

neometropolis  
0x01 06/2004

BIO-DRONE MK2

MK2 "Dad"  
Unit on  
test with  
focus  
group age  
4-6 yrs.

temp  
viol  
aural

Overseer  
(human)

+0082

+0006

-0002

-0055

**DAD Knows Best...**  
The MK2 Bio-Drone Model DAD  
from SocModBiosoft scores top  
in focus-groups 4-6 years. Trust  
our Bio-Drones for that homely  
"nuclear family" feeling of old!  
**SocModBiosoft** "We Care"



a.r.yngve 2004

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Neometropolis is:

John Jacobs, *Editor, Webmaster, Tortured Genius (well, tortured anyway)*

Tim Knodel, *Assistant Editor*

Peter Mondlock, *Assistant Editor*

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# NEOMETROPOLIS

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Cyberpunk isn't dead. Not by any means. The term "cyberpunk" may be dated, but the movement it stands for is alive and breathing.

How can I say this? Because I've seen it, experienced it, lived it. It's much more than a sci-fi derivative, although that's where its roots lie—it's your mom sitting at the computer, using this baffling "e-mail" for the first time; it's drug-addled teens at an industrial concert or hackers and script kiddies at a 2600 meeting; it's the software giants, battling for control of a digital world in some kind of corporate titanomachy. It's the synthetic, artificial lifestyle we so take for granted that it seems *natural* to us.

Cyberpunk is on the news, in our homes, in our fucking minds. We are all cyberpunks, because we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every day it is seeping like quicksilver through our very existence, indiscriminately blending fiction and reality past the bounds of discernability.

It's an entire generation, raised on Nintendo, gorged on information, and handed the keys to a boundless world where physical limitations no longer apply. This magazine is evidence of that.

In this magazine you will find articles, artwork, and original fiction from people all over the globe. Call it "cyberpunk," call it what you will.

This is the human race.

- John, 20 May 2004

*"This one was a pleasure to write. While I can't claim full authorship of its futuristic vision, I had a lot of fun painting my version of technology gone haywire. Out of the dozens of stories I've written, I think The Whole Circus is the only one that looks chaos right in the face."*

## THE WHOLE CIRCUS

By Darren Speegle

The nearer you were to Chaos, the more numerous and glaring its symptoms. It was hard to believe that only a decade ago it was still known as Orlando, entertainment capital of the world. Always State of the Art, the city had been the first to go fully automated. Too late New Orleans, Miami and Las Vegas saw Orlando's error. They were now suffering the same fate. They would likely never achieve the state of electronic and social bedlam their forerunner had, but they were nonetheless places you would not want to take your children.

To Shelley, who knew all too well about symptoms, Chaos was home. Even now, as his captor led him along the tubular passage, he experienced that strange sense of connection, that feeling of needing only a terminal to bring it all into glorious focus. He saw it mirrored in the eyes of the people he passed. The lust for life had been replaced by a shimmering brought on by the phantasmagorical splendor of electrons and currents and information bombardment.

Surrounding the flow of foot traffic in the tunnel, screens displayed nonsensical, indecipherable, illogical messages. In the ceiling, light panels dimmed and intensified, dimmed and intensified, contributing to the routine surreal quality of the scene. The lower half of a hominoid robot strode by, drawing scarcely a glance as it journeyed to someplace remembered by its legs. Pieces and parts of things, not always inorganic, cluttered the base of the walls. Homing spheres, seeking to deliver certified messages that had long since lost their relevance to anything, hummed by, occasionally colliding with a public access monitor,

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someone's head or shoulder, another sphere. A random scream, or peal of laughter, echoed and shuddered along the passage. And all this in an auxiliary tubeway outside city limits.

As Shelley felt the mysteries deepen around him, reminding him that they were approaching the moving tube, direction Anarchy, he craved his Psycho. Ian, his captor, had promised it to him in periodic, small doses, but he'd yet to see the first drop - except as depicted in the frequent, passing flash ads, whose scare tactics were far more effective when you were on the stuff. In the heart of Chaos you would have to search hard to find such propaganda. Out here on the fringes, it was all you could do to escape the picture of the eager human face, the poised dropper, the single luminous teardrop of Self-replicating Psychedelic Chemical Organism freefalling towards a bloodshot eye. The image itself was actually quite delicious; the footer is what got you: *PSYCHO WILL FUCK UP YOUR MIND.*

Shelley knew it had fucked up his. Why else had he allowed himself to turn rat against Silver, Prince of Psycho? On one side of the scale, a life sentence; on the other, a death sentence. He had chosen the latter. Did he despise Silver for what the man represented, what the man commanded? Did he despise himself for being the dependent on Silver's candy that he was? Was he so repelled by the idea of a foreign organism taking up residence inside his body that he wanted to die? For reasons beyond the grasp of his depleted layman's gray matter, the duration of the high and the lifespan of the organism did not agree. The high on average lasted some fifteen hours per the standard dose of one cc, while the organism continued to grow indefinitely. There was an antibiotic which, when combined with an electrochemical application of some sort, was said to rid the body of the invitee. But a single treatment ran fifty thousand dollars.

Shelley had no money, which was why he had been put in this position in the first damn place. Silver, whose labs generated the purest strains of the city's supply, had dangled Psycho, and Shelley killed three men for him. The job had gone down to the north, in Ocala, where there remained some semblance of law. The three men had been Ocala's biggest pushers, but they were still three men. Shelley had been an easy arrest. Electronic eyes watched him commit, electronic eyes watched him go into a tube, human hands apprehended. Officer Ian, as the man introduced himself, had not been soft. He had manhandled Shelley, inserting a device into his neck below the base of his cranium. The device was activated by Ian's voice; when he spoke in anything other than an even tone, pain tore through Shelley's nervous system. It had been easy to give in to the officer's demands.

