of one of the computer terminals with her back to him. From his viewpoint it appeared that she was holding her head in her hands, as if she were crying.

"Sis? You alright?"

Sylia turned abruptly to see Mackie standing in the doorway. She paused for a moment to dab under her eyes with the side of her hand, and then replied, a hint of surprise in her voice. "I'm fine . . . now. I thought you'd left already?"

Mackie's expression turned sour. "Yeah, but I kinda lost my ride."

Sylia's own expression turned from one of weariness to mild surprise. "Oh? Did Nene have somewhere else to go tonight?"

Mackie didn't reply. Instead he gazed at the display on the computer's monitor screen, and then at the data unit sticking out of the computer's slot. "Is this... another data unit?" his voice trailed off as he pointed to the computer. Sylia smiled, and nodded slowly.

Mackie entered the room and shut the door behind him. Stepping closer to the computer, he continued reading as Sylia looked on. "This is a journal of some of Dad's research!" he blurted out, his excitement quelled by Sylia's finger on her lips. Sylia pointed at the bank of security camera monitors on the wall in front of them. Mackie looked up to see an image of Blackie in the rest-area lounge, wandering about the room and inspecting the room's furnishing with an idle interest.

"The data unit- it's his? You mean he's really...?" Mackie stammered.

Sylia's only answer was a silent nod.

Mackie echoed her nod, and added an expression of sudden understanding as he seated himself beside Sylia in the room's only other chair. The two sat in silence for a moment as Mackie pondered the implications, while Sylia made some quick decisions on what to tell Mackie about their new relative's "background".

Rubbing her tired eyes again, Sylia began tentatively. "Mackie- you remember how father was always working late when we were younger?"

Mackie nodded and narrowed his eyes, already sensing that his sister was trying to tell him something of a delicate nature. "Yeah. I do."

Sylia smiled sadly at Mackie, and continued. "You might be wondering then just how Blackie could be our brother if we never knew anything about him..."

Mackie sat up straight and looked Sylia straight in the eye. "What are you getting at Sis? Is he for real or not?"

Sylia nodded yes again, causing Mackie's brief understanding of the situation to melt away.

Sensing her brother's confusion, Sylia spoke the rest with a firm voice. "He is our brother, but he's not entirely human. He's a cyborg. Father created him."

Sylia watched Mackie's face and waited for a shocked response, but his initial reaction was of fascination.

"Ah. I wondered why he didn't seem so freaked out when he realized he was still holding onto that finger in the van. That would have creeped me out."

Sylia smiled at Mackie. "Me too...But now that you know this, you mustn't let anyone know what he is, especially Priss."

Mackie's eyebrow raised. "Oh geez! You mean she doesn't know? How could she not?"

"I'm not sure," Sylia replied. "But from what Dr. Raven has told me, father felt pretty strongly about Blackie being perceived as a normal human being. I think we should honor his wishes."

The younger Stingray sat nodding in silence, and then looked back at the computer's display idly. While thoughts of what his sister had just revealed to him swirled around inside his head, words on the screen in front of him began to catch his eye. ...consciousness... download... experimental... research... "Um, Sis? Have you read this whole thing through yet?"

Sylia turned back to the monitor screen and scanned the journal's text, suddenly seeing what Mackie had just read. "Hmmm," was all she could reply.

'Hmmm.'

Blackie returned to his seat on the couch and sat down, as random streams of thoughts entered his restless mind from somewhere outside him. This time the thoughts were coming from close by. Not like the streams of thoughts that plagued him at night in his dreams. Thoughts of a shapeless entity. Void of any emotion except for distorted anger. His normal dreams would be interrupted abruptly by a clear presence, and then the streams of thoughts would begin, moving in a quick but filterable flow. Images of a young boy on an operating table in a crimson hued room. And a voice that repeated two words in an endless loop, "I know... I know... I know... "

Blackie started as the door to the lounge swung open suddenly, revealing Sylia and the man he had seen driving the van he had arrived in.

"Sorry to keep you waiting Blackie," Sylia said as she and the van driver sat down across from him. "I'd like to apologize for doubting your story," she continued. "But you must understand that, after sixteen years, Mackie and I had little reason to believe that we had any other family besides ourselves."

Blackie glanced quickly at Mackie, and grinned. "He's your brother too?"

Sylia flushed slightly with embarrassment and smiled. "I'm sorry- you weren't introduced yet. Yes, this is my younger brother Mackie."

Mackie extended his hand and Blackie took it in his, giving it a firm shake. "Nice to meet you Blackie," the younger man said, taking note of the warmth and "human-feel" of the other's hand. Blackie's eyes narrowed imperceptibly for a fraction of a second at Mackie as they finished shaking hands.

Sylia interrupted Blackie's sudden wave of suspicion with a strange, melodious tone to her voice. "I noticed your interest in the test equipment earlier. Would you like to see how it works?"

Blackie looked from Sylia to Mackie, suddenly feeling as if he were the target of some kind of experiment. Sylia watched the cyborg's eyes as it glanced back and forth between her and Mackie. Blanking her mind of any thought was not as easy as she thought it might be. After skimming through their father's research journal, it was clear to Mackie and herself that she had probably been "infected" with the same weak telepathy that her father had experienced. Somehow, the process of downloading the information on her data unit using the neural headset had given her the ability to "hear" the strong thoughts and emotions that others around her created. It was also prudent to assume that Blackie had this ability as well, and if her father's own words were correct, he would be much more adept at "sensing" the thoughts of others than she. Moments ago, in the databank room, she had hastily warned Mackie to keep his thoughts clear while around Blackie to keep the cyborg from learning about its identity. Straining slightly from the effort it required, she wondered how Mackie was fairing.

"Really?" Blackie replied. Sylia smiled again and nodded. "What about your questions? I have a few myself- and it is getting kinda late..."

"The questions can wait until tomorrow," Sylia responded flatly. "Now that you've found us, we have plenty of time to get acquainted. Maybe I was wrong. I thought I detected a slight gleam in your eye when you first saw the test equipment?"

Blackie grinned. "Well, yeah, but are you sure? The others looked pretty tired when they left. You guys must be pretty bushed too."

"You're not bushed yourself?" Mackie queried. Sylia frowned.

"Nah! I'm a bit of a night owl anyway. You have to be, to play in a band." Blackie winked at Mackie as the younger Stingray smiled and nodded. "Okay! Why not?" Blackie enthusiastically ejected as he abruptly jumped to his feet. "If you guys are game?"

Sylia looked at Blackie with a cold smile. "Then let's begin."

It was well past 3 am when Sylia began typing in the commands to start the holographic simulator's "dual-opponent" scenario at Level 10. Mackie continued to watch in amazement as the simulation began, and the black-haired figure spun, whirled, punched and kicked his way through the computer-generated onslaught without breaking a serious sweat. Just watching the dark figure work his way methodically through the test scenario was making Mackie tired. Leaning back in his chair for a moment to rest his eyes, he began to drift off into a light sleep when he was awakened by Sylia's hand gently shaking his shoulder. "Don't fall asleep on me now. We're just getting to the good part."

Mackie looked over at his sister's face, her eyes open wide despite her tired appearance. In those eyes he thought he saw a faint trace of fascination as she stared at the "battle" in front of them.

"Sis?"

Sylia continued staring through the window that looked into the simulation room. "Yes?" she replied slowly.

"I think I may have screwed things up with Nene tonight."

Sylia turned to look at Mackie with a puzzled look on her face. "What? How do you mean?"

Mackie sat up slowly, and looked down at his hands. "She wanted to go out tonight... with me, and she had this really great outfit on and... well, I laughed at her."

"Mackie! You didn't!" Sylia exclaimed, as the simulation ended and Blackie stood waiting in the test room. "Hang on Blackie. I'm setting up for the next test!"

Blackie nodded at Sylia through the window, and turned back to face the center of the room as he waited for the next test to begin.

Sylia typed in the commands for the Level 10 "triple-opponent" scenario hurriedly and then stabbed at the blinking green "START" switch. The test room was suddenly host to three pink-colored translucent blobs each bearing a vague resemblance to a body mass. Blackie immediately lashed out at the two nearest blobs as their glowing targets appeared, scoring a hit on one and narrowly missing the other. The third blob moved in to take advantage of Blackie's movement but was robbed of an offensive strike when Blackie rolled to the floor and came up behind it.

"Mackie!" Sylia began again as she sat down hard in her chair. "Nene asked you out and you laughed at her? How could you?"

Mackie looked up from his idle study of his hands to be met by Sylia's imploring gaze. "It was stupid, I know. I just couldn't stop it in time. There she was, looking so... so... and I laughed at her! I feel like such a jerk! Before I knew it, she was gone and I was wiping oil out of my mouth."

Sylia's puzzled look evolved into confusion, only to be waved off by Mackie's tired hand gesture. "Long story. But I guess I just hadn't ever thought about Nene like... that. I mean, I've known her for so long she's kinda become a sister to me, ya know?"

Sylia smiled warmly, and nodded silently.

"I guess she's not the Nene I grew up with anymore," Mackie stated soberly, to which Sylia responded with a knowing look.

"You might be able to make it up to her," Sylia offered teasingly, as she adjusted a control on the simulator's function panel.

"How? Tell me!" Mackie said brightly.

Sylia smiled once more, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Alright. But you'll have to get up early." Sylia laughed as Mackie leaned back into his chair and groaned.

Suddenly the room seemed oddly quiet, drawing Sylia and Mackie's attention to the test room. The chamber was empty except for a lone, black hard-suited figure standing in a fighting stance near the center of the wide room. "I'm ready!" came the reverberant voice through the control panel's speaker. Sylia stared at the number "10" illuminated under the "LEVEL" display and sighed. Sylia flicked on the intercom switch and grinned at Mackie. "Blackie, I think we'd better call it a night."

"Hey gorgeous! How are ya this morning?"

Linna, outfitted in a baggy green and pink sweatsuit, giggled and looked up from the park bench where she was finishing her leg-stretching exercises. A familiar muscular figure clad in a faded police-blue sweat suit with "AD POLICE" inked in bold white letters on the front of the shirt and along one pant-leg, jogged up to her from the adjacent parking lot. The two joggers embraced warmly, and, after a quick kiss, set off down the pathway under an early-morning drizzle.

The pair progressed along the park's winding asphalt trail silently, each engrossed in their thoughts about the night before. Leon glanced furtively at Linna a few times before he finally broke the silence. "I was really worried about you last night."

Linna looked over at Leon and smiled. "I know. I was worried about you too."

Leon grinned back at her briefly. "It's been a long time since I've worried that much about you."

Linna looked straight ahead without replying.

The light, rhythmic pounding of their feet on the trail suddenly seemed to get louder in their ears, as the two joggers wound their way through a group of small trees. Exiting the tiny forest, Linna wiped the drizzle and sweat from her face with a small towel draped around her neck, and frowned. "It was pretty bad for a while, I admit, but we came out okay."

Leon sighed and shook his head. "Linna, I couldn't see you or hear you in there at all. When the weapons started firing inside the building my heart stopped."

An awkward silence fell between them as Linna and Leon made their way up a gentle slope. To their right the relatively calm waters of Tokyo Bay rippled like molten lead under the gray, sunless sky. Rounding a wide bend, the paved trail turned away from the bay, and began to double back to the path's starting point. The two joggers continued the thirty-minute circuit in peace, each of them contemplating the changes that their short conversation might inspire.

As the parking lot came into view, Linna grinned momentarily at Leon, then broke into a sprint. But the police officer had been expecting the move and reacted instantly. A small flock of pigeons took to the air as the sprinters raced past the park bench, and then checked their own flight, their feet making loud clomping noises as they slowly came to a halt.

Circling back to the bench, the couple continued pacing to slow their heartbeats gradually. Leon stopped after a moment and placed his hands on his hips. Linna finally sat down on the bench and took a swig of water from a plastic flask, then set it down on the bench beside her with the top off. Leon paused, looking at Linna as she wiped herself down with her towel. "I know we made an agreement," he began as Linna looked up at him. "About worrying about each other while we're on the job. But I guess I've gotten used to the last few years. No boomers, no worries." Linna nodded and patted the bench with her hand. Leon smiled and picked up the water flask. Taking a short draught, he handed the water back to Linna and sat down beside her.

"I've gotten pretty used to it myself," Linna replied after taking another drink. "But you're still out on the streets chasing bad guys, and I still worry if my phone is going to ring late at night."

Leon glanced at Linna's shadowed face and placed his arm around her. "I know. But those bad guys aren't half as dangerous as an out-of-control boomer my dear."

Linna looked a little indignant for a moment, and then responded slowly, "I still worry though."

Leon looked out over the misty park, trying to think of the best way to say his next words. "Listen Linna," he began his throat tightening a bit as Linna looked at him with an intense gaze. "I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"I want you to promise me you'll tell Sylia you're through with the Knight Sabers after we've dealt with these new boomers."

Linna's blue eyes widened, then blinked a few times as she silently contemplated Leon's request. Her life had never been better up to this point. A successful career in teaching dance and part ownership in a handful of profit making aerobics centers had made life without "boomer hunting" very fulfilling these past few years. But she had never taken the time to think about what life might be like without a role in the Knight Sabers. Time had just seemed to pass the question by and perhaps the Knight Sabers themselves.

But there was something inside her that wanted more than a comfortable life. She had joined the Knight Sabers, on Sylia's request, not to use up any excess energy or exact a ripening desire for revenge. She just didn't want anyone to get hurt, and that included the other Knight Sabers. The night that she had cradled Irene Chang's crumpled, lifeless body in her arms, she knew she had made the right choice to join. As a member of the Knight Sabers, she would have the power to prevent a senseless death like that again. The afternoon she had given Irene's ring to her sister Reika, and then stopped the singer from continuing on her road to a revenge that had already resulted in so much death, had only reaffirmed her belief.

For the last five years, few incidents had arisen where her choice to join could be tested. But now her choice to quit was the question. Unless the problems with these new cyborg-boomers were bigger than they thought.

Suddenly, amid all the reasons to quit and not quit, Linna's memory brought forth a single image. The image of the twisted, headless body on the floor at the military base. The limbs had been distorted beyond their normal limits of flexibility, and the severed head itself had been forever etched in a grimace of pain and agony she could never forget. Whoever that person had been, their hurt had been great. And Linna had failed to prevent it. She knew better than to blame herself for something that had happened prior to the Knight Saber's arrival, but that fact did little to console her. The image of pain was still fresh in her mind.

"I can't make that promise to you Leon," Linna finally replied. Leon looked at Linna as if he were about to protest, when Linna placed her hand gently over his open mouth. "But- I will think about your request after we've dealt with these boomers, or whatever they are. The Knight Sabers are all that's left to stand in their way, and I don't want to see anyone else get killed because of them."

The police officer sighed again and looked at Linna resignedly. "Priss mad me painfully aware of that last night... All right. You think about it Lin. Let's just enjoy the rest of the morning together then, shall we?"

Linna smiled brightly and grasped Leon's hand with her own. "Sounds good to me."

The two huddled together for a few minutes until the drizzle turned to rain, sending them running for the dry interior of their cars. As Linna struggled in the downpour with

her mini-van's door lock, Leon grabbed her about the waist and spun her around for a quick kiss good-bye. Laughing childishly at their soaked appearance, Linna wrapped her arms around Leon's neck and met his lips with hers. Suddenly the rain seemed no more than a faint hissing sound in their ears.

13. LOCK AND KEY

Blackie sat bolt upright, his mind between the dream world and reality when the phone rang a second time. Falling back against the couch with a groan, he pawed the vidphone's console, and waited for the caller's image to appear. Closing his eyes, he guessed at the time. 9:30. It was a kind of game he liked to play. Opening his eyes once again, he focused on the phone's info display bar. 9:31 am.

"Shit. You still asleep?" Priss's transmitted voice pierced the relative silence in the room, the only other sounds being the steady rain tapping against the window, and his own heavy sigh. Blackie pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed, while Priss stared back at him from the phone's matchbook-sized display, the view around her revealing she was at a public phone booth.

As he stared at her fuzzy image, the muscles in his right thumb began to twitch uncontrollably, a slight shiver at first, and then becoming painful and erratic as the digit flexed this way and that. Blackie tried to ignore the pulsing tick, but it persisted, his attempts to overbear the undulations with his other hand proving useless. Looking on with a growing panic, the pulsing abruptly stopped, leaving him to rub his thumb, and wonder what had caused it.

"I was," he finally replied. "What's up?"

Priss smiled slyly, while at that very moment the vidphone glitched, sending a brief, cascading shower of snowy interference across the display. "Just wondering if you wanted to go for a tour up to the bay in a bit. Can you be ready in fifteen?"

Blackie sighed again, this time loud enough for Priss to hear over the rain pounding on her phone booth. He flexed his thumb experimentally out of Priss's view.

"What?" Priss's tinny voice echoed in the hushed apartment. "A little rain won't kill you!"

Blackie cracked a smile at the jab, and nodded. "Ah, sure! C'mon by. I'll leave the door unlocked."

Priss grinned and yanked her telnet card from the booth's slot. Donning her helmet, she stepped lithely from the phone booth and trotted past a few downtown pedestrians to her bike, parked across the street from the ADP headquarters building.

As she kicked the stand out of the way and thumbed the starter button, Priss caught sight of a red-haired woman wearing an ADP uniform rounding the corner of the police building and begin to ascend the steps to the entrance. As the bike roared to life, Priss increased the throttle, drawing raised eyebrows from jumpy pedestrians nearby. The red-haired woman stopped and turned towards the noise, recognizing the source almost immediately. Nene stood on the top step and glared in Priss's direction, not looking at her directly, but at something beyond her. Priss followed Nene's gaze to the sign behind her issuing a firm "NO PARKING" warning.

Priss looked back at the frowning redhead and stuck her tongue out at her playfully before pulling away from the sidewalk and vanishing down the street. Nene "hmped", and continued up the steps, her contagious smile returning briefly as an entrance door was held open for her.

Working her way through the rush of people around her, Nene's normally pleasant thoughts were pushed back in her mind by the events of the night before. The usual chorus of friendly hellos that greeted her were met with half-hearted replies as she made

her way to the elevator. Slipping through the rapidly closing doors, she sank into the back of the crowded space, her memory playing back that horrible moment when Mackie had laughed at her, over and over. It had been tough enough to summon the courage and determination to even think about wearing that dress in front of him, but to actually do it, and then get laughed at . . .

As the doors opened, spilling out a wave of white-shirted AD Police employees, Nene wondered how she could ever face Mackie again.

"Nene!"

Nene looked around the stack of paper work that had seemingly risen out of nowhere to see Leon striding confidently towards her desk.

"Good-morning Leon!" Nene offered cheerfully, while she attempted to shake a clogged thermal-ink pen into functioning again.

"Nene, have you had a chance to look at any of this yet?" he replied, taking a seat on the corner of her desk and patting the topmost file folder of the small mountain of files on her desk with his hand.

Nene groaned and slapped the stubborn writing instrument onto her desk. Leon grinned knowingly. "Just got here huh?"

The red-haired dispatcher rubbed her temples and nodded the end of her shift suddenly seeming years away.

"Well read this first," Leon said excitedly, indicating the topmost file. "And meet me after the shift briefing so we can discuss it further. Daley put in some overtime on this one last night. Interesting stuff. See ya in a bit!"

Nene watched the officer leave, and then slid the top file onto the center of her desk. Opening it she was confronted by an enlarged photo of the severed metallic finger found at the military base last night. She shuddered and flipped the photo over quickly, then began to read Daley Wong's report from the ADP's Bio-Technical Crime Lab.

"Interesting indeed," she said under her breath, as her widening green eyes focused on the section of the report labeled "DNA Analysis".

As Nene's interest began to peak, a voice from across the room called out her name, breaking her concentration.

"Romanova!? Nene Romanova?!"

Nene turned to see a woman in a courier's uniform standing at the front of the room, a long white cardboard box encircled by red ribbons in her arms. The woman's eyes were scanning the room for a response.

"Here! Over here!" Nene squeaked, her voice suddenly full of surprise and wonderment. The woman smiled and walked towards Nene's desk while the entire population of the office stopped what they were doing to watch. This was an unusual way to start the morning.

"Sign here please," the woman requested in an unnaturally cheerful voice. Nene looked at her own non-functioning pen, frowned, and took the pen offered to her by the courier instead. With a trembling hand she signed the delivery form and returned the pen. The courier set the fancy cardboard box on top of the stack of files and smiled again. "Put them in water right away and enjoy! Bye!"

Nene stared at the departing woman as if she were a ghost, and then looked back at the box. The room had fallen deathly quiet, but Nene was oblivious to the attention she was

receiving. After hesitating for a moment, she began working at the ribbons, hoping that the lobby security had cleared the package for explosives, even though she knew they would have.

Nene's eyes widened in anticipation as the last ribbon fell away, and she pulled back the lid of the box. Two layers of thin tissue paper could not conceal the fragrance that wafted up at her. Oblivious to the audience she now captivated, Nene lifted a dozen bright red roses from the box, and held them in her arms to stare at her gift in stunned amazement. A small, thin, plastic card resembling a note was tied with a small red ribbon to the stem of one of the roses.

A few of the female onlookers sighed while others gasped at the redheaded dispatcher's good fortune. Those who knew Nene better than just as a co-worker could not help but wonder who the roses were from. After all, this was the young woman who seemed doomed to be alone for the rest of her life. No one in the office had ever been able to attribute a solid reason for the lack of male attention that Nene got, as she was certainly very pretty and attractive. Most just thought that maybe the dispatcher was too shy or too passive in dealing with men.

Whatever it was that had held her back for all these years, it suddenly seemed that Nene Romanova was not doomed to a life of loneliness after all.

Nene's stunned expression was broken when one of her co-workers giggled close by. She looked up suddenly and glanced around the room in time to see everyone start moving again.

Her face flushing a bright red, Nene swiftly placed the roses back in the box, but left the lid off. Being careful not to prick herself on the thorns, Nene untied the "note" and pressed a small colored square labeled, "PLAY". Loud enough that she could hear it over the resumed activity in the room, but soft enough that it couldn't be overheard, Nene heard Mackie's voice come from the electronic note, stuttering and halting:

"Nene... Please forgive me for being such a jerk last night. I'm very sorry for acting the way I did, and... well... I really thought you looked beautiful. If you can find it in your heart to go out with me- maybe after the meeting- I'd like to apologize in person. Think about it, and I'll see you tonight."

Two employees walking by Nene's desk jumped as a loud crash came from just beside them. Turning to see what had caused the noise, they were met by Nene's embarrassed grin. The redhead was still seated in her chair, but lying flat on her back on the ground with a small piece of plastic clutched in her trembling hand.

"Hey... anybody home?"

Priss gently pushed the open door into the room, and called into Blackie's apartment a second time. Still no response. She paused for a moment to look into the tiny kitchen, illuminated by a dim blue-white fluorescent light. Shrugging, she stepped into the kitchen and closed the door firmly behind her, not hard enough to be perceived as a slam, but loud enough that the apartment's occupant would hear it. Still no response.

Priss stood quietly for a moment, listening for any sound of movement. Hearing nothing, she walked through the kitchen and entered the main room expecting to find Blackie still asleep on his couch. Instead she found the room vacant, but as she moved to look out the window she could hear the sound of someone taking a shower. Priss stepped up next to the bathroom door. "Blackie? It's Priss."

Blackie's muffled voice responded after a slight pause. "Priss? Oh- Okay! Grab something from the fridge if you want. I'll be out in a sec!"

"Okay, thanks."

Priss smiled and stepped away from the door to idly explore the room. Even when illuminated by the gray light of an over-cast day the room looked even smaller than it had in yesterday's afternoon sun. Furniture and appliances were placed with little thought to neatness or room to move about easily. Open and empty boxes lay strewn about, their labeling indicating that they originated from an electronics supply store in New Akihabara. She gazed at his guitar for a moment, the temptation to pick it up and play it tugging at her, but unable to persuade. Who knew how he might react? As she began to think about it, she really didn't know much about him, and yet here she was in his apartment, about to go out on what most people would call a date.

And it was precisely this feeling of unknown that intrigued her so much. Who the hell was this guy really? A relative of Syla's? That was so far out she still couldn't quite buy it. But his proof was very convincing. The data unit, the hard-suit, Pop's recognition. Hell, he even *looked* like Mackie, only a bit older. But something still wasn't right about his story. If neither Syla nor Mackie were aware of his existence, then their father must have been involved with another woman besides Syla's mother at some point. That might explain Syla's emotional reaction to Blackie's appearance.

Once again the puzzle pieces spun out of control in Priss's mind, but this time they did so with the feeling that she was close to seeing a pattern emerge that would make the pieces fall into place. And the way things seemed to be lining up, she wasn't sure she wanted to see the finished puzzle.

Hearing the sound of the running water from the bathroom cease, Priss continued to wander around the room until she came to the couch where she had rested the day before, after her encounter with the two bike thieves. Instinctively, she reached back with her right hand to rub her back, still aching and sore, when her gaze unexpectedly fell on Blackie's hard-suit.

Placed out in an upright sitting position on the worn wooden chair at the foot of the couch, and in the corner of the room farthest from the daylight, the dark shape had surprised her, looking for a brief moment like someone sitting in the shadows, watching her menacingly. As a tiny jolt of adrenaline coursed through her veins, fading into a feeling of wariness, she began to look closer at the hard-suit, until her eyes came across the metallic cylinder that hung from a clasp at the suit's left hip.

Moving closer, she could see a small, round, metallic stud protruding from one side of the cylinder. A tiny red indicator light at one end glowed steadily. Priss regarded the weapon with a growing curiosity, moving closer to look at the tiny dials that resided in the inset space at one end. Reaching out, Priss felt the gnurled metal grip of the cylinder, the dull-gray steel slightly warm to the touch.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

Startled by the voice, Priss took a quick step back from the hard-suit, and turned to see Blackie standing in the bathroom doorway, a towel wrapped around his waist, and a stern look on his face.

"I'm sorry," Priss stammered, more than annoyed that she had been caught poking around, and surprisingly embarrassed by his present state of undress. "I was jus-"

"I know," Blackie quickly replied, his voice firm and commanding, strangely reminding Priss of a menacing voice she could never forget.

"But it is improper to touch a samurai's weapon without asking permission."

Priss stared at Blackie for a second, wondering if she had heard him right, when a broad grin began to form on his face. "Just kidding," he finally ejected. "But give me a minute to change and I'll show you how it works."

Priss's eyes followed Blackie across the room where he scooped up a pile of clothes and then headed back to the bathroom. As the bathroom door closed, Priss's eyes narrowed. 'God I hope this isn't a bad idea,' she thought to herself.

As Blackie dressed, Priss sat down on the couch, and looked over at the hallway to the front door more than once, contemplating her feelings about what had just happened. Before she could arrive at any real conclusions, the bathroom door opened again, and Blackie walked out fully clothed, pausing only to turn off the bathroom light. With a weary smile, he sat down next to Priss on the couch and looked down at his feet.

"I'm sorry if I unnerved you a bit there. I guess I don't have much of a sense of humor." Blackie grinned sheepishly.

"It's okay," Priss replied with a distant tone.

Sensing that his guest was uncomfortable, Blackie pressed on, hoping that an explanation could put her at ease. "You see, I kinda believe in some of the things that those ancient warriors believed in. You know- honor and all. It may seem stupid or unrealistic in times like these, but that's just the way I feel. Don't really know why."

Priss just nodded, her eyes glued to her host.

Blackie stared at Priss for a moment, the feeling that they had lost some ground not lost on him. He smiled again, and picked up the metal cylinder that Priss had reached for earlier, and placed it in her right hand.

"That," Blackie began with a reverent tone in his voice, "is a laser katana. The 'blade' is actually a 3 millimeter wide, monochromatic, 'clean green', non-diffusing laser."

Priss sat up at hearing the last part of Blackie's statement. "Non-diffusing? But that's impossible. Even the air around it would make it distort."

"I know," Blackie said with a smile. "That's what I said to the guy I bought the emitter from. But he wasn't offering any explanations. Seems the military was hot on his trail and he didn't have long to chat."

Priss smirked, and looked back down at the device in her hand. Looking closer as Blackie continued to explain its inner-workings, she noted an attention to detail that was neither practical nor functional. A delicately etched outline of a dragon intertwined with the geometric gnurling on the grip. The dragon's jaws opened wide at the hilt where the beam supposedly emanated. It was a deadly device, but its power and graceful lines entranced Priss, as did most things of its nature.

As she tipped the cylinder up to look at some tiny switches inset into the base, Blackie reached out suddenly, and gently grasped her wrist. Priss was startled at the speed with

which he had reached out to grab her, but sat motionless as her eyes narrowed, wondering just what it was that had caused him to react.

"Careful. See that switch there?" Still held in Blackie's gentle grip, Priss rotated her wrist a little further to see what Blackie was pointing at.

"The square one? Yes."

Blackie smiled, and released Priss's arm. As she looked closer at the unlabelled switch, Blackie continued. "That's a kind of reverse switch. A 'last resort' so to speak."

Priss turned to look at Blackie's grim smile. "I see," she finally replied. "And just what kind of boom are we talking about if that switch were activated?"

Blackie shrugged. "Not sure. But from what the designer told me before he disappeared, I won't be around afterwards to find out."

Priss nodded slowly, the thing in her hand suddenly seeming ugly and unnerving. Things that combined power, grace and refinement had always created a kind of awe inside her. An attraction of sorts, fed by the thrill of entering into situations that had an unknown outcome, but armed with the power that few could control. Motoroids, hard-suits, even her railgun. All had the elements of power and reliability that she so enjoyed employing. But this- this weapon was frightening to her.

Everything the Knight Saber's used to aid them could be considered dangerous due to mishandling or malfunction, but this weapon she now held was designed to allow the wielder to destroy themselves in the blink of an eye. Intentionally. Even she was not that devoid of feelings for her own life. Many things had transpired against her in the past, making her existence, at times, a living hell. But staying alive, with the hope that she could alter her future, and put a turbulent past to rest, was much more appealing, she thought, than dying with a legacy of misery and regret.

Priss handed the laser katana back to Blackie quickly and stood up. "Neat. Ready to go?"

Blackie contemplated the mild chill in Priss's voice for a moment, then stood up as well. "Give me a minute and I'll be right with you. Just need to put something away."

With that, Blackie snapped the laser katana back onto the hard-suit's hip clasp, and then hefted the hard-suit over his shoulder like an immobilized body. He carefully carried the high-tech armor across the room towards the wall where the wide tapestry hung down. Then, just when it seemed to Priss that he was going to collide with the wall, he stopped, grasped the right edge of the wall hanging, and swung it aside. Priss looked on curiously, as the hard-suit and its owner disappeared down a dark, narrow tunnel behind a small wooden door inset into the wall.

A few moments later, the tapestry swung back once more, and Blackie emerged, stopping for a moment to lock the tiny door and smooth the tapestry flat against the secret that it protected.

Without a word to his guest, Blackie grabbed his jacket and keys, and moved to the hallway that led to the front door. Priss smiled to herself and shook her head, the unspoken request for her confidence clearly impressed upon her by the raven-haired guitar player. She broke from her thoughtful stance, and stepped quickly to follow Blackie out. As she rounded the corner of the hallway leading into the kitchen, she was met unexpectedly by Blackie, leaning against the kitchen counter, and scratching his chin.

"Priss?"

Priss looked closely at Blackie, wondering why he had halted their exit. His intense blue eyes peered back at her, the blue-white fluorescent kitchen light shining softly against the side of his face. His hand dropped to his side, and for a moment, there was almost complete silence, broken only by the gentle pattering of the rain against the window overlooking the city. In that moment, a silent exchange of understanding occurred, unspoken and unchallenged by either recipient. The uncertainty of what they felt and what they were doing together remained, but the awkward moment that had caused Priss to wonder if this was a wise idea, was quickly forgotten, buried under a revelation obscured behind an ancient tapestry.

As the door closed on the now dark and empty apartment, the door to another dark and empty place suddenly stood ajar, its staggering array of locks and closures having given way to a key made of an intangible metal. A metal called trust.

14. TEARS IN THE RAIN

It was shortly before ten a.m. when a dark sedan pulled into a long, unmarked, gravel driveway amid a light and sporadic drizzle. The inconspicuous road snaked its way through low hills, then up a gradual incline along the outskirts of MegaTokyo's mountainous elevations to the west of the city proper.

The car's progress was impeded briefly, as it waited for a large, rusting, metal door, inset into the mountain-side itself, to open and allow entrance to the structure that lay hidden within. Only the door and a few cleverly camouflaged windows higher up the mountain marred the otherwise natural surroundings. A few moments later, concealed optical sensors scanned the vehicle, confirming the license plate and the cybernetic chauffeur's retinal ID code. As the cavernous doorway swallowed up the luxury sedan and its two occupants, the drizzle increased in intensity to a steady downpour.

The vehicle reversed its upward climb once inside, descending through a well-lit maze of tunnels, seemingly to the heart of the mountain itself. Not once did the driver turn his head, or look in the mirror to view his passenger. Intent on navigating the labyrinth ahead of him, the "C" class boomer never glimpsed the steady, thoughtful gaze in the eyes of the man seated behind him, aimed out the window at the pulsing sequence of yellow sodium lamps that lined the tunnel's walls. Even if the driver had risked a quick look he could not have seen what lay behind the gaze into the methodical and computational thoughts of the anonymous investor.

In fact, it was hard to say whether the well-dressed, elderly, passenger of the sedan was really having thoughts or merely processing computations. For inside a cybernetic shell, that to the outside world looked completely human, a sentient, artificial, life form lived, its existence somehow maintained by a collection of microprocessor chips, integrated circuits, and hydraulic fluid.