But the device had not been the reason Shelley had acquiesced. Coercion was as worthless on him as self analysis. And no matter how much of the latter he did, he kept returning to the single most disturbing of possibilities - that he was simply amusing himself. *PSYCHO WILL FUCK UP YOUR MIND.*

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They arrived at the Lakeland-Orlando Tubeway. Its name was somewhat misleading, as it had actually been diverted outside of Lakeland, same as the tube in Ocala, and Daytona, and wherever the hell else they wanted to cut themselves off from Chaos. Such measures amounted to temporary fixes of course, for nothing could prevent the seeping. As Shelley and his captor stood in the press of bodies, a digit above the portal registered the minutes to window, when a maximum of ten could step aboard. The Orlando-Lakeland, which ran above the Lakeland-Orlando, was accessed via an elevator, which also accepted ten. Odd, Shelley thought as he compared the queues, that as many people seemed to be traveling *to* Chaos.

Four minutes they waited. Before the zero had appeared, Shelley was begging of his captor a drop, the merest drop. The bathroom was right there if the officer was concerned about it being a spectacle. Ian shook his head and Shelley was beginning to lose patience.

As they stepped from the auxiliary into the main tube, he recalled the last time he had lost his patience: a month ago, after an overdose. The doctor had told him that even if he quit now, the damage would go on. "What damage?" Shelley had wanted to know.

"The damage to your body."

"What damage to my body?"

The doctor's spiel had been an impressive one, a smattering of three-dollar words alongside the latest platitudes and mannerisms, but Shelley had seen the truth - perhaps the Psycho within him had seen the truth - which was that they didn't fucking know. He told the doctor just how transparent he found him, but the fact was, the doctor was just doing what he thought best. Shelley was left wondering if this Self-replicating Psychedelic Chemical Organism and its effect on the human body mightn't prove to be a microcosm of full automation on Orlando. They called the result Chaos, yet what was chaos?

The craving was chaotic, no doubt there. He envisioned sinking his teeth into Ian's jugular, his own body twisting in agony as Ian's choked scream flung to the end of every nerve in him. He'd have his hands on the dropper then, or be broken or dead, the same result that would come of delivering Ian to the Prince of Psycho. What would Ian do anyway? Put up your hands, Silver! Give it all up, Silver! Your labs, your warehouses, your army!

Yeah, same result either way.

Another thought occurred to him. Get out of the range of Ian's voice, where the device, unless the officer had other means, could not be activated. But where would he go? To fucked-up Psycho clown boys with triple homicide notches, that

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was the mother of existential questions. Not the profound *Where did I come from?* but the abyssal *Where do I go?*

The dropper was in his face suddenly, the officer's frowning countenance behind it.

Shelley seized the dropper, pulled back his eyelid and let two, four, five, six - was the jerk going to stop him? - seven teardrops of salvation into his eye. The blood vessels were right there, the nerve trailed the retina like a tentacle, then the brain itself, poised and hungry. Seven drops of sweet agony like homage to the psyche.

"Do you really enjoy it?" said Ian in a mercifully even tone.

Shelley considered. "I have a better understanding of what is going on around me when I'm Psycho."

"Do you know what is so abhorrent about your Silver?"

"Not *my* Silver," Shelley said.

"That he exploits chaos - the condition of chaos - itself."

"Maybe chaos exploits him."

Ian smirked. "Sure. And he systematically sends out his slaves to eliminate the inconveniences in his world."

"Who said there's no system to the circus?" As he spoke Shelley scanned his surroundings with some intensity.

"What are you looking for?" said Ian, put off.

"A terminal."

A woman standing nearby turned to Shelley. "You are seeking a terminal?"

She was svelte and beautiful; flawless, he observed, recognizing at once the significance of that fact. As she turned her back to him, raising her blouse to reveal the perfect contour of her back, he remembered her model's name: *Ethereal*.

"If you wish you may use mine," she said, indicating a standard outlet in her flesh, "but be conscious of time."

"I didn't mean...that is, I wasn't looking for..."

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“Ah,” she said, dropping her blouse. “It’s the other you want.”

“No...No.” He looked back at Ian, embarrassed.

He had meant a wall terminal, thinking he might persuade Ian to let him borrow the unit the officer wore on his belt. Already scintillating, Shelley wanted that feeling, that *knowledge* of being hooked up to the whole crazy circus. A robot was too much though...at least at this early, extremely self-conscious stage...there were people...

As he scanned for others inspired by his recently attained lack of anonymity, the female hominoid remained tuned to him.

“Look at this,” she invited. “Behind each of my eyes are two electrodes and a capsule of sodium vapor. Watch.”

Shelley watched as her eyes began to glow, one yellow, one green.

“Ian - ” he said, confused.

“I don’t know what you want,” Ian said. “Shall I be Joseph in his Technicolor Dreamcoat?” His tone veered slightly off the even and the sudden riot in Shelley’s nervous system was almost an oasis from the external.

“I don’t want anything,” Shelley said. “I’ll cool it.”

He thought he saw, but couldn’t be certain, a look pass between the hominoid and Ian.

Seven were too many drops. Heightened awareness and hallucination were intermingling. Twenty-seven individuals occupied the section of tube, seventeen men, three women, three certain androids (including the Ethereal model) and four possibles. He hadn’t counted; he simply knew. Psycho was like that. On a really acute trip, you might be able to say which of the lot were married, who had children, who would die first. This was becoming one of those trips and more. That he had confidently picked out three hominoid robots in a field of twenty-seven individuals was testament to the fact. As to the possibles...that’s where the hallucinations came into play. He was seeing beneath the skin of these four bodies to blood vessels, wires, tubes...

He caught one of them looking back at him. The body of the male had over-developed musculature, which was unusual in androids - or anyone else, when those muscles were visible beneath the skin, shimmering along their contours. The male, blinking three distinct times, increased the width of his stance, then stretched out his arms perpendicular to his frame, becoming da Vinci’s Vitruvian

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Man. Shelley clearly perceived the circle formed of his perfect proportions, and imagined it wheeling down the tubeway, the figure within it a spoke conceived by a cartoonist.

The other three of these possibles had become no less fantastic - a life-sized doll, a science prop, a superhero - and every eye among them looking Shelley down. He wondered if perhaps that's what made them possibles, that they probed him in return. Maybe they too were under the influence of seven drops of Psycho. Maybe he had skin the color of water and was exposed to them. He looked down at his arms, his legs, becoming immediately fascinated by the concept that he *was* covered.

"Hey!"

His flesh caught fire at this liberal exclamation from his captor's mouth.

"Hey, we're almost there, Shelley. You need to hold it together." The words evened out as they came, and the fire subsided.

"Don't worry," Shelley said. "I know precisely where he is, and that's where I will take you."

"Keep focused. I will not be pleased if you fail us."

*Us?* Shelley saw it again. That look passing between sets of eyes.

Even as he narrowed in on that word, the doors of his senses were swinging wider, the self-consciousness fading into the howling song-noise of limited particularity. Pleasure, meanwhile, Shelley did not relinquish. Pleasure was in the participating, in being consumed by the whole beautiful circus. He was transported momentarily to an Orlando of a dozen years ago, a city of sprawling lights and action, dinner shows, night clubs, roller coasters, machines of all sorts at your whim and desire. *Ah youth*, he thought as he echoed back to the present.

But on his tongue was the word and question: "*Us?*"

Ian said, "We have been unsuccessful at breaking down Silver's superior strains of the drug. He uses some sort of code that we cannot decipher."

"When you say *we*...?"

Ian's voice was smooth as the surface beneath their feet. "There was a maxim among the fully automated law enforcement, tourism, and other services of former Orlando."

The ever present Ethereal spoke it:

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*"Entertainment is primary."*

Shelley peered, trying to make sense of it.

"The maxim of course was installed," Ian said.

"So?"

"So...this naturally conflicted with the taboos imposed upon artificial intelligence."

Shelley let his eyes drift around the compartment. How strangely attentive was this random car on the Lakeland-Orlando Tubeway.

Ian went on, "The Matrix was approached by a union of independent intelligences - by 'independent' I refer to those intelligences which are well armed with human brain cells and do not have to rely on programs. These intelligences extolled the virtues of experimentation. Little did we know where those experiments would lead..."

He produced the dropper that Shelley had taken a shower beneath. As he held it over his eye, everyone else within the car followed suit.

"Little did we know," Ian repeated, blinking.

Shelley looked from face to face, eye to eye, realizing that the ratio was far more fantastic than he had figured. Psycho, it seemed, would fuck up more than human minds.

It was beginning to look like those labs and warehouses were obtainable after all.

Turning to the Ethereal model, all the more beautiful for her glistening, Psycho-awakened eye, Shelley asked her if that terminal was still available.

*Darren Speegle's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in such venues as Flesh & Blood, Gothic.net, Chiaroscuro, and Best of Horrorfind II. He has two short story collections coming out in 2004: Gothic Wine from Aardwolf Press and A Dirge for the Temporal, in which "The Whole Circus" will appear, from Raw Dog Screaming Press. Visit Darren's website at [www.dspeegle.com](http://www.dspeegle.com). Darren lives in Germany.*

*Robert J. Sawyer has been called "the dean of Canadian science fiction" by The Ottawa Citizen and "just about the best science-fiction writer out there these days" by the Denver Rocky Mountain News. His Hominids won the 2003 Hugo Award—the top international prize in science fiction—for Best Novel of the Year. His The Terminal Experiment won the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America's 1995 Nebula Award for Best Novel of the Year. Rob's also won the top SF awards in Japan, France, and Spain, as well as an Arthur Ellis Award from the Crime Writers of Canada. His novels are top-ten national mainstream bestsellers in Canada, appearing on the Globe and Mail and Maclean's bestsellers' lists, and they've hit #1 on the bestsellers' list published by Locus, the US trade journal of the SF field. In addition, Rob edits the Robert J. Sawyer Books science-fiction imprint for Calgary's Red Deer Press. Rob's most recent releases are Hybrids, which concludes his "Neanderthal Parallax" trilogy begun with Hominids, and his short-story collection Iterations. Rob lives in Mississauga, Ontario. For more about him and his work, visit his web site ("the most elaborate and interesting of any created by a Canadian author," according to the Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature) at [www.sfwriter.com](http://www.sfwriter.com).*

## ROBERT J. SAWYER

Interviewed by Lynne Jamneck

**You're currently working on your next novel, Action Potential. Can you tell us a bit about the book?**

*Action Potential* is a thematic expansion of my short story "Shed Skin," which appeared in the January 2004 issue of *Analog*—different characters, but the same basic premise. It deals with what happens to the biological original after a person uploads his consciousness into an immortal android body. The book is an interesting stylistic challenge because it has two different first-person viewpoint characters, both of whom have the same name: the biological original of Jacob Sullivan, and the uploaded version of Jacob Sullivan. The book deals with a lot of philosophy and neuropsychology about what constitutes personhood, includes a love story between a 44-year-old upload and an 85-year-old upload, has an exciting hostage-taking event, and has a lot of courtroom drama. Tor will be publishing it in hardcover in January 2005.

**Which normally comes first to you in the course of writing a story: the idea or the research?**

The research. I love to learn things! I pick a topic area—for *Action Potential*, it was consciousness studies; for the Neanderthal Parallax trilogy (*Hominids*,

*Humans*, and *Hybrids*), it was paleoanthropology; for *Calculating God*, it was intelligent design; for *Flashforward*, it was the nature of time. And then I do three or four months of solid research—reading popular and technical literature, web surfing, talking to scientists, attending lectures and conferences. And out of that research, the ideas, and the key plot points, for the novel emerge. Indeed, whenever someone says to me that they're having trouble coming up with things to write about in their fiction, I ask them what the last work of nonfiction they read was—and usually the answer is they can't remember. Research is the heart and soul of good writing of any kind, but it's particularly important in science fiction.

**What do you see as the major differences between Canadian and American SF? Is it more a matter of style, theme—atmosphere?**

I like to say that American SF has happy endings, Canadian SF has sad endings, and British SF has no endings at all. There really is a lot of truth to that: Canada is a small country in terms of population, and a minor player on the world stage: we know there are problems that we just can't solve. Our American friends wield enormous power; they tend to think that any adversity can be triumphed over in the end. Canadians also tend to be more mainstream in their writing approach. We come from a culture that produces a few hundred, instead of thousands, of novels each year, and so, in general, we don't compartmentalize or subdivide our work as much. I'm a top-ten mainstream bestselling writer in Canada; there's nobody writing hard-SF in the states who can make the same claim in their country. Canadians are willing to embrace a wider range of reading material, and that's in part because Canadian authors tend to bring more in the way of mainstream virtues—subtle characterization, solid stylistics—to their writing.