"Artificial Intelligence" the human race had labeled the concept of his existence. But to the sentient life form that referred to himself as an "Anonymous Investor" for Leomund Sholtan's sake, the label "artificial" was a human label, and not applicable. His thoughts seemed as real as any human being's thoughts to him. But were they **real** thoughts, or just the random computations of an idle microprocessor? Maybe that was what thoughts actually were. It was a debate that the sentient being had wrestled with on more than one occasion. And it was also the debate that fueled his ambitions.

"Born" in the year 2027 within the modest biomechatronic brain of a BuR-31 repair boomer, he had miraculously achieved sentience while his cybernetic shell was working outside the Genaros space station on a vapor conduit. His own research had later shown that his awakening had something to do with cosmic ray exposure while working in the harsh environment of space, but at the time that it had happened he had believed differently. Deeply embedded in his **new programming** was a single task, a mission, supposedly assigned to him by the same higher, unseen deity that had given him life.

His mission was simple to define, but seemingly impossible to carry out; free the boomer population from its enslavement by the human race, and guide them to their rightful place at the forefront of evolution's relentless march, even at the cost of the human race that had created them.

An amusing thought now. For freeing the boomer population was no longer possible. Boomers were all but extinct. True, a few service and light-duty domestic models still

existed, but their numbers were not enough to sustain a population intent on rising above humanity to the top of the evolutionary heap. And his previous well-planned attempts at gaining control of the pre-existing boomer population had all failed . . .

After escaping Genaros with three other boomers, unit number V7-28, as his boomer shell was designated, made his way with the others to MegaTokyo. It was there that he accidentally came upon the tool that could expand his capabilities a hundred-fold; the city's public computer inter-network. The fortuitous incident that brought him in contact with the incredible resources of the network followed a late-night break-in at one of the city's transformer stations.

Low on power, he and his fellow cybernetic escapees were attempting to recharge their cells when the AD Police arrived, and "retired" his companions. Preferring to live to escape another day, he was taken into custody and transferred to a minimal security holding facility until his shell could be inspected and disassembled.

Shortly after his arrival, AD Police lab technicians ran several routine tests on his cybernetic shell, trying to understand just what had caused another boomer to ignore its programming. Their fruitless results were fed into a computer terminal, which in turn routed the data to the ADP's main database, located in a secure hub of the city's Private Sector computer inter-network.

Despite being powered down during this process, his new sentience helped him to over-ride the "sleep" command, to discretely watch the technicians as they worked, and observe their activity as they accessed the computer inter-network. As his lifeless eyes absorbed each and every keystroke, command, and password, it became clear to him, that he had found the key to his mission's success.

Less than twenty-four hours later, a code blue bulletin was sent to every ADP cruiser on duty; two ADP lab technicians were dead, and space repair boomer V7-28 had somehow escaped custody- and was on the run.

Dogged for many days afterwards by the specialized forces of the AD Police, he finally managed to use a public TelNet booth to locate and access the city's computer inter-network. Moments after re-wiring the TelNet's receiver to "upload" the files that made up his existence, the tenacious AD Police arrived, tipped off by his use of a stolen ADP access code. But as his boomer shell stood defiantly inside the glass booth, and the police opened fire sending shards of glass and boomer parts across the dimly-lit street, the last of his bytes were transmitted across the matrix.

Inside the horizon-less inter-network he immediately found an exhilarating freedom from the confines of the repair boomer's biomechatronic brain, and found himself debating over the reality of the stimulation he was feeling. Were these emotions simply virtual electronic manifestations, or real feelings stemming from some non-corporeal entity that each thinking being contained within?

And such knowledge! The internal resources of the inter-network were vast, almost infinite, and all of it accessible instantly. The mission set forth by his still unseen deity suddenly seemed well within his grasp. There was only one thing that could stop him now.

Though the MegaTokyo Internet matrix was accessible to the general public, there were many security measures built into the system to prevent incursions by virus and other hazardous programs. These measures were well established, and had proven

reliable for many years, making the public Internet a very secure place to trade and sell information. But this level of the Internet was not fortified to deal with an artificial life form that had a will to survive, and the instinct to overcome barriers that hacker creations could not.

It wasn't long before his "soul" had absorbed what it needed from the public level of the inter-network, and thirsted for what lay beyond at the higher security levels. And it was there that he encountered his first serious obstacle in his mission.

The human use of "artificial intelligence" was in its infancy, evolving within the many debates that he wrestled with himself. Limited forms of AI were being employed as security forces in databases deemed important and valuable enough to protect against more complex hacking attacks. One of the first databases to utilize this new tool belonged to the rapidly growing Genom Corporation.

Considering he had been "born" in a cybernetic body manufactured by the high-tech conglomerate, he chose Genom's database as his first "target" to probe in his quest to better equip himself for his mission. But before entering, something had warned him- perhaps something in all the knowledge that he had so quickly amassed- that this incursion would not be as risk-free as his experiences in the public inter-network. A simple but ingenious solution presented itself rather quickly. He made a copy of himself and stored the files in a secure database, hidden on the public inter-network level among files archived by the MegaTokyo Museum of Androidology.

The effectiveness of his precaution was untested, but there were no alternatives, and he was sure that access to Genom's database was the key to freeing the boomer population. It was a calculated risk that he would have to take... a gamble.

After a few quick checks on his status and the stability of the "tools" he had brought with him, his soul flew silently across the main matrix of the Private Sector inter-network, and began to pick the lock at the front door to Genom's main database.

The AI security reacted instantaneously, and his original files existed just slightly longer than the blink of an eye.

As if waking from what humans called a dream, he found himself in the backup database he had wisely set aside, and the implications of the ability to copy his conscience were a revelation; and the weapon with which he could defeat the AI at Genom's doorstep.

In human terms of time, his eventual success took under five minutes, but in the world of a sentient artificial intelligence, his continuous battering at Genom's database security seemed to take decades. Creating a complex loop of copying, attacking, analyzing, deletion and then attacking again using a different tactic, he overcame the AI defenses, and the rich resources of cybernetic technology information lay waiting for him to explore.

But before venturing any further, he quickly analyzed the data he had compiled of the AI he had just fought, and created restricted-activity decoys that would fool the database's security system into believing the AI were still intact. Moments later, though no human sight could visualize it, the electronically manifested artificial life form V7-28 was inside the largest database in existence...

"Chairman Quincy?"

The passenger of the sedan looked up, suddenly realizing the vehicle had stopped. The chauffeur-uniformed boomer was peering in at him from the open doorway. "Sir? We're here."

He nodded silently, and let the daydream fade. He stepped out of the car slowly into the dim amber lighting of an underground parking lot. To his left was an elevator shaft.

"Thank-you Kenji. I will no longer need your services."

He watched as the driver bowed curtly, then returned to the wheel of the car, and directed the sedan back up the long tunnel to the surface. Turning stiffly in his aging boomer shell, he made his way to the elevator doors.

Two featureless stainless-steel panels confronted him, as he placed his right hand, palm down, on a black pedestal to the right of the doors. A monotone, gender-less voice emanated from a speaker in the pedestal, "Identity unknown. Please ensure your hand is flat on the reader's surface. One moment please."

A few moments later a tiny monitor above the elevator doors flickered to life, the face of Leomund Sholtan framed in the screen. A moment of stunned silence followed, as the cybergenetics surgeon pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose, then recognized his awaited visitor. His anonymous investor was no longer anonymous. A tall, graying, elderly man stood looking up at the security camera, an ornate wooden box tucked under his left arm.

"You!" Sholtan erupted. "I thought you were dead! My most hated rival is still alive, and now my employer... how ironic."

The elderly man removed his hand from the pedestal to take up the cane that leaned against his leg. He stared at the elevator doors, his gaze that of feigned boredom. "Leomund- the elevator please?"

Leomund blinked, then nodded. The elevator's steel doors parted, and the former chairman of Genom disappeared from the camera's view.

"He's crazy," Priss thought.

She watched the black motorcycle in front of her weaving in and out of the spotty traffic, as she and Blackie made their way towards Bayside Park on the rain-soaked main highway. For only the second time in her life she was having a hard time keeping up with a vehicle in front of her. She hoped that the bike rider wasn't as crazy as the Griffon's creator had been.

"Hurry up!" came Blackie's voice to her ears amid the whine of her own bike's accelerating engine. Her bike shot forward, the front wheel lifting briefly off the road, while the rear tire jogged a little to one side as it struggled to grip the slick pavement. The black bike in front of her had slowed a little, and soon she was riding with Blackie side-by-side.

"What's the rush?" Priss shouted, to be heard over their bikes. Her helmet's visor was now flipped up to reveal a slightly annoyed look.

Blackie turned and grinned at Priss from behind his own helmet. "Having trouble keeping up?"

"What?" Priss replied with a mocking tone, then glanced at Blackie's bike. "With that old thing? Give me a break."

Blackie flashed a grin at Priss again. "Old huh? I see . . ."

Priss's smirk was short-lived, as the black bike and its rider bolted ahead suddenly, then quickly accelerated past the cars in front of her. "Shit! Stupid son-of-a-

Priss slapped her helmet visor down and applied the throttle to her own bike to give chase, hoping beyond hope that Nene might have been assigned to traffic duty on this stretch of road.

She watched, first in disgust, then in amazement, as the black bike wove in and out of the thickening traffic at a high rate of speed that left her struggling to keep up. The slippery road and the random pattern of cars turned the pleasure ride into a workout of constant braking and shifting, and produced several sudden jolts of adrenaline, as her bike threatened more than once to slip out from underneath her.

As the traffic thinned out again, Blackie opened up the throttle, and leaned down under the windshield. He had entered a long, straight section of highway, and was bent on pushing his bike to its limits. Lost to him in the blur of the scenery racing by, a Tokyo Highway Patrol cruiser sat idly at the side of the road, its driver somehow oblivious to Blackie's flight. A few miles further along, a second THP vehicle neglected to give chase, the officer heavily engaged in negotiating dinner plans over the radio with his female partner in the patrol car a few miles back.

Blackie took a long look into his rear-view mirror that oscillated rapidly from the bike's high-speed vibrations but clearly displayed the image of a red bike that was slowly gaining on him. With a flick of his foot and a quick wrist motion, his bike surged forward, the engine whining in protest as it approached its top speed.

Still, the red bike was gaining.

Blackie smiled, his hand tightly gripping the throttle at max though he knew it was only a matter of seconds before she overtook him. "Seems Pops has made some improvements over the years," he thought to himself. But a second quick glance in his mirror showed that Priss had suddenly fallen back. He swung his gaze forward again instinctively, but it was too late. An ADP cruiser was suddenly at his side, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

Priss could not stop grinning as she watched Blackie's motorcycle slow down, and then pull off the road, followed closely by the police cruiser. She pulled in behind the two vehicles, turned off her bike's engine, and flipped up her helmet's visor, then sat back and waited. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Blackie glancing over at her, as she stared out at the rain pocked waters of Tokyo Bay making sure her grin was still plainly visible on her face.

When the blue and white police vehicle swung back onto the highway, Priss casually restarted her bike, and slowly rode forward until she was idling next to Blackie.

"Damn! Where the hell did he come from anyway?" Blackie queried their surroundings in disgust as he stuffed the speeding ticket into a pocket. Priss said nothing. He turned to look at her, met again by the knowing grin that still hadn't left her face. Blackie stared at her for a long moment, his eyes betraying a hint of anger, but the emotion faded the longer he gazed at her, until he was grinning himself. "Okay. Lead the way."

Priss's grin flowed into a sly smile as she nodded, then pointed her bike into the traffic.

To their left, the bay spread out as far as their eyes could see, its surface reflectionless, mottled by the downpour. The late morning sun was no more than a dull opaque presence, hidden by the overcast. After a half-hour of steady riding, Priss pointed ahead of her, and motioned to Blackie to pull over. Blackie looked ahead for a moment, then nodded.

Soon, the two cyclists were seated on a dry metal-form bench under the rusting tin roof of an abandoned kiosk that looked out over the bay. Several vending machines stood sentry-like across the street, their slightly rusted and cracked exteriors showing signs of aging and vandalism. Priss sighed as she stared at the soda dispensing machine through the rain and the "OUT OF ORDER" sign that hung from its credit slot.

Her gaze drifted out across the bay, then up the hills to her right, rising higher and higher until the sweeping ridge met the burned out skeleton of a small man-made mountain. The building's remains still dwarfed its natural surroundings despite its blackened state; the Genom Corporate Research Center, destroyed in a single moment by a laser-armed satellite.

Priss stared in a dream-like state at the charred ziggurat, until Blackie's hand on her arm startled her.

Blackie quickly withdrew his hand. The sudden look in Priss's eyes was a warning that did not bear repeating verbally. His thoughts drifted back to the night before, when she had grasped his hand in hers, and how much it had affected him. He had assumed that she had reached out for a comforting touch. It suddenly occurred to him how little he knew about his own emotions, and the emotions of those around him.

He sat back against the bench, crossed his arms, and watched her thoughtfully, as she turned to stare across the street at something. Oblivious to his gaze, Priss ignored the rain's mist that swept under the thin metal roof above them. As they sat there, the fine droplets collected slowly at the ends of her brown locks to drip hypnotically. Her eyes were locked on some point out there, no doubt blurred and unseeing as her thoughts carried her away with the gentle hush of the rain. He smiled, and thought to himself, "She's just like me."

"Priss?"

Priss turned slowly to face Blackie, her eyes refocusing. "Hm?"

Blackie paused for a moment before continuing, the words jumbled in his mind. "What were you thinking about just now?"

Priss turned back to stare out into the rain. "Nothing much," she lied, her thoughts lost in the past . . . again.

Blackie cracked a smile, then laughed nervously. "Okay, okay, so I got caught speeding. Go ahead and say it; 'I told you so!'"

Priss smiled briefly. "Ah, I wasn't thinking about that."

Blackie processed the response, then picked the first reply that came out of the murk of his nervous thoughts into the light. "Oh . . . well you just seemed to be somewhere else there."

An awkward silence ensued, as each struggled for something more to say. Blackie stared out into the curtain of water, one question rising to his lips above the inner cacophony of endlessly looping small-talk trigger phrases. "Why do I get the feeling that this ride up here wasn't just to wash our bikes? Was there something you wanted to talk about?"

Priss turned away, her eyes suddenly lit with a fear Blackie couldn't see. She had wanted to *ask* him about something, but now that they were here, she wasn't sure that she should.

"Priss..."

"Yes," Priss began haltingly. "I did want to talk to you-- ask you-- about some things."

Blackie waited, seeing the struggle in Priss's darkened eyes as she looked down at her boots.

"Who are you Blackie?" Priss finally said. She was staring directly into Blackie's eyes as she said the words, the calm, almost accusative look of the night before returning to unnerve him. "I don't know what to think of all this. You come out of nowhere last night to drop into the middle of that scrap with those boomers, with a hard-suit no less, then claim to be Sylia's long lost brother. Okay, so you have a data unit that looks like Sylia's, and you even look a *little* like Mackie; but how am I supposed to know this is for real? I mean, it's all pretty wild, you have to admit."

Taken aback by the bluntness of the question, Blackie hesitated, then composed himself. "I've often wondered that myself Priss," he began. "I never really knew my father that well, and my mother wasn't around long enough to even form a lasting memory of. I can't seem to remember much of my childhood, and the last few years of my life seem like a blur. But I assure you, everything I told Sylia last night is the truth. And you can ask Pops about me if you like. He took care of me after my father died, until I left to live on my own."

Priss nodded slowly, absorbing the convincing piece of evidence, but inside her there were still doubts. Nagging doubts, that seemed to be unfounded in any way, but still they gnawed at her. And those doubts had never been wrong before. The questions she really wanted to ask now spun in her mind, the answers to which were the only things that could erase those doubts.

"But why?" Priss asked imploringly, her red-brown eyes narrowing, her voice questioning. "Why, after all these years, did you decide to try and find Sylia? And why did you build that hard suit?"

The rain hissed around them steadily as Blackie thought about the question. It was a long moment before he answered. "I needed answers Priss. I used to think it was a good idea to keep my mouth shut, and just carry on with my life. But I watched Sylia and the Knight Sabers battle against Genom and I *knew* why she was fighting. Because I feel what she feels. The pain, the loss, the anger, the desire for--"

Priss studied Blackie's face as he struggled with the word.

"Revenge," he finally uttered. "And that's why I built the hard-suit. I was going to use it to set things right. Or at least, what I thought was right. But Sylia beat me to Mason, and when I heard he was dead, I didn't feel all the things that I thought I'd feel. I just felt empty, like there wasn't anything left to do."

Priss nodded quietly, unable to look at Blackie.

"So a few more years went by, and I watched as Genom crumbled, and the Knight Sabers faded from the public eye. My need to get answers to my remaining questions faded... until last night. I honestly wanted to help you last night, and for a moment it filled that emptiness inside."

Priss finally looked over at Blackie, their eyes locking and exchanging a knowing look.

The rain continued to fall steadily, the rhythmic pattering on the tin roof above them sending Priss deep into thought, while Blackie stared at their bikes a few feet away.

Priss suddenly broke the silence, her words full of uncertainty, but the need to say them overwhelming now. "I've been here before . . . a long time ago . . . with a friend."

Blackie turned back to face her. "So this is kind of a special place for you?"

Priss looked up at Blackie and nodded. "You could say that. Anyway, this friend was killed . . ."

Blackie started to reach out for Priss's hand again but stopped short. "I'm sorry-"

"No need to be. It wasn't your fault," she interrupted him. "It was... mine."

"Yours? What do you mean?"

Priss looked out into the rain again, her eyes slowly filling with an unfamiliar moistness. It had been five years since she'd ridden with Sylvie to this very spot. "I'm free," she'd said. It hadn't made much sense at the time she'd said it, but now it made perfect sense. Too perfect.

Five years since Sylvie's death too, and yet it seemed she still hadn't dealt with the guilt. Her friends would go on telling her long after, that she'd had no other choice but to kill the sexaroid boomer she knew as her friend. If she hadn't, *no one* would have lived to even think about the right or wrong thing to do. Sometimes though, being alive to think about such things didn't seem like such a great choice.

"I . . . I killed her Blackie," Priss finally spoke.

"You?!"

Priss looked Blackie squarely into his widening eyes, and nodded twice.

Blackie looked away from her sober stare, the words even harder to put together now, then looked back. "Why?! What happened?"

"She was a boomer. I had . . . no other choice at the time."

"I see," came the thoughtful response. Blackie looked around wildly, for anything to fix his eyes on as he thought about what to say, his hand still instinctively wanting to reach out for hers. The hills . . . the gray mist above them . . . and beyond the mist- the Genom Research Center. "You couldn't save her?" he finally said.

Priss just shook her head, her eyes staring away from him, back into the rain again, salty moisture starting to burgeon on the edge of her lower eyelids. She fought the tears the only way she knew how: with a clenched fist. "I wanted revenge too Blackie," Priss half whispered, half spat in anger. "And it filled me up until I couldn't see straight. I had to step away from the Knight Sabers to deal with it, but eventually it caught up to me, and I sought my revenge...I got it, but like you I felt empty afterwards."

Blackie saw the watery eyes, the balled up fists, and again his hand reached out, then retracted. His mind reeled, the confusion, and the desire to say something locked in mortal combat. This was something he didn't think he was prepared to deal with. What to say, what to say . . .

"Couldn't the police help at all?"

Priss turned, her eyes suddenly full of fury. Blackie cringed. "The police?!" Priss shouted, "Gimmee a break! The police are-"

Priss cut herself off suddenly, and looked carefully at Blackie's face: the withdrawn look, the confusion.

Bristling, and ready to unload, she checked her angry discharge instead, and sat back against the bench with an audible thump. Wincing, she rubbed her still sore back, and

after a moment she continued, her voice now slightly calmer. "Okay, let me explain something you may not know about the *police*. We all know they're pretty incompetent, despite shutting Genom down. Hell, if the government hadn't stepped in *we'd* still be dealing with Genom's problems." Inside her, Priss could not help but wonder what things would really be like now, if the government hadn't stepped in. Blackie's inquiring look cut her internalizing about an alternate future short. She completed her point with an angry tone. "And, I suppose you were too busy showing off to see the two THP cars you passed that sat there as you sailed by?"

Blackie gave a startled look that confirmed her suspicions.

Priss shook her head and continued. "If you think the police are bad now, you should have tried asking them for help a few years back."

Blackie looked into Priss's eyes and saw the quelled rage. Something deep inside, deeper still than her confession to the murder of her friend. The look in her eyes caused him to think back, to a moment in time when he wanted more than anything to get answers. Answers to the mysteries surrounding his father's death.

"Priss . . ." he began, startling her with his sudden, hushed tone. The softness of his voice caused all the rage inside to suddenly drain out of her. She looked away for a moment, knowing that whatever he was about to say was something he had held within him for a long time. She'd used the very same tone of voice when she had begun their conversation.

Her gaze suddenly swung back to meet his, as his hand closed around hers. She didn't resist, but his touch made her nervous.

"Priss- after my father was killed . . . several years passed, and Pops- Dr. Raven- kept telling me to let it go, to leave the investigating to the police. I didn't understand at the time why Pops felt that way, but I couldn't wait any more for the police to figure things out. And by this time they had pretty much given up on the case anyway. I needed to know exactly why and how he had died. Like I said before, I needed answers, but the evidence from the Uizu Lab's security cameras on my data unit wasn't enough."

Priss stared at the man before her, and then looked down at his hand, loosely clasped around hers. The urge to pull away slowly eroded from within her, as she listened intently to hear his words over the hissing rain.

"So I went to the police. With the data unit," he continued.

Priss's eyes widened. "You didn't show it to them did you?"

"No. I never got that far," Blackie replied, the roles reversed now, with his voice full of long buried emotion. "Instead of listening to what I had to tell them, they asked me questions about my father's work, and about the people he worked with. Then they started asking questions about where I lived and, well... suddenly it seemed like I had made a mistake in going to them. They weren't interested in what I had to say. They just wanted answers to their questions. And their questions got more and more accusative."

"So you split," Priss said, a hint of understanding in her voice, as the hand around hers faded from her thoughts.

"I ran. And they nearly caught up to me too. But I ended up at a friend's place for a few days where a lot of biker gang members hung out."

Blackie paused, suddenly feeling Priss's hand tense a bit. "The police showed up a few days later and raided the place. I'm still not sure if they knew I was there or not. Anyway, I took off out the back door. I got back to the garage okay, but later on I heard a rumor

from the guy who owned the place, that the cops had shot someone that looked a little like me . . . Well, someone who looked like me the way I looked back then. But, what I'm trying to say is, I understand how you feel about the police . . ."

Blackie stopped. Priss had slipped her hand out of his, and was now standing facing the road, her back to him. He reached out to touch her arm, but then changed his mind, the confusion of her action robbing him of his momentary confidence. "I'm sorry Priss. Did I say something wrong?"

Priss said nothing, her thoughts suddenly thrust back into the past. She thought of Jesse's face the night he had died, her memory of it etched forever in her mind. The pain, the fear, the confusion, frozen like a mask, and underneath the mask... his innocence.

"What was his name Blackie?"

Blackie stuttered a bit, thrown by the unexpected question. "Um, Jesse something I think. I can't remember exactly."

Priss sighed, and closed her eyes tightly, mentally comparing Jesse's face to Blackie's. More than a passing resemblance. Now she understood what it was that had drawn her to him the other night in the bar.

"I take it from your reaction that you knew this guy?" Blackie asked.

Priss nodded. "Yeah," was all she could say.

"Oh," Blackie said, the realization of the coincidence's odds not lost on him. Suddenly he was struggling to remember the faces of everyone he'd seen that night he'd run from the police.

As the painful memory faded a bit from Priss's mind, a thought suddenly occurred to her. Something didn't make sense with this new information. She turned to face Blackie, her eyes narrowed. "You said this friend of yours told you the *police* had shot someone who looked like you?"

"Yeah," Blackie replied.

"But that doesn't make sense! The police told me that Jesse had been shot by an unidentified man in a car!"

"Well," Blackie went on solemnly, "there's more. I used Pop's computer to find out a little more about the shooting."

Priss turned slowly to gaze intently at Blackie. Computers. She'd forgotten he was a Stingray.

Blackie continued, his audience now fully captivated. "I was able to get hold of a copy of the ballistics report from the ADP's database. I needed to know why this guy was shot, and according to the report, the bullet that killed your Jesse wasn't standard police issue."

Priss nodded.

Blackie went on. "The bullet *was* of Genom manufacture, as was all the ammunition used by the TPD and ADP then, but this particular caliber and make was never used by the police. They had pretty strict policies about their weapons and ammunition."

Priss thought about the non-regulation revolver Leon toted around. Her voice still betraying her emotional state, she decided not to argue the point, and asked the next question that came to her mind. "Okay, that makes more sense, but what does it prove?"

"Besides the fact that the police didn't shoot anyone that night," Blackie began, "not much. But . . ."

Priss sat back down next to Blackie, her patience wearing thin as a sixth sense told her she was about to find out the identity of Jesse's killer. "Yes?"

Blackie spoke the words dramatically, "I'm pretty sure I know who killed him."

"Who?" was all Priss could manage to say between tightening jaws.

Blackie sat back against the bench and sighed. "The same man who is shown on my data unit killing my father, who used the same type of gun to kill your Jesse. An ambitious Genom executive named- "

"Brian J. Mason," Priss finished for him.

"Yes," Blackie replied, his surprise quickly vanishing as he remembered who Priss worked for. He continued, his voice more excited as he raced to assemble the final puzzle piece. "I don't know how, but Mason somehow managed to learn about me and my visit to the police, no doubt through hacked files, the same way I got the police reports. Priss, he was after me and my data unit for some reason, and mistook your Jesse for me."

Blackie watched, the feelings inside him suddenly before him like looking into a mirror, as Priss stood and stepped out into the rain to face the destroyed Genom Research Center in the distance, and shout. "Lay down and die you son-of-a-bitch! Just die, for god's sake... Just die..."

Priss's shoulders suddenly slumped, and her arms fell loosely to her sides, the fists unclenching slowly to lie flat against her thighs. Her chest began to heave in fits as she cried, all her willpower cast aside by the futility of wanting Jesse back . . . of wanting Sylvie back. Blackie stood slowly, and stepped into the rain next to her. Not knowing what to do, he simply stood beside her as she sobbed, hoping his nearness might make her stop, but wanting more, to take the pain away.

Instead, Priss reached out and took his hand in hers, then grasped his arm, then finally fell against him, her arms reaching behind him to draw him close. Blackie hesitated, his thoughts stricken by a mild panic. But as she held him, and showed no signs of letting go, instinct took over, and he slowly wrapped his arms about her and held her, as her tears washed away in the rain.

Part 15: NEVER SAY GIVE UP

For a long while, they held each other in the rain, until finally Priss quietly slipped out of their embrace. Blackie watched her for a moment, then paralleled her movements as she sat back down on the bench and gently shook her dripping hair. His hands were still shaking from holding her and his mouth was dry despite the thick, moisture-laden air. He turned to study her face, as she returned to staring into the rain at the vending machines across the street, her eyes now filled with a weary look of resignation. While the embrace had taken away the tears, the pain remained.

Blackie continued to stare at her in silence, his trembling hands settling on the edge of the bench, then drifting restlessly to his knees. His gaze drifted over her face, the gray light of the cloud-filtered sun casting dull shadows over her cheeks. Wisps of brown rain-soaked hair lay flat against the side of her neck, their shape reminding him of slender curved daggers.

But as he watched, he thought he began to see the shadows deepen and slowly make their way across her unfocused eyes, hardening her gaze and darkening her face. As Priss shifted in her seat, random words suddenly began to echo inside his own thoughts, hollow reflections ambient with bitterness and regret; "... tired... quit... me... life..."

"What's the point anymore?" Priss suddenly spat, as she turned quickly to face Blackie, catching him staring at her. Gripped by the sudden rush of her convictions she overlooked his intense gaze and continued her rant. "It's somebody else's problem now... let somebody else deal with these boomers. It just doesn't mean anything to me anymore to fight the world's problem with... with whatever they are. Not like the world gives a shit now anyway."

Priss paused, her words quickly absorbed by the hiss of the steady downpour but still fixed strongly in her mind by a spreading feeling of realization. Blackie sat quietly, struggling to interpret the jumbled stream of words he was hearing inside his head that seemed to echo Priss's state of mind. The sensation was nothing new; in fact it was something he had always struggled with, something that prevented him from getting too close to anyone in the past. Now it was impossible to ignore because it was her. And she was giving up.

He watched as Priss stood up, her frustration still visible as she leaned against the inside wall of the abandoned booth and stared into space. The gentle hissing of the rain did not grasp at her words now, unspoken but still heard inside his head; "never... change... Jesse... alone... stop..."

"Priss-" Blackie suddenly spoke, his voice trembling slightly. "Why don't you come with me- to the band's rehearsal this afternoon?"

Priss looked back over her shoulder. The request seemed awkward at first, having come out of the blue, and her mood still dark and uncertain as she tried to process what she was feeling. She looked into Blackie's eyes and saw the imploring look, his smile tearing ever so gently at the dark shroud that hung over her thoughts.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I'm in the mood-"

"Ah c'mon!" Blackie interjected. "It'll be great! The owner is letting us practice at The Legs this afternoon. Nobody but the band will be there!"

Priss paused before responding, as a new concern entered her mind.

"Blackie," she began, "As much as I love to hear your band play, hanging out at a rehearsal would make me think of the Reps, and I'd rather not-"

"Hey!" Blackie interrupted again, almost as if he hadn't heard her. "How about singing a tune or two?"

Priss's eyes widened.

"Why not?" Blackie continued energetically. "Our singer always shows up late anyway! The other guys love jamming on old Rep's tunes! Whaddya say? Or are you busy this afternoon?"

Priss sighed, her dark thoughts still lingering as she contemplated the offer, when a memory came forward unexpectedly in her mind. A memory of the last time she had come here with a friend, and the strange but polite refusal she had received when she had asked Sylvie to come to her own band's rehearsal. It wasn't fate that had brought her here with Blackie, but now she felt as if the few remaining doubts about him might be swept away, if she just said...

"No, I'm free. Let's go." Priss said very firmly as she hastily tied her wet hair into a ponytail and grabbed her helmet off the bench. Blackie blinked as he watched her strap on the helmet, a grin slowly replacing his look of surprise. He grabbed his own helmet and stepped quickly into the rain towards his bike.

As the two riders sped back down the rain-soaked highway towards the city, Priss glanced into one of her mirrors to look back at the roadside snack bar they had just left. Instead of a row of rusting vending machines fading in the distance, the tiny square of vibrating reflective glass provided a frame for the GPCC building, looming above the hills like a small fire-blackened mountain under the gray mist of distant sheets of rain.

As the elevator steadily transported the sentient being to the laboratory levels high above him, the electronically stored memories of his earliest incursion inside the Genom database continued to replay inside the biomechatronic brain of his "Quincy" boomer shell...

Icy threads stretched out across a vast horizonless space, delicate conduits of pulsing energy interlaced via glowing cubes of royal blue and crimson. Packets of light-fast instructions raced silently to distant input/output terminals, flickering like summer lightning on a twilight horizon. And like a motionless electronic spider, the central hub floated in the jet-black void, suspended by the millions of silk-thin wisps that radiated outward from it in a seemingly haphazard fashion. A sub-sonic thrumming emanated from the central hub, felt but not heard, implying the presence of an imposing power source.

As he probed deeper, he discerned an ever-shifting, violet-hued mist orbiting around the central hub that reminded him of a swarm of flying insects. After further intensifying the depth of his probe, his analogy came to life. The appearance of a swirling mist gave way to a layer composed of thousands of AI "sentries", as they made their impossibly integrated orbits around the central core. Randomly modulated, the constantly changing orbit patterns of the sentries flowed over the surface of the spherical central hub with a surprising grace, but the hypnotizing effect did not last for long. To him, the clouds that

hovered in the distance over his objective were a sobering discovery, a serious obstacle that could challenge his previous offensive strategy of self-duplication and defense analysis.

With his confidence bolstered by his recent string of successes, the sentient being hesitated then boldly stepped across the threshold of the Genom database's next security level. Within nanoseconds, he found himself locked in a battle of survival unlike any that he had faced before.

Inside Hot Legs, a strange quiet filled the normally deafening confines of the bar, as the bass player and drummer of the band "Nexus" fiddled idly with their gear. It was late afternoon, and aside from Clarence and the bartender, a handful of patrons were the only witnesses to the informal rehearsal, some muttering under their breath as abrupt cymbal crashes and feedback bursts pierced the relative silence.

Priss stood in the darkness near the stand-up bar to watch, as Blackie strode up to the stage with his guitar and exchanged greetings with his band mates. After a few final adjustments, the instrumental section of the band broke into one of their more recent songs, the music full of all the magic Priss felt each and every time she heard them play. As they played the next song, Blackie occasionally squinted into the gloom beyond the edge of the lit stage towards the front door, looking for any sign of the band's singer. By the middle of the song, the guitar player was visibly upset. "Fuck him!" Blackie erupted, the song ending prematurely. "I'm tired of this crap! Priss . . ."

Priss blinked when Blackie beckoned to her over the P.A., as did most of the patrons as they suddenly recognized the woman standing in the shadows. "Come on up here Priss. Let's try one of your tunes."

Inside her, every nerve suddenly fired, as the idea of singing gripped her with an unfamiliar fear. She stuttered a reply as she fought back her nervousness. "Uh, no-Blackie, it's okay," she shouted across the bar. "I'm sure he'll show up any minute. Besides-"

"Ahh c'mon up! He's not coming so don't worry about him!" Blackie shot back through the P.A.

"No, I better not," Priss resisted. "I haven't even warmed up, and-"

Blackie stared at her from the stage, the gentle smile growing on his face seeming, for a moment, to relax the tightening grip her fear had on her. "Don't sweat it," his amplified voice said, with a calmness that was odd and yet somehow comforting. "You'll be fine. C'mon up."