**Are you seeing any interesting new developments in SF, both from a Canadian and a more global perspective?**

Just the same-old same-old: the death of mass-market publishing, the shift to more and more hardcovers, the shrinking of the SF audience, the graying of the SF audience, the reduction in the number of SF publishers, SF magazines, and SF specialty bookstores. It's very depressing, actually. Twenty years ago, I started out trying to make a career in science-fiction publishing; twenty years ago, my wife started out trying to make a career in the commercial printing industry. Sadly, both of those things are very much on the wane: there's no doubt that most dead-tree printing will disappear in the next few decades, and I'm afraid the same may be true of the science-fiction genre. It's a great, powerful storytelling medium, but it also may be as firmly rooted in the now-past twentieth century as the gothic novel was in the nineteenth.

**A number of your books (for instance Calculating God) deal with the issue of religion vs. science. Scientifically, we are coming to understand more about ourselves and the world we live in every day. Do you think science**

**will eventually eclipse religion, as we understand the term today? Isn't science a religion on its own—just in a different context?**

Science has already eclipsed religion except in fundamentalist circles. Science explains the origin of the universe, the origin of life, the development of new species, and the origin of consciousness much better than any religious model. And no, I vehemently disagree that science is a religion. Religion takes claims on faith; science tests claims empirically. Religion is about static models; science is about ever-evolving and growing models. If an idea doesn't work in science, you throw it out. In science, you can always say, "Prove it." And religion, you can't.

**Ever been condemned for something you've put to paper? People are notoriously sensitive when it comes to issues of faith and religion.**

Oh, sure. And, ironically, the worst has been from skeptics rather than fundamentalists. The skeptical movement these days, as typified by the magazine *The Skeptical Inquirer* and its parent organization, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, has ossified into a dogmatic pseudo-religion, with its canonical texts and saints (Gould, Sagan, and Dawkins). They don't even look at issues anymore; they just shout down those who suggest that some ideas might be worth considering. It's pathetic, actually. But, yes, at least once a month someone writes me trying to save my soul. Ah, well. As a writer, you want people to have a strong reaction to your work, so that's just fine by me.

**In your opinion, to what extent does SF (past and present) inform science?**

Well, it's always been great about inspiring people to go into scientific careers. And certainly from time to time it does set a research agenda. Indeed, there was a fascinating book published in 1997 by MIT Press called *Hal's Legacy*, discussing how much of modern artificial-intelligence research was based on people trying to make actual the things Hal 9000 could do in the movie and book *2001: A Space Odyssey*. These days, I think science fiction's greatest contribution is that it's one of the few areas that allow multidisciplinary thought. So much of science is hyperspecialized: don't talk to a cladist about punctuated equilibrium; a geneticist and a molecular biologist are two different things; and so on. But in SF, you get lots of cross-fertilization: exciting ideas about quantum theory that riff on cosmology and wink at evolutionary biology. That's very stimulating.

**Tell us about a typical day in your life. Do you write on a daily basis?**

Absolutely! Writing is my full-time job. The only part I find feels like work, though, is the first draft, and so for that I have to set goals. I do 2,000 words a day when I'm doing my first draft. If things are going well, I can get that done in

about 90 minutes – and the carrot is that once I reach that tally, I can knock off for the rest of the day and do whatever I like. Of course, it often takes ten or twelve hours to get the 2,000 words—and when it does, I do keep at it until I'm done. All that said, I'm a firm believer that a writer has to also be a reader: I also make sure I get at least an hour and hopefully two of reading in every day—fiction, nonfiction, whatever. I have a wonderful office in my home—nineteen-inch LCD monitor in front of a reclining La-z-boy chair, a cordless keyboard in my lap, a fireplace visible off to my left. It's very, very comfortable—and that's important. A writer needs to feel he or she *wants* to be at the keyboard, not that it's some unpleasant chore being performed in some cramped space.

**Which authors have influenced you the most? Was SF always your milieu of choice?**

Within SF, in order of my discovering them, it would be Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Larry Niven, and Frederik Pohl. They're all brilliant, of course. From Asimov, I got clarity; from Clarke, I got that sense of transcendence; from Niven, I got cleverness and big ideas; and from Pohl, I got the human element—the agony of feeling—that's so often in my novels. Outside of SF, the big influences have been Harper Lee, who wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*; John Jay Osborn Jr, who wrote *The Paper Chase*, and, more recently, John Galsworthy, who wrote *The Forsyte Saga*. But, yes, SF has always been my chosen form; I've never seriously thought about writing anything else.

**Tell us about the line of books you are editing for Red Deer Press, impressively titled Robert J. Sawyer Books. What type of material are you looking for?**

This is me doing my bit to keep the flame of science fiction alive. We're only doing three books a year to start, but we're doing big press runs and giving the books major distribution. It's a small gesture saying that SF is still a viable genre. I want books built on a foundation of accurate, cleverly extrapolated science, but they most also have believable, subtle, sophisticated characterization. I want real people, not cardboard heroes and villains. I firmly believe that SF is the literature of ideas—and I love the sense of wonder that good science fiction invokes. Most of all, I want books that are *about* something. If your first impulse in describing your novel is to make a thematic statement, I'm interested; if, on the other hand, your first impulse is to give a plot synopsis, my line isn't the right place for you.

**Tell us something about Robert J. Sawyer that nobody else knows.**

My childhood imaginary friend wasn't a person, or an animal—it was a magic hook, that descended from somewhere far, far overhead. I have no idea what the deep symbolism of that is, but certainly on the surface it's interesting that an author who ended up writing about technology had a mechanical contrivance as a his imaginary friend.

## **What happened to Your Illegal Alien being optioned for the screen?**

Exactly what happens to most film projects. I got five years of option money, a screenplay was written that went through a dozen drafts, the funding didn't come together to make the film, and the project fell apart. That's the story of 99% of all film options. The money was nice, though! If anyone else is interested in giving it a try, *Illegal Alien* isn't under option currently. I still think it would make a terrific film!

## **What are your top 5 SF films of the last decade? What makes them stand out?**

I don't see enough films, I'm afraid. The Matrix is certainly a recent standout, though.