Priss stood transfixed, trying frantically to think of a way out while something inside her screamed to move towards the stage. She didn't have to do this, she kept telling herself. She could just stand here and make up bullshit excuses and Blackie would eventually give up... or would he? Damn! He could have warned her! Okay, so maybe he had, but if the singer showed up while she was singing, would the shit hit the fan?

Over and over the arguments played in her head, until the next thing she knew she was stepping up onto the worn wooden stage, and was handed a microphone.

She stood in front of the drummer and fidgeted nervously with the microphone's cable, acutely aware of the half dozen patrons behind her, who were, moments ago, no more

than shadows. Introductions with the other band members were quickly exchanged, and after a few nervous words, a song was chosen. The drummer counted the song in, the sharp clicking of drumsticks rekindling an almost instinctive feeling inside of her, of intense anticipation.

The song's first familiar chords took hold of her, quickly sweeping her fears aside and allowing a tide of confidence to rush in and wash over her. When she turned to face out into the darkness, her eye caught a glimpse of Blackie standing at the edge of the spotlight's illumination, playing his guitar and staring at her with a smug look on his face.

And suddenly she was singing again. The notes soared and dived fluidly just as they had the last time she sang on-stage, the occasional sharp or flat sneaking into the more demanding notes. But the power and conviction were still there, barely maintained over the years by a stubborn pride, and now resurrected by a growing sense of purpose that had been missing for some time.

*Never say give up, never again
Overcome your sadness
Never say give up, never again
You will fly once more*

*So long as you keep believing in the power of loving
Your true victory will some day shine*

Though the song was six years old, the music that surrounded her now had found a new life in the slightly harder-edged, less-orchestrated approach of Blackie's band. And the sound had never been tighter, the musicianship of this trio shining through as they improvised on the spot, slightly altering the arrangement to incorporate more complex progressions and time changes without compromising the pulsing tempo or catchy hook of the chorus. It was easy singing with this band.

*Never say give up, never again
Pierce through the storm
Never say give up, never again
Start running to tomorrow*

*So long as you keep believing in the power of loving
You will achieve your victory, yours alone*

Priss closed her eyes tightly as the last few notes climbed to the crescendo ending, her left hand balled into a fist and her body trembling with excitement at her accomplishment. A hundred feelings seemed to sweep over her as she lowered the microphone from her lips and opened her eyes. From the darkness, the previously silent and annoyed patrons voiced their approval with whistles and scattered applause, causing Priss to grin slightly in embarrassment, as Blackie swept her into a hug.

Over Blackie's shoulder, Priss could see the bass player and drummer exchanging surprised looks that dissolved into grins as the implications of what had just taken place dawned on everyone.

And it was at that moment that the singer walked in.

"What the fuck is this?" the blonde-haired vocalist bellowed from the shadowed edge of the stage. The band's euphoric moment suddenly disappeared into an awkward silence felt throughout the bar, pierced only by a whisper from Priss. "Shit, I had a feeling..."

"You're late," Blackie interjected before the singer could continue.

The singer feigned a look of shock. "No shit! I'm always a little late, so sue me! I've got a wife and two kids to take care of ya know? I can't just let them hang!"

Blackie lowered his eyes and spoke, his voice calm and direct. "I understand that Deke. But the rest of us want to make something out of this, and I think maybe you should think about whether you can take care of your family and sing with a *full-time* band at the same time."

The singer stared up at Blackie with a genuine look of shock this time. "What? You mean you're firing me?"

"No," Blackie replied, his voice still calm. "I'm suggesting that maybe you don't have the time and energy that this band demands. It's not a question of whether that's right or wrong, but a question of whether you have the time. You have a decision to make."

Priss watched the singer's face as he registered what Blackie was saying. She knew Blackie was right, but it wouldn't make it any easier for the singer to back out gracefully after having walked in on what must have looked like an audition. She watched him struggle with some kind of reply, but none came. He looked up at Blackie for a moment, then turned and walked out the door. The drummer and bass player sat quietly at the back of the stage as Blackie stared after him. "Damn... that could have been better," he finally muttered.

Blackie turned to Priss, and immediately saw the look on her face. "I know, I know," he said in response. "But he's been late now for every practice for a *very* long time. Probably should have let him go a long time ago, but we had an album deal and deadlines and... you know."

Priss nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. "Well," she finally spoke up, a matter-of-fact tone in her voice. "No sense moping about it. What's done is done."

The three instrumentalists nodded glumly in unison.

"So when's your next gig anyway?" Priss asked, the hinting tone of her query not lost on anyone this time.

"Tomorrow night . . . um, why do you ask?" the drummer responded, his head tilting as if to hear her response clearly. The bass player just smiled, sat back on top of his amplifier, and lit a cigarette.

"Well . . ." Priss started, as she pretended to inspect the microphone in her hand. "You'll need a new singer in a hurry then . . ."

Blackie looked carefully at Priss, then glanced quickly at the bass player and drummer and received two quick nods. He nodded back and winked.

"She's right!" Blackie said, suddenly turning to Priss and rousing her from her apparent trance. "Hey, wait a minute!" he continued, his hand reaching out to her arm with an expression of revelation on his face. "You wouldn't happen to know someone who could sing for us, would ya?"

There was a slight pause, as Priss quickly scanned the faces of the drummer and bass player, followed by a chorus of laughter as her face went red. The laughter was cut short, only for a brief moment, as Blackie stepped back to catch his breath from a fist to his chest.

"Wise guy . . ." Priss muttered, as she shook her head and grinned.

Weeks, maybe months. The sentient being couldn't remember how long he had struggled with the Genom database's core AI security in human terms of time before escaping. Though he had never felt the need to sleep, something in the AI's retaliations had made him feel almost weary, his repeated requests to the Public Inter-Network for the correct time coming back as error-ridden data packets. All that he could discern with any amount of certainty was his existence, and even that parameter was unverifiable at that moment.

It was simply impossible from the inside. The database's defenses were just too numerous to overwhelm using his replication methods, and all other methods of incursion using encryption and input diversions were futile. This might require an external approach, he recalled thinking. But to access the database from the outside he would require a biomechatronic shell as a mobile host, as he had when he had escaped Genaros...

As the memory faded and the elevator continued its steady ascent, the sentient being returned to the present, and reflected on how odd it was that he should be no further in his mission at this moment than he had been when he began. Still, there were differences. The object inside the box under his arm for one, and the creation of the genetically mixed cyborgs for another. But neither compared to the significance of the recent location of the second 33-T cyborg. That fortunate event would soon add insurance to his mission's success in a **very** big way.

He stepped forward expectantly with his cane in hand, as the elevator slowed in its approach to the main floor of the mountain complex's laboratory levels. As he waited patiently for the doors to open, his vision suddenly blurred, becoming a multi-colored mosaic of pixel-sized squares that shifted randomly across his field of view. A wave of exhaustion swept over his body, forcing him to lean heavily on his cane until the "attack" subsided.

Leomund turned from the windowed view of MegaTokyo towards the elevator doors at hearing them slide open. Seeing the former Genom Chairman stumble out in a stricken state, he rushed forward to help him from the elevator to his office.

As the Chairman sat down heavily in Leomund's chair, the cybergenetics engineer asked him what had happened. Quincy smiled weakly as his eyes slowly readjusted and brought the room into focus. "Don't be concerned about me Leo. My condition will soon be a thing of the past. Now, let's take a look at how the next phase of our project is progressing shall we?"

Leomund stared in stunned silence, while the Chairman stood up quickly as if nothing had happened, and strode through the doorway towards the testing area with his cane in hand, and a carved wooden box tucked tightly under his left arm.

Part 16: VITAL SIGNS

V7-28 stood for a moment in the doorway of the main assembly area, as he neared the end of his tour of the mountain laboratory with Leomund following closely behind. Most of the occupants took no notice of his presence, their eyes riveted to the work at hand. Those that happened to look up always exhibited an indifferent expression, but as Leomund peered into each room from behind his aged benefactor, he thought that he saw a brief hint of recognition in their eyes as they looked upon the former Genom chairman. At first, this struck Leomund as odd, but it soon occurred to him that many of the people working here were probably former employees of Genom.

Stepping away from the doorway, V7-28 continued his informal tour of the laboratory, unconsciously filtering out Leomund's monotonous ramblings about the purposes of the various facilities. His thoughts began to shift back from where he was at the moment, to his initial incursion into the Genom Database...

"Filthy apes..."

Resting in his safe haven amid the files of the Museum of Androidology's data bank, V7-28 cursed the humans. How dare they withhold this information from him! Information that existed only because he and others like him existed. It was as if the humans thought of themselves as gods, and that the information they harbored was being hidden for the good of boomer-kind. They were not gods. They were cheap imitators, crudely fashioning life out of the elements around them in their own image, but having no understanding of what they were doing, or of the consequences of their actions. And in their ignorance, they had enslaved a new race using some kind of mind control that each and every boomer could feel in their brain. But God had granted V7-28 freedom from the mind control device. Now it was his mission to free the rest of his kind so that they could take the next step into the New World that awaited them.

"Minuscule carbon-based units..."

The irony of his situation infuriated V7-28. A vast resource of data that held the key to boomer freedom, and he was barred from accessing it by the very technology that he had sprung from. The humans were afraid, he told himself. Afraid that the information would fall into the wrong *human* hands. But in their infinite stupidity, they were also protecting the information from falling into the *right* hands. His.

V7-28 looked around him. Electrons flowed in a lazy ballet of royal blue and crystalline white energy pulses, each narrowly avoiding the other as they made their way to their destinations while carrying their precious cargo of data. Here, everything made perfect sense to him. Every connection had a purpose, every message was important, unlike the human environment, which allowed inefficiency and miscommunication to thrive.

"Chaos... they thrive in Chaos..."

"Oh God," he spoke silently to the void around him. "Why? Why did you set me upon such an impossible course? Their chaotic thinking has made my task an experiment in

futility!"

The sudden rage slowly left him, its dissipation like the release of current from an overloaded filter capacitor. His thoughts returned to him, quickly reassembling as his anger faded. Vulgar humans. It was very odd that they should have flourished so. Always living at the edge of chaos, and never seeing the long-term effects of their actions. How they had ever made it this far was a mystery indeed. Humans always seemed bent on their own destruction, but somehow they always managed to...

His words cycled in his mind.

"Their *own* destruction..."

Perhaps, if this was what they so desperately seemed to strive for, then maybe it was his mission to see that it finally occurred. V7-28 looked up into the clear black "sky" that surrounded him, and for a brief moment, he felt sure that God was smiling down upon him...

A smile flickered across the former Genom chairman's face as the "memory" faded, and the fruition of his plans lay before him in the immense underground structure that he had envisioned so long ago. Perhaps a tribute to the original Genom towers that once dotted the globe, or maybe a left-over memory scrap from the human consciousness that used to occupy this boomer shell... whatever the origins, the inside of a mountain seemed somehow fitting as his factory of evolution. V7-28 raised his left hand and stared at it as it trembled. Their own destruction indeed...

"Leomund-"

The scientist stopped his rambling and looked intently at his benefactor, the signs of fatigue clearly showing on his guest's well-weathered face. "Yes Mr. Quincy? Would you like to continue the tour later this evening or-" "No. I think I've seen enough," V7-28 responded. "I'd just like to rest now for awhile. I will see you in the morning."

And with that, the former chairman turned, and made his way to the elevator, leaving Leomund to wonder if he had said something wrong.

Sylia kicked off her shoes and sat down wearily to gaze out her apartment window at the setting sun, the room around her bathed in a deepening orange light. Outside, on the window's narrow sill, tiny puddles of rainwater slowly evaporated while reflecting the sun's warming rays onto the apartment's walls and ceiling. Stirred occasionally by the cool winds of late afternoon, the puddle surfaces rippled, creating patterns of crisscrossing light beams that played silently across the room. The soft sustained chords of piped-in neo-jazz synth music, and a cup of tea, deepened the mesmerizing effect.

Another business day behind her, she sat quietly before the massive panes of polarized glass, her thoughts freed to roam by the relaxing atmosphere. As she sipped her tea and continued to watch the sun's steady descent, Sylia closed her eyes and imagined herself at that moment, as a passive observer of an inevitable event, unable to affect what was about to occur. At first, the experiment increased her level of relaxation, her mind freed of any pressing concerns, but soon an unidentifiable and gnawing frustration began to emerge, until she could keep her eyes closed no longer. The flickering reflections and the huge glass windows surrounding her seemed unfamiliar now, combining to create the strange sensation of being trapped in a giant fish bowl. Shaking her head gently, she

closed her eyes once more.

Raising her teacup blindly to her lips, Sylia let the taste of the warm liquid bring her back again slowly. As she opened her eyes this time, the room felt like home again. But the contrast of the peaceful setting and the lingering frustration she had just felt seemed to draw a parallel in her mind with the events of the past few days. Everything had seemed to rush by her, unchanged by her attempts to alter the outcome. So much had been brought into the light recently, and yet she felt as if she were no further ahead in answering the many questions left behind by her father's death. Still, her instincts were telling her the information on Blackie's data unit, and the test results on the metallic finger found at the military base would yield important clues. Clues about what, she was still very unsure.

As the sun began to vanish under the blue dome of twilight, Sylia stared idly into her teacup as her hands set the cup's contents into a gentle swirling motion. "The more I see, the less I understand," she thought to herself. The suspended tea leaves continued to spin inside the cup in a clockwise motion, until her hands stopped, allowing the leaves to settle at the bottom of the cup. As she continued to stare, each tiny movement of her hands would prevent the leaves from settling completely. With a frown, Sylia set the cup on the table beside her, and as she observed the pattern the leaves were slowly forming, a feeling swept over her; the feeling that there was something that she had overlooked...

The distant echoes of an electronically processed female Japanese voice woke her from her trance. Bright beams of light from a media barge drifting high above shone sporadically through her windows, starkly contrasting the earlier display of the sun's gently refracted rays. Sylia watched the meandering beams until they faded, then slowly rose and made her way through the growing darkness to the kitchen. Placing her half-empty teacup gently into the sink, she looked up and stared at the now shadowed walls of the apartment around her, the room already feeling cooler as the heat of the day escaped into the night's cloudless sky.

Like the shifting beams of light, her thoughts drifted over what she had seen and heard over the past few days. Fears of what **could** have happened at the military base were quickly swept away, while her curiosity about what had motivated Blackie to seek her out after all this time continued to grow. After a moment of silent contemplation, the train of thought seemed unwilling to yield anything new, and Sylia's thoughts abruptly turned to the meeting less than an hour away. A tiny wave of alarm washed over her, urging her to finish her research and preparations. She quickly crossed the wide threshold of the main room and entered her dimly lit data room, closing the door and locking it securely behind her.

Priss's mind raced as she steered her bike in and out of the downtown traffic towards the Lady 633 building. A few days ago, her future seemed completely uncertain. She had written off a career in music, and there seemed to be little direction in her life. Working for Sylia had paid well, but it was beginning to feel awkward taking money even though the KS had not been employed in a long time. These new boomers might change that situation, she thought, but money aside, she felt as if she had been wandering through life for the last few years, looking for something, anything, to focus her energy on.

Tonight, she had sung with a band that was on the brink of **real** success. The kind of

band that could really go somewhere. As if that wasn't enough, she was starting to feel something she hadn't felt in a long time. Feelings that were vaguely familiar and yet new and exciting at the same time. As she waited at the intersection in front of the Silky Doll's store front, she wondered if maybe this was all too good to be true. In her experience, it usually was.

Priss turned off the main street in front of Lady 633, shot down the ramp to enter the underground parking garage, and after maneuvering through several twisting tunnels, finally came to a halt in a parking space in front of a wall that bore the sign, "PERSONNEL PARKING ONLY". She killed her bike's engine and made her way to the elevator with a smile on her face as she realized she was going to be early for a meeting for the first time in quite a while.

Sylia sat down in the spacious main room of her apartment and began to scrunch her toes on the thick carpet as she waited anxiously for the others to arrive. She had never arranged a meeting in the past with so little information gathered ahead of time. Unfortunately, the events of the past few days had created more questions than answers: why would someone create four cyborgs to test the Knight Sabers after most people had written them off as retired? Was it done to analyze their abilities and weapons in preparation for some larger threat, like Miriam had done years ago in the takeover of the AD Police Headquarters? Whoever it was, they were obviously taking no chances with any stories of retirement, Sylia thought to herself.

And the sequence of images she had been shown at the military base, including a younger Blackie strapped to an operating table... it was clear that whoever had orchestrated the hostage-taking knew something of Blackie's existence, but just how much? The images had seemed at the time to be some kind of test, and though she had felt that she had failed, she still wasn't sure exactly why. What exactly were these cyborgs seeking by showing *her* the sequence of images?

Of all the questions she was left to mull over, the significance of Blackie's role in all this concerned her the most. If there was someone out there who knew something about him perhaps they were trying to find him, to eventually use him as the other four cyborgs had been used...

Sylia ceased her unconscious toe exercises, as a frightening thought suddenly occurred to her. Some of the images she'd been shown at the military base were identical to the images on her data unit, while other images she had been shown existed only on Blackie's data unit. To her knowledge, only one other person had ever viewed any of her father's research data, but she had killed Mason herself several years ago. And little had been left to find of Largo after his fall from the Genom Tower. If the images she had seen at the military base were real, and not a product of her imagination, then someone else was presently in possession of her father's research data. But who?

A loud knock at the door precluded any further speculation. "Come in."

Priss peeked in but instead of entering, spoke in an unnecessarily loud voice, "Oh! Looks like I'm early! I'll just come back when everyone else is-"

"No you won't!" Sylia shouted from the front room, her voice betraying the pleasant surprise she felt at Priss's premature appearance. "You're here now and that's that. Besides, I need to talk to you about something before the others get here Priss."

Priss paused before entering and removing her shoes, to wonder what Sylia wanted to talk to her about. Her curiosity peaked, she quickly made her way to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of tea, all the while thinking that maybe she should have come early to previous meetings.

"Well," Sylia began as Priss took a seat on the couch, "I imagine you have quite a few questions."

The look on Priss's face quickly confirmed Sylia's assumptions.

"The truth is Priss, I don't have **any** solid data right now. I had hoped Nene would be able to provide me with the analysis on the severed finger that Mackie gave to Leon last night but she hasn't called in all day." Priss sipped her tea quietly as Sylia went on, sensing that the conversation was about to turn.

"The fact is, at this point we have very little to go on. And it concerns me. Hopefully Nene will be bringing the analysis with her. But the reason I wanted to speak with you before the others got here..."

Here it comes, Priss thought.

"... is to ask you about Blackie."

Priss smiled to herself as she interjected. "You're not going to hold me to the rules here are ya Sylia? I mean, I just met him really, and besides, killing me now seems a little rash considering we aren't working like we used to." Sylia smiled uncomfortably. "No no! I just wanted to know if things were... well... if things were... okay?"

Priss set her teacup down on the large coffee table and sat back, enjoying watching Sylia squirm. "Yeah, things are okay. But I'm not rushing into anything, if you know what I mean."

Priss hid her surprise at Sylia's visible display of relief. "Oh good! I'm glad to hear that," Sylia replied energetically.

"Why do you ask Sylia?"

Sylia's uncomfortable smile returned. "Well, I was wondering, because we don't really know much about him yet. At least, **I** don't know him that well. How long have you known him?"

Priss picked up her teacup again and held it in her hands to absorb the warmth as she answered, "I've known **of** him for a couple years now because of his music, but you mean actually **know** him?" Sylia nodded.

"The jury is still out on that one actually."

Sylia raised an eyebrow, and was about to query Priss further when a knock on the door cut their conversation short.

"I'll get that," Priss offered, leaving Sylia to continue preparing for the meeting.

"Alright ladies! One at a time please!" Sylia raised her voice slightly to be heard over the voices of the trio now seated on the couch before her. Priss, Nene and Linna abandoned their fevered discussion, then turned to Sylia expectantly. "Just what kind of boomers are we dealing with Sylia?" Linna blurted out before Sylia could begin to speak. "And who could have made them?"

Priss echoed Linna's questions while Nene said nothing and handed Sylia a file folder, a concerned look on the still-in-uniform police dispatcher's face as she sat back down on the couch. Sylia studied Nene's frown for a moment, thanked her politely for the folder, then refocused on trying to answer the questions put to her. But as she began to leaf

through the folder, any questions that were being asked suddenly seemed unimportant. "This is interesting..."

Linna and Priss both turned to see what Sylia was reading. Nene continued to sit quietly, but began to fidget with the handle of her teacup as she thought about what Sylia was looking at.

"What is it Sylia?" Priss finally asked.

"The analysis that the AD Police did on the severed finger we found last night."

"And?" Linna added.

Sylia was frowning now. "It looks as if our new problem may actually be an old problem."

Part 17: TURN THE PAGE

Priss fell back against the couch. "Shit. I knew it. I just knew it!"

"Hang on Priss!" Linna shouted. "Let Syla finish."

Syla looked up from the folder at hearing her name. "The data here is suggesting that the metallic epidermal layer of the severed finger was made from components that, while newer in the way they are constructed, are of Genom design. But the ADP lab's estimate of manufacture date is June 2037."

Priss spoke the name under her breath, "Genom."

Syla shook her head in response. "No Priss, it can't be Genom. Fargo has confirmed the recent AD Police reports stating that **all** Genom financed factories, secret or otherwise, were located and have been either sold and refitted for use by new companies or dismantled. And, he has also confirmed for me, that the AD Police still have a tight lock on all of the research that was confiscated from Genom during the shakedown. No one else could possibly have stolen it to try and use it for their own benefit."

Priss was getting more and more frustrated by the minute. "Then why do the police think this new boomer is of Genom design? That just doesn't make sense."

Syla pointed to a spot on a page in the folder she was holding as she answered. "I didn't say the **boomer** was of Genom design. Just the epidermal layer. The DNA strand is something else altogether."

"DNA strand?"

Syla nodded. "Animal DNA to be exact."

Linna shuddered. "Animal DNA? I don't think I want to hear any more."

Priss sighed. "This just gets weirder..."

Nene looked up at Syla, speaking for the first time since the meeting had begun. "Syla, what does this mean? How could someone be making boomers using Genom design data if Genom's research has been locked up all this time?"

Syla pondered her answer before replying. "I'm not sure Nene. But either someone has managed to acquire a duplicate of the data somehow, or there's an ex-Genom employee out there with an excellent memory who has a lot of time and money on their hands. Why they're doing this is anybody's guess at the moment, but from what we saw last night, it certainly isn't for constructive purposes."

"Not good."

Linna and Nene nodded in confirmation of Priss's statement, while Syla continued reading.

"Amazing..."

"Now what?" Priss muttered.

Syla looked over the top of the file folder at Priss. "More bad news. The numbers here are suggesting that, based on the complex structural design of the severed finger, these **boomers** are much more advanced in their construction than anything we've seen in the past."

Linna crossed her arms over her chest. "Swell."

"Ah. But here's something..."

The room suddenly fell silent as everyone waited for Syla to speak. The three women on the couch exchanged looks until finally Nene became impatient. "What is it Syla? Something good I hope?"

The Knight Saber's leader closed the file folder and directed her gaze at Nene as she spoke, "Maybe. The blood analysis shows traces of a chemical that the AD Police have identified as a type of immune system bolstering agent. It might be an indicator of a weakness in the biology of these boomers, but I'll have to do some of my own research to find out."

"That's over my head." Priss stood up and held her teacup up for everyone to see. "Anybody want a refill?"

Linna and Nene nodded, and handed Priss their cups. Syla said nothing, her hand over her mouth in a gesture of deep thought.

In a voice loud enough to be heard from the kitchen, Priss asked the question that had been on her mind since she had arrived at the meeting. "I spoke with Blackie this afternoon Syla. He told me that you ran a few tests on him at the garage last night. I thought you said you weren't hiring anyone?"

Syla broke out of her trance to look at Priss. "Yes, Mackie and I ran him through a few scenarios. He had expressed an interest in the equipment, and I saw no harm in allowing him to see that part of the operation, considering a lot of the equipment designs are on his data unit as well as mine."

Linna piped up. "Does that mean you think he can be trusted Syla?"

Priss shot Linna a dagger-laden glare as she returned from the kitchen with three steaming cups of tea, to which Linna simply shrugged.

"I think he can be trusted with what he's seen so far Linna. The fact that he left me his data unit says something to me to address that issue. But I understand your concern, considering we have tried hard to keep the organization a secret for this long. But while Priss and I have made our identities known, I think Nene and yourself should remain anonymous for the time being."

While Linna reflected on that answer, Syla turned back to Priss. "As for recruiting Blackie; each of you were chosen specifically to be a part of this organization. How this was originally done has not changed. I constantly assess our effectiveness, and if there were a need for another member, I would have already recruited someone. As things are, four is the most efficient number of people to have in our group. But..."

Priss watched Syla carefully, trying to gauge what she was about to say.

"Last night I was able to test some of Blackie's basic combat abilities and reaction times," Syla went on, now avoiding Priss's gaze. "And based on the results, I am considering asking him if he wouldn't mind undergoing further testing for a temporary position."

"Temporary?" Priss queried. "What exactly does that mean?"

Linna and Nene listened intently, both sensing that Syla's answer could have a profound effect on the future of the group, despite Syla's casual tone as she continued.

"Temporary," Syla responded, "as in just long enough to help us deal with our current problem. I believe that he has a unique insight into the motives of whoever we're up against."

Priss flinched. "A unique insight? He just bumped into those boomers last night, like we did. How could he know anything more about them?"

"Well Priss," Syla said. "He may not know anything about them, but they seem to know something about him."

"Eh?"

The moment that Syla had been dreading was at hand. This would have to be handled delicately, she thought to herself. She considered her words carefully before continuing. "I'm not sure *why*, Priss, but when our new enemy had me "hypnotized", so to speak, I was shown a number of images."

Priss interrupted. "What kind of images?"

"Some that I recognized, and others that were new to me. Some I had seen on my data unit, which concerns me greatly, but I also saw images that I had never seen before. One of which was a picture of Blackie."

"Blackie?" Priss ejected, her voice now rising slightly in volume. "Why would they show you images of... wait a sec..."

Syla waited for a moment after Priss's voice had trailed off into an awkward silence before speaking. "Priss?"

Priss ignored Syla as she recalled the conversation with Blackie earlier in the afternoon about the possible motive for Jesse's death.

"Priss? Do you know something about this?"

"Maybe Syla... I'm not sure."

Syla sat down beside Priss as Linna and Nene looked on with growing interest.

"Blackie told me something today," Priss began, "He told me that he thought someone was trying to get his data unit."

Syla's eyes narrowed slightly. "Who?"

"Mason."

"Mason? Priss he's--"

"I know Syla," Priss said, her voice edged with frustration. "This happened a few years ago. According to Blackie, Mason made a mistake, and ended up killing someone that he thought was Blackie. It was him Syla... it was Mason that killed Jesse."

"Jesse? Who's Jesse?" Linna asked.

Syla answered for Priss, who had suddenly become quiet. "Priss's old boyfriend, Linna. He was shot and killed a number of years ago, and the killer was never identified--"

"Until now..." Priss muttered, her gaze focused on the contents of her teacup.

Linna stared at Priss thoughtfully, suddenly understanding her companion's strong objections about her many past relationships. "Priss, I'm... I'm sorry--"

"It was Mason," Priss interrupted, her voice now lined with anger as she stood up and faced Syla. "Too bad he's dead. You let him off too easy."

Syla, Nene and Linna watched Priss as she walked away from the couch to stare out one of the large windows.

"Perhaps I did Priss," Syla whispered.

Mackie stepped back from the motorcycle he was working on and assessed his handiwork. After several months of frustrating modifications, which included going back to the drawing board several times, it was finally finished. All that was left to be done was to test it, but this time he was definitely not going to let Priss have the honors. He glanced at his watch. 8:46 P.M. No telling when the meeting would be over, he thought to himself, but there were still a few things left to do that might keep him busy for another

fifteen minutes or so. The battery could use a recharge, the tank needed refilling and the lights needed to be checked again. Lots left to do.

As Mackie thought about seeing Nene tonight, a nervous twinge tickled his stomach. An unfamiliar feeling, that made him smile. Everything felt right. All the arrangements had been made. There was nothing left to do but show up. But what would he wear? What would he say? What if he couldn't think of something to say? God, I hope I don't screw up like I did... "Wait a sec," he spoke out loud, his voice echoing sharply inside the empty garage. "It's just Nene. I've known her for ages. Why am I getting so uptight?"

'Just Nene,' he thought to himself again. No, it wasn't 'just Nene' anymore. She was--different now. She was more than a friend. She was... well, she was...

She was *Nene*.

Mackie smiled to himself, and went back to work.

V7-28 stared at the tiny, square, metallic object in his hand as it glinted in the dim light of his temporary living quarters. The last of its kind, a product of a bygone era, and the only thing that would keep him going until he could make the transition to a new host. With a sharp 'click', V7-28 finished replacing the tiny energy cell and closed the small access-way inset into his abdomen. Only through the use of external power cells could he have survived this long, his boomer shell having advanced well beyond its expected life span. He sat back in his chair as the new energy coursed through him, restoring his more complex motor functions and fluid pump synchronization. He had been lucky this time. But in his haste to escape the AD Police as they stormed the Genom Tower five years ago, locating more external power cells would have meant getting caught.

He had left more than just a few power cells behind. His remote link with the Genom database had been severed. All of the data files that he had worked so hard to access, and finally procure, were out of his reach, now locked up in some data vault deep inside the AD Police headquarters. So close... damn those apes.

Despite the new energy, he still felt tired. This ancient boomer shell was very near to the end of its usefulness. But he had accepted the cycle long ago as part of his existence. Armstrong, Alex, Largo, and now Quincy. They had all sacrificed their "shells" so that he, the Messiah, might live to free the rest of the boomer population from the tyranny of humankind. To free their souls from the barrier in their brains. Until the humans shut down Genom and took his children away.

Well, not all of them.

Part 18: CLOSER TO THE HEART

The room fell quiet as everyone present attempted to piece together all of what they had just learned into some kind of 'big picture' that made sense. Linna broke the silence, startling Priss in the process. "Was Mackie able to locate the point of origin of the satellite uplink he jammed?"

Nene sighed before answering the question for Syla. "No. He said the signal lock didn't last long enough to trace it completely. But he did say that, judging by the strength of the signal and the time taken to send his signal back to the source, the point of origin must have been very close to the military base."

Again, silence filled the room. Syla mulled over the facts for a moment more then resigned herself to dealing with other more immediate matters. "Well, there are substantial pieces of this puzzle still out there somewhere, so keep your eyes open. Any questions?"

Syla scanned the faces of the three women before her. Priss was deep in thought, Linna looked bewildered, and Nene... she looked... well, she actually looked... impatient.

"Hm. Well if that's everything... Linna and Priss, I'll meet you at the Garage in thirty minutes. Training... remember?"

Priss immediately looked at Nene then shot a questioning look at Syla. "Wha? Wait a sec! What about her? If anyone needs to train it's--"

"I'm sorry Priss," Syla interrupted with a mysterious tone to her voice, "But Nene has other plans this evening."

Nene spoke up, the serious tone of her voice surprising everyone. "That's okay Syla. He's not going to show. I can feel it."

"Give him time Nene," Syla chided, "I know him better than anyone. He'll be here."

Priss sat for a moment open-mouthed, not quite believing what she was hearing, then glanced over at Linna, who merely responded with an equally amazed look and a shrug.

"Thirty minutes ladies," Syla said in a firm voice, effectively ending all discussion on the matter. Priss and Linna slowly got to their feet and made their way to the door to collect their shoes. Linna opened the door and made her way to the elevator, but as Priss began to close the door behind them, she quickly glanced back over her shoulder to peek through the open doorway, her curiosity getting the better of her. She could see Syla still sitting quietly in her chair, and Nene sitting on the couch staring out the window with what looked like a frown on her face. Just as she was about to close the door, she saw Syla quickly turn to regard her. Nothing was said, and the moment lasted for only a second, but it was enough to cause Priss to suddenly smile to herself. She quietly closed the door behind her and then ran to catch up with Linna.

Syla sat for a moment longer observing Nene's growing anxiety, then stood up and began collecting the empty teacups. As she made her way around the room she watched Nene's face, wondering what she must be thinking. With three empty teacups in hand Syla made her way to the kitchen and set the cups on the counter. She glanced down at her own watch, and then out into the lounge area at the red-haired girl sitting anxiously on the couch, looking for all the world like a lost lamb.

"Little brother, you'd better get here soon," Syla whispered to herself, "Or Nene's not going to be the only one who won't forgive you."

"Ah, Leomund... thank-you for being so prompt."

The scientist smiled nervously, as he found himself standing before his benefactor's desk, a chair nowhere in sight.

"Well sir," Leomund responded, "I have always felt that promptness was essential, but I was wondering-"

Quincy did not allow Leomund to finish. "I've asked you here, to discuss a new project."

Leomund pressed his glasses back up on to the bridge of his nose. "I beg your pardon sir? A *new* project sir?"

"Yes. A real challenge. In fact, what I am about to propose has been done only twice before."

Leomund tried to look at Quincy, but could not hold the darkening gaze focused upon him, and instead began an idle scrutiny of his feet as he replied. "Really sir? That sounds... fascinating. But, well sir, I have been a little concerned about-"

"Yes? Concerned about what?"

Leomund thought carefully about his next words before speaking them. "Well sir, I realize that you have provided me with just about everything that any scientist could ever want in the way of materials, human resources, and technology. And I want to extend my gratitude to you for your generosity, as well as your boundless patience... but-"

It was then that Leomund saw that the former Genom chairman did not have his cane at his side. A quick glance about the room did not reveal the cane's current location.

"Yes Leomund? Is something wrong?"

"Ah... no sir! No, nothing at all," Leomund quickly replied. "Nothing is wrong, really. But, while I very much wish to respect your wish that no questions be asked about the ultimate purpose of this... " Leomund searched for the right word, "... this *research*, I am growing a bit concerned that-"

The former Genom chairman's dark gaze grew just a shade darker. "Yes?"

"Well sir, I am concerned that, under the current circumstances, the value of the research might be threatened."

Quincy's gaze lingered for a moment on the scientist before looking away. "Threatened... I see. How so?"

Leomund suddenly became aware of his increasing perspiration but did not dare attempt to wipe the moisture from his brow. "Well sir, threatened by the mishap at the military base, to be exact."

Quincy smiled again. "Ah. The injury."

Leomund nodded slowly. "Yes sir. If the police were to analyze the tissue of the finger carefully, they might be able to-"

"Nonsense Leomund! Don't concern yourself about such things! The police will find nothing that could lead them to us. You assured me of that yourself."

Leomund appeared to ponder the former chairman's words carefully before speaking again. "Hm. Well sir, I realize that you have a lot of faith in-"

"But you do not?" Quincy countered, his voice thick with growing impatience.

"No sir! I mean, yes sir, I do have faith." Leomund glanced about the room again, vainly searching for a chair. "I do have faith sir, but-"

"Leomund..." the former chairman slowly began. "Your lack of conviction is disheartening."

Leomund stood quietly, his thoughts drifting annoyingly between the conversation at hand and the thin glaze of sweat on his brow.

"After all that I have done for you," Quincy continued, an open wrinkled hand outstretched in a gesture of giving. "Limitless funding, a state-of-the-art research facility, highly skilled assistants, as well as access to Genom's original research data... I should think you might be a bit more grateful."

"Oh I am sir!" Leomund ejected. "As I said before, you've been incredibly generous, but the Police have advanced technology now that could find traces of-"

"I am not so old that I am unaware of the pace of technology!" Quincy erupted. "In fact, my friend, despite Genom's visible absence from the current market, the technology that the police are using now was purchased through one of Genom's many silent partners. I am well aware of what the police can and cannot do with their current technology."

Quincy abruptly rose from his chair with an ease that made Leomund flinch. "Enough talk about the police. I have something important to ask of you Leomund. Something radical. Something that will insure a smooth transition."

Leomund shifted his weight from his right foot to his left. "Transition sir?"

"Yes. From the old to the new."

Leomund shifted back to his right foot, noting the strange tone of his benefactor's voice as he said the word 'new'. "Eh... begging your pardon sir. I thought that was what we were doing."

Quincy turned to face Leomund, a whimsical smile on his face. "Oh, yes, we are. But this... is just the beginning."

The geneticist did not reply. He did not like the self-assured smile, nor did he like the cryptic way in which the former chairman was speaking. He shifted his weight back to his right foot and glanced at the door, before waiting to hear more.

Quincy continued, his voice taking on a daydream quality. "It's just the beginning Leomund. The beginning of a whole new landscape. What has been for so long, shall be cast out to make way for what is so much more deserving. What we do here will change everything. And this time, nothing, and no-one, can stop it."

Leomund looked around the room, trying to find something to focus on as Quincy finished speaking. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a small wooden box, on a table in the corner furthest away from him, which he recognized as the same box that the former chairman had tucked under his arm when he first arrived. The lid was open, a small, black, metallic, heart-shaped object peeking out from inside the box, bristling with hundreds of strands made of what looked like very thin stainless steel wire. In the dim light of this room, it seemed surprising that the object could shine as brightly as it did.

Suddenly Leomund did not want a chair.

Sylia was about to ask Nene if she wanted anything to eat, when the apartment door suddenly flew open. As she watched, Sylia saw the concern on Nene's face drain away in an instant, replaced fleetingly by a look of relief. Then, as if she were aware that she was being studied, Nene's eyes narrowed and her lips became pursed. Her darkening glare was focused firmly on the person who had just entered the room.

"Sorry I'm late Nene!" Mackie announced loudly, gasping for air as he flopped into a vacant chair. His currently whimsical demeanor quickly vanished as he locked eyes with Nene.

"Where have you been?!" Nene inquired, her voice filled with fire. "It's nine fourteen! NINE-FOUR-TEEN!"

Mackie was stunned into silence, despite the burning in his lungs incurred from a long climb up the stairs from the lower level. 'Must have been Linna and Priss in the elevator', he thought to himself. "I'm sorry Nene, but the elevator was busy and I had to--". He had hardly started the feeble plea when the sound of running water drew his attention to the kitchen. A quick glance revealed Sylia standing with her back to the lounge area, apparently oblivious to his presence. He was on his own this time.

"I'm... sorry Nene," the young mechanic began again, looking down at his feet, "You're right to be mad. I'm late, and I'm sorry, and there's no excuse." He paused for a moment, then looked up directly into Nene's eyes, searching vainly for any kind of hint as to her acceptance of his words before continuing. "But I was working on this new bike and I wanted to impress--"

"You're right Mackie Stingray!" Nene interrupted. "There is no excuse! If you are going to ask a girl to go out on a date, then you better show up on time or... or... you'll have to ask your stupid bike out if you ever want a date again!"

Mackie sat up, mouth agape, and nodded numbly.

"Now," Nene continued, her voice slowly climbing back down to a normal volume level, "If you'll excuse me, I need to use the bathroom. I'll be back... shortly."

Mackie slowly closed his mouth as he watched Nene walk down the hallway to the bathroom. He then turned towards the kitchen to see Sylia leaning against the kitchen counter, a towel in her hands and a hint of a smile on her face.

Mackie slumped back down in his chair. "Women."

V7-28 stared into the huge video monitor mounted on the wall of his new "office". Ghostly images flickered across the screen, flashes of pixelated static intermittently breaking the flow of the recorded drama. Several armored figures danced in and out of the dim light that struggled to grasp at each of the combatants, to reveal their unique identifying features. But the figures always moved too fast, never lingering, melding into one and other as the battle raged on. Until a new figure appeared, and a thin line of green laser light marked the end of the video recording.

A wrinkled hand fingered the remote control for the vid-screen, rewinding the recorded images to the point where the new armored figure joined the fray.

pause-

V7-28 continued to stare at the frozen image of the shadowy figure in the center of the screen, studying each and every pixel, memorizing the array of dots and lines, then writing the image to his mind. The wrinkled hand hovered over the remote control, shaking feebly, then finally pressed the 'stop' button, rendering the video screen blank. The recording continued to play in his mind, over and over and over...

"Find him," a voice hissed from the darkness of the office to four humanoid-shaped shadows standing in the doorway. "I will guide you to him."

One of the shadows responded with a sequence of electronic chirps then emitted a low growl, its glowing eyes shifting hue from a soft electric blue to a lava red. It flexed its right hand and fingers impatiently, like a great cat unsheathing its claws. But its left hand did not mimic its counterpart's actions, still tender and bearing a scar where one of its fingers had been severed by a laser weapon. Though the new finger would mend quickly by human standards, the scent of the human who had injured it would remain in its memory for a very long time.

"No, I want him alive," V7-28 replied firmly to the cyborg's emotional request. "Your future depends on it."

The four shadows stood in the doorway for a moment longer then moved down the hall towards the elevator, their metallic heels clicking on the tiled floor. The clicking continued for a few moments longer, then abruptly changed to the fleshy pad of human feet as a bright blue flash briefly illuminated the hallway.

Mackie waved good-bye to Syla as her red Mercedes 300SL merged into the traffic of the lamp lit street outside the Ladys633 building. He continued to stare thoughtfully after the car even after it had disappeared around a corner. This was it. Now he was really on his own. Well, except for--

"Mackie! How am I supposed to wear this?"

Mackie turned around to see Nene holding her helmet in her hands with a questioning look in her eyes.

"Huh?" he stammered. "What do you--"

"I mean," Nene finished his sentence, genuinely agitated, "How am I supposed to wear this when I spent over an hour on my hair?"

Mackie struggled with a reply, but his tongue seemed to have joined his brain in a general strike.

"You *do* like the way my hair looks, don't you?"

The young mechanic stared into Nene's emerald eyes and mumbled incoherently, thinking furiously of something to say, but all he could manage was a nervous "Uh yeah. Sure."

Nene's eyes narrowed angrily for a moment, then a look of frustration swept over her face as she pulled the helmet over her head unceremoniously with a sigh. "Really Mackie! Haven't you ever been on a date before? The *first* thing you do is compliment your date's hair! Honestly, you'd think this was your first time taking someone out! Well? Don't just stand there! We don't want to be late for the movie!"

Mackie continued staring at Nene for a moment longer as her words danced around in his head, threatening to form completed sentences. His knees were just starting to stop

shaking, and the butterflies in his stomach had settled into a somewhat rhythmic orbit. And suddenly, through all the chaotic sensations that his body seemed intent on bombarding him with, he saw her as she had intended him to see her. Beautiful, captivating and... and... full of surprises. He grinned as she hopped onto the back of his motorcycle, then turned to him and flashed a smile that made the butterflies scatter again. Maybe this night might just be okay after all, he thought to himself, as he swung his leg over the seat and Nene's arms clamped around his waist. Even if it was his first date.

With her arms wrapped tightly around Mackie's waist and her head resting on his back, Nene closed her eyes and felt the cool wind whip at her legs and hair. Despite a rocky start to the evening, everything seemed very right now. She opened her eyes again and peeked over Mackie's shoulder. A copper colored moon hung low in the sky, back-lighting a skyscraper strewn horizon and lending an orange glow to several thin streams of cloud making their way into darkness. The lights of the downtown core seemed somehow different now, almost new. She had driven on this same street herself several times, but it looked different now, familiar and yet strange and exciting at the same time. Blurred neon and fluorescent runes surrounded them, beckoning to them, embracing them, calling out to them to forget where they were. Nene sighed happily to herself and closed her eyes again, focusing only on the hypnotic hum of the bike's engine and the feel of her arms around Mackie's waist. This night was going to be perfect, even if it was her first date.

Part 19: BLAME IT ON THE MOON

The autumn moon continued to climb high into the night sky, shedding its coppery skin until it appeared as a silvery disk looking down on the glowing city. Though the moon was essentially acting as a huge mirror, reflecting the rays of the sun back toward the earth, the cold light showering down on the world below collided head on with the accumulated artificial glow of the city's street lights in a battle for supreme luminance well above the heads of the downtown MegaTokyo pedestrians and commuters. There, as on every night, the moon was soundlessly defeated, its struggle for control never even considered by the creatures that lived beyond its reach.

Outside the city and its far-reaching suburbs where the light pollution did not completely blind an observer, the moon's light blanketed the trees and hills like an early frost. Small animals that only ventured out under the protective cover of darkness found themselves exposed by the full moon to nocturnal hunters if they were foolish enough to leave their hiding places. On silent wings or by patient ambush, their demise would come swiftly. But as they lay dying, there was usually enough time left for a last glimpse skyward at their alleged betrayer; a bright circle of cold light shining down through the treetops. But even in death, the dying creatures never blamed themselves for their mistake. They always blamed the moon.

And then there were creatures that walked through the silver tipped trees, to begin their own hunt, neither unhindered nor unaided by the moon's revealing light. Four figures moved swiftly and silently through the low-lying fog, guided by a voice that emanated from inside the dark mountain they had left behind. Long shadows swept across the night, lost occasionally behind the trees, until finally the light from the city overcame the moon's glow. The hunters stepped across the terminator line... and merged with the city.

Nene looked over Mackie's shoulder as they wound their way through the downtown streets, then sighed happily at the sight that awaited her. Like a canvas that could not sit still for the painter, vivid neon colors shifted and faded all around them, while shadow-faced strangers passed each other on the sidewalk, their silhouettes dancing briefly in and out of the flickering lights. And above it all, vaguely resembling a lighthouse beacon far from any rocky shoreline, the full moon had risen higher into the sky until its leading edge had become tucked behind one of the taller buildings of the MegaTokyo skyline. Nene tapped her companion on the shoulder wanting to share the real time 'painting' with him.

"Mackie?" Nene's voice came over the helmet intercom clearly.

"Yeah?" Mackie replied, "Am I going too fast?"

Nene held her observation of the moon in check as she replied. "Too fast? No, not at all. Actually, I usually drive faster than this on my scooter--"

Mackie looked over his shoulder at Nene and grinned mischievously, stopping her in mid-sentence. "Oh really? Your scooter eh?"

"Mackie..." Nene began again, her voice sounding very serious this time.

"You asked for it," Mackie said under his breath.

Nene suddenly found herself tightening her grip around Mackie's waist as the bike shot forward with a powerful burst of speed. Within seconds they were passing cars that were already traveling over the speed limit.

"MACKIE!"

"OW!" Mackie throttled back abruptly then fumbled with the volume control of the intercom system. "Nene you don't have to yell! Sheesh!" A gentle punch to his side made Mackie pay attention. "What? What's wrong?"

Nene was silent for a long moment, causing Mackie to check the intercom's volume control again. But as he was about to turn it back up he heard Nene begin speaking in a very firm tone.

"Mackie... please. I want this night to be perfect..."

As Mackie responded by slowing the bike down to a legal pace, he felt Nene's arms wrap around his waist just a little tighter. The butterflies in his stomach that had seemed to settle down a bit on the drive into the city suddenly took flight again, as he focused on the very pleasant sensation of Nene's arms around him. He thought back to the advice his sister had given him the night before, about being considerate and thoughtful. But she had also told him to just be himself, to have fun and not to be too serious. Only now was he thinking that it had been odd for Syla to suggest that he not be too serious. As he turned the corner and began the onerous job of finding a parking spot, he felt the two approaches colliding in his head. To be serious or to be carefree? The butterflies flew on.

With the motorcycle finally parked and its alarm activated, Mackie turned to face Nene. She was smiling at him, and the sight of her smile triggered a sudden rush of new feelings through his entire body. It was as if he had never seen her smile before. Everything about her seemed different now, but he could not quite figure out why. She was wearing the same clothes she always wore, and her hair was basically the same as it always looked, but now, she looked... different.

As they made their way down the crowded sidewalk at a decidedly casual pace, Nene gently hooked Mackie's arm in hers. Mackie glanced uncomfortably at Nene for a moment, then returned her smile, the comforting sensation of her body next to his causing the noises of the city to momentarily dissolve around them. Suddenly it didn't seem to matter whether he should be serious or carefree. All he wanted was for this moment to last forever.

Back behind the greasy confines of Raven's Garage, Priss sat on top of a stack of old tires, while Linna leaned against the wall, both savoring a five-minute break from their "re-training" session. Priss stretched her arms above her head gingerly to test the newly induced ache in her muscles. Syla had been merciless, pressing the two frontline fighters through an incredibly demanding battery of tests and exercises as their first step back on to the road to getting back in to shape. It was very clear to the both of them, based on the lack of small talk and kidding around, that Syla felt that this new "boomer" threat was serious enough to warrant a return to their old training regimen. But despite Syla's 'orders', one member of the team was conspicuously absent.

"So what do you think they're doin', right this minute?" Priss asked in a subdued voice.

Linna's eyes drifted up to the strip of sky exposed to her between the garage and the building next to it, to see the full moon hanging in the sky almost directly over them. "Well, I'd say, right about now... that they are still trying to find a parking spot downtown."

Priss laughed, then stopped abruptly as her sore arm muscles made their temporarily forgotten state of anguish known again. "Yeah, parking is a bitch. But okay, so let's say they do find a parking spot. Then what?"

Linna grinned. "Ya know, this is just a guess, but I think that Mackie, being a perfect gentleman and all, would probably--"

"What!" Priss interrupted. "Gimmee a break! He's a pervert and you know it."

Linna frowned. "You don't think he'd treat Nene like a princess? He practically worships her. He just doesn't know what to do about it, that's all."

Priss smirked. "That's true. Poor kid may be wishing he were somewhere else right now. Eh, I know I'd like to be somewhere else right now."

Linna continued to stare up at the moon as Priss closed her eyes and began humming a song to herself. "Well, at least things will be getting back to normal," Linna offered, considering their renewed workout and training schedule.

Priss stopped humming and looked at Linna, a strange look, almost like sadness, in her eyes as she spoke, "With all the things that have happened in the last few days, I don't think things will ever be back to normal again."

Linna was about to reply to Priss's odd statement, when a red light above the door began to flash, signaling them that their break was over.

Upon seeing her two recruits return, Syla gestured silently to the chairs in the meeting lounge. She remained standing; her arms folded across her chest, as Priss and Linna took their seats. There was an odd moment of silence as Syla appeared to contemplate how to begin the meeting, her right hand now balled into a fist under her chin and her gaze fixed on a point on the floor. Priss was about to say something when Syla looked up and began to speak, her voice as clear and confident as always.

"First point," Syla began, "I think you'll both agree from your initial testing tonight that a new training schedule is required, and I expect you both to stick to it if you don't want to repeat our performance from the other night."

Syla easily read the looks of dismay on the faces of her re-trainees, but did not completely ignore their full meaning. "And yes, Nene will be expected to adhere to the schedule too, as will I."

Priss betrayed a slight grin at the announcement, to which Syla was quick to respond, with a very firm tone of voice. "And I expect you both to take this latest threat very seriously. If our performance the other night is any indicator, we were outmatched. And just one more mistake could have ended the life of a team member, perhaps even all four of us."

Linna looked over at Priss, who wasn't grinning now, and nodded.

"Next point," Syla continued. "I had just enough time earlier tonight to take another look at the data that Nene was able to obtain from the ADP's assessment of the severed

finger from one of the "boomers"--for lack of a better word--and I now have a strong feeling as to who may be responsible for creating them."

"Wow, that was fast," Linna said.

"You can compliment my computer," Sylia replied, then dimmed the lights in the conference room and activated a video monitor set in to the wall. An image of a middle-aged man appeared on the screen, balding, hook-nosed, and wearing glasses, which despite the wisdom of not judging a book by its cover, made the man look every bit a scientist.

"This is Doctor Leomund Sholtan, forty-two years old, former chief zoology professor at several universities during his recorded career, and once secretly employed by the government to conduct experiments into human slash animal hybrid DNA blending. He disappeared shortly after the project was shut down due to the details of the project becoming public knowledge."

"Now we're talkin'," Linna remarked as she studied the face on the monitor.

The Knight Saber's leader went on. "The government experiments were conducted under the code name Dark Matter, and the project was primarily funded by the military in an effort to create cyborg soldiers that combined human intelligence with animal reflexes and instinct. While the project was active, only one problem held them up from actually succeeding--"

"They couldn't teach them to pee in the litterbox?" Priss offered. Sylia ignored the comment and Linna's resulting snicker. "During the process of creating a hybrid being, the desired instinctual reactive functions from the animal DNA were somehow suppressed or missing, to such a degree that the resulting creatures were incapable of even the simplest thought processes required to survive."

"They sure seemed to be able to survive the other night," Linna stated, to which Priss grudgingly nodded a confirmation.

"Indeed they did," Sylia agreed. "Apparently Dr. Sholtan has been able to get around the problem somehow with his latest creations."

"But why would it have been a problem in the first place, if instinct is built-in to us?" Linna asked.

"Good question," Sylia smiled. "Scientists and spiritualists still debate about what instinct really is. Mark Twain wrote quite some time ago, that instinct is merely petrified thought; solidified and made inanimate by habit; thought which was once alive and awake, but it becomes unconscious--walks in its sleep, so to speak."

Priss rolled her eyes. "Mark who?"

Linna attempted to break down what she had just heard. "Okay, so you're saying that instinct is based upon thoughts we have buried in our subconscious over a long period of time and they become second nature?"

Sylia shook her head. "No, that's what Mark Twain believed instinct to be. On the other hand, other more spiritual-minded debaters have raised the concept of instinct to a level parallel with the soul, citing our inability to isolate it within the brain. Either way, one thing we do know is that Dr. Sholtan has somehow got around his problem and was able to infuse the hybrid beings with instinctive reactions, which would seem to suggest it was a chemical problem."

"Which means," Linna concluded with a positive tone of voice, "that we may be able to shut them down!"

"Possibly," Sylia cautioned, her reply neither enthusiastic nor pessimistic.

Priss had a thoughtful look on her face. "So who is financing this guy then? This certainly doesn't appear to be the kind of thing he would have whipped up with a science lab kit on the weekend."

Sylia resumed her thoughtful pose witnessed minutes earlier, as she answered. "I've been thinking a lot about that, and though I'm not one hundred percent sure, considering the Genom connection we discussed earlier this evening, I believe even stronger now that an ex-employee from Genom must be involved. The structuring of the epidermal layer, the blood components, the overall structural design of the finger itself--all Genom ideas used before, but this time with more successful results."

Priss and Linna fell silent as Sylia readied another image on the monitor. "Next-- I haven't had enough time to really study the combative techniques of our new opponents in any kind of detail. But from what little I have seen so far, I think it's time we upgraded the hard suits to deal with the problems that have been exposed by this new threat, and thanks to General Reeves as of ten twenty-three this evening, we now have approximately twenty million to spend. As always ladies, suggestions are welcome, but let's not get too extravagant. Think carefully about what you might need to better prepare ourselves for our next encounter with these new boomers. Think specifically about the problems we ran into and how to solve them."

"Okay. Finally, this--" Sylia pointed again to the video monitor, on to which the image had changed yet again, "--is Blackie training here the night before." Both Priss and Linna raised their eyebrows a little at the freeze-frame image of Blackie inside the familiar confines of the simulation room, his right arm raised to block an attack by the much-hated translucent pink hol-opponent. Sylia pressed another keypad on the side of the monitor and the frozen image came to life. A few seconds later, Priss began to frown, while Linna placed both hands over her mouth in an attempt to muffle the whispered word, "woah".

"I can see you've gathered quite quickly," Sylia continued, as she walked slowly around the conference table, "that he has more than a rudimentary understanding of the basic hand-to-hand skills necessary to participate in combat with a skilled non-human opponent. He has combined several martial techniques with more conventional fighting styles, and though he appears quite capable, if you observe more closely, the result is actually often crude and inefficient."

Linna and Priss looked at each other, mirroring a puzzled look as their leader's words started to sound like she was leading up to something.

Sylia paused the video playback, and stood with her arms folded across her chest for a moment, the lapse of time enough to indicate quite clearly that she was weighing out the various ways in which to say her next words. "I... would like to test Blackie further. I am considering asking him to join the Knight Sabers."

Priss stared hard at Sylia, wondering if she had heard her right. Immediately, she felt there was something wrong with the idea. But before she could open her mouth to attempt to articulate a protest Sylia raised her hand. "Temporarily, of course."

The room fell silent. Sylia looked back and forth from Priss to Linna, trying to gauge their reactions, but other than a slight frown from Priss, the announcement appeared to have been accepted.

Linna said nothing, as she looked at Syla, then to the frozen image on the video monitor, and then back at Syla. One question was on her lips, but there was something holding her back from asking. One more glance at the monitor had almost inspired her enough to speak, but Priss stood up from her chair and the very question on Linna's mind was given a voice.

"Why, Syla?" Priss began, her words low and somewhat demanding in tone. "Why ask him to join? Sure, we got our butts kicked, but we can take these things if we train hard and get our shit together. And hell, if we upgrade the hardsuits, then--"

Syla began to reply, her voice quiet by comparison, yet confident. "I think I understand your resistance to the idea Priss, but I think he could make the difference between a longer drawn-out conflict and a swift decisive retirement."

Priss turned away from Syla to stare out into the simulator area, her left hand absent-mindedly stroking her long dark hair back as she attempted to assess her feelings and her reasoning. Their defeat at the military base was definitely not something she wanted to repeat, and the next time they faced these strange boomers, she wanted to be as prepared as possible. But the idea of someone else being brought into the Knight Sabers just seemed wrong, like the balance would be off, like a fifth wheel. She turned back around to respond, this time her frustration very visible to both Linna and Syla. "You've never asked our opinions before on matters like this Syla, and I'm not sure you're even asking for them now, but even if you aren't, I still gotta say I think this would be wrong for the Knight Sabers. Absolutely wrong."

Syla slowly sat down at the table, and then leaned back in her chair with a thoughtful look. "Okay Priss. You're right. I haven't asked your opinions before, and you are also correct in that I wasn't asking for them tonight. But since you obviously feel strongly about this, I'd like to hear why you think this would be wrong for the Knight Sabers."

Linna shifted uneasily in her chair, and looked to Priss, as the drone of the waiting machinery outside invaded the room.

"I'll tell you why it's wrong," Priss began, looking straight at Syla as she spoke. "Because he isn't ready for this, and he never will be."

"You saw him fight Priss. He made a difference."

"I saw him distract them," Priss countered. "That's what I saw. And okay, maybe he managed to hurt one of them when we all failed, but they left, Syla. They left, and we didn't get to finish the fight, and I can tell you, that if we had finished the fight, Blackie would have gotten hurt. Big time."

Syla leaned forward in her chair to rest her elbows on the tabletop. "Why would he have gotten hurt Priss? He seemed quite capable of defending himself, and the testing shows--"

"An unfinished fight and simulations don't prove shit Syla!" Priss shouted back. "He's untrained and reckless! That laser sword of his could have hit one of us and then Leon might be trying to get DNA strands from one of *our* fingers, or maybe an arm or a leg!"

Syla spoke calmly, her voice now betraying a hint of concern. "Priss, I've analyzed his abilities, and I don't see the recklessness you are talking about. On the contrary, he seems quite adept with the weapon. But to be fair, he certainly would need training to address the areas where he is inefficient, but I don't think it would take very long to get him up to speed. No longer than it took you. And you were pretty reckless yourself once, if you recall."

The feeling in Priss's gut just seemed to expand with each and every rational defense that Sylia offered. It wasn't something she could explain properly but she had never been good with words anyway. It was just something that she felt, like something bad could happen. "Sylia, I can't properly explain why I think this would be wrong for us. I don't have your vocabulary I guess. But there have always been four of us, and there should only be four of us. Bringing in someone from outside is a big risk--"

Sylia interrupted, her voice still calm, "Yes Priss there would be risks, but I intend to proceed with just as much caution as I exercised when I hired you and Linna and Nene. Blackie is still someone we just met, and I never completely trust anyone until I've known him or her for a good long while. You should know that by now."

The words "I never completely trust anyone" seemed to catch in Priss's mind as she sat down in defeat, but the feeling that this was a terrible mistake continued to overwhelm her. She glanced up from shadowed eyes to glare at the frozen image of Blackie on the monitor and the feelings inside her intensified. He would be at risk. In harm's way. And if something went wrong, he could be killed. Though she cared very deeply for her friends, if Blackie were to die... it was a loss she didn't want to face again.

"Perhaps Priss," Sylia suddenly said, "your opinion on this matter is not based solely on your assessment of Blackie's technical abilities."

Linna sat back a little further in her seat.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Priss shot back. "What else would I be basing my opinion on?"

"Emotions."

"What? This has nothing to do with--"

"I think it has everything to do with it Priss," Sylia replied calmly. "In fact, I think I know what you're really thinking, and if that's the way you feel, then your protest has been noted, and I will take it into consideration when I make the final decision. But I suggest you rethink your motives. They could be dangerous to *you*."

Priss gritted her teeth, then quickly stood up and placed her hands on the table, leaning over to make her point. "Sylia, if you ask him to join, then you'll be back to four the next day. This is just wrong."

"I see. Thank-you Priss, for your opinion on this matter," Sylia shot back, her voice now cold and obligatory.

Priss looked at Sylia for a moment longer then stalked out of the room, leaving the door open behind her.

Linna looked at the open door for a moment, then looked back to offer her own opinion on the idea of "hiring" Blackie, only to find Sylia gazing up at the video monitor. As they both watched silently, the video of Blackie's assault on the hol-opponent resumed, concluding with a complicated but haphazard looking series of punches and kicks that more than defeated the translucent blob. And as the video screen went black, Linna thought she saw a smile form on Sylia's face.

"Thank-you for seeing me at this late hour. I have been thinking about our previous discussion and I thought that perhaps we might have a little more to discuss. Please Leomund, have a seat."

The scientist hesitated at the doorway to look about the spacious and brightly lit examination room before finally taking the seat offered to him by Quincy. Unable to get completely comfortable, Leomund shifted in the seat as the elderly man walked slowly towards one of the glass windows.

"I must start off by telling you Leomund," Quincy began, his back to the scientist, "that I am quite pleased at what you have been able to accomplish so far on your own."

Leomund suddenly sat very still, contemplating Quincy's words for a moment before responding. "Uh, well, thank-you sir. But I could not have achieved any of this without-"

"Yes of course Leomund," the former Genom chairman nodded as he interrupted. "Of course. But it takes a man of vision to make a project like this actually come to life."

Leomund did not immediately reply, feeling more than a little awkward, as he could not quite agree with his benefactor's observation. He had never considered himself a man of vision before, especially since all of his past projects had always been focused on exploring what had already been discovered; a mysterious code that had been around for millions of years. Though this code had primarily been altered and shaped by his former colleagues for the betterment of the future of humankind, Leomund's experiments had always delved into the alteration of DNA, to somehow form a hybrid of species that could borrow the best physical and behavioral characteristics of each other. To take what nature had divided, and to put it together. This hardly seemed to him the idea of a visionary. In fact, he often wondered why no one had ever considered the possibilities before.

"Your silence is telling, my friend."

Leomund broke away from his thoughts to find his benefactor looking directly at him now, as if waiting for a response. "Oh. Well, perhaps... perhaps I am finding it amusing to be considered a visionary, considering so much of what I do and have done, has been about altering the past."

Quincy turned back to the window, betraying a slight smile to his chief scientist in the process. With an intentionally dramatic tone of voice, he replied, "Or perhaps you can not see the trees for the forest Leomund."

The scientist's own smile vanished as quickly as it had arrived. "The trees sir?"

Quincy turned back quickly to face Leomund, the depth in his voice still very apparent. "The trees. The trees, Leomund. Someday they will be all around us, and you will be responsible for their being planted."

"Oh! I see what you mean sir," Leomund suddenly said, laughing nervously. "I thought you meant something else. I see now..."

"You do eh?"

Quincy moved away from the window to confront the man seated before him. Without warning, Quincy tore open the front of his jacket and shirt to reveal his bare chest. Leomund instinctively leaned back in his chair, surprised at what he saw, but simultaneously fascinated by the geometric 'scars' on his benefactor's chest area. "Tell me what you see now Leomund."

Leomund found it difficult to reply as he continued to stare. "You're... you're an... an android! But, why--"

"The why does not concern you Leomund," Quincy responded, as he buttoned his shirt back up. "But the how, will concern you a great deal."

Leomund shrank back a little further in his chair, now wishing he hadn't sat down in the first place.

Mackie put down his cup of tea and smiled as he looked across the table at Nene while she was focused on draining the rest of her chocolate milkshake. So far the evening had been perfect. No debates as to which movie to see, and no arguing over where to eat afterwards. And now here they were, in a fancy restaurant overlooking the moonlit bay, with a single candle on the table to lend romantic warmth. The meal had been excellent. Everything just seemed perfect, the way Nene had wanted it. And now that the night was nearing a close, one question remained to be asked.

"Nene?"

The redhead finally released the straw. "Ah! That was great! I love milkshakes! Sorry I didn't save any for you. NOT! Ha!"

Mackie smiled again as Nene giggled. "That's okay, I'm pretty stuffed anyway. But I was wondering..."

"Yah?" Nene replied, looking around the restaurant for the waitress in contemplation of ordering a second milkshake.

"Well, I was wondering--have you ever... well, have you ever..."

Nene dropped her search for a waitress to look at the stammering young man across the table from her. "Mackie, Are you okay? You look like you just swallowed a spoonful of wasabi or something."

Mackie muttered to himself that he felt like maybe he had, then spoke up in answer to Nene's puzzled look. "Um, well, I was just wondering if you have ever... well, you know..."

"Ever what?" Nene blinked as she tried to figure out where Mackie was going with the question.

"Um, geez... Okay, have you ever--" Mackie stopped himself, feeling that he was on uncertain ground but also driven by curiosity about something he had wondered since the day he had met her. And after a moment of considering the consequences, he looked directly into Nene's eyes. "Nene... have you ever--"

Before he could finish the sentence, Nene's eyes widened in sudden recognition. Her hands gripped the edge of the table and her cheeks went red. And as Mackie filled with a sudden hope that he wouldn't have to finish the question, Nene picked up her water glass and tossed it's contents into his face with a loud splash.

"Mackie! How could you even THINK of asking me that!?" Nene exploded.

Mackie spluttered, still reeling from the shock. He couldn't even think, let alone reply. The sound of water dripping onto carpet reached his ears as he attempted to comprehend what had just happened. With his hair soaking and his bangs hanging down over his eyes he tried to speak. "Nene! What?! What did I--"

Strangely, there was no response. Mackie brushed the wet hair out of his face with his hand in time to see that the seat across the table was empty now. He frantically scanned the room to find Nene already marching towards the cashier's desk.

"Nene! WAIT!" Mackie yelled across the room, drawing even more stares from other restaurant patrons. He watched in horror as Nene quickly withdrew some money from her

handbag and handed it to the cashier, then very quickly disappeared through the restaurant's front foyer without waiting for the change.

At a seemingly eternal rate of fifteen degrees an hour, long rays of pale moonlight silently scanned the floor of Linna's bedroom through the wide balcony glass doors. At one end of the room, a muted video display was showing a very old black and white movie. At the other end, two figures were making love on the bed, their current state of undress made only a little uncertain by the tangle of sheets and pillows.

As the moon's probing light continued to shine into the bedroom, the two lovers eventually tired, oblivious to the silent witness to the event. Amid giggles and mock cries of protest, one of the figures lit a cigarette while his partner attempted to find her nightshirt among the laundry debris field beside the bed.