## **Where do you see the Internet going in the next 15 – 20 years? How will it affect writers and the publishing industry in general?**

Eventually, online electronic distribution will replace print publishing. That's obviously going to happen—but whether it's in the next twenty years or the next fifty, I can't say. There's a lot of inertia. People my age and older tend not to like reading on electronic devices (although I do—I love reading e-books on my Sony Clie). We have to wait for that generation to die off, and the kids who are playing with GameBoys to become adults—they'll have no aesthetic objection to reading off of portable screens. The best thing about the Internet is that it makes writers directly accessible to their readers. I have a giant web site at [www.sfwriter.com](http://www.sfwriter.com), and a very active online discussion group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/robertjsawyer/>—both of them let me interact with readers in a way that was impossible a few years ago. There's no doubt that a lot of my success is because of the grass-roots support I get from my online presence.

## **What would you like your epitaph to read?**

Here lies Robert J. Sawyer. He made people think.

*Lynne Jamneck is a writer/photographer from South Africa. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in various markets in South Africa, Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. Her first mystery will be published by Bella Books in 2005. She is the creator and Editor of Simulacrum: The Magazine of Speculative Transformation <http://www.specficworld.com/simulacrum.html>*

## Wild Man Virtual

By Jeffrey Turner

The news resonated with the speed of an unchecked virus: Rex Digitalis and the Shogun were going to meet in open combat, send all guns blazing across the etherworld, determine once and for all which of them truly ruled the Silicon Sea. Bandwidth vanished; no web-boy or hammerchick would miss this fight willingly. Their electronic eyes monitored the systems in which the battle would be fought; their meat puppets sweated pure excitement.

Wild Man Virtual, better known as Wim, watched from the cover of the Topeka Public Library Infonet, his electronic presence soaking up minor bandwidth while his meat puppet lay motionless in a San Diego apartment. A queue opened, message from Liss, a hammerchick in Rex Digit's employ and Wim's only real friend.

"This is it, baby. End of the road for the Shogun!"

"You think Rex can fry him?"

"Can and will, Wimmy. Gonna turn the Shogun into a vegetable, make his people work for us if they want Net access at all."

"Hey, Liss, what if I told you I could hack the root process?"

A burst of static; Liss's electronic version of a sigh. "I told you, Wimmy, can't be done. You can fry a root, but you can't catch it. Now shut up so we can watch."

"I prefer 'Wild Man,'" said Wim.

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They tuned into the chosen battleground: a seldom-used branch of the Texas A&M Neuro-Research Database System. The two titans of the Silicon Sea were already preparing. The NERDS bandwidth hummed with both defensive and destructive programites, primed and ready to deploy when the flag dropped.

Wim turned his attention for an instant, giving the rest of the Sea a broad sweep. The presence of so many observers staggered him. Specifically, the thought that half of them would be leaderless by the end of the day. Each member of the loser's entourage would face a simple decision: join the victor's ranks, or face the wrath of the hammerchicks. The latter could result in a brain-fried meat puppet or, worse, banishment from the Silicon Sea. Wim's puppet shuddered; a lifetime stuck in Version One was unthinkable.

"Here we go!" said Liss.



And the Shogun disappeared.

The etherworld fell completely silent for a nanosecond. The first shot had yet to be instantiated; the programites remained poised but inactive. The Shogun's presence was nowhere to be found in the Silicon Sea. He was simply gone.

And then the message flashed out: Wild Man Virtual had captured the Shogun's root process. The titan sat in a virtual cage, unable even to disconnect. Unless his followers could manually disconnect his meat puppet, hidden away somewhere in Version One, the Shogun was helpless.

"Shit, Wim!" said Liss, as Rex Digit's people howled in triumph. "What did you do?"

"I told you. I figured out how to hack the root."

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"That's im--" she started, then caught herself.

Rex Digitalis had vanished as well.

Throughout Version One, meat puppets gasped. Some dropped interface altogether. Rex Digit's web-boys and hammerchicks left virtual wakes through the Silicon Sea, then came to a halt as the situation crystallized: Wild Man Virtual held Rex Digitalis as well.

"Wim, are you insane?"

Half a million variables changed state in the Topeka Infonet as the hammerchicks pointed their programites at Wim, virtual spears in the form of viruses which would overload his interface and toast his fragile, organic brain. They held an electron's breadth from striking, however, as Wim knew they would. They couldn't afford to fry him while their leaders were captive of an unknown program.

"I'm not crazy, Liss. I'm trying to make a point." He sealed off the messaging queue, limiting transmission to Liss alone. "Rex should've promoted me months ago, Liss. I'm good, I deserve to be a captain, maybe even a general."

"Dammit, Wim, he doesn't promote you because you always rush things off half-cocked. Just like this!"

"He thinks I'm an idiot. Doesn't give me credit for anything." He continued monitoring his caging processes, where Rex Digitalis and the Shogun cooled their virtual heels, and risked a glance at the broad state. The Sea was in turmoil; bookies laid odds on the outcome of this unexpected event, while neutral web-boys broadcast coverage to their corporate and government sponsors.

"Wimmy, he knows you're friggin' brilliant, all right? He doesn't give you the big plays 'cause you don't follow orders. Always gotta do things your own way, you know?"

"It's 'Wild Man,' Liss. I just had to prove to him that I'm good."

"He knows it, damn you! If you wanted to impress him, why not just catch the Shogun? You think you haven't pissed him off personally now?"

"He would've said that I didn't do it by myself. He had to see it firsthand."

More programites choked the bandwidth in Topeka. The hammerchicks were eager to render Wim into so much brain-dead pulp.

"All right, Wim. Now what?"

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"Now I'm going to talk to him, then I'm gonna let him go."

"Nice knowing you, Wimmy."

"Wild Man. He won't hurt me—you're always tellin' me how he recognizes talent, promotes the best. He'll see that I belong at the top."

"I'm telling you, Wim, you're done. He's always said that you're not a team player, and now you're worse—you're dangerous. You want my advice? Disconnect, go back to V-1, and run like hell."

"There's nothing aggressive in those programs, Liss. When he sees them he'll know I meant no harm."

"Right."

"And I'm prepared. He'll have to punish me to save face, right? I've got a hundred tees of untraceable storage, plus I'm handing him the Shogun on a plate. He'll take both, I get a public reprimand, then a promotion."