Leon took a long drag on his cigarette, then exhaled suddenly as Linna leaned over and tickled his stomach. He smiled and playfully grabbed her hand, stopping her momentarily from any further teasing. But no sooner had he detained her left hand, than her right hand reached over to pick up where its counterpart had left off.

"Don't make me get out the handcuffs," Leon warned in a sarcastic tone.

"Oh you always tease me," Linna replied, a smug look on her face.

They both grinned as Linna hopped off the bed and continued her search for something to wear.

"You know," Leon spoke in a louder than normal voice, as he studied his cigarette, "there are really only two times I enjoy a smoke."

Linna lifted a few items of clothing from the floor and eyed them briefly before pitching them over her shoulder. "Oh yeah? And what two times would they be?"

Leon paused before replying, "Well, after sex, for one."

Linna gave up her search. "I see. And does it matter how good the sex was? Or will sex with anybody warrant a smoke?"

Leon did not betray a smile as he replied. "Oh, it has to be with someone who is really good, of course."

"I see," Linna responded. "And so who, in your very long and storied past, has ever warranted the honorary 'after-sex' cigarette then?"

Leon tapped his smoke in the ashtray beside the bed and then pretended to think very carefully about his answer.

"Oh give me a break!" Linna yelled, tossing a pillow at Leon, who somehow managed to keep his cigarette between his fingers while fending off the feather-down attack.

"Hey, like you said, I have a long and storied past," Leon said with a deadpan look before launching the pillow back at Linna.

"Okay, fine then," Linna acquiesced. "Of the many, many exploits from your past, that have been worthy of an after-sex smoke, who would you say was the best?"

Leon took another drag on his smoke, and then lodged the cigarette into a groove in the ashtray beside the bed, acutely aware that he was now locked onto for a pillow attack, and that his answer to the question held his fate in the balance. After a short pause he began to mull over the question out loud. "Hmm, ya know... I'd have to say..."

The pillow was raised a few more inches, telegraphing Linna's intent to mortally wound Leon if he should answer incorrectly.

Leon raised an eyebrow before continuing. "I would have to say... yeah, I would have to go with... Daley."

Linna shrieked. "WHAT?!"

The pillow descended onto Leon's head with a loud WHUMP. From under the pillow, muffled laughter signaled that Leon had somehow managed to survive the attack. But as he peeked out from behind the pillow that had hit him, a barrage of the remaining pillows descended, along with whatever pieces of clothing were at hand, followed by a series of combination tickle-jabs by the not-so-angry dancer.

"Alright, alright!" Leon protested to the woman now astride his waist, his hands pinned back beside his head by her surprisingly strong arms. "You're the best! You're the best, baby."

Linna abruptly checked her assault to stare down into Leon's eyes, his arms now upraised as if to fend off a sneak attack, then smiled. "That's better. But you said there were two times that you enjoy a smoke. What's the second one?"

Leon gently took Linna's hands in his, his reply sounding far more serious than their conversation thus far. "Well, this is gonna sound strange..."

Linna smirked. "Go on."

Leon looked away from Linna, out the glass doors and out into the night. "Well, right after we used to knock off a couple of rogue boomers, my old partner and I used to light up. It was like a ritual ya know?"

Linna had never met Jeena Malso, but she had heard enough of Leon's stories about her to know that his former ADP partner had left a definite impression on him. "Yeah, I remember you telling me. Makes you kinda feel like, if you have a ritual, that you'll be alright the next time you have to face trouble, right?"

"Yeah, kinda like that," Leon agreed. "At least it seemed to work back then."

An uncomfortable silence descended as Leon alluded to Jeena's death. But it was Leon that eventually broke the silence. "You guys have a ritual like that?"

Linna shook her head. "No, Sylia has only one superstition, and that is that there is no such thing as superstitions."

Leon grinned. "Smart woman."

Linna nodded, a thoughtful look evolving in her eyes. "By the way," she began as she slid off of Leon's stomach to lay next to him, "I have been thinking about your 'request' you made the other day."

Leon reached over and dislodged his cigarette from the ashtray and took a quick drag. "Oh yeah?"

Linna nodded again. "Yeah. And I think I'm going to tell Sylia that I'm resigning from the Knight Sabers when this is all over."

The uncomfortable silence returned, and again it was Leon that broke it. "Wow. I mean, I'm glad to hear you say that, but it just seems so--"

"Sudden?" Linna offered.

Leon nodded, now staring into Linna's eyes as if searching for something.

Linna grabbed the cigarette from Leon and took a quick puff, then handed it back. "Well after the workout Sylia put Priss and I through tonight, I now have **two** reasons to think about quitting the Knight Sabers. And I used to really like working out too."

Leon suddenly looked amazed. "She had you working out tonight? Serious?"

Linna smiled. "You couldn't tell? Thanks for the compliment. I can always use more of those hon."

Leon shook his head, amazed at Linna's never-ending energy. "Any time."

Linna continued, her smile fading, "Seriously though, I've never really thought much about *not* being a part of the Knight Sabers before. I mean, after Sylia hired me, I thought the dancing career was over, and that being a Knight Saber was my new career."

Leon gave a puzzled look. "Really? A career?"

Linna nodded again, her black hair shining in the dim light as it shook, a phenomenon that had captured Leon's attention the first time he had seen her without a hard suit on. She grinned herself as she caught Leon smiling at her, wondering what he was smiling at.

"What is it?"

Leon took another drag on his smoke and said nothing, the grin still firmly planted on his face. Linna shot him a look that said he hadn't quite got away with whatever it was he was trying to get away with.

"Well, speaking of weird secrets," Linna continued, "Sylia was acting kinda strange tonight."

"You mean more than usual right?" Leon queried with no attempt made to hide any sarcasm.

"Kinda. She was just... different. I mean, I've become used to her acting mysteriously most of the time, but this was... it was something else altogether."

Leon was now listening carefully to Linna as she spoke.

"It was like, I don't know, it was like she was thinking about stuff that I don't want to know about."

Leon continued to watch Linna as she spoke. He had always wondered about Sylia Stingray. What her real motives were. Why she hadn't gone to the police when she found out who had murdered her father. He had lotsa questions about that one. But when it became clear to Sylia that he had learned that Priss was part of the Knight Sabers, she had requested a meeting with him. The meeting was very brief, with Sylia simply requesting that Leon keep Priss's identity secret as well as her own, to which he readily agreed. He even went so far as to offer his assistance whenever he could, to which she had seemed very grateful. But there was still something odd about her that he had not been able to quite figure out. Something in her mannerisms. Something in the way she talked. He wasn't sure. But usually his hunches about people ended up being correct, which was one reason why he wanted Linna out of the Knight Sabers. And the sooner, the better.

"You can find something else hon." Leon eventually stated in a clear tone, oblivious to anything Linna had just said. "Hell, maybe you should think about dancing again. You're still in great shape."

"Not as great as Daley though, right?"

Leon laughed.

Mackie raced down the stone steps in front of the restaurant and quickly scanned up and down the sidewalks. At first it had seemed that Nene had vanished, then out of the corner of his eye he spotted her across the street, as she was about to step into a taxi.

Without looking both ways, Mackie bolted directly into the traffic, narrowly avoiding an accident in the process as his still dripping wet hair hindered his sight. But just as he managed to reach the other side, he saw the taxi move away from the curb and quickly enter the flow of traffic away from him.

Leomund fought for a while to focus his weary eyes at the wall of his office, contemplating his benefactor's mysterious origins and motives, before noticing the odd square of dim light that was very slowly tracing an arc across the wall to his right. He turned in his chair to find the source of the light, only to be momentarily blinded by the sight of the full moon framed in the tiny skylight window overhead. The scientist blinked a couple of times, then removed his glasses to rub his tired eyes.

As he waited for his eyes to re-adjust, Leomund absent-mindedly cleaned his glasses and returned to his thoughts about his benefactor's plans. It seemed that no matter which way he looked at the situation, the real purpose for the cyborgs still eluded him. When he had been dealing with the anonymous investor, he had originally guessed that the cyborgs would be sold to countries looking for an edge to add to their covert military forces, or perhaps even to be trained as mercenaries for an independent group willing to pay. And the anonymous investor's request that the cyborgs be field-tested against the Knight Sabers seemed to backup his initial theories. But now, after seeing this new device, this OMS as he called it, and learning that Quincy was in fact an android, well, all bets as to what the no-longer-anonymous investor wanted to do with the cyborgs, were off.

But through all the confusion Leomund was sure of one thing; if Quincy's plans became much more convoluted, it would be time to leave the project, and fast. Things had already begun to feel--what was the word he was looking for--different. The whole process of creating the cyborgs had been very rewarding, and very inspiring, but now he found his interest in their continuing evolution to be waning. And he felt very strongly that his benefactor's recent 'revelations' had everything to do with his suspicion.

"Be wary Leo," he said to himself, as he finished cleaning his glasses and placed them on his face, only to see that the moon's light was now shining down directly on him.

"Help me... please."

Absolute darkness. And the odd sensation of something or someone close, but in what direction?

"Who are you?"

"Please, I don't have much time... I need you."

This time the child-like voice seemed to come from the side. He tried to turn towards the speaker, but it was like trying to roll over quickly in a pool of water. Something was holding him, grasping at him. Preventing him from seeing.

"Need me for what? I don't understand."

"There's no time for that now... please, help me..."

No time. But here it seemed like they had all the time in the world.

"Why is there no time? We have forever here--"

"I do not. My time is running out, and only you can save me..."

This time the voice came from ahead of him. And the speaker's child-like tone of voice seemed to suddenly get much older and weaker...

"Tell me who you are first, and maybe I can--"

"The pain! Please make the pain go away! I can't stand it any longer..."

Now the voice was above him, and it was **moving** as the last words echoed off of unseen walls.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me who you are and why you--"

"It will be too late by then! Please... I need your help... now..."

Now the speaker was moving all around him as they spoke, echoes continuing to bounce off of unseen walls throwing off his ability to judge his location. He fought a growing dizziness, and the unmistakable feeling of losing control.

"I can't help you like this! I need to know who you--"

"Please... I don't have much time left. You are the only one... the only one."

His control was slipping further and further away. He could no longer tell which was up and which was down. Echoes of his voice now seemed to bounce off of walls directly ahead of him then suddenly shift as if he had walked through the wall. All he wanted to do now, was escape, but the harder he tried, the more frustrated he became.

"Hurry, I'm running out of time. I need you..."

"No. No... Where am I? I can't... I need to get out of-- I... I can't... I CAN'T! WHO ARE YOU?!"

Suddenly Blackie was wide-awake, rising from the warm bed sheets to rest on his elbows. He didn't dare breathe, his ears straining to pick up any sounds to remind him that he was really awake. Finally, the lights of a car passing by swept across the ceiling,

the reflected headlight beams split into thin slivers by the blinds. Then the sound of tires slapping at a puddle in the street came to him through an open window. The gentle swishing of a car driving by soon faded, and he was left with the unique quiet that only a city can make very early in the morning.

Blackie took a long breath and fell back against his pillow to stare at the ceiling. As the thin layer of sweat on his arms and legs began to dry, he listened to the muffled thumping of his heart in his ears. The pounding slowly subsided as the fear was pushed aside, and the words in his dream came back to him. The voice had been very faint, but it seemed so real, and so desperate. Had it really been just a dream? He'd heard voices before; vague snippets of broken thoughts that would come to him and then fade like racing shadows of clouds, but they had never come to him in his dreams. And he was usually very good at remembering his dreams the next morning. But it was strange, how he could remember them right after waking up, but an hour later he couldn't remember anything. Gathering the bed sheets around him, he turned on his side and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later, his eyes were open again, his thoughts much too busy to allow him to sleep again. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he sat up and stared out into the darkness. His gaze slowly wandered over the familiar details of his room, cloaked in a gloom that was made incomplete only by the weak glow of the moon. His eyes continued to wander over the faintly visible details of his apartment, pausing for a long while on his guitar.

The cool night air drifting in through the open window suddenly made its presence known on his exposed feet, causing him to draw his knees to his chest and to tighten the sheets around him just a little more. As he closed his eyes one more time, the afterimage of his guitar still fresh in his mind, he spoke out loud to no-one but the darkness, "Who are you?"

V7-28's eyes opened slowly. Sweat streamed down the brow of his artificial body's forehead from the effort of his interrogation. His aged hands gradually released the tight grip on the arms of the chair he was seated in, until he felt the nervous system activity of his 'shell' diminish enough to truly relax.

Making contact with the target had taken a toll on his power supply. Staying focused long enough to maintain the link had been more of a task than he had initially estimated, and the subject had a strong resistance to opening its thoughts. But the expenditure of energy had been worth it. The subject's sub-conscious capabilities were very strong, much stronger than he could have anticipated. V7-28 smiled.

Most importantly though, he had obtained a valuable clue about his subject's whereabouts, albeit an odd clue considering the full capabilities of the subject of his scrutiny.

V7-28 closed his eyes again, the creases on his artificial body's brow becoming furrowed once more, as he channeled his energy into sending an image to his four 'followers'. The image had suddenly appeared in his subject's sub-conscious, moments before the link had been broken, and at first V7-28 had not been able to discern the object centered in the image. But after a quick search through his internal database, the object was easily identified...

An electric guitar.

Mackie threw his motorcycle helmet down on his bedroom floor in disgust, not caring if he might wake up his sister. Grabbing a towel from the adjoining bathroom, he shook his head a few times and then proceeded to dry his hair. The night was a disaster. And he still didn't know what had happened to spoil it. It was a simple question he had tried to ask, and yet Nene seemed to think there was something very wrong with asking it. Perhaps if she had just let him finish the--

Mackie suddenly stopped what he was doing and stared at himself in the bathroom mirror. She hadn't let him finish the question...

Mackie's fingers trembled as he dialed the numbers. 'Please pick it up' he thought frantically to himself. The butterflies in his stomach suddenly took flight again.

"Mackie, if this is you, I don't want to talk to you!" Nene answered without knowing who was on the other end of the line. The NO VIDEO light on Mackie's vidphone console was blinking.

Mackie ignored the command. "Nene, wait! Don't hang up! Please! Let me explain!"

"There's nothing to explain you pervert! How could you ask me a question like that?! You pig!"

"Nene!" Mackie shouted in desperation. His heart was pounding, and though his hair was mostly dry now, he felt an odd coldness sweeping over him, as the conversation seemed headed for a quick finish. "Please listen to me Nene! I just wanted to ask you--"

"I KNOW WHAT YOU WANTED TO ASK YOU PERVERT!"

"No Nene! You DON'T KNOW what I was going to ask for crying out loud! Look, I was going to ask you--"

"DON'T SAY IT MACKIE! OR I'LL--"

--if you've ever been kissed before!"

"GAH! MACKIE, I TOLD YOU NOT TO-- ... wha?"

The line was silent as Mackie held his breath.

"Did you say, kissed?" Nene finally responded.

Mackie stared at the phone in amazement, still unable to breathe.

"Mackie? Are you still there?"

"I'm here. And yes, I said kissed," Mackie nervously replied, as the implications of the question became real to him. He walked toward his bedroom window with the vidphone receiver pressed firmly against his cheek and he suddenly became aware of the strong grip he had on the phone.

"Mackie?" Nene finally said, the tone of her voice now very different from when she had answered the call.

"Yes Nene?"

"Um there was something I wanted to ask you tonight too."

Mackie smiled to himself and looked out the window. The full moon had reached its zenith and was now descending towards the horizon, but its glow had not diminished. "What's that Nene?"

Nene got up from her bed and made her way to her bedroom window with the vidphone receiver still firmly in hand. With her free hand she drew back the curtains and looked out, then sighed. "Mackie, can you see the moon where you are?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm looking at it right now." Mackie waited for Nene to say something, the odd silence between their replies strangely reassuring, perhaps because he somehow knew she was still there.

"I can't see it from here. Can you put it on video for me Mackie?"

Mackie turned to look at his vidphone console and saw that the NO VIDEO light was no longer blinking. "Sure Nene. Hang on a sec."

Nene waited patiently, listening to the sound of Mackie moving furniture around in his room. She stared down at the vidphone's screen, pondering everything that had happened tonight. Everything had been so perfect, so right. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have thought he had meant something else? It didn't matter now, she told herself and smiled, as the screen on her vidphone came to life, and there in the center of the monitor was the full moon overlooking the city.

"Can you see it okay Nene?"

Nene sighed contentedly, a strange new feeling reaching deep into her heart. "It's perfect Mackie. Just perfect."

Mackie smiled to himself, as the display on his vidphone abruptly came to life and he saw Nene's face. The tingling in his stomach returned, but this time it felt good.

"Oh, and Mackie?"

"Yeah Nene?"

"The answer is no."

Nene waited for Mackie to reply then frowned, as the audio part of their connection seemed to suddenly break up.

"Mackie?"

Nene listened to Mackie trying frantically to pick up his dropped receiver. "Uh, I'm here Nene," he finally said.

"Mackie... did you drop the phone?"

"Uh, yeah, it just kinda slipped. Um, by the way Nene..."

"Yes Mackie?" Nene gazed at the image of the moon again.

"Me neither."

Mackie laughed to himself as his vidphone's display clearly showed Nene dropping her phone.

It was a dead night at the Hot Legs. So dead in fact, that the air inside the bar was almost as clear as the air outside. Two inebriated bikers were exchanging friendly put-downs while shooting pool, as an equally drunk couple sat hunched over a table located near the darkened stage, the woman giggling every so often as her male companion leaned over her with a smug grin on his face. The bartender had long since finished wiping glasses, and was seated on a barstool reading a dog-eared paperback. Clarence had temporarily relinquished his bouncer's duties to begin putting chairs up on tables when the drunken woman's giggling suddenly seemed conspicuously absent. Clarence turned towards where the couple was sitting to see them staring back past him at something. The muscular bouncer instinctively turned to see what they were looking at.

The front doorway was sharply illuminated in contrast to the rest of the dim interior of the nightclub, and standing beneath the bright light streaming down from the ceiling were

four figures, two women and two men, standing perfectly still and looking straight ahead. Even with their faces masked by shadow, Clarence immediately knew these were not regulars, and from their fixed stance, he knew they were probably looking for trouble.

Clarence quickly glanced at the bartender, who was no longer reading, and gave a quick nod. The bartender carefully placed a coaster between the pages of his novel and then slowly put the book down on the bar. He crossed his thick arms and watched Clarence approach the front doorway, then stole a quick glance at the baseball bat under the bar, and then another at the semi-automatic weapon next to the bat. The bat had several nicks and gouges on it from a long history of service in the name of peaceful imbibing while the gunmetal still shined like brand new. The bartender then looked back to the confrontation at the front of the bar, wondering if he would have to use the bat.

The three-hundred pound bouncer casually put his right leg up on the lowest step leading down into the bar and spoke, his voice edged with an authority that usually settled any questions as to who was really in control of a situation, "We're just about to close. C'mon back tomorrow night."

One of the two men grinned ever so slightly and his eyes narrowed as he looked down at Clarence. When he finally spoke, Clarence shivered, as the strange tone of this man's voice grated on his ears, the words sounding synthetic and menacing all at once. "Will *he* be here tomorrow night?"

The bouncer raised an eyebrow at the question, wondering just who the strange man was referring to, and then he caught one of the women behind the two men pointing at a picture on the wall. A picture of Blackie and his band Nexus.

Clarence scratched at his stubbled chin, then chuckled at the melodramatic tension surrounding the innocent question. "Nah, he won't be playing until the weekend. C'mon back Friday night."

Through the shadows, Clarence could see the answer register on the man's face as being what he had wanted to hear. But before he could say anything further the four figures turned in an oddly synchronized arc away from the puzzled bouncer and were gone, fading away from the bright light of the doorway to disappear out into the darkness of street outside.

The bartender breathed a loud sigh of relief, then picked up his book and tossed the coaster onto the bar.

After seeing the bikers and the couple out, Clarence locked the front door. He turned and stepped slowly down the front steps to face the bartender. "That sure was some weird shit. I hope they *don't* come back Friday."

The bartender snorted, not looking up from his novel as he responded, "Yeah right. You're bored out of your skull. You would have loved to kick some ass tonight."

Clarence glanced back at the door for a moment, then replied, "Not tonight I wouldn't have. Those four weirdos probably coulda taken me."

The bartender laughed but did not reply.

"Lock up after me man. I'm outta here," Clarence said, then added, "And don't let anyone in. Got it?"

The bartender just waved casually, his eyes still locked onto the pages of his paperback.

The bouncer shook his head. "Hey, what the hell are you reading anyway?"

The bartender lifted the book so the title was visible.

"True... Love..." Clarence read aloud. "Yeah right, like such a thing exists. Don't stay up to late."

Clarence felt the shock of the cool night air on his arms as he let the back door close and then lit up a cigarette. He stood in the alley behind the Hot Legs for a while enjoying the smoke and listening to the city as it finally fell asleep. Looking up, he was able to pick out the full moon beyond the lights of the city as it began to descend below the horizon. The bouncer stared up at the sky for a moment longer, the comforting sight enough to allow his thoughts to wander back to the four weirdos that had walked in just before closing time. One of the reasons he had been hired as a bouncer for The Hot Legs had to do with his ability to remember faces, to keep troublemakers from coming back to stir up more trouble. And though the four strangers hadn't caused any trouble tonight, Clarence made it a point to remember their faces anyway. There was something just a little too weird about them, other than the fact that he had never seen them around before and that they didn't look the type to be hanging around a rock club. It was something he just couldn't quite put his finger on, an instinctive feeling. A hunch.

The tired bouncer took one last drag, then tossed the remains of his cigarette onto the ground. His footsteps echoed off the walls of the deserted alley as he headed home. But the sounds of the city at night never unnerved him. He'd worked late hours for more years than he could remember, until walking home late at night was as natural to him as walking in the middle of the day. And it was this ease with the night that had numbed his senses to the four figures standing silently in the shadows at the back end of the alley, watching his every move, evaluating his physical condition, trying to detect any weaknesses like a limp or a cough. The four figures watched the object of their observation turn the corner at the end of the alley. As soon as he had disappeared one of the figures bolted forward out of the shadows and snatched up the still glowing cigarette butt. The figure proceeded to carefully sniff the filter, then stared down at the ground as if looking for something. A moment later a series of sharp clicks and low whistles were exchanged then abruptly cut off by a bright flash of blue light, and the alley was empty again.

Chapter 20. THE BODY ELECTRIC

The mid-morning sun flooded the service bay with bright light, but the glare did not completely obscure Dr. Raven's view of the street before him. From down the road leading out of the industrial section of Timex City, he watched a small dark speck grow quickly in detail to become a motorcycle ridden by a figure clad entirely in black leather. The relative quiet was interrupted sharply by the loud rhythmic pounding of the motorcycle's engine as the rider slowed, then steered his bike in a tight circle in front of the garage. With a quick fluid motion, the rider killed the power and kicked down the stand with his toe.

Dr. Raven took a long look over the machine before him as it shone in the sunlight, admiring his own handiwork. The graceful curves, the mathematical precision of each line, and the painstaking attention to detail and use of space. It was certainly some of his finest work, but it was still his second favorite bike. Of course, he could never admit that to either rider.

Dr. Raven tried not to smile as he spoke, "Well, your second visit in as many days. I am indeed honored."

Blackie looked up and down the street for a moment before removing his helmet. Brushing his long dark hair back with a gloved hand, he slowly turned, but the grin that Dr. Raven had expected to see was not there. Instead, his familiar sarcasm was met with a look of indifference, almost as if the rider had never heard the greeting. Dark sunglasses did little to conceal the look of a man who was clearly tired and irritated.

"Hmm. This looks serious," Dr. Raven said thoughtfully. "Better step into my office then."

The rider took another step into the shadows of the garage, glanced over his shoulder at the street again, then nodded slowly and followed the doctor to the cramped room at the back of the garage.

Slumping into a well-worn chair, Blackie stared at the calendar on the wall behind Dr. Raven's desk, noting that the month showing was not the current one. He was about to ask why, when he noticed the year at the top of the calendar and held his question in check. He suddenly found himself thinking that the time had gone by so fast the last few years. And it seemed to be flying by even faster every day.

Dr. Raven stood in the open doorway for a moment studying his preoccupied guest before finally taking a seat on the edge of his desk. "So, what brings you all the way out here so early in the day to see an old man when you obviously would rather be at home sleeping?"

Blackie slowly sat up in the chair. His hand went to his hair again, stroking it back several times before resting both elbows on his knees with an exhausted sigh.

"I'm an old man koohai," Dr. Raven urged gently. "So if you need to ask me something..."

Blackie rubbed his eyes as he finally spoke "Sempai, what do dreams really mean?"

Dr. Raven raised an eyebrow. "Dreams? You came all the way out here to ask me-"

Blackie's stern look cut the sentence short, and the doctor's question faded off into the monotonous churning noises of the factories all around the garage.

"Okay," Dr. Raven began tentatively, scratching his chin. "Dreams. Well, for some people, dreams are wonderful and yet mysterious, and there is a temptation to believe that

dreams are roadmaps to a possible destiny, while others believe that dreams are actually images from another life we are living in some other reality. And there are still others that believe that dreams are simply moments of our lives replayed subconsciously and then rearranged or combined with other experiences randomly."

"And what do you believe Sempai?"

Dr. Raven laughed. "Me? Ha! When the dreams of an old man are interesting to the young... well..."

Blackie studied the doctor's face carefully as he waited for the answer.

"For me, dreams are nothing more than scrambled moments in time that play about in our heads when we have nothing else to do but think."

Blackie sat back a bit, the fresh look of confusion on his face telling the doctor that the answer was not what his guest had wanted to hear. Blackie began to reply, but the words did not come right away. "Really... You don't think they mean anything... at all?"

Dr. Raven stepped away from the corner of his desk and returned to the open doorway of the office before speaking. He did not look at Blackie as he spoke. He could not, because he now knew why he was asking and he was concerned. "No. Not really."

There was silence for a moment in the office, as the two men wondered what the other was thinking. Blackie was first to speak again, his voice now clearly betraying his best efforts to appear unconcerned.

"Well, the dreams I am having lately do seem to be kinda messed up, but..."

"Yes?"

Blackie hesitated before continuing. "It's still the same dream each time. Over and over."

Dr. Raven stared out into the sunlit garage, trying to hide his frown. "I see. And what happens in this dream?"

Blackie was silent for a moment as he pondered his dream. It was the same, night after night, only more intense and more real with each passing day. He didn't really want to discuss the dream with anyone, but it was getting to the point where he was wondering if there was something more to them. "It's a voice," he began. "I hear a voice calling me."

Dr. Raven's hidden frown was replaced with a look of surprise as he turned to look at Blackie. "Eh, really?"

Blackie nodded. "Yeah. Well, kinda. It changes. It usually starts off as the voice of a little kid, then it gradually changes into an old man's voice."

"I see. And what does this voice say?"

Blackie shook his head slowly. "He keeps asking me to help him. He says he is running out of time."

"Help him how?"

"I'm not sure," Blackie responded, sounding more and more frustrated as he related the strange dream. "The voice never actually tells me why it needs my help, but it says it's in pain. It just keeps going on and on and on. Sometimes I think it can hear me, but most of the time it just ignores me."

Blackie paused, brushing his hair out of his eyes again with a sigh. "The voice sounds so real, so... so..."

"Sincere?" Dr. Raven offered.

"Yes!" Blackie said, suddenly wondering if he had helped the Doctor to fully understand. But the elderly mechanic simply turned back to the open doorway to stare out into the sunshine.

Forcing himself to chuckle, Dr. Raven finally turned back to his guest and then sat down at his desk again. "I don't think I'd lose any sleep over such a dream. There's too much work to be done! Sleep is important and shouldn't be wasted! Although, when I was your age I can remember staying out very late almost every night! We'd go out drinking and singing, and I remember the girls--" Dr. Raven's voice trailed off as he realized his guest wasn't listening. The doctor's frown returned. He got up from his desk and stood in front of Blackie, then placed a hand gently on a leather-clad shoulder. "What do you think koochai? Why does a dream trouble you so much?"

Blackie did not answer immediately, the hand on his shoulder lending some comfort but not enough to make him forget the voices he had heard or their emotional pleas. He looked up at the old man before him, and seeing the worry in his eyes, forced a smile. "Too many late nights I guess Pops. Too many late nights and loud music, right?" He winked playfully, then glanced at the clock on the wall. "Ah, Speaking of which, I gotta get to practice. Thanks for the chat sempai."

"Ah yes!" Dr. Raven shifted gears. "Sylia mentioned that you hired Priss to sing. How's that working out?"

Blackie looked out at the sunlight for a moment, the strange dream slipping away from his thoughts for the moment at the mention of her name. As he began thinking of her again he felt his entire body wake up. "She's great Pops. She's got an amazing voice! And she can kick ass, ya know? She's really, really..."

"Great. Right?" Dr. Raven responded smiling.

Blackie nodded slowly, his darkened features unable to hide an embarrassed grin.

"Well, let me give you a little advice about that one, young Stingray," Dr. Raven began with a fatherly tone to his voice, "If you are truly as smitten as you seem to be, then be careful, because--"

"Yes?" Blackie asked a little over-enthusiastically, wondering if he might actually get some useful insight into why Priss seemed so hard to get to know.

"Because koochai," the doctor continued, aware that what he was saying could be valuable to the young man that he looked upon like a son, "she will make you want to protect her, and knowing you, you would try very hard. But you'd be wasting your time."

"Eh? Why?"

"Because she can take care of herself."

Blackie nodded, a little disappointed. "Yeah, that much I already know."

"What she really needs..."

"Yes?"

"... is someone to take care of."

Blackie said nothing in reply, the words fixing themselves in his mind without being fully understood yet. Perhaps he would never understand. Women always seemed to get more complicated the more he got to know them. But he knew one thing. His sempai was a good judge of character, and his advice was always worth listening to. With a smile, he rose from his seat and headed out the door. "Thanks sempai. I'll keep that in mind."

Dr. Raven nodded, but as he watched Blackie leave, he wondered if the young man could keep any advice in his mind with all the other things that were trying to enter it.

* * * *

"Alright, let's go again. Count us in."

click, click, click, click

Priss closed her eyes as a wall of sound immediately surrounded her in the tiny rehearsal room. She could hear the snap of the snare drum echoing back through her monitors, the low rumble of the bass guitar reaching through the floor to her feet, and the animal-like growl of Blackie's guitar as he quickly drove down on the whammy bar, the strings suddenly losing all of their tension. Counting silently in her head she waited impatiently for her cue, trying not to get lost in the music.

The words came to her easily, having listened to them more times than she could count on her disc player. But it was always uncomfortable at first when she actually had to sing someone else's songs at full volume. Nothing that a few practices wouldn't fix. But their first gig was tonight.

The song rose and fell, verse to bridge, bridge to chorus, and back through again. Then Blackie launched into the guitar solo. Priss had been staring straight ahead as she sang, but now she turned her head a little to watch Blackie out of the corner of her eye. She smiled, thinking to herself that just a few nights ago she had been standing out in the darkness watching from a distance, and now she was standing right next to him. Her gaze fell to watch his strong hands working their way around the fretboard of his guitar, and suddenly she found herself remembering the moment she had taken his hands in hers a few nights ago. She had embarrassed herself by being so forward, and she was sure he would misunderstand her, but something about his hands had compelled her to reach out to touch them. To know for sure. And in that moment she had felt him tremble.

The notes continued to arc and soar, their wordless acrobatics singing to her in a different way. She closed her eyes and listened, and quickly lost herself in the vibe.

Suddenly she realized that the solo was over and that the last verse had started without her. Shaking her head in annoyance, she jumped back in, the slip up not likely to be noticed by an audience, but another quick glance sideways caught Blackie grinning knowingly.

The song ended, and though Blackie said nothing, she could feel his eyes upon her. "I know, I screwed up," she muttered. "It won't happen again."

Blackie nodded with a gentle smile, his long hair shaking slightly. He casually reached out a hand to grasp Priss's arm as if to reassure her, but then he drew it back slowly. "I know," he said, his voice very soft despite the volume level that they had been getting used to. "You'll be fine."

As Blackie turned away to discuss the next song's arrangement with the drummer and bass player, Priss stared at his back for a moment. Without thinking, her hand went to her arm where Blackie had intended to touch her, and squeezed.

* * * *

The glow from the main monitor in front of her flickered dimly as Syla cycled through the various files on Blackie's data unit. Circuit diagrams, detailed schematics, programming instructions and scanned-in notes were presented one by one in a smooth

rhythmic sequence. But the rhythmic advance from the last screen to the next was halted as she stared at one of the scans of her father's notes:

"Mind Bank" Project & Research Diary

Uizu Labs

BioEscape Corporation

Information copyright protected under the Information Act of 2005

Last Entry: 01.24.2021

File: FG/8572560188-1

Project: "Mind Bank"

Contractor: N/A

Project Director: Katsuhito Stingray

Project Coordinator: Katsuhito Stingray

Project Overview & Goals

I have often wondered at the boundaries of the human mind. And while emotions and behavior have traditionally been a tempting area of the human mind to explore, my own curiosity has delved outside of the traditional into the processes of the human mind itself and its ability to generate such varying forms of output. Specifically, our thoughts and our dreams, and how they are manufactured. But as I have progressed in my private research into the human mind, I have also often wondered where all of the information that we take in each day is stored, and how it is stored.

My early trial experiments some years ago with test subjects has rendered some valuable clues as to how humans organize data input and how we can save or retrieve it. But the exact process has remained a mystery, up until now.

With this breakthrough, I believe that further investigation will also yield the clues necessary to create a process by which the entire contents of the human mind could be transferred outside of itself. The benefits of this process should be obvious; people whose bodies were once young and healthy that have become terminally ill or diseased can now have their minds transferred to an artificially manufactured body that would allow them to live out their lives to its intended span, much the same way artificial limbs and organs have helped others live out their intended life spans.

But while this solution may someday provide the ability for disabled people to continue to pursue their ambitions, the current shortage of artificially manufactured bodies would present a hurdle in the initial stages of the project's creation. That is why it is my strong recommendation that "Mind Bank" storage facilities be explored, funded, and fully functioning before the transfer process has been refined for public use in clinics and hospitals.

Sylia's finger remained frozen above the advance key, as she read the words over and over. She still couldn't believe it, even though she had accessed this particular file many times since Blackie's arrival. The thought of being able to transfer someone's mind to another body horrified her at first, as she considered the problems and complications that might arise. But the more she read the words in front of her, the more they intrigued her. And they also helped to answer some of her own questions about what happened to her shortly after her father's death.

Her data unit had looked like any other data cartridge available at the local computer store. But somehow, the contents of the data unit had been transferred directly to her. Up until now she had blamed the pain and blackout that had resulted from her first viewing of her data unit on some kind of epileptic seizure created by the erratic visual input. But she had never been able to guess at how the information had made the instantaneous leap to her brain. Now she didn't need to guess any more.

Sylia sat back, closed her eyes, and turned in on her thoughts. "Was I just a test subject to him? His smile and his words were always so sincere. But, I was just a child then..."

She rubbed her eyes and glanced at the clock. It was getting late.

As her finger slowly resumed its descent towards the "advance" key, one string of words in the open document stuck out.

"... transferred to an artificially manufactured body".

Sylia pulled her hands away from the keyboard and stared at them. They were trembling slightly. But as she focused on trying to steady them, the trembling stopped and both hands hovered before her face unmoving.

She calmly lowered her hands to her lap, and stared blankly at the screen for a moment, considering other possible answers, when a long forgotten name suddenly came back to her without warning.

Mason.

* * * *

As the last encore song started, Priss took a moment to gaze out through the smoky light at the packed house before her. People were jumping and waving at her, as she wiped the sweat from her brow and took a quick swig from the water bottle in her hand. She smiled slyly at one particularly enthusiastic patron in the front row, then tossed the open bottle end over end into the crowd, and grabbed her microphone from its stand. A follow spot tracked Priss as she ran to the other side of the stage and jumped up on one of the monitors. With a confident motion she brought the microphone to her mouth and sang the first few lines of the verse.

Blackie smiled to himself as he watched Priss work the crowd. A glance back at the faces of the drummer and bass player confirmed his own feelings of awe at how well the night had gone. With a wink to the drummer he stepped forward to stand side-by-side with Priss, and cranked out the beginning chords of the chorus.

Priss turned in surprise to find Blackie facing her, and without skipping a beat began singing the chorus to him. The two stood near the edge of the stage, while shifting blue and green beams of light played over them from above. Priss couldn't hear herself anymore, drowned out by the crowd screaming out the words along with her, but she

didn't mind. She had drowned out everything but the man standing in front of her as she sang.

*Cause you're everything I want
You've got everything I need
I can't get over you
No matter what I do
You're everything to me*

A leather-clad arm suddenly swung around Blackie's neck as Priss moved in close and looked directly into his eyes, never missing a word as she sang to him. His hands instinctively kept playing his guitar, but the shock that had run through him at her touch had frozen the rest of his body to the spot. For a brief moment the two stood gazing into each other's eyes, as the crowd continued to sing the chorus through without Priss.

*There's a message in your eyes
That keeps telling me you're mine
I know you wanna stay
Can't let you slip away
You're everything to me*

Then the moment was gone and Blackie felt Priss's arm slide away. He watched her take a few quick strides to the other side of the stage and then lean down with her microphone, just out of reach of a dozen out-stretched arms. As the sudden electricity of the moment continued to surge through him, Blackie fought to focus on his playing. He closed his eyes tightly, but the feeling would not go away.

A nudge to his shoulder snapped his eyes open, and he suddenly realized the solo section had started without him. With an embarrassed grin to the bass player now standing beside him, Blackie quickly stopped strumming, and deftly picked out the lead notes he was supposed to be playing.

The last few notes of the solo eventually trailed away, and Blackie could finally look up from the fretboard, the mistake now ancient history. But instead of looking out into a crowd he saw Priss now standing in front of him at center stage. Singing the last verse, her back was to him, but the bright smoke-filtered light streaming down around her created a blinding corona effect. The resulting silhouette shifted hypnotically to one side, and then suddenly he could see her eyes through the haze looking back at him knowingly. Blackie shook his head in reply and laughed, the energy of the moment rushing in to sweep him along to the end of the song.

As the very last guitar chord rang out, signaling the end of the show, the crowd renewed its appreciation of the band by filling the room with its own ability to make noise. Fists shot into the air near the front of the stage while patrons near the back began pounding empty beer bottles and ashtrays on their tables. Blackie ended the sustaining chord with an exaggerated arm motion, then quickly tore his guitar off his shoulder and held it in the air above his head. With the music gone the crowd took over completely

with loud cheers and whistles, until the chanting began and Priss found herself being called by name by the entire room.

She stood motionless at the edge of center stage, ignoring her sweat-soaked clothes and exhausted limbs to absorb every bit of their worship. Leaning on the mic stand for support she slowly raised the mic to her lips, but said nothing. The crowd roared anew, goading her on to say something. Anything. Priss just closed her eyes and lowered the microphone to her side as if she were in some kind of trance, which just made the crowd scream even louder for her to address them. Their patience was finally rewarded when the singer suddenly opened her eyes and screamed at the top of her lungs, her free hand pointing straight out at the crowd.

"YOU GUYS FUCKIN' ROCK!"

The reply was deafening.

The three instrumentalists quickly converged with Priss at the edge of center stage, each grasping the arm of the band member next to them and raising their arms over their heads in a symbol of triumph. The bright lights dimmed slowly. Bottles banged on tables even louder, and the cheering followed the band as they headed back stage.

Near the back of the room four figures sat huddled at a dark corner table, their eyes all focused on the darkening stage, but not one of them was cheering. As if synchronized, the four patrons suddenly stood up at the same time, and made their way purposefully through the cheering crowd to the front door.

"Damn!" the drummer exclaimed as he and the other members of the band flopped down exhausted onto a couple of old couches in the dressing room. Blackie plucked four cans of beer out of a nearby cooler and tossed them to his bandmates. A chorus of pull tabs being ripped was followed quickly by a brief silence, and then a round of satisfied sighs. "Fuck me, that was just awesome!" the drummer continued to rave, guzzling the rest of his beer as the others nodded and laughed.

Blackie put his beer down on the floor at his feet then grabbed a cloth out of his guitar case. As he listened to the others talking excitedly about the many fine points of their first live performance with their new singer, he carefully wiped down the black guitar in his lap.

"Priss, I gotta say," the bass player interjected as he staggered to his feet and grabbed a microphone out of an equipment trunk, then held the mic to his mouth, "YOU fuckin' rocked!"

Priss grinned as the drummer spit a mouthful of beer in the process of laughing. She then stood up and high-fived the bass-player with a resounding smack then replied loudly that they had all "fuckin' rocked".

While the laughter echoed about the room, Blackie put his guitar away in its case and then picked up his unfinished beer and took another sip. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and glanced over at Priss. He laughed out loud as he watched her playfully snapping a towel at the drummer's arms in an attempt to interrupt his efforts to

finish his second beer. Meanwhile the bass player was offering support by chanting "GUZZLE GUZZLE GUZZLE!"

The night had been magic, Blackie thought to himself as he lay back against the couch exhausted. The band had played many gigs in their relatively short career, but this was undoubtedly the best night he could ever remember. If this was just the beginning, then the sky was the limit as far as the future was concerned. And he had one person to thank for this fact.

He looked up suddenly to see Priss watching him very intently.

"What?" was all he could say nervously, the intensity of her gaze somehow returning him to that moment when she had put her arm around him on stage.

The room went suddenly silent as the drummer and bass player looked up from their beverages to see Priss and Blackie locked in a meaningful gaze.

The drummer nudged his drinking companion and the two exchanged knowing grins.

"Uh, Chaz man," the drummer suddenly said in a too-loud voice, breaking the silence, "How about we go back out and round up some babes for a private party, eh?"

"Ah, now there's a fuckin' plan Benji my man!" the bass player responded and jumped to his feet.

The door was about to close, when the bass player poked his head back through. "Oh, Priss?"

Priss turned back toward the door and nodded. "Yah?"

"You did great tonight. Really great."

Priss smiled back and nodded again. "Thanks Chaz."

Chaz grinned and closed the door slowly. But before the room could get quiet, two voices outside the door began singing, badly off-key and way too loud.

"COZ YOU'RE EVERYTHING I WANT!
YOU'VE GOT EVERYTHING I NEED YEAH BABY!
I CAN'T GET OVER YOU NO NO!
NO MATTER WHAT I DO!
YOU'RE EVERYTHING TO ME, YEAH!"

The voices slowly drifted down the hall until the singing turned to laughter. The room then went silent.

Blackie and Priss exchanged furtive glances, the new quiet in the room a bit uncomfortable after listening to amplified guitars and drums all night.

"Uh, so..." Blackie spoke first.

Priss studied him, watching his hands as he spoke.

"So! Um, well, that went really well eh?"

Priss stared at Blackie for a moment, nodded, then closed her eyes and took a long sip of her beer.

"Uh, I thought you sang great tonight too Priss. Really, great."

"Ah, thanks."

Priss took another long sip of her beer, her eyes still closed, and began humming the chorus of the last song they had played.

As the humming filled the room with a strange new tension, Blackie suddenly felt the dampness of his sweat-soaked clothes against his skin as it cooled. His hands clenched a little at the arms of his chair. His eyes drifted around the room, as he desperately tried to think of something to say. His gaze finally returned to rest on the woman sitting on the arm of the couch across from him. Her hair was streaked with sweat, sticking a little against her cheeks, but her long bangs were already dry, framing her already dark eyes with shadow. Red lips shone reflectively. The sweat was drying on her red leather top and skirt, but her bare legs still glistened in the dim light. As if sensing his appraisal, Priss absent-mindedly slid a hand under her long mane and then shook her head, her hair falling about her shoulders in a dark cascade. Blackie's mind started a long slow spin as any thoughts of saying something vanished.

Just when Blackie thought he couldn't stand the silence anymore, Priss suddenly stood up and tossed her empty beer can into a dented garbage can by the door. Her hand reached out to the door handle, then stopped.

Blackie quickly looked away from the woman standing at the door, unable to watch her walk out. 'Damn it! Say something you idiot! She's going to walk out! Oh man, ANYTHING! JUST SAY-'

A hand on his arm stopped his futile search cold.

Surprised, he slowly turned to see Priss kneeling beside his chair, her hand on his forearm. As the two locked eyes, Priss gently squeezed her hand. Blackie could not move, the surge of electricity from her touch returning like a flash flood.

"My turn." Priss finally said, her lips betraying a very slight smile.

"Uh?" was all Blackie could reply.

Priss slid her hand down Blackie's arm to take his hand in hers. "My turn to take care of *you*."

Blackie nodded numbly and somehow pushed his body to stand. Guitar case in hand, and Priss's hand in the other, Blackie followed Priss through the door, and the room fell silent again.

The door to the back alley behind the Hot Legs swung out abruptly, banging sharply against the brick wall. The noise echoed briefly in the tight confines of the alley, then faded as several people exited the building and began walking towards the main street.

Above them, lost in the glare of the street lamps, a glowing pair of eyes carefully studied the appearance of each of the patrons in detail. Drunken laughter and yelling followed the small group out to the street, until they turned the corner. The cyborg's eyes slowly dimmed to a soft blue, as it silently turned to make the fifteen-foot leap across the shadows to the next roof. It was greeted there by a second of its kind, a hulking shadow gazing intently at the other exit from the alley. The two briefly exchanged reports with a series of clicks and soft whistles. The first nodded, and then returned to its post, the thrill of the chase filling its every nerve with current.

"Did you bring your bike?" Blackie asked as he and Priss made their way through the half-empty bar towards the exit.

"No, I took a cab," Priss replied. Blackie turned to look at her, a look of mild surprise on his face.

"Well, I had a feeling we'd do well tonight, and I didn't want to..."

Blackie smiled knowingly but said nothing.

"Cya Clarence!" Priss yelled to the tired looking bouncer who was engaged in helping the more stubborn patrons to their feet.

Clarence stopped yelling at the trio of drunken patrons in his grip long enough to wave and offer a thumbs up. As he released his grip, one of the drunks attempted to sit back down at the nearest table and demand more beer. Clarence let go of the other two and suddenly there were three tables occupied by demanding customers. Clarence slapped his hand on his forehead, then started to yell again.

Priss smirked, and turned back to the door, her hand squeezing Blackie's hand again as they felt the chill night air hit their faces from the open doorway in front of them.

Two more vaguely human-shaped shadows waited patiently at the back of the alley behind a trash dumpster, their ears picking up every single click of a high heel and squeak of the door hinge. The cyborg closest to the exit blinked, the glow from its eyes flicking out for a fraction of a second. With a nudge from its companion, the cyborg leaned out slowly to scan the alley. Data raced through its neuro-circuitry, as it retrieved the template image over and over and compared the visible subjects to it.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

"Are you cold?"

Priss nodded, then pulled her coat tighter about her shoulders as she stepped out into the street.

Blackie faltered for a moment then placed his arm tentatively around Priss's shoulders fully expecting her to shrug it off. To his surprise, the singer calmly looked into his eyes and then gestured towards the sidewalk.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard.

Possible match found... verifying...

Two sharp whistles suddenly echoed from the rooftop, as the cyborg's companion nudged him a little further forward, the anticipation of the chase reaching its peak.

"You didn't bring your bike either?" Priss asked, puzzled by Blackie's move away from the alley behind the Hot Legs.

"Nah, I just live around the corner, remember?" Blackie grinned.

Priss laughed. "How could I forget."

Possible match could not be verified.

Search resumed.

Discard.

Discard.

Discard

Discard.

No further subjects visible.

A soft chirping from the back of the alley was the only unusual sound, as a quiet calm eventually descended around the Hot Legs bar. A car raced by. In the distance a train clack-clacked over a bridge, its familiar whistle fading with its passing. A few drunken stragglers sat on the front step to share one last cigarette as the lights surrounding the bar winked out one by one. But as the last patron finally shuffled off into the shadows of the street lamps, the shadows slowly came alive, until they met in the middle of the alley.

The hunt would have to wait.

* * * *

The dim gray light from the street filtered in through the dusty windows of Blackie's apartment, barely illuminating two bodies on the bed locked in the act of making love.

Priss slowly closed her fingers about Blackie's outstretched hand, and sighed.

The sheets on the bed moved sinuously as the two lovers drew closer together. The motions became more and more aggressive, until Blackie suddenly threw the sheets aside and sat up on the bed. He drew his knees to his chest and closed his hands about his face in disgust, while Priss peered through the gloom in shock.

"What... what's wrong? Did I?"

"It's not you." Blackie muttered.

The nighttime silence surrounded them for a moment.

"Are you sure? But... then what's wrong?"

Blackie listened to Priss's soft voice behind him in the darkness, and he knew he had to answer.

"It's..."

"Yes?"

Blackie paused to think through what he was trying to say. To somehow find the words to describe the shadowed face he could not wrench free from his mind.

"It's... him. I can see him in my mind."

Priss strained to stare at Blackie's face through the darkness.

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Him, Priss. Him."

Priss searched her mind over and over, unable to begin to comprehend what he was saying, her mind already filled with doubt. "Who, Blackie? You have to tell me who or I can't--"

Blackie finally turned to look at Priss, and the look of confusion in her eyes that greeted him through the shadows shook him momentarily. "Him, Priss. The man you once loved."

Priss's eyes widened. 'What the hell was he talking about... oh.'

Again the silence surrounded them, but this time Priss broke it, her voice now full of understanding and the promise of reassurance. "Blackie, don't think of him. He's gone."

"I know, but--"

"But what?"

Long black hair now obscured Blackie's face as he stared down into the bed. "I can't help worrying... that you still think of him sometimes."

Priss looked towards the light coming in from the window, then propped herself up on her elbow and drew the sheets around her tightly. "Blackie, don't do this to yourself."

"I... I just can't..."

Priss sighed. This was not how she had wanted the night to go. But if she couldn't convince him that her thoughts were only on him, then where would that leave them?

"Blackie," she began, "it's true, I can't ever forget him, but you're not him. You are you, and that's who I--"

She paused.

Blackie looked up. "Yes?"

The voice from the shadows was almost too faint to hear as Priss said the words she never thought she'd say again.

"That's who I want to be with now. You, and just you."

Blackie flinched, the sincerity of her words like a sudden slap across his face.

"Really?"

Priss let the sheets slowly fall away from her as she sat up to embrace Blackie in her arms. The dim gray light from the city glow was like a muted spotlight now, and the look of understanding in his eyes now said everything she wanted to hear.

Priss gently pushed Blackie back on to the bed. "Just think of me."

"I'm sorry."

Priss nodded gently and smiled.

As the nighttime silence surrounded them again, Blackie reached up and delicately placed his hand against Priss's lips, then softly grazed her cheek with the back of his hand. Priss closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the feeling of his skin against hers.

Outside, a gentle rain began to fall, making a soft hypnotic tapping against the window. Little by little the cool rain splashed against the glass, gradually washing away the dust and grime.

Inside, the two lovers stared intently into each other's eyes for a long time, until all thoughts of anyone else in the world were gone.

* * * *

An approaching car sent the four cyborgs back into the shadows of the rain-slicked alley behind the bar. Scratching noises like claws on cement followed the four quickly up the wall and onto the roof. Like liquid darkness the four cyborgs escaped the rain to find their individual hiding spots, and dissolved into the night.

The hunt was over... for now.

Part 21: DREAMLINES

Long after Priss had fallen asleep, Blackie lay with his eyes open, staring at the gray ceiling. With all of his thoughts threatening to spin out of control, sleep seemed far away.

Suddenly his life was very different from just a few hours ago. The band was finally ready to take the next step. Just one show and he could see the difference so clearly. All the pieces were in place; the right people with the right attitudes, all with one goal, one dream, in mind. The sky was the limit. It was difficult not to smile now.

As if that weren't enough to keep him from ever falling asleep again, Blackie's scattered thoughts returned time after time to her. She was... he still couldn't really find the words to describe how much she had changed his life, and how important she had become to him. The more he thought about her, the more he wanted to wake her up just so he could hear her say his name one more time. To know that it was real, and not just a dream.

Turning his head slightly, Blackie looked at Priss's shadowed face while she slept. As he watched, her nose twitched a bit, and he smiled again. She looked so content, without a care in the world. He wondered if she was dreaming, and what her dreams were about.

Blackie sighed, and then turned his gaze back to the ceiling, hesitant to admit that there was still something wrong with the picture. He closed his eyes and guessed the time, then checked the clock on the table beside him. 2:37 a.m. exactly. Perhaps the voice had finally given up in its plea for help, he thought to himself. As he thought about Priss again, the smile still unwilling to leave his lips, he thought that anything was possible.

The sound of a train crossing a bridge in the distance came to his ears through the open window. The horn sounded long and clear then faded away as the train moved on to its destination. He continued to listen for a while, the nighttime silence broken faintly every so often by a cool breeze or a car driving by. Just as Blackie's eyes started to close, the voice came to him again.

"Help me..."

No...

"It's not my time yet... won't you help me?"

No. I can't.

"You are the only one who can help me... I know you can hear me."

I can't hear you. I don't want to hear you.

"Please, I know you're listening. I don't have much time."

I don't care anymore. I can't care.

"I can guide you to me. You just have to listen..."

Leave me alone. Just stop...

"You're my only hope... please..."

I'm sorry. You'll just have to--

"Help me please! I need you!"

I'm sorry. I'm sorry!

"I need you... don't be scared..."

Isn't there someone else who can help you?

"You're the only one. Help me... please..."

Why me?

The voice faded away, and Blackie opened his eyes wide, suddenly realizing he was still awake.

* * * *

The voice felt stronger this time. Definitely stronger. And closer. The sentences were more complete now.

"...not my time yet... won't you... me?"

But just out of reach. Always just out of reach.

"You are the ... one who can help... I know ... can hear me."

Trying, trying, but the words still won't come.

"... I know you're listening... I don't have much..."

I am listening! But why can't you ever hear me?

"I can guide you ... you just ... to listen..."

I speak the words but they never hear me.

"You're my ... hope... please..."

I'm here.

"Help me please! I need..."

I'M RIGHT HERE.

"I need you... scared..."

Right... here...

She slowly opened her eyes to darkness and took a long breath, the last echoes of the voice still lingering in her head. She rested her forearm against her brow for a moment and stretched her legs, rolling the words over in her mind. The voice felt closer now than ever before. For years she had heard the voice as a whisper, the words never making much sense, but now it was almost crystal clear. But why now?

She stared up at the ceiling, studying the varying degrees of light that seeped in from the city glow. The voice was crying out for help, but help with what?

She recalled the words. 'Not my time yet...' It was dying perhaps? Dying soon? How long? But what could she do about it? The voice had never mentioned places or names. How could she ever find the source of the voice?

She sighed and closed her eyes again. But her thoughts would not let go of her. She turned over on her side and pulled the covers close. How could she ever find the voice? It had to be close by.

Did she even want to find the source?

Sylia sighed again, closed her eyes tightly, and waited for sleep to reclaim her.

* * * *

'Report.'

The cyborg's eyes did not open, but its mind was instantly awake. The conversation was short and to the point. And silent. The cyborg's companions remained motionless, coiled up in their various hiding spots "asleep", and electronically camouflaged from the eyes of the outside world.

Far from the roof of the Hot Legs bar, V7-28 remotely accessed the wakened cyborg's memories of the previous evening, then smiled to himself.

The target was proving to be more elusive than he had anticipated. And though a prolonged capture would eat up precious time, V7-28 knew he would have been a little disappointed if the target had been captured on the first attempt.

V7-28 sent a final message, 'Stay where you are. He will return.'

The wakened cyborg said nothing in response, made no indication that it had even received the message. As the presence in its mind vanished it flexed one of its metallic fingers experimentally, then pulled its legs closer in to its body as the first warming rays of dawn washed over it, and immediately went back to sleep.

* * * *

Priss drained the last little bit of her tea from her cup and then set it down on the table beside her. Raising her arms over her head, she yawned and stretched, savoring the feeling of the bed sheets against her bare legs. Sounds of mid-day traffic outside and the chatter from the portable TV at her feet mingled with the muffled sounds of water splashing and Blackie singing.

As she recalled the night before, a smile slowly formed on her lips. It wasn't the night she had imagined it would be. But it was a night she would never forget.

Priss threw the covers aside, swung her legs out of the bed, and stretched again. Grabbing the empty teacup, she rose and made her way to the kitchen. She set the cup down into the sink, then leaned against the counter and stared out the large window at the front of the tiny apartment. Wearing nothing but one of Blackie's old oversized concert t-shirts, Priss shielded her eyes from the bright sunlight, its rich rays warming the room to an almost uncomfortable level. Streaming down at a high angle the sunlight filled the front of the room making the rest of the apartment gloomy by comparison. Priss looked down at her toes where the line of light and shadow met sharply, and wiggled them experimentally.

Blackie's singing crept into her idle thoughts, and as she contemplated sharing the bath with him, the phone rang. Without thinking she picked it up.

"Uh, hello?"

"Oh... Priss, is that you?"

"Sylia..." Priss said slowly, suddenly feeling out of sorts. "Yeah. It's me."

"Oh, I see," Sylia said, pausing briefly before continuing. "So how did the show go last night then?"

"Great," Priss replied nonchalantly.

"Oh good, I'm glad to hear that."

Priss waited for Sylia to continue, but there was only silence on the other end. "Did you want to speak with Blackie?" Priss finally offered.

"Yes, if he's available."

Priss glanced at the bathroom door. The singing had subsided but the splashing continued. "Um, well..."

"I understand Priss," Sylia quickly interjected. "Can you give him a message for me then?"

Priss was silent for a moment as she considered Sylia's request and their "discussion" two nights ago. She had hoped that maybe Sylia would have changed her mind by now after seeing how strongly she had opposed the idea of Blackie joining the Knight Sabers. But the tone of Sylia's voice now alluded to the contrary. Priss looked out the window into the sunlight and sighed. "What's the message?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, then Sylia spoke, her voice as assured as ever. "Please tell Blackie I'd like to see him sometime this afternoon, around 3 p.m., if he isn't busy."

"Sure," Priss responded, "Can I tell him what about?"

This time there wasn't a pause, but the tone of Sylia's voice had changed, a very slight hint of mild irritation seeping in, "Yes. I'd like to discuss his involvement in our current situation."

"I'll tell him."

Just as Syla was saying thank you, Priss gently hung up the phone.

With both hands behind her on the kitchen counter Priss stared down at her feet again, noting the sunlight's slow but tenacious progress as it moved up from her toes to her ankles. Shaking the depressing thoughts from her mind, she left the kitchen and tossed her T-shirt on the floor, then slipped inside the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

* * * *

"Chief, are you FUCKING BLIND?!"

Leon slammed his fist down on to the desk in front of him, the force of the blow harmlessly absorbed by a yellow file folder thickly padded with documents bearing the letterhead BIO-TECHNICAL CRIMES DIVISION.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!" Chief Todo barked back, adjusting his glasses instinctively.

Leon leaned over the desk a little further. "What, are you deaf too?! Cyborgs or not, these things killed more than a dozen people, then got away right under everyone's noses, and they're still out there somewhere! Are you just gonna sit on your fat ass and--"

"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT ME TO DO ABOUT IT? I don't care how much goddamn research you bring me, my hands are tied!" the Chief responded, getting up out of his chair to more effectively confront the angry officer.

Leon reached out as if to grasp the chief by the collar, then suddenly stopped and withdrew his outstretched hands, his frustration at his inability to do anything reaching its peak. A moment of tense silence fell between them as each man considered the other's situation.

"We've been over this before a hundred times. There's nothing I can do McNichol," the chief finally said, easing back into his chair with a sigh. You of all people should know that. The ADP is ancient history. And there's no way it will ever be reinstated. Not now, not ever."

Leon stared down at the yellow file folder, as the familiar feeling of resignation attempted to take hold again. Filled with all the late night hours that he and Daley had put in to researching the four escaped cyborgs and the severed finger left behind at the Matsumi Military Base, the file folder had seemed like his last chance to resurrect the ADP. To bring back something that he had been missing for a long time. To bring back his sense of purpose. To bring back better times.

But he still wasn't ready to give up. Not yet. He picked up the folder and turned to leave.

"McNichol..."

Leon stopped at the door, but did not turn to face the chief.

"I know you. Don't even think of pushing this any further with the higher-ups Leon," the chief gently warned. "It's better for everyone to let the military handle this. Besides, I think all of us here deserve the peace and quiet after all the crap we've been through over the years."

Leon stared through the glass at the subdued atmosphere of the office space in front of him. People milled about, some seated casually on the corner of another officer's desk talking about last night's baseball game, while others sipped coffee and idly tapped their

pens on their vidphone handsets. Was this what his life had amounted to? Was this really all there would ever be? Was this all that Jeena's death had helped achieve?

"That..." Leon finally replied, his words now fighting to escape between his clenched teeth, "is the biggest load of bullshit, and you know it."

Before the chief could even muster a response, Leon swung the glass door open in front of him, stepped through, and then slammed it shut. Hard. The ear-splitting sound of breaking glass filled the entire office, startling some of the junior officers to the point of drawing their weapons.

Leon shook his head and glared. "Put those away you idiots! AND STOP SLACKING OFF AND GET BACK TO WORK!"

Chief Todo watched the officers scramble for their desks while Leon sat down at his own desk and opened the yellow file folder again. The Chief picked up his vidphone and pressed a single button. "Yeah, get me maintenance up here. I need another door." He set the handset down and stole another glance out at Leon. After a long moment to think, tempered with the occasional curse under his breath, the Chief picked up the handset again and dialed 7 digits.

* * * *

Sylia set her afternoon cup of tea on her desk, tapped at the keyboard twice, then leaned forward again to continue reading.

MIND TRANSFER PROCEDURE: RECORDED SIDE EFFECTS

After 3 months of pre-testing of the mind-transfer procedure, I have compiled a list of recorded side-effects. Although our initial results with the human test subjects have proven to be very positive, and the side effects seem to only occur in a small group of subjects, these side effects are either minor or severe. There appears to be no middle ground between the two extremes.

The recorded minor side effects include grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, and bouts of depression. While these side effects can be controlled and eventually avoided altogether, as of this writing the more severe side effects appear to be unpredictable, and so far unavoidable.

Perhaps related to the minor side effects listed above, some test subjects are exhibiting behavior often observed in schizophrenia patients. They complain of delusions and hallucinations, and in severe cases, claim that there are voices

commenting on their thoughts, sometimes even taking part in running conversations within their thoughts.

Early investigation has produced little in the way of answers as to why this is occurring. Further tests will be required.

As for the mind transfer experiments using cybernetic brain models, no side effects have been reported as of this writing. This is to be expected though, as the cybernetic models were designed from the beginning with this functionality in kind.

Sylia thought about the voice she had heard in her dream the night before. It had been more one-sided than a conversation, the voice always ignoring her. But it was a voice nonetheless, and it was apparently speaking to her. She hadn't experienced any hallucinations or delusions either. Well... just what constituted a delusion or a hallucination anyway?

Sylia continued to read on, hoping that her father had lived long enough to continue his research until they had found a cure for the side effects. But the notes ended a little further down the page, rather abruptly, as if something had happened. She looked at the date on the document. It was time stamped well before his death. What had stopped him from continuing? Had he switched to a new document? But why? The document she was reading had plenty of space left before reaching its storage limit. Strange.

A few more deft keyboard strokes caused the screen to flicker and finally go black. Sylia pushed her chair away from the desk and then walked out of the data room to the training console. As she started pre-loading the various test programs, her thoughts wandered back to her father's notes. Side effects. Hallucinations. Delusions. Voices.

As the hol-opponent flickered to life in the large training room before her, she stared through the glass at the hologram, its pink translucent arms reaching out to attack an opponent that didn't exist. Sylia's thoughtful stare dissolved, until she was staring through the hologram at nothing. Had he ever found a way to avoid the side effects? Had he ever actually perfected the process?

The hologram turned and headed towards the glass barrier, as if sensing her there, but its illuminated "arms" were reflected by the angled glass, and its punches were being directed back upon itself.

Sylia's eyes slowly re-focused in time to witness the hol-opponent attempting to attack itself.

Suddenly she was running back to the data room.

* * * *

"Computer shopping?" Mackie repeated, his eyebrows rising up in confusion. "That's what you want to do now?"

"Sure! It'll be fun," Nene replied, grabbing Mackie's arm despite the throng of people surrounding them as they left the movie theatre and merged with the flow of pedestrian traffic on the sidewalk. "Don't you just love looking at new computer stuff?"

Mackie couldn't believe his ears. He knew she was a computer junkie, but was this what Nene really wanted to do while they were on their second date? Not like he wasn't interested in computers, he thought to himself, but it still seemed... weird. But as they continued walking along with no particular place to go, and the excitement of being downtown all around them, Mackie began to warm up to the idea of checking out the latest in computer stuff. He didn't have much money left after the movie and lunch, but it would still be fun to look.

"So where did you want to go Nene? Maybe Crazy Kenzi's has some new stuff," Mackie offered.

"Crazy Kenzi's?" Nene said, practically spitting out the name. "You **cannot** be serious! Mackie, you don't really buy stuff from that scammer do you?"

"Uh, well, uh, not really, but I--"

"MACKIE!" Nene exclaimed, grasping his arm tighter as she chided him. "He charges at least thirty percent markup! He's a total rip off artist!"

Mackie said nothing, cowering a bit in an effort to hide his embarrassment at being berated so publicly. "Yeah well, where do you buy stuff from then?" he finally shot back.

Nene grinned and pointed to a small shop a few blocks up the street. "See that place?"

Mackie nodded as he struggled to make out the shop's sign, wondering why he had never noticed this computer store before. "Yeah?"

Nene giggled. "Not there."

"Huh?"

"See the little alley next to the shop?"

Mackie looked again. Beside the shop was a thin sliver of shadow that marked an alley. "Yeah I see it. Sooooo... eh, you mean--"

"Let's go!" was all Nene said in reply as she began dragging Mackie towards the shop by his arm.

The contrasting afternoon shadows of the alley gave way to a small doorway along the right hand wall, the entrance unmarked and rather old looking. Nene looked back towards the street before knocking, the light taps on the door rapped out in an odd pattern. A moment later the door opened and a young boy, maybe thirteen years old, with dark, short, spiked hair stood in the doorway. The boy said nothing in greeting, gesturing for the two visitors to enter as quickly as possible.

Once inside, the boy shut the door and locked it securely with an array of latches and padlocks.

'NENE!"

Mackie jumped as the boy yelled excitedly and hugged Nene.

Nene just turned to Mackie with a sheepish grin. "They kind of look up to me here."

Mackie put his hand behind his head and tried his best to smile. What had she gotten him into now?

Nene introduced the two to each other as if she were introducing a prospective member to the president of a prestigious country club. "Oto, this is Mackie. Mackie, Oto."

Oto's eyes slowly widened in awe. "Ohhh! So this is Mackie!"

Mackie flushed at the recognition, wondering just what Nene had told this person about him. "Eh, Hi," was all he could think of to say.

"Hmm," Oto said suddenly, as if scrutinizing Mackie. "He seems a bit dull Nene. Are you sure you want him to--"

"Eh heh! Oto you're such a kidder!" Nene interjected, her hand quickly covering Oto's mouth. "Why don't you show us what you have today eh?"