"You got it all figured out, huh Wimmy?"

"Yeah. I'd better go talk with him. Later, Liss."

"I doubt it."

Wim closed the queue and turned his concentration to the program ensnaring Rex Digitalis. He knew his meat puppet was sweating bullets; despite his bravado to Liss, he was scared. The whole thing was a colossal gamble. A good one, but a gamble nonetheless.

"God hates a coward," he said, and prepared a connection to Rex Digit's message queue. Before initiating the dialogue he took a quick look at the Shogun's cage.

And stopped.

He threw open a diagnostic, stared at Rex Digit's electronic signature. With the root process captive, he was able to see far greater detail than usual; it was like cutting open the king's meat puppet and examining his guts. Wim scanned the data eagerly, then did the same with the Shogun's.

His consciousness reeled. He almost dropped interface.

"Liss!"

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She answered immediately. "Still alive?"

"Liss, you aren't gonna believe this—Rex Digitalis and the Shogun are the same person!"

The connection was private, but in the space of a nanosecond Liss bolstered the insulation with her own, far superior programites.

"Say that again, Wimmy?"

"Rex Digitalis! He's the Shogun! All this time—years—he's been orchestrating this war, competing for contracts with the V-1 players. Damn, Liss, you know how much money he's probably made, making everyone think he's two different factions? He's been running the whole show all along!"

"I know."

"What?"

"The top people from both entourages know, Wim. Today was the day to end the charade. The mutli-corps and the government agencies are dependent on us now, no need to keep faking two organizations. Rex Digitalis was going to destroy the Shogun and absorb his people."

Variables changed state; Wim's cages remained in place, but Rex Digitalis and the Shogun disconnected. At the same time, an improved version of Wim's capture programs slammed into place around his own root process.

"Liss!"

"We disconned him manually, Wim. Rex isn't stupid; his puppet's always protected, but not unreachable."

"Liss, wait—"

"It's better this way, Wimmy. The others figured out how your hack worked. They wanted to hold you for a long time, make it as bad as possible. I'll make it quick, all right?"

He scrambled for defensive programs, but he was no match for Liss. Back in Version One a blast of electronic noise surged through Wim's interface. It overloaded the circuits, sending residual arcs of blue fire off the cyberwire and into the delicate pathways of his brain. His meat puppet stiffened and cried out, then slumped back into his chair. His heart continued beating and his lungs pumped air, but his brainwaves went flat.

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Two doors down, the scream just penetrated the door of another apartment. The girl on the couch opened her eyes and unplugged the wire from just behind her right ear. "Sorry, Wild Man," she said, and wiped a tear from her cheek.

*Simon Owens is a 20-year-old neo-pro wasting four years in college as an English Major. He's sold a number of short stories and poetry to both semi-pro and pro markets, most recently to Flesh & Blood and the cutting edge Pine Magazine. This story was based off a friend's AOL screen name, in which he simply took the words "Tractor Girl" and put them into an opening line. The story you see here is what followed.*

## **Tractor Girl**

By Simon Owens

There were pools where she dived. Her mother dug holes with her heels and jumped off the cliff's lip into the ocean of stone below, but Tractor Girl fell to the coldness that only felt like death in wintertime. Even the waters were a rarity, they were to cling to her thighs and arms as the tractor made its way through the fields where the slaves once plowed beneath the stalks, the corn shaded them even as they gave birth to more slaves.

The brake came down by the old kissing tree, where Newton's ghost dropped an apple in her lap. Tractor Girl held it in her hands to let time bleed away until she had a name again. She was no longer just Tractor Girl and the fruit was a weapon, an object assailing her brother. Redness split into white on his forehead and the juice came down, running in spider webs across his face. His fingers sunk into a rotten apple at his feet for revenge, but that was another time and the apple threw into nothing but air and remembered pain.

She dove, naked. Claire, behind the plantation. A daddy's girl falling into a fish's lair with her pale skin. You think about the paleness when you ride, when you tower above the black backs on your horse. Even the saddles were dark. And later, the tractor, a scarlet metal.

"The color of blood in an old wound," Shera told her. Beneath the bamboo roof the contrast of white eyes and dark skin made her a ghost. A swollen belly

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pressed against the table, and somewhere else Claire recognized that belly for what it was, for what her father was when weakness crawled up and reached its tendrils through his desires.

“Master,” they heard from the stables late at night. “Mister.” She interchanged the two, letting them play over the silence coming from her parent’s bedroom. Loudly, her mother said nothing. The nothing hurt Claire’s ears.

“You wear that paleness the way I wear mine, child,” Shera whispered in the morning. “When you’re older you’ll feel guilt. You’ll feel it on your back like the leather they use on ours. Just remember you’re not your father. There’s things mine’s done I wouldn’t be proud of neither.”

But the guns opened their barrels just the same. In the distance, sounds of the shots harmonized with the dull roar of the tractor. Higher than the horses, almost higher than the branches of the kissing tree she rode. Ghosts stared up at her from the stark field, woken from slumber by the rumble that made the crows fly and the field mice scurry. Slaughtered ghosts that lay in the fields wondering how death came forth, masked by their siblings’ deeds and misgivings. They’d died for three barrels and three shots until round murals painted the barn in red blood and Claire’s mother screamed.

They were shadows when they woke her and gagged her and dragged her to the barn. The tractor lay waiting for them, a machine somewhere above the ignorance. Dimly, the slaves had recognized it from another time. Another world. Claire had watched the children hiding behind their mothers’ aprons. She read their lips as they prayed beneath the sun and the master’s daughter riding over them on that red machine, roaring and trudging along to the pumps behind the house to feed it vile liquid. Only in her dreams could it be enticing, the smell playing over her nostrils. In the morning she’d sneak down when her father was in the fields to put her head over the barrel. She’d let it all in until she could almost float away, lying in the tall grasses to greet the darkness behind her closed eyes.

It watched them, the tractor. A time travel observing in wizened patience as the black ghosts herded the master and his family through the door.

“Rape,” the ghosts said.

“Slaves,” the father replied.

“Shera,” the ghosts said.

“Whore,” the father replied.

Three guns and three pulls of the trigger and the workers came running. But the

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slaves were already gone, a ghost story to be told by a weeping mother. She pointed at the murals as she spoke. One spread speckled with bits of skull and leaked down the dry cracks. She pointed and cried and three days later she dove off Grittensburg Run, down to the stones below. Head first like she taught them at the edge of the river. Chin tucked forward and eyes closed.

Some days, when it rained in the mountains and churned up the soot, the water flooded in a black void. On others she could see the trout swimming by the bridge where Tractor Girl dove. Down in the river where the water muffled the gunshots ringing in her ears. Even the ghosts had to pay. While Claire sat on her tractor, her time traveler, atop the hill, the white men rode down to the fields and the slaves. "There's a price to pay," her father's brother yelled over the wind. "There's a dead white man and there's a price to pay." And they paid, the horses came around and the roar of the guns turning the slaves to ghosts echoed off the red metal of the tractor. It reached up and tainted the apples of the kissing tree. And it soaked down to sour the soil and harden it with spilt blood.

When the tractor roamed the fields their fingers reached up and graced the wheels. Her name was Claire. She whispered the name over and over again until it had no meaning, until she was only Tractor Girl. Others called her so, from the outside. She didn't see them, she only stared ahead, but others watched and talked. They told stories of the mythical Tractor Girl. She rode the hills, and children were not to wander from their yards, lest they get run over. The wheels turned by time over the years, as confederate soldiers marched through the grasses, observing the monster they called a Tractor on the horizon. They fell to guns and bayonets, and the tractor rode. Their children had children. There children's children had children. "Look," they said and pointed to her. Tractor Girl would glance up briefly and see dead slaves in children's bodies. They were pointing to her father's dried blood on her apron that never washed off, not even when she dove to the coldest, darkest realms of the river.

The buildings rose around her. Tall and ethereal and wonderful. Like the tractor, but more beautiful. More precise with technology enwrapping them and making her machine look primitive and pitiful. World Wars raged, but the distant battles were mistaken for her memories. Even the bombs sounded like stolen muskets to her ears.

One day the tractor sat poised along the lip of the river. Around her, the legend gained new names. Some now were claiming the girl's name had once been Anita. Others settled for mythical goddesses, and natives of the reservation spoke of the spirits roaming the prairies. Regardless of her name, she looked up from the waters, her wrinkled skin tight to the coldness, her white hair strung together, and saw dirt and small rocks falling beneath the wheel. She noticed the tilting of the tractor and how close it was from falling into the river and drowning forever. Claire waited and willed it to tumble. It teased her from the edge until she rose up out of the water.

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Footprints in the soft soil trailed along the bank. Crawfish scurried out of them and furrowed deeper into the waters as her clothes dripped onto the rusted metal. They were watching her, Claire's past waiting in the waters for her when the ignition turned and the ancient machine roared to life. They stared and called while the tractor reversed back, and smiled when it came forward, its shadow casting over the river below. The rust melted, turned to youth and scarlet. Something for the slaves to awe over. The dying slaves who paid for her dead father. Her uncle burned the fields when he left, leaving the bodies to be buried in their own ashes, and the smell snaked up until even on the hill she could smell it.

Tractor Girl could smell them now. Her name was Claire and they smelled like the river, dark and brooding and wonderful, something only the tractor would fear. It could sense death lurking below, and not even in its new youth could it resist gravity's pull to the bottom of the river's floor.

A legend for the natives, Claire disappeared into the water. Only they called her Miris, spirit of remembered pains.

Children were not to wander near the river, lest they get lost in the memories of ancestors blowing in the prairie wind.

## BLISS

By Lee Masterson

"Just one more, Thorn. Please?"

"Cloudy, how many times have I told you not to order from me online?" The disembodied voice boomed through the skull-mesh she wore and she adjusted the volume control quickly. Dramatic as always, Thorn's online holo-image appeared in the center of the room with a blinding flash of light. For the thousandth time, Cloud wondered what he really looked like behind the holo.

"Please, Thorn? I only need a boost."

"I've already sent you enough this week to wipe out half the city. Now get off my line."

Cloud positioned her own holo to display an image of herself kneeling with her hands clasped before her face in silent plea. She widened her eyes and let her bottom lip quaver. It was her best beseeching pose, and it almost always worked on Thorn.

"That won't work with me this time, Cloudy." His holo swelled and grew, frowning down on her kneeling form from under impossibly heavy brows. He curled his lip in a snarl, revealing a needle-pointed eye tooth. "You're getting in too deep with this stuff. Maybe you should ease off a little."

"But I need it. I can't work without my Bliss-fix. You of all people should understand that."

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Thorn made a sound that was half-expletive, half disgusted sigh and his holo softened. The overhanging brow receded and pity now overlaid his vicious glare. "What happened to the stuff I sent you earlier in the week? I sent you enough to last you a month."

Cloud frowned, frantically sorting through the mismatched memories and hazy hallucinations that had been her week. She could not remember when he had last sent her anything. Too late, she realized he expected her to answer him. She covered her confusion with a sheepish grin.

"I took extra at night to stop the nightmares."



"At night?" He laughed in disbelief. "You stupid bitch. Bliss makes nightmares *more* vivid."

"But I needed it," she said in a small voice, painfully aware of the pathetic whining tone her voice adopted when she begged. Without allowing her holo to mirror her movements, she reached out and altered the sound quality of the interface on her console.

"Jesus, Cloud, listen to yourself. What happened to you that's so bad you need to do this? What are you so desperately trying to forget?"

She mumbled a vague answer under her breath, not giving away anything.

"If things are that bad for you, why don't you go in to the Clinic and get one of those permanent memory blocks implanted, instead of taking enough Bliss to kill off half your brain-cells and fry all your synapse-connectors?"

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"I can't. They won't..." Her mind blanked. For a brief moment her holo froze too. The constant swirling of the honey tresses she chose to wear defied gravity for an instant, standing in the air around her head like a golden nimbus.

"Damn it, Cloud. You're breaking up. Don't you dare drop out now."

She blinked rapidly in a futile attempt to clear her hazed vision. She was only peripherally aware that her online holo-image was fading. What concerned her more was why Thorn's majestic image stood in the center of her nightmare.

"All right, kid, you win," Thorn relented, his hands stretched towards her. "Authorize the credit transfer and I'll send you some more in the next chute."