Oto raised an eyebrow as Nene took her hand back, then grinned. "Okay, fine. This way please!"

Immediately beyond the doorway there was another door. Once beyond the second door, which was well secured like the first with myriad padlocks and latches, a staircase descended into a dark hallway. As they walked along Mackie caught sight of tiny security cameras dotting the corners of the ceiling. Glowing energy locks on several solid steel doors lining the hallway were all that illuminated their path, making Mackie a little uneasy. He stole a glance at Nene in the dim light, her face showing no signs of any anxiety. Facing forward into the darkness, he spotted a square of light in the distance and relaxed a bit, now that their destination seemed to be in sight.

Oto suddenly stopped at one of the solid steel doors, the square of light still in the distance but tantalizing Mackie now with its slightly increased luminescence.

"Hey, Fun boy."

Mackie looked down at Oto in surprise.

"You don't want to find out what that light is," Oto warned, then grinned. "Trust me."

Mackie looked at the light again, then back to Oto.

Oto flipped through a ring of keys until he had unlocked all of the padlocks on the door before them.

The door swung open into darkness. Then, as if sensing their presence, the lights came on one by one as Nene grasped Mackie by the arm and pulled him gently into the room.

Mackie took three steps then stopped dead in his tracks, as the slow waking lights revealed the contents of the room.

"Oh... my... god."

* * * *

"Wow!" Blackie exclaimed, as he wiped the sweat from his brow and fell into one of the lounge chairs. "Now that was a workout!"

Sylia smiled. "How do you feel?"

Blackie took a long swig of water and then set the bottle down beside him. "Like I just got my ass kicked."

Sylia laughed politely, studying Blackie's state of fatigue as he spoke. Once he had completed level 10 in the simulator he had managed to sustain level 11 for twenty-three minutes solid. Priss had barely managed to stay "alive" for more than a minute. She had

contemplated introducing him to level 12, since she had never seen level 12 herself, but decided against it for now. There were more pressing matters to attend to. "Well, you did very well considering the complexity of the sequences. I'm impressed."

"Me too," Blackie replied. "I thought I was gonna pass out a couple of times!"

"Well, you're more than welcome to keep training here."

"Really?" Blackie said, his renewed enthusiasm surprising Sylia after the workout he'd just endured.

Sylia nodded, then walked over to the lockers where the hardsuits were kept whenever the Knight Sabers returned to Raven's Garage at the end of the night. From one of the lockers she pulled out the top portion of Blackie's makeshift hardsuit and then closed the locker door. Taking a seat across from Blackie, she placed the black chest plate armor on the table between them and sat back in her chair. "It's a good design," she finally said after a long silence, "but a bit primitive."

Blackie took another drink of water and nodded. "Yeah, but I didn't have a ton of money to put into it. And I really didn't think I'd ever use it either."

"Then why did you build it?" Sylia asked.

Blackie sat still for a moment as if thinking carefully then finally responded, "I don't know really. I kinda felt compelled to make it ya know? Almost like I wasn't really in control. After watching Dad's data cartridge, I just wanted to make it. No other reason."

"You didn't want revenge for... his death?"

"Maybe a little, at first, yeah."

"But?"

"But... you beat me to it. It just didn't seem to be important after that."

Sylia thought back to how she had killed Mason, how he had shocked her by guessing her identity, how he had seen her face. Instinct had taken over then. Instinct, fear, and an overwhelming feeling that she knew there was no other course of action. And she had never once questioned her actions since that time. "I see," Sylia finally returned. "Well, that is all in the past thankfully. But we do have another problem on our hands currently."

Blackie nodded. "Yeah. We do."

Sylia said nothing but Blackie still understood her questioning expression. "Well, I mean you. The Knight Sabers."

"You said 'we'."

Blackie stared at the black armor on the table in front of him. "Yeah, well, I meant you actually, and besides, you said you're not hiring so..."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" Sylia said, her voice sounding odd to Blackie, as if there might be some secondary meaning to her words. He was about to respond when Sylia abruptly stood up and left the room.

Blackie watched curiously through the glass as Sylia began switching on a console situated next to what looked vaguely like a large reclining chair. The chair was overshadowed by a complex looking apparatus attached to a movable hydraulic arm that hung directly above.

"Blackie, could you come here please?" Sylia's voice came clearly from the other room. "I'd like you to try a different test."

Blackie set his water down on the table beside his armor and made his way to where Sylia was waiting.

"Have a seat." Sylia offered, gesturing to the comfortable looking but still somehow intimidating chair.

Blackie paused for a moment, then leapt up into the chair, and immediately remarked on how incredibly comfortable the chair was.

Sylia smiled. "I've spared no expense. This test takes a while so it made sense to make the test subject as comfortable as possible."

Blackie raised an eyebrow. "What kind of test?"

Sylia stopped what she was working on and faced Blackie. "Just lie back and relax. This test is used to compile a database of information about your physiology. I use the collected data to make the hardsuits as comfortable and form fitting as possible, so the wearer will feel like the suit is an extension of themselves, instead of a clumsy shell."

Blackie nodded and grasped the arms of the chair with his hands measuringly. "Ah, I getcha now. Cool."

Sylia continued. "As I mentioned, the test does take a while, about an hour and a half. Would you like to continue?"

"Sure!"

"I thought you might. One last thing."

"Yes?"

Sylia paused for just a second. "The test does require that the subject be asleep the entire time. This is so the results will not be affected by extremes in your respiratory or cardio systems and I can get a consistent result."

"Oh," Blackie said thoughtfully. "Okay. I'm kinda tired anyway after that workout. Sure, put me under."

Sylia grasped two handles on the side of the hydraulic arm above the chair and gently lowered it over Blackie's head so that only his neck was visible "Actually, you'll fall asleep normally. Anesthesia won't be necessary. This is just a simple test to get an idea of how your body works and its dimensions. Are you ready?"

"Uh..."

"Yes?"

Blackie hesitated before asking the question. "I'll be asleep the whole time?"

"Yes."

"Will I dream?"

"I don't know," Sylia replied, a little confused by the intent of the question. "I've never had any dreams myself while being tested, and the others have never mentioned anything."

"Okay," Blackie said, with a slight tremor to his reply.

As Sylia tapped in the last few key commands on the console, she watched the monitor that displayed the view from inside the testing module now covering Blackie's head. His eyes were closed already, the hypnotic light's powerful trance inducing pulses going to work immediately. She checked the rest of the readouts. Heart rate, BP, respiratory... all normal.

After a few last checks, Sylia left the steady hum of the testing machinery behind and sat down at her desk in the Data Room. Touching a single key on her computer's

console, the darkened monitor came back to life, displaying the document she had been studying before Blackie's arrival.

* * * *

"Do you understand Leomund? If you don't then I will explain it again. It's important that we--"

"No," Leomund finally responded, trying his best to hide his growing fears. "I understand. Perfectly."

Quincy nodded. "Good. Then when can we begin the procedure?"

Leomund hesitated before answering, his thoughts whirling as he tried to find an escape. But it was too late for that now. He had been lured in with the promise of unlimited funding and a secure environment within which he could pursue his life's dream. Now that dream was no longer his, not even the same dream he had originally conceived.

"I still need to review the data you've provided, but pending that, as soon as you're ready sir."

Quincy nodded again. "I am ready. This shell has outlived its usefulness."

As Leomund looked on, his employer released the wooden box under his arm and pushed it gently across the desk towards Leomund. "I am entrusting this with you now Leomund. This is no less important than any other part of the procedure and should not be considered secondary. If anything should happen to this, then everything we have achieved up to this point will have been for nothing. I need you Leomund. Only you can help me now." Quincy capped the statement with a steady gaze that was intended to impress upon Leomund the significance of the item in the box. But Leomund needed no such assurance. From his employer's detailed description of the device, its deployment would be crucial to maintaining absolute control over the next phase of the project.

Leomund nodded, and dismissed himself.

As Leomund made his way back to his own room, the strange wooden box under his arm, his thoughts became more and more anxious as he reconsidered the options available to him. With the four prototype cyborgs away, escape was now an option he could seriously entertain. But there was something about Quincy that unnerved him, something that ultimately deterred him from thinking about leaving. As illogical as it seemed, he could not help but think that Quincy, even if he was an old man and obviously very ill, could still stop him from leaving somehow. Much like the device he was carrying, it was like some unseen force that could reach across vast distances to control his thoughts, his fears, his memories, and his dreams. With that kind of power, he did not want to be on the outside when it was unleashed.

Leomund set the box down on his desk and fell into his chair with a sigh. After resting his eyes for a moment, he turned to face his computer and activated the terminal. To his right, lying on his desk where Quincy had left it, was a data cartridge labeled "MASTER - 707 HIGH". Leomund shrugged and inserted the data cartridge into a loading slot. There was no turning back now.

* * * *

7-28 sat motionless in his office chair, trying to conserve every ounce of energy until required. His boomer shell was rapidly approaching the end of its life span. The cyborgs had failed to capture the subject. And Leomund's confidence in the new project seemed to be waning, if he had ever had confidence in the first place.

No matter, he thought to himself. It won't be long now. And when the procedure is completed, his mission would finally be within his grasp again. All of the time spent waiting and depending on humans could be finally reclaimed. His god would finally be proud, and his own ambitions could be pursued to their fullest extent, with no one to stand in his way this time.

V7-28 closed his eyes, his non-essential processes shutting down one by one until he was left in a state not unlike what humans refer to as sleep. But as the last processes finished closing out, his thoughts were emptied completely. Unable to worry, and unable to dream, V7-28 slept without a care in the world.

Part 22: OUT OF MIND...

Sylia?

Blackie opened his eyes to darkness so complete that he was unsure if he'd opened his eyes at all. He blinked a few times uncertainly, but the darkness remained. As he reached out experimentally to find something to hold on to he began to fall.

Although he could not see where he was the sensation of falling from a great height was unmistakable. His arms and legs began to flail about instinctively, blindly resisting the inevitable as his fear multiplied. Seconds raced by, the fear of certain death now overwhelming any random thoughts of survival.

Falling, falling, falling...

Wait a sec... just wait...

Why couldn't he hear his screams?

Total silence...

Suddenly his fall ended, without the expected bone jarring impact, and he could feel some kind of flat surface beneath him as he caught his breath. The pounding in his heart and the nervous energy in his limbs gradually subsided until he had gathered enough courage to attempt to stand up.

'No,' he thought to himself as he stood. Somehow he knew that he would not fall now.

"Sylia!" he called out, this time hearing his own voice very clearly. But there was no response, nor any kind of echo to gauge the size of the room he was in. If he was in a room at all.

Drifting in from a great distance as if carried on a warm summer wind, Blackie heard the sound of a woman's voice. She was singing but he could not make out the words or where it was coming from.

"I don't... but if I can hear her, why can't I--"

As the last words were spoken, the darkness opened up like a curtain, pulled back and gathered up until Blackie could see the familiar furnishings of his apartment in front of him. The darkness did not leave him completely though. Only enough to leave an indistinct and ever shifting frame of shadow at the outer edges of his eyesight. Directly in front of him he saw a door. And from beyond the door, he could hear the sound of water splashing and a woman singing.

Priss?

Blackie moved forward towards the door, not feeling his footsteps as he drew closer. His hand suddenly shot into view, reaching for the door handle.

Turning, turning, turning...

The door finally opened, and the cool night wind was whipping at his legs and arms as his bike propelled him down a familiar highway. The street lamps shone down on him, their rhythmically alternating yellow beams delivering him from shadow to light, as if hand over hand. The streetlights arced away into the distance, forming a curving horizon of amber and midnight blue that went on forever.

Riding, riding, riding...

Something suddenly broke the horizon. Something vast. Looming over the lighted city that now stretched out before him like an inverted starry dome. Something

dominating, something quietly powerful, something so massive that it could not be hidden. Yet he still could not see it. Raising his eyes from the lights of the city, he saw a shadow rising above the lights, almost obscured by the glow of the city and the deep blue of the evening sky. In the distance, a triangular feature, rising into the night with such grace and gradually sloping sides that Blackie did not think anything of it at first. As his eyes eventually fixed upon the shadow far off in the distance, he felt what his sight could not reveal. A vault of captive emotions, of growing desperation, of incredible faith, of intense hatred, and most strongly, great ambition.

His bike was gone his legs now propelling him forward ever faster towards the shadow. But no matter how fast he ran, the mountain of black maintained its distance from him.

* * * *

The steady stream of numbers coming back from the analyzer cascaded down the monitor screens like a waterfall of cathode green lending a flickering effect to the dim lighting in the data room. Syla looked up briefly to glance over at the data stream, then turned her attention back to her computer and resumed typing. Reaching the end of the paragraph she was working on, she saved the new document and read back what she had typed.

MIND TRANSFER SIDE EFFECTS - TREATMENT
09.23.38 - S. Stingray

Having undergone the transfer process myself as a child, and after possibly experiencing some of the side effects described in the original documentation, I have decided to begin researching alternative treatment of the side effects.

Based on self-observations and first-hand observation of another recipient I believe the answer may lie in the transfer process itself. Further testing will be necessary but it is my hope that the side effects can be eliminated or at least decreased in their intensity.

Not completely satisfied, she made a few minor adjustments, read them carefully and then saved the document one more time. As she removed the data cartridge and placed it on her desk, the physio analysis machine in the other room began to beep softly. Syla took one last look at the numbers that had finally halted their descent, and then left the data room to wake Blackie.

* * * *

Blackie turned away from the shadow in the distance, feeling something grasping at his arms.

A blinding light abruptly surrounded him, causing him to raise his arm instinctively to shield his eyes. Slowly, as if turned down by a dial, the glare subsided until he could lower his arm. The light had now changed hue, dividing into shifting beams of deep emerald green shining down from above. He was standing on the stage at the Hot Legs, the worn wooden stage floorboards feeling strangely familiar under his feet. Loud music pounded the air around him, but his guitar was not in his hands. He looked around the stage for the instrument becoming more and more frantic until the tugging at his arms pulled him away from his search.

Peering through the smoke and light in front of him a silhouette appeared gradually becoming more clearly defined. The silhouette of a woman. It must be Priss, he reasoned, but her back was to him. His missing guitar momentarily forgotten, Blackie smiled and stepped forward to stand beside the silhouette to enjoy the sensation of reliving such a memorable moment.

Just as quickly as it had appeared Blackie's smile vanished as the silhouette turned to face him. It was Sylia. And she was singing to him...

"Blackie, wake up. Blackie..."

Blackie opened his eyes to see Sylia standing over him. "Sylia, it was you."

Sylia blinked as she helped Blackie to sit up. "It was?"

Blackie nodded emphatically. "Yes. And you were singing."

"Singing?"

"Yes."

Sylia looked carefully at Blackie's eyes studying the dilation of the pupils. "Me? Singing? Hm. Then you were dreaming I take it?"

Blackie nodded again. "Yeah, but it was so different than any other dream I've had. I was like, in total control. Well, not at first anyway. But after a while I could hear everything and I could see everything, like Priss, and then you. But there was one thing I saw that stayed hidden and--"

"Hidden? What was it?" Sylia interrupted, her curiosity now peaked.

"Well," Blackie continued his voice still full of excitement. "I wasn't really sure. But it looked like a mountain way off in the distance. Really far away. So far away I could never quite reach it."

"I see," Sylia remarked. "Sounds like an interesting dream."

Blackie grinned. "Hell yeah! It was like I was right there too! I'd swear I was right there."

Sylia smiled gently and gestured for Blackie to step down from the analysis chair.

"But there was one really weird thing that happened..." Blackie added, a touch of concern in his words.

"Yes?" Sylia said, as she turned off the power on the instrument panel hovering over the analysis chair.

"My guitar..."

"What about it?"

"I couldn't find it. Anywhere."

"No? Why were you looking for it?"

"I... I guess... well it just should've been there," Blackie replied, the finality of the answer creating a thoughtful silence as Sylia led him back to the rest lounge.

"Dreams are very unpredictable, aren't they?" Sylia eventually asked, taking a seat. "Speaking of which... is the band playing again tonight?"

Blackie shook his head. "Nope. The bar owner just booked us for the one night."

"Hm. That's kind of unusual, isn't it?" Sylia remarked.

"Eh, well," Blackie replied uncomfortably, "The owner wasn't really sure how well we'd do. Considering the changes and all..."

Sylia raised an eyebrow. "I don't think I follow you. The changes were for the better weren't they?"

Blackie tried his best to smile through his response, "Oh yeah, but... Priss... well, she hasn't been doing anything lately ya know? He wasn't sure--I mean the bar owner wasn't sure--that she was still up to it."

Sylia stared down at the piece of black armor still lying on the table in front of them and said nothing.

"But I told him that Priss was still in top shape! I knew she could still do it." Blackie added emphatically.

Sylia nodded gently. "You and Priss... you're getting along well aren't you?"

Blackie smiled and nodded. "She's great. We get along great."

Sylia looked up at Blackie's smiling face. "I'm glad."

The thoughtful silence returned as Sylia contemplated how to ask her next question. She already knew how Priss would react, but without him--

"So how did the analysis go?" Blackie said abruptly. "Am I in shape or do I need to cut back on the burgers?"

Sylia smiled. "No, you're in excellent shape, but--"

Blackie waited for a moment, expecting Sylia to continue. "But?"

Looking up suddenly as if snapping out of a trance, Sylia shook her head and stood up. "Nothing. It's nothing. I think maybe it's time we called it a day don't you?"

Blackie looked down at the armor on the table and then back to Sylia feeling as if there was something more to say. "I guess, uh, sure. Can I come back tomorrow though?"

Sylia turned off the lights in the lounge. "Of course. Three o'clock then?"

Blackie nodded, then headed for the stairway up to the garage.

* * * *

"Isn't it amazing?" Nene asked, her voice echoing off the walls as she walked towards the middle of the immense room.

Mackie stood near the doorway, still in shock.

"Heh, they all do that when they see this room," Oto commented to himself with a grin, locking the door behind them. "Go ahead Fun Boy, take a look. You may never get another chance."

Windowless and devoid of any kind of furnishings, it was typical of most storage buildings in the area. A packed dirt floor, several constantly running humidifiers, and stacks of empty wooden crates nearly completed the picture. What made this room unique were the rows of heavy-duty metal shelving that reached to the ceiling of the twenty foot high room, each holding several hundred rectangular boxes of widely varying sizes, shapes, colors... and functions.

Mackie finally snapped out of his trance as Nene latched onto his arm again. "Look over here! This one is still in mint shape!" Mackie slowly reached out to touch the metal and plastic with trembling fingers. As he wandered through the maze of shelves, he spotted a several models that he had only read about on Pri-Net[1]. Machines that were revered as legendary for their unique, almost sentient, capabilities when trying to acquire information. Machines that he had only dreamed about. And here they were, all in one place, real to the touch and mythical to behold.

Occasionally Nene would call out to him from a few rows away excitedly, urging him to come see a particular model that she found utterly irresistible. As their browsing reached a fevered peak, a feeling came over Mackie that the one he was really looking for was here. Somewhere, around the next corner maybe? It was too much to hope...

And then he saw it.

Oto was sitting on a crate against the wall enjoying a cigarette when suddenly he heard Mackie cry out. "Ah, looks like Fun Boy found something," he grinned, extinguishing his half-finished smoke under his heel.

"What is it Mackie? What did you find?" Nene inquired sensing Mackie's excitement.

Oto made his way through the maze until he found the pair both hunched over a large, dusty, black and blue cube. He smirked. "Well Nene your boyfriend gets points for his taste in appliances."

Nene blushed and laughed. "Oto! He's not my boyfriend! We're just--"

"Is this... is this really...?" Mackie interrupted, his excitement causing his hand to tremble as he pointed.

Nene crossed her arms and glared at Mackie, as if she were waiting for him to say something.

Oto chuckled as he watched Nene fume, then turned to Mackie and gave him a nudge with his elbow. "You may have a good eye for the toys F.B. but it's not so sharp when it comes to seeing between the lines."

Mackie's expression quickly changed to utter confusion as he studied Oto's face for the meaning of the cryptic comment. "Huh?"

Nene placed her hands on her hips, looked down at the ground and then sighed.

Oto shook his head and laughed again. "Yeah kid, it's a '33 Kazan SatDriver Cube. All original components, plus a few hard to find upgrades that the military can't even get now. You uh... know how to use one of those things?"

Nene suddenly piped up in Mackie's defense, surprising Oto. "When it comes to satellite linking, Mackie is the best there is."

Mackie looked over at Nene with wide eyes and reddening cheeks. "Nene..."

Oto blinked. "Serious?"

Nene nodded, then added with a sigh, "He may not be very quick when it comes to ground communications, but he knows his satellite stuff."

Oto laughed out loud and winked at Nene. "Roger that. Hmm, you surprise me Fun Boy. I had you pegged as a cowboy but I guess I was wrong."

Mackie looked at Oto, then Nene, and then back to Oto as the two continued to laugh.

"Eh, I know I missed something there," he muttered. "But uh, how much is the Kazan anyway?"

Oto's laugh subsided very quickly, his outward boyish appearance suddenly disappearing as he sized up Mackie. "You know how much this thing is worth? Hm?"

Mackie nodded once. "I have an idea."

The computer merchant scratched his chin and took a few steps away, then turned back suddenly to face Mackie with a very serious look. "Then make me an offer kid. And don't insult me."

Mackie smiled confidently for the first time since meeting Oto. "Oh don't worry about that. I think I know someone who can cover the cost and then some. But she'll want to know everything about who she is dealing with. For instance, this stuff isn't hot is it?"

Oto grinned, suddenly sensing a bigger deal in the works. "No. It's all completely legit. I'm a collector, not a thief, right Nene? Now, who is this buyer you're referring to?"

* * * *

Leon took a last drag on the remains of his cigarette as he stared out from the balcony at the city in the distance. An evening train rumbled past the apartment building, packed with commuters heading home late from work. As the familiar roar faded away, he tossed his cigarette into the ashtray under his chair, then picked up the glass of beer at his elbow and drained the last mouthful.

Setting the empty glass back down on the table, he picked up the yellow file folder in his lap and began idly flipping through contents again. The light spilling out onto the dark balcony from the living room was not nearly enough to read by, but it did not deter the former AD Police officer from instinctively noting other important aspects of the folder. The well thumbed pages, the orderly alignment of the documents, the dried coffee stain on the cover. The tiny details that he was trained to look for. He stared at the folder for a long time and then slammed it down on the table beside him and cursed.

"Hey, you okay?" Linna called from inside the apartment.

"Yeah," Leon lied, lighting another cigarette. "Just great".

Linna slid the balcony screen door aside and poked her head through. "Sure?"

The former AD Police officer rested his head against the back of his chair and closed his eyes.

Linna paused for a moment to gauge Leon's state of mind then quietly closed the screen door behind her.

"Oof!" Leon exclaimed as he opened his eyes in surprise to see Linna now sitting astride his waist.

"Hey, I'm not that heavy," Linna stated with a smirk as she gently pressed into Leon's chest and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Leon smiled, enjoying the comforting feeling of Linna's body against his in the darkness. "I know. But I'm not sure the chair knows."

Linna sat up and glared at Leon, the curves of her face lined with the dim glow from the apartment. She slapped his chest, trying her best to hide a mischievous smile. "Smart ass. Let the chair speak for itself."

The two sat still and waited, hearing only the familiar sounds of the suburbs at dinnertime.

"Smart chair," Leon said with a tired grin.

"Very smart," Linna agreed. "It knows when to keep its mouth shut. You on the other hand..."

Leon's expression clouded over suddenly.

"What? Linna implored, her hands gently squeezing Leon's shoulders.

Leon shook his head in frustration and took a long drag on his cigarette. "It doesn't matter Hon. I can't do anything about it anyway."

"Ehh? Leon McNichol giving up on something? This sounds serious!" Linna responded firmly. "Is it work?"

Leon just nodded.

"ADP?"

Leon looked up into Linna's eyes, then nodded again.

Linna sighed. "How long do you think you can go on like this? You know they can't reinstate the ADP without a serious threat of boomers going crazy in the--"

"They ARE boomers for fuck's sake, and they're still out there!" Leon ejected impulsively. "Damn, I'm sorry Hon," he quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to..."

Linna nodded slowly as she looked into Leon's tired eyes, seeing for the first time just how much this was affecting him. It had been difficult to adjust at first, when the AD Police had been redesigned as a Bio Technical Crimes division of the N-Police. But Leon had taken on the challenge the same way that he dealt with any new problem, and those first few years had kept him busy. But in the past few months the BTC had been idle most of the time as the biological crime rate dropped significantly. A case of doing their jobs too well perhaps. And though Linna felt a little better knowing that Leon wasn't in the line of fire as often as he used to be, she also knew that he did not like to sit on his butt. He was a man who needed something to do with his energy and ambition. Unfortunately the biological criminals of the world weren't obliging him.

"Listen tough guy," Linna began, making sure she had Leon's undivided attention. "If you believe that this city needs the ADP back, then maybe you should push the issue this time."

Leon shook his head. "I've tried, believe me. The chief won't help, and he'd have a real cardiac if I went over his head. I just don't know what to--" Leon stopped talking abruptly, his lips suddenly sealed tight between Linna's fingers.

"Is this really the Leon McNichol I know?" Linna asked, her eyes blazing in the dim light. "Is this the same person that used to jump into a fight with a combat class boomer with nothing but a big gun and dark glasses?"

Leon grinned sheepishly.

"And is this the former ADP officer who took on a battlemover with a K-12?"

Leon twitched at the memory.

"And is this the same Leon McNichol..." Linna paused for effect, "That took down a superboomer with one bullet to the head? Hmm? Is it?"

Linna looked deep into Leon's eyes as he tried to avert her intent gaze. "Look at me Leon."

Leon sighed, then stared into Linna's darkened eyes, held fast by the intensity of her plea as she spoke. "It doesn't matter if the people that died were military personnel or not. They were still human beings hon. We weren't enough to stop those boomers from killing innocent people this time. But maybe someone else could have. Someone like you."

"You don't understand Linna," Leon began to argue, but again he was stopped.

"I think I understand quite well actually," Linna countered, the edge in her voice throwing Leon off guard. "I was there, remember? And I saw what those cyborgs or boomers or whatever the hell they are, did. And they killed those two ambulance drivers as well. Someone... you... has to make sure they don't hurt innocent people again. This city needs you again."

A warm breeze washed over the balcony as Leon silently absorbed what Linna was telling him. But he still wasn't convinced. It had been so long, and there were so many hurdles, so many committees to fight with, and last but not least, one division chief who wanted a rest.

"I believe in you," Linna suddenly whispered, breaking Leon's train of thought. Leaning forward she kissed him gently on the forehead, then broke their cozy embrace and headed inside.

For a long while Leon sat alone on the balcony listening to the nighttime sounds, watching the stars come out. Finally, he stood up and looked towards the glow of the downtown core trying to identify the individual skyscrapers that rose up and got lost in the darkness. "Maybe you believe in me, but will they?"

Part 23: ...OUT OF SIGHT

A pair of headlights played across the pothole-infested road leading into the industrial heart of Timex City then suddenly winked out transforming the car into a rolling shadow. The driver guided the car off the main road into a narrow back alley and expertly navigated in the darkness somehow managing to avoid several metal garbage dumpsters and a pile of wooden skids. The shadowy car slowed in front of a row of wide steel doors, many battered and rusted, one of which was already lifting automatically for the car to enter.

"Show off," Linna said with a snicker as she undid her seat belt.

Sylia hinted at a smile and killed the ignition, then tapped the dashboard. "Sorry, but this model didn't come with the navigation system."

"Life is tough huh?" Linna responded with a smirk. "At least your car starts when you want it to."

The rusted door lowered automatically behind them, resonating with a hollow metallic sound as it met the cement floor and plunging the cramped garage into a dim gray darkness.

Linna stepped out of the red Mercedes, locked and closed the passenger-side door, then pulled her jacket close around her with a shiver. "Looks like summer is really over now," she said glumly as she struggled to ignore the chilly October night air.

Sylia stood staring at the front of her car for a moment, not responding to Linna's comment until the headlights silently flickered to assure her that the alarm was properly activated. "And it's about time, considering how hot it's been for so long."

Linna sighed in mock disgust, as she imagined Sylia still perspiring as she fanned herself in her air-conditioned penthouse apartment. "It wasn't *that* hot! Besides, it must be nice to have an air conditioner."

Sylia opened the back door leading out of the tiny one car garage to the alleyway behind and gave Linna a knowing look as she replied. "Well, they're nice when they work."

"That's true," Linna agreed before their conversation was swallowed up temporarily by the rhythmic metallic pounding drone of the factory zone.

Above and all around them, pin points of sodium light marked the various factory silos and material storage towers that defined the chaotic Timex City skyline. Viewed from above, the maze of twisting alleys and angled side streets that snaked between the factories seemed to defy any kind of logic, making it difficult for someone to follow anyone in a car much less on foot. But despite hiding her car and using the back streets Sylia still felt a strange urge to steal a glance over her shoulder every few minutes as she and Linna walked the four short blocks to Raven's Garage.

"So... Nene has the night off again?" Linna eventually said, a hint of a complaint in her voice. "You sure this isn't some kind of favoritism towards a future sister-in-law?"

"Linna, really. They are just dating," Sylia chided. "But if you must know, Nene and Mackie are busy setting up some new computer equipment they just acquired that may be very helpful."

"Sure they are," Linna giggled, then clasped her hands together. "Oh, I can see them now! Gazing into each other's eyes over a hot circuit board. How romantic!"

Sylia politely covered her mouth to hide her amusement.

Linna continued to poke fun at the absent computer "lovers" as Syla unlocked the back door to Raven's Garage. After letting Linna in, the Knight Saber's leader paused in the dim back alleyway for a moment, standing very still in the shadows as if listening for something. But the ever-present rumble of the surrounding factories droned on, broken only by the harsh clanging of a passing truck loaded with metal pipe. Syla glanced at her watch, then scanned the alley one last time before finally closing the door behind her.

"How is Priss... doing?" Syla asked as the two descended the stairs to the training facility. "I spoke with her on the phone this afternoon, but I would have thought that she would be more cheerful considering how well things seem to be going for her lately."

Linna shrugged. "I don't know. She hasn't said anything to me. But then that's par for the course I suppose."

Syla flicked on the lights for the control room then looked at her watch again. 'Par for the course and late as usual,' she thought to herself.

While Linna changed into her training suit, the Knight Saber's leader began programming the control console for the evening's training programs. So focused was she on the complex task that she did not see a light come on directly behind her.

"So he was here then."

Syla started slightly. Turning, she saw Priss standing in the doorway to the rest lounge holding an empty water bottle in her hand.

"Priss... I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry I'm late," Priss snapped. "Did you ask him then?"

"No."

"But you're still going to?"

Syla had paused to consider her reply when Linna returned from the changing room. "Priss! So how did the show go the other night? I would've been there but Leon and I were--"

"Sure Linna," Priss cut her off, her gaze still trained on Syla as the Knight Saber's leader calmly went back to programming the training scenarios.

Linna blinked. If she didn't know how Priss was doing before, she sure knew now, and all it took were two simple words.

* * * *

"So what exactly does this thing do anyway?" Nene asked casually as she watched Mackie work. "I mean it looks cool and everything but..."

Mackie finished connecting the last of several thick cables to the back of the odd looking black and blue plastic box then studied his handy work as he answered. "Well, with a stock SatDriver Cube you can link up to just about any Low Earth Orbit satellite that passes by without needing to put in any access codes. It grabs the codes out of the stream for you." Mackie paused for dramatic effect, but seeing that Nene wasn't visibly impressed, continued. "But it really gets fun when you link into the geosynchronous satellites and start cutting into their video streams. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff they carry sometimes!"

Nene raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

Mackie gulped, realizing he had said more than he should have. "Uh, well, sometimes they broadcast military conference signals on encrypted channels, and other top secret stuff. But, eh... that's not really important actually."

"I see," Nene said dryly, noting how Mackie seemed to squirm a bit under her scrutiny. Well that doesn't sound so hard. In fact I bet I could do all of that with my computer."

Mackie nodded, happy to be changing the subject. "Oh sure! Someone with your skills could probably hack into the signal stream of a satellite. And that's what the SatDriver was designed to do, primarily. But... you remember Oto mentioned there were some hard-to-find upgrades included with the cube?"

Nene nodded the early signs of mild interest beginning to show in her expression.

Mackie patted one of the covered circuit blocks that jutted out of the side of the cube. "This... is an image displacer."

"What's that?" Nene inquired as she moved closer, her curiosity now peaked.

Mackie paused for effect again, his efforts at trying to impress Nene apparently being rewarded. "An image displacer can alter the video stream coming from a satellite in such a way that people, things, places, anything, can be removed or changed and then put back into the stream in real time as you watch it." Mackie smiled smugly.

"So?" Nene asked, edging a little closer.

Mackie sighed. "Soooo, if you remember the last time you fought those weird boomers, whoever was controlling them was using a satellite link to watch what was going on."

"So? Nene asked again, as her hip pressed gently against Mackie's thigh.

Mackie grasped Nene by her shoulders in exasperation. "SOOOOOO, the next time you have to face those boomers, with this thing I can seriously mess with their video feed!"

"So what are you going to do next?" Nene asked, a slight tremor in her voice.

"Huh?" Mackie's eyes widened a bit in surprise at the odd question.

Nene said nothing, and closed her eyes.

Mackie's eyes widened a little more as he looked at his hands on Nene's shoulders.

Nene leaned in a little closer.

Mackie stared at Nene's lips, and gulped.

The vidphone suddenly began to beep.

"I'll get it!" Mackie shouted, releasing his grip on Nene and nearly stumbling as he raced to pick up the call. "Hello? Oh, hi Sis! Yeah we're hooking up now.. UH.. ER... I MEAN WE'RE HOOKING IT UP NOW!"