Still lost within the fragmented wasteland that was her memory, Cloud pressed her palm into the plate on her console. Thorn swore and threw his arms into the air.

"You're out of credit. Do you hear me?"

She stared at him dumbly. "Just one more, please?" she whispered. He did not answer. His holo bent forward, leaning towards a work surface she could not see, his hands fluttering in the air at waist level before him as though he played a phantom piano. After a few moments, he stepped back to review the results.

Surprise and disbelief warred for supremacy in the comical tilt of his features. His eyes opened wide, and his jaw worked soundlessly. Cloud thought he looked like a bad cartoon, but she didn't possess the clarity to laugh.

"I can pay you another way, Thorn. Please don't cut the connection. Help me." She reached for him, her hands snaking around his waist, and he pushed her away roughly. The stim-tabs on her holosuit passed his touch on to her skin and she crumpled to the floor in an inelegant heap. His touch was usually so gentle, feather-light caresses on her body. The unexpected roughness scared her and she lay still.

"You've locked me in, you little bitch," he said in disbelief. "I'll send you some damned Bliss, just let go of the connection."

Floating, weightless, her golden hair fanned out around her face like gossamer tendrils of silk caught in the tide. She reached out to touch the strands, wanting Thorn to go away now.

"Cloud? I'm gonna lock up your damn interface if you don't snap out of it."

The honey-colored silk vanished and her sensor-glove clasped a fine grey cable, which ran from her skull-mesh rigging. It was stretched taut from her temple to a

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point in the room that she could not see. The remains of her holo-image flickered unsteadily before her, alternating between the saucy blonde temptress she had created for the world to see, and the jaundiced, malnourished real her.

"Your holo's cutting out again. Take your fucking skull-mesh off, Cloud."

Helplessly, she watched him bend to his console again. She knew he would try to stabilize her connection to the online world from his end. Only Thorn had the authority to ride her private lines with her, and only because he had come to her rescue so many times before.

"It's not working," he said. His voice wavered. "Your line *is* stabilized, but you're not. Don't you dare pass out on me, bitch. Not while I'm linked into your line. You'll destroy my entire interface."

She moaned as she recognized the onset of her nightmare beginning again. The familiar vertigo that swamped her every time was more intense than she had ever felt and her stomach heaved. If Thorn had just given her some Bliss, the nightmare might have been held at bay this time.

"Wake up!" he shrieked. "You stupid dream-freak. I'm stuck on this fucking bandwidth with you. Take your helmet off."

From somewhere far away she could hear Thorn's panicked screeching and she looked beyond the grey cable that still encompassed her vision.

In the center of the room she saw an image of herself opening a greeting cube. Thorn ran in erratic circles around the calm figure that was an early version of herself, but she paid him no heed. The greeting cube glowed green when she triggered the message to begin.

Thorn's head snapped up when he registered what she was doing. "For Christ's sake, you're Blissing out now, you lying junkie. Snap out of it." He struck her image in the face with his clenched fist, and his hand passed through the hollow image that no longer contained any substance. As though reassuring himself that she really wasn't in there any more, he swiped his hands through her midriff several times.

Cloud smiled, but the movement did not show on her holo. The unfamiliar expression pressed the skin on her cheeks against the stifling skull-mesh she still wore.

"Oh great. I'm stuck watching the shit some dumb junkie dreams up until she wakes up enough to remember to cut the bloody connection, stupid little..."

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He sat heavily on an unseen chair to wait out her hallucination, still cursing under his breath.

Cloud tried to focus on him, wanting to anchor him to the nightmare loop she had come to dread. If Thorn was there, then maybe this time the horror would end. So far, though, nothing was different. She shuddered and her hand clenched the grey cable from her helmet spasmodically.

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The greeting cube unfolded to reveal the magnificent holo-image of a tall, attractive man. There were no interface-generated graphics overlaid on his image at all, which was rare, and she appraised the figure at leisure.

"Hello, neighbor. I've just moved into the building and thought it would be nice to meet some of the people living here. So I'd like to invite you to a little party on Saturday. Just drop by and bang on the door. I'll be happy to meet you."

The image folded back into the cube, and the green glow vanished. Cloud stared at the inanimate plastic cube in horror. She wasn't sure whether to throw it into the recycler or push it out the door and pretend she hadn't seen it. She only knew she didn't want to touch the filthy thing.

Stories abounded among the cyber-citizens in her friend-circle about the dreaded Communicasts. Some said they kidnapped their victims and had them reprogrammed to be loyal to their kind. Others said the members brainwashed new recruits until their beliefs were firmly entrenched in the victims' minds. Cloud didn't care for hearsay. She only knew she resented the invasion of her treasured privacy.

Outraged and offended, she tossed the greeting cube into the recycler. A quick glance at her com-console told her she still had a few minutes before she was due to start work, which meant she had just enough time to compose a reply to her rude neighbor.

She settled into the sensor-seat, nestled in close to her com-console and pulled the skull-mesh over her head. She clenched her teeth through the prickling sensation in her scalp as the cerebral implant needles were inserted and relaxed again as the synapse connectors found home.

The grimy walls and litter-strewn floor disappeared as the system immersed her in the sparkling bright online world that was her real home, and her carefully maintained holo-image sprang to life.

Strands of golden hair wafted in and out of her vision, writhing slowly to their own private tune in an invisible breeze, and Cloud was comforted by the familiarity.

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"Com-console, set to compose personal greeting," she commanded. She positioned her holo into a defiant stance, enhancing her angry glare with a tap of a button, and began in a frosty tone.

"Hello neighbor. I decline your invitation and feel I should warn you that I will be lodging a formal complaint regarding your inappropriate behavior. Preaching your twisted beliefs to innocent citizens is an illegal and immoral practice. You shall be punished for your attempt to corrupt me. Do not contact me again in future."

Cloud slapped her hand down onto the send tab, and smiled triumphantly. She imagined the shocked looks on the faces of people at work when she told them she had been overtly solicited by a real Communicast. The nerve of some people, merrily forcing their out-dated, unrealistic, unhygienic lifestyles onto unsuspecting citizens.

A small red warning flashed across her vision, telling her it was time to begin work. She logged into her secure channel. The swirling nimbus of golden hair