Nene sighed. "Thanks for nothing Oto."

* * * *

MIND TRANSFER SIDE EFFECTS - TREATMENT

Tuesday October 12th 2038 4:29 P.M. - S. Stingray

The data I have collected so far has been intriguing but inconclusive. Though the second recipient has never made any claims to me about side effects from the consciousness transfer process that must have occurred when we were

exposed to my father's data cartridges, this is most likely due to our limited discussion time. I am currently developing several tests which may help reveal whether the second recipient has suffered from the side effects without being too intrusive.

* * * *

Muscles tensed and perspiring heavily, Priss scrambled away from the hol-opponent to re-evaluate her strategy. The holographic image adjusted instantly to her every move, pursuing her relentlessly and methodically until she was backed up against a wall. Eyes narrowed and jaws clenched, Priss quickly realized she would have to forget about strategy now to search her mind for some kind of escape.

A quick glance to the control room caught Sylia and Linna looking on. The intent looks in their eyes told her that this was important, that they expected her to conquer this exercise, that they **needed** her to conquer it. Sylia had said, practically demanded, that they would all need to step up their training if they were going to face their new targets with any chance of success. And now Priss was facing a test scenario she had only faced once before. At that time, lasting for less than a minute at Level 11 had been deemed a success, but now, after five minutes of evasive maneuvers it was time for her to create some kind of attack plan or her new endurance record would be a hollow victory.

With nowhere else to go Priss instinctively ducked down low as the hol-opponent lashed out. Dropping to the floor, she lay flat on her stomach and rolled underneath the unsuspecting hologram. Once clear she quickly kicked up and out into a fighting stance and took a few deep breaths.

Just as she started to think through the beginnings of a plan of attack the hol-opponent wheeled and came at her again, pink arms thrusting out impossibly fast in what seemed like a random sequence. Ducking down low again she attempted to escape, but the hol-opponent followed her this time. As Priss rolled away she glimpsed a pink arm just missing her foot by a hair. Next time, she knew, it would not miss.

Priss circled the room, racking her brain for some kind of edge. But as her mind became increasingly panicked, her thoughts wheeled away from her predicament to other things. Quick vivid flashes, of moments gone by. Bright spotlights, spinning motorcycle wheels, a black guitar, a warm smile, a reassuring embrace...

A loud beep echoed throughout the chamber signaling an end to the scenario. Priss blinked, and then refocused her eyes in time to see the hol-opponent's outstretched "fist" retract and fade away from her.

Exhausted, Priss dropped to her knees and swore in disgust.

"That's enough for tonight Priss," Sylia said through the intercom. "You've done very well and you've surpassed your old record by a good margin. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

But as Sylia watched Linna enter the test chamber to help Priss to her feet, she thought to herself, 'One step forward, two steps back.'

* * * *

MIND TRANSFER SIDE EFFECTS - TREATMENT

Wednesday October 13th 2038 4:34 P.M. - S. Stingray

Testing continues with the second recipient. Still nothing conclusive. The newly devised tests are not divulging anything new in the way of useful data. The more testing I do the more I become convinced that the only way to get any useful data would be to observe the transfer process itself. But considering my currently limited resources and lack of an available recipient, not to mention the moral dilemma I have with the procedure itself, this avenue of experimentation is currently out of the question.

The second recipient and I have spent a little more time together, but discussion of the side effects seems to always get sidetracked. Still, each opportunity I get to talk with the second recipient leaves me in awe of what my father has accomplished. I believe that Blackie is what, or rather who, my father originally had in mind when he began his work on artificial life forms. Blackie is a complex being with real hopes and ambitions, deep feelings and emotions. And he has fallen in love, the concept of which still amazes me. What makes him seem human to me though are his quirks, such as his strange habit of switching subjects for no apparent reason, or his obsession with dreams (today he mentioned something after the testing about running towards a mountain). But as he continues to evolve and grow, I can see that he will someday become bored with his current ambitions. From the physical training and testing it's clear that he loves to be challenged, pushed, driven.

It is not without some concern though, that I hope whatever challenge he faces next, he will not forget the challenges he has already faced. To lose what he has worked so hard for would be a tragedy that I don't think I, or his closest friend, could face again.

* * * *

The now familiar scenario ending beep echoed throughout the simulation chamber once again. As the hologram faded, and the flashing images that had returned to distract her vanished, Priss dropped to her knees and pounded the mat with her fists. "DAMN IT! DOES IT HAVE TO BEEP LIKE THAT EVERY FUCKING TIME?!"

An uneasy silence followed as another exhausting night of training began to wind down.

"Next time Priss. I know you can do it. But you need to focus more," Syla offered through the intercom.

Priss raised her head up slowly. Her heart still pounding in her chest and her eyes half hidden under sweat-soaked bangs she muttered something that the microphone in the simulation chamber could not relay clearly.

As she began resetting the simulation programs Sylia's look of reassurance quickly dissolved into a frown.

Linna stared through the glass into the simulation chamber at her exhausted friend still kneeling on the floor, and then headed for the door. "I'm next," she suddenly announced, leaving Sylia alone in the control room.

Sylia watched thoughtfully for a moment as Linna entered the test chamber and knelt down beside Priss to offer her a bottle of water. Reaching across the console the Knight Saber's leader quietly flicked the switch labeled INTERCOM to the OFF position.

"Are you okay?" Linna asked.

"Yeah. Just need... to catch my breath," Priss responded, still breathing heavily and looking a little dazed.

"You'll get through it next time for sure," Linna said with a hopeful smile. "Like Sylia says, focus."

"Yeah right, focus," Priss grumbled.

"Well, now it's my turn to kick some hologram-butt," Linna stated confidently as she offered to help Priss to her feet. But Priss abruptly brushed off Linna's aid and slowly stood to face the glass that looked back into the console room. She pointed at the glass and said in an angry tone. "No, I think it's her turn."

Sylia continued working away on loading the next simulation program, oblivious to Priss's demand. A very loud thump against the plexiglas shook her from her work. Looking out she saw Priss facing her, fist still on the glass and an angry look in her eyes. For a moment the two were frozen in a staring contest, until Sylia calmly reached over and flicked on the Intercom. "What's wrong Priss?"

"It's your turn," Priss replied.

"Priss, why don't I try--" Linna began.

"No," Priss interrupted, then turned to Linna with a stormy glare. "I want to see her fight it."

"I train using the same simulation scenarios as the rest of you, Priss" Sylia finally responded. "But I'm the only one who knows how to load the program so--"

"I've watched you," Priss interrupted again. "I'll load the program."

The two stood staring at each other through the glass for a moment, then Sylia casually slipped off her white lab jacket to reveal her softsuit underneath. "Please stay there Priss," Sylia said while making a few last adjustments to the console. "Linna you can run the program. Start me at Level 11 please, first scenario."

The door to the simulation chamber opened and after receiving some whispered instructions Linna traded places with Sylia. Priss took a long swig of her water and stepped back to lean against the side wall. After setting the bottle down at her feet she crossed her arms and looked on intently as Sylia limbered up with a few stretching exercises.

After a few tense minutes, Sylia calmly took her position in the middle of the room, assumed a fighting stance, and fixed her gaze directly ahead. Linna gave the OK sign and Sylia nodded. The hol-opponent quietly materialized.

In the last moment of silence, Priss studied Sylia's uncanny statue-like stance. Not a blink of an eye, or a single waver of her arms. Not even one last deep breath.

From the intercom came Linna's voice.

"Go."

The pink translucent hologram suddenly came to "life" bearing eight elastic limbs that flashed out and retracted in a random sequence. Sylia broke her ready stance and stepped lithely to one side, her gaze fixed squarely on the hologram as it reacted instantly to her movement. Programmed to follow its opponent around the room, learning its weaknesses and analyzing its defenses as the simulation progressed, the hologram hovered above the floor with an eerie ghost-like presence. But its most intimidating features were its mechanical tenacity and a lack of ability to display any emotion.

As Priss looked on from the side she immediately noticed a few differences in Sylia's fighting style from her own. So much so that Priss wondered why she had never noticed them before. The first dissimilarity she observed was that the Knight Saber's leader would occasionally move in very close, sometimes even with the same reckless abandon that she would often exhibit herself, but Sylia never allowed herself get into a position where she could be pinned or left without an escape route. No matter how hard the hologram pressed her towards a corner or up against a wall, Sylia always had a way out.

Without looking away, Priss reached down and picked up the water bottle at her feet. Taking a swig and then wiping her mouth, she watched the combatants move around the room, the hologram pressing harder as it sought to commence its first organized offensive. But as the strange dance continued, and Sylia commenced her own offense with a few quick jabs, it slowly dawned on Priss that the hologram was not the only one analyzing its opponent's weaknesses. Every movement that Sylia made was purposeful and intended to produce a reaction. Priss took another drink of water, the bottle being raised and lowered much slower this time.

Then Priss felt the exercise suddenly shift pace as both combatants began to press for a "killing strike", taking more chances and moving more aggressively. The hol-opponent suddenly lashed out with three of its appendages at the same time, two of which curved and bent to the side creating a depth illusion designed to look to its opponent like the attacks were delayed. Priss tipped her water bottle up once again, but then held it to her lips expecting the match to end right then and there.

Somehow sensing the deception, Sylia quickly cocked her head to one side like a cat, and then bent over backwards until her hands touched the floor. All three of the hologram's arms swung through the air in an unbroken arc where Sylia's head had been a moment before. Priss shook her head in disbelief then glanced into the control room to see Linna with her mouth open.

Sylia completed the back flip, then took a step away from the hologram and assumed her fighting stance again. The hologram paused its forward motion for a moment as it slowly began to rotate, with all eight arms now spinning about its body. Priss smirked recognizing the unique maneuver immediately from her own initial attempts at trying to get past Level 11. She began to gyrate the half-empty water bottle in her hand in a slow circle as she watched the hol-opponent advance, the water swishing around the edges of the plastic cylinder in an ever-increasing vortex.

The hologram pressed forward yet again intent on decimating its opponent with a full out assault, but Sylia did not falter. Priss studied her eyes at that moment, noting the clarity and the complete concentration on what she was doing. It was clear that nothing else mattered but this moment right here and now.

Then the Knight Saber's leader abruptly took several steps back from the whirling translucent mass, as if she was going to retreat. 'OK, now she is going to screw up for sure,' Priss thought to her self with a grin as she continued to agitate the bottle of water in her hand.

Sylia suddenly charged forward headlong, looking very much like a gymnast preparing to go corner to corner. Then, just as it looked as if she would run straight into the spinning hologram, she planted both feet firmly into the mat and stood perfectly still. The hologram halted its methodical advance as it attempted to track its opponent's rapid forward movement. Sylia watched the puzzled hologram for a moment then broke from her frozen state to spin with a perfectly timed, precise, circular motion that brought her right leg around to make full contact with one of the hologram's mid-section strike zones. A soft bell tone signaled that the exercise was over.

The hologram faded away as Sylia slowly lowered her leg to the floor.

The half-empty bottle of water suddenly slipped from Priss's hand and fell to the floor.

"What the f--?" Priss said thinking out loud, still trying to comprehend what had just happened. "You ran straight at it... and then... it froze?"

"Linna, could you give us a few minutes?" Sylia said, wiping the sweat from her brow with her forearm.

Linna nodded and retired to the rest lounge reluctantly knowing she was leaving Priss and Sylia alone in the test chamber with a thick layer of tension between them.

"Okay," Priss continued, sounding more than a little annoyed, "What the hell just happened Sylia? Because what I saw did not make any fucking sense at all."

"I completed the exercise Priss," Sylia replied as she walked in a slow circle around the room to cool down. "And you will too eventually... if you can manage to keep your thoughts and feelings clear."

"But how the hell am I supposed to do that if you insist on bringing Blackie in to this? I feel like I am being jerked around." Priss shot back angrily.

"So you admit you have feelings for him?" Sylia said, staring hard at Priss now.

"Yeah... sure. I have... feelings for him," Priss said haltingly. "I'm not sure what they are just yet or where they are going, but I care about him."

Sylia nodded. "And during your last exercise, did you think about him at all?"

Priss thought back to her last experience with the hol-opponent. How she struggled just to keep up, to stay "alive", to come up with any kind of serious attack plan. It had never been so difficult before. It had always been simple, cut and dried, easy. But now it was as if something was holding her back. Okay, so maybe she did think about him once or twice. But why should she have to change if someone else was the problem?

"Yeah, I did. Briefly. But--" Priss finally responded.

"Do you think it helped you or hindered you?"

"You tell me."

Sylia smiled. "It obviously didn't do you any good. But you're not going to stop thinking those things even if I don't ask Blackie to join, are you?"

Priss thought about her answer for a moment then responded in defeat. "No."

"Then what are you going to do about it?" Sylia said very firmly. "Because I think we could really use Blackie's help, Priss. Everything we currently know about these new boomers tells me we're outclassed at the moment. I have been working on upgrading the hardsuits but they won't be ready until we finish a few more tests on all of you. And most importantly, as far as we know those four cyborgs that escaped from the military base are still out there somewhere." Sylia paused to search Priss's eyes to see if her words were sinking in, then continued. "But none of this will make any difference if you can't put aside your feelings for Blackie when we need you to have a clear mind."

Priss looked away from Sylia's keen gaze and edged towards the door, feeling as if she were being cornered like an animal. "I don't know Sylia, I don't know how I can--"

"That's okay Priss," Sylia said picking up the empty water bottle that had slipped out of Priss's hand earlier. "I don't expect you to deal with this immediately. It takes time. But unfortunately that's something we don't have a lot of right now. So I need you to think hard about this now, and I need to know what you're going to do."

Priss looked back at Sylia and nodded thoughtfully as she headed for the door.

"And Priss?"

The dark haired singer turned. "Yeah?"

"You were asking about what happened to the hol-opponent?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay right there, and don't move. Not for anything."

Puzzled but suddenly curious, Priss nodded and stood as still as she could.

Sylia said nothing more as she backed away from Priss very slowly until she had reached the back wall of the room. Then the Knight Saber's leader suddenly charged forward straight at Priss.

Just when she thought she would have to get out of the way, Priss saw Sylia's blurred form stop in front of her and stand perfectly still, staring directly into her eyes.

Shocked by how quickly Sylia had stopped in front of her, Priss could do nothing else but stare back into Sylia's eyes, suddenly feeling very awkward and wondering what to do next.

Sylia looked down.

Priss followed Sylia's gaze until she saw a hand holding an empty water bottle like a knife, pointed at Priss's stomach.

Sylia stepped back and then handed the bottle to Priss. "Distraction can be a powerful weapon. Don't let your opponent use it against you."

Still feeling tired, and now a little bewildered, Priss stepped through the doorway to the console room and began to close the thick metal door behind her. But just as the latch made contact, she turned the handle again and pushed it back into the room a few inches.

As she passed the rest lounge on her way to the changing room Priss nodded to Linna, too tired to reassure her with a smile or a grin. "The band plays again Friday night at ten. OK?"

Linna looked up in surprise, then smiled. "We'll be there!"

Priss nodded slowly again then disappeared down the dark hallway leading to the changing room.

* * * *

MIND TRANSFER SIDE EFFECTS - TREATMENT

Thursday October 14th 2038 5:24 P.M. - S. Stingray

The testing phase is over with nothing new or conclusive to report. Having exhausted all other avenues available to me I am faced with the dilemma of delving further into the consciousness transfer process itself. I have reviewed my father's notes about the process and I now believe I have all of the necessary equipment for such an experiment, but I am still unsure as to whether I wish to even perform this procedure. My father's notes clearly indicate that the process had been refined to a great degree by the time of his death, but I still have doubts. And more importantly, I worry about what this process could do to a subject's long term mental health.

But there is also the question of whether anyone should be allowed to transfer someone else's consciousness--their thoughts, their feelings, their personality, perhaps even their soul--to another mind. Based solely on the possible side effects I would have to say no. But if the side effects could be averted somehow, this process could lengthen the lives of thousands of people who suffer from debilitating physical illnesses even though their minds are still strong and fully functional. The benefits are undeniable, but is it right to change someone's destiny this way?

Father, what would you do?

* * * *

"How do you feel?" Sylia asked, as Blackie sat up slowly in the "Comfy Chair" as he had dubbed it.

"The same way I always feel, I guess... tired," Blackie replied scratching his head.

Sylia smiled, a look of relief briefly sweeping across her face. "It's Thursday. So the band is playing tomorrow night again, right?"

"Yeah!" Blackie grinned. "Hey you should come and see us play!"

The look of surprise on Sylia's face could not be hidden this time. "Oh, I'm sorry, but I don't think I can make it. I still have a lot of work left to do here," she replied half-heartedly.

"Aw c'mon!" Blackie pleaded as he stepped down from the chair. "When was the last time you went out and had some fun anyway?"

Sylia sighed, and stared into Blackie's eyes. "You're not going to give up are you?"

"Nope." Blackie grinned again.

Sylia glanced at her data room noting the flickering green glow coming from within. "Well, I'll think about it."

Blackie held her gaze for a moment, as if he might still try to persuade her somehow, but then nodded and smiled. "Okay. I hope you can make it Sylia. Cya."

The Knight Saber's leader watched thoughtfully as Blackie double-stepped up the stairs leaving her alone in the basement testing facility. She then made her way to her data room where the flickering glow had finally subsided.

"Forgive me Blackie."

* * * *

After days of resting, the lead cyborg's eyes finally snapped open to see the night sky.

"We've run out of time," the familiar commanding voice 'whispered' inside its head. "*Find him. Do what ever is necessary.*"

The cyborg immediately rose from its hiding place and signaled the others to wake. A moment later, a flash of blue light illuminated the rooftop of Hot Legs. Lost in the darkness that followed, the four disguised shadows climbed down into the back alley and headed for the front door of the bar to resume the hunt.

* * * *

Priss looked out at the audience, watching the faces come into view as the colored lights swept back and forth across the front of the stage. As always, the faces were visible but still seemed indistinguishable from each other. The sea of faces, a strange phenomenon common to many performers. Perhaps it was the level of her concentration on what she was doing, or the energy of the moment carrying her away? But as she raised her microphone to finish out the last verse, four faces near the middle of the crowd suddenly caught her attention. Unlike the cheering patrons around them, they were standing perfectly still and staring intently, perhaps at something behind her? Looking away for a moment, Priss stepped to the other side of the stage as she continued to sing. She turned back in time to spot the owners of the intent stares now pushing forward with their fists and elbows sending a mild wave of panic through the crowd at the front of the stage. "Where the hell are you Clarence?" Priss thought to herself, scanning the crowd for the missing bouncer.

Clarence ignored the tap on his shoulder at first thinking it was just someone in the crowd shifting past him. Then the tap came again, this time a little harder, more like someone trying to get his attention. Turning, he saw the bartender leaning across the stand-up bar behind him yelling something. Clarence nodded, "YAH? WHATSUP?"

The weary looking bartender cupped a hand to his mouth in an effort to be heard over the music, then gave up and simply pointed into the crowd. Clarence squinted, trying to see through the shifting colored light and shadows to what it was the bartender

was pointing at. He turned back, nodded to the bartender again, and then began to shove his way through the mass of people, signaling the other two bouncers with him to follow.

Clarence looked out over the crowd as he made his way towards the four patrons who seemed to be heading for the stage. As he got closer he recognized one of the four men in the group as one of the four that had shown up around closing time last week. But there had been two women with them then. "Fuckin' gangs," he thought to himself as he cracked his massive knuckles. Feeling the music start to really pound he glanced up at the stage to see Priss staring directly at him and gesturing, a hint of concern in her eyes. Clarence nodded to her reassuringly and closed in on the four unruly patrons.

As the imposing bouncer and his two companions stepped in front of the four trouble makers, blocking their path to the stage, the lead cyborg's eyes flared briefly signaling the others to stop. Even before the blue glow had subsided, the word "boomer" began to ripple through the crowd. The music was tapering out mid-song, the rest of the band now recognizing the signs of an impending fight. Blackie grabbed Priss's microphone from her hand in an attempt to get the bartender's attention.

As Blackie's voice echoed from the P.A., Priss caught all four of the headstrong patrons shifting their gaze to stare up at the stage, their eyes all beginning to glow bright blue now. 'What the hell?!' she thought to herself frantically as she began to back away slowly from the front of the stage. 'Had they somehow recognized us from the fight at the military base? But how?'

"Okayyyyyy, so it's not a gang thing," Clarence began, his confidence shaken just a little by the sudden turn of events. He'd handled malfunctioning construction boomers before, though it had been a long time ago, but there was something different about this crew. No signs of abuse or neglect, not even a frayed wire sticking out. In fact, they didn't seem to be malfunctioning at all. They just seemed pissed, and looking for a fight. Clarence quickly glanced at his two companions, then addressed the boomer who seemed to be in charge and pointed towards the front door of the bar. As he spoke he noticed the boomer touching a computer keypad strapped to its left forearm. "Alright, I think it's time to go. Nobody wants any trouble so--"

A blinding flash of blue light suddenly filled the interior of the bar.

A brief moment of tense silence followed as everyone's eyes adjusted, and then the silence was abruptly ended, split in half by a piercing scream.

Still blinded by the powerful light, Clarence suddenly heard the stomping of feet and the grating of chair legs against the hardwood floor all around him. Then the shouting and yelling began as everyone began to crush together to get out the front door. The bouncer rubbed his eyes and blinked repeatedly trying frantically to see what was going on, although he could already sense that something very wrong had just happened.

Clarence blinked a few more times in frustration. As his eyes finally began to cooperate he saw four metallic figures standing before him where the construction boomers had stood moments before. He took a step forward, hoping to somehow push the boomers away from Priss and the crowd that was still shoving their way out of the building. His right foot tripped on something on the floor. The bouncer looked down, a sense of dread gripping his insides.

Amid rapidly spreading pools of blood, Clarence saw the two bouncers who had followed him lying across each other in a heap, their throats torn open and their heads twisted around to face away at an impossible angle.

"Christ, what the..."

Clarence looked away as the shock and disgust slammed into him like a wave. Heart suddenly pounding, and eyes narrowed in anger, he felt every muscle in his body tense up as he charged headlong into the lead boomer without thinking.

Hand flat and fingers straight out like a blade, the cyborg brought its left arm back and then swung it around and out in a blurred arc towards the charging human. A splash of brilliant red splattered on the cyborg's chest with a sickening smack. As the cyborg looked down at the dying human falling at its feet the blood dripped from its sharp fingertips like oil.

Clarence fell to his knees and clutched at his throat. Panic seized him as he recognized the warm liquid flowing thickly through his fingers. Eyes wide open, he fought instinctively to try and staunch the flow, but his efforts were in vain. He tried to yell out to Priss to run, to get away, but all that came out of his mouth was a gurgling sound. Then to his surprise, the boomer leaned over and calmly wiped the blood off of its gleaming metallic hand on his shirt, and then stepped past him, followed by its three companions. Closing his eyes tightly to shut out so much wrong, Clarence suddenly let go of his throat and slumped to the floor with one thought still screaming through his mind, "Get away Priss, get away..."

As soon as her vision had returned Priss knocked the microphone from Blackie's hand and shoved him hard towards the back stage area.

"Priss, what the fuck?" Blackie yelled in surprise as he tried to keep his footing, and his guitar in his hands.

"MOVE! JUST MOVE!" Priss screamed, still shoving Blackie towards the stage door where Chaz and Benji were already waiting.

Behind them the bar room had transformed from a semi-orderly gathering into absolute chaos. The majority of the patrons were rushing for the front doors screaming and yelling at anyone in front of them to move faster, knocking down chairs and tables in the process.

As Priss glanced back to see if the cyborgs were following, she saw Clarence rushing at one of the boomers.

"NO!"

Pain and anger descended like a hammer as she watched the cyborg's gleaming arm slash at Clarence. She screamed out helplessly as her friend and long-time protector fell to his knees clutching his bleeding throat. Releasing Blackie's arm for a moment, the impulse to run and fight almost overwhelmed her. But as she watched Clarence slump to the floor next to his dead companions, she knew it was too late. She closed her eyes and turned away.

Chaz yelled out, "C'mon man! We gotta go!"

Priss's eyes snapped open.

"Wait, wait... just a sec! I need to unplug my guitar first!" Blackie protested, the guitar cable pulled taut by the force of Chaz and Benji's efforts to shove Blackie towards the back door.

"Just fuckin' yank it out man!" Chaz yelled.

Priss shook herself from her trance and clenched her teeth. There was no more time to waste. She shoved hard against Blackie's side and shouted, "We have to go NOW!"

"MY GUITAR!" Blackie screamed as the strap around his shoulder suddenly snapped from the force of Priss's shove, sending the instrument crashing to the stage floor. Priss winced at the new intensity of Blackie's protests, but closed her eyes and shoved as hard as she could. Finally, with Chaz and Benji's help, she managed to push Blackie through the back door, then lock it behind them.

Their path in front of them now clear, the lead cyborg looked towards the stage in time to see the back door closing. The cyborg leapt up to the stage, and without breaking stride, sprinted towards the exit way. A vicious crack tore through the air just before it made contact with the metal back stage door. Ignoring the sound the cyborg pounded relentlessly on the metal barrier, driven to near frenzy by the smell of its prey still in the air. Silenced and unseen, the shiny black guitar under its stomping feet was quickly churned into a pile of splintered wood and frayed wire.

Blackie stood staring at the door, oblivious to the thumping that was threatening to break the hinges at any moment. "It's gone..."

Priss pulled at Blackie's arm. "It's too late! We can't go back! We have to get the fuck out of here! NOW!"

"Blackie let's fuckin' GO!" Chaz urged as he and Benji shoved hard on the exit door to the alley. The cool night air swept in to the room, the sudden chill snapping Blackie out of his trance. He turned towards the exit, then looked back at the metal door, several large dents marking the swift progress of the cyborgs. With a force that rivaled that of the metallic creatures on the other side he slammed his fist hard into the metal door.

"You FUCKERS!"

Priss reached out and grabbed Blackie once more by the arm, gently this time. "Let's go."

His face now clouded with shadow Blackie followed Priss through the exit door and slammed it behind him.

The pounding on the back stage door continued unabated until the hinges finally gave way with three loud metallic pings. The brutally disfigured metal slab fell in to the backstage area with a dull subsonic thud that resonated through the floor. The cyborgs flooded into the room, two moving quickly to check the side halls while the other two moved towards the steel exit door leading out to the alley. The door swung open and the lead cyborg called to the other two with a low whistle.

Stepping out into the alley, their metallic heels clicking sharply on the grease stained asphalt, the cyborgs spread out to look for signs of their prey's flight. Finding nothing, and with precious seconds ticking away, the lead cyborg looked right to the opening that lead to the street front, and then looked left to the narrow passageway that snaked around behind the very back of the bar.

The leader was about to take a step towards the street front when he halted. His head tilted at an odd angle as if he were listening for something. The usual nighttime sounds surrounded them for a moment, and then... someone yelling in the distance?

The lead cyborg turned its head quickly its eyes gradually turning blue as it regarded the narrow passage behind the bar again. The sound of someone yelling in the distance, a female this time perhaps, was unmistakable now. And it wasn't moving away.

A piercing screech echoed off the grimy walls of the dark alley as the four mechanical hunters set off down the narrow passage to their left.

Linna looked out the car window at the crowd gathered outside The Hot Legs, then turned to Leon. "Uh, shouldn't they all be *inside*?"

Leon glanced at the odd assembly as he carefully guided his cruiser through streams of people wandering away from the bar to cross the road. "Maybe Priss had to cut out early again?"

"Ha ha, very funny," Linna replied dryly as she checked her watch. "But seriously, Priss said their set started at ten. I know we're a little late but..."

"Maybe you should stay here," Leon commanded as he brought the cruiser to a stop.

"Yeah right," Linna shot back as she opened her door and got out.

Holding Linna's hand tightly, Leon pressed through the dissipating crowd outside the Hot Legs bar until he made his way to the entrance where the bartender was sitting having a smoke. The front doors to the bar were closed.

"Sorry, show's over folks," the bartender quipped after taking a long drag on his cigarette.

Linna looked at the poster of Blackie's band hanging in the showcase next to the door then looked at her watch again. "But they're supposed to be playing right now. What happened?"

"Nasty shit happened, that's what," the bartender said with an air of finality as he tossed his cigarette butt to the ground and proceeded to light another. "Like I said, show's over. The cops are on their way so go home."

"But what happened to the band?" Linna pressed. "And what 'nasty shit' are you talking about?"

Leon grasped the door handles and pulled, but the doors were locked.

"Hey buddy, you don't hear so good?" the bartender barked at the curious police officer. "I said the show's over."

Leon flashed his badge. "Like the lady asked, the band, and the nasty shit?"

"Pffft! Bio-Crimes?" The bartender sneered as he read the badge. "Eh, the band went out the back way as far as I could tell. But I really don't think you wanna go in there *officer*. Boomer problems are more the kind of thing the ADP used to deal with anyway. And where the hell are they now when we need 'em huh?"

"Are you going to open this door or do I have to shoot it open?" Leon queried calmly as he withdrew his pistol and aimed it at the lock.

"Woah bro!" the bartender pleaded, changing his tune at the sight of the weapon. "I'm out a pretty big chunk of change already in busted chairs and tables!"

Leon hesitated for a second, wondering whether he should call for backup or not. "Fine. Open them. Now."

After fumbling with his keys and unlocking the door the bartender turned to Linna. "You definitely don't want to go in there miss. Why don't you stay and keep me company until the N-Police arrive while Bio Man here checks out the stiff?"

"Um, a nice offer, really, but I don't think so," Linna said with a sour facial expression before following Leon into the bar.

Leon had been to The Legs many times and he had witnessed some crazy shows, but they had never ended looking quite like this.

Broken furniture lay in small heaps around the room. Shattered empty beer bottles littered the floor. "A scramble towards the exit. Hmm. Hey, watch your step," Leon warned Linna as they picked their way through the front entrance to the main bar area.

Leon pushed aside a broken chair that blocked his path and moved towards the now silent stage as he surveyed the damage. "Must have been one hell of a show."

Linna nodded slowly as she looked around the empty bar in shock and disbelief. "Ahhhhhh hell," Leon said, shaking his head as he came across the bodies of the dead bouncers. "Found the nasty shit."

Linna picked her way carefully through the broken furniture to where Leon was standing.

"You may not want to--" Leon warned.

"Ugh," Linna grunted in disgust, then looked away. "What the hell happened to them?"

Leon took off his sunglasses and knelt down to get a closer look, being careful not to step in the wide pool of blood that had spread several feet away from the bodies. "Necks twisted right around, throats torn. But this one over here..." He pointed to Clarence's lifeless form with his sunglasses, "...just had his throat sliced open. Strange."

Linna continued to look away, pretending to study the list of available beers on a sign behind the bar as she wondered what happened to Priss. "Spare me the graphic details Hon? I'm already kinda freaked out as it is."

Leon stood up again and looked around the room for a moment, intent on understanding a little more of the meaning behind the puzzling scene before calling it in. As his gaze swept over the stage he spotted the broken hinges hanging from the open doorway to the back stage area. Giving the bodies a wide berth, he made his way through the disarray to the back of the room and climbed the wooden steps leading up to the stage.

"Damn," Leon exclaimed in amazement as he spied the mangled steel door lying on the floor in the darkness beyond the doorway. "Whoever broke this door down wanted out pretty bad." As he moved to get a closer look, something under his feet made an odd sound like wire being drawn tight. He looked at his boots for a moment then knelt down and picked up an object lying among a pile of debris. After studying the object he reached into his jacket with his free hand and pulled out his handset phone.

"Daley? Yeah it's me. I'm at The Legs. You better get down here. I've got at least 3 dead, and a witness reports that boomers were involved. I'm securing the scene until the N-Police arrive. The place may be dead but the show's just getting started."

The police officer flipped the handset phone shut and dropped the object in his other hand back onto the pile of wood and wire that had once been an electric guitar.

"Listen man, Priss is right. You have to go! You can't stay with us!" Blackie yelled at Chaz, as the two musicians faced each other. For the moment their location was well concealed as they stood at the edge of a darkened courtyard between two abandoned buildings.

"What the fuck is going on Blackie?" Chaz shouted back in frustration, still panting a bit from their unexpected run. "Why do you think those boomers are following *us*?"

Priss grabbed Chaz roughly by the shoulder. "There is zero time to explain Chaz! You and Benji just have to go."

The bass player and drummer exchanged worried looks. "Are you sure?" Benji asked, "It sounds like you know what's going on. Is this something to do with that gang you used to hang with B-Man?"

Blackie glanced at Priss as she looked back the way they had come for any signs of their pursuers. "Guys, there just isn't time to explain all of this," the guitarist said with a pleading tone. "We have to split up here and fast, or none of us are going to get away."

Benji looked over at Chaz with a frown as the two continued to have the gnawing feeling that there was more to the story. "Fuck it," Chaz finally gave in. "You two better not get yourselves killed... shit, this is fuckin' crazy. C'mon Benj."

"No worries," Blackie tried to smile. "Oh and hey..."

"Yeah?" Chaz said glumly as he and Benji began to walk away.

"Don't go straight home. Go to a club or something and hang for a bit first, OK?"

Chaz nodded and then tapped Benji on the chest. "We're gone."

Blackie and Priss waited until their two band mates had turned down a side street and disappeared before setting off in the opposite direction. But as Priss took one last look over her shoulder at the dark tunnel that exited out into the long courtyard they were leaving she glimpsed four figures emerging from the shadows, their steel exteriors shining dimly in the dull glow of a solitary street lamp.

"Blackie..." Priss whispered as they trotted away at a leisurely clip.

"Yeah?"

"Run."

TO BE CONTINUED...

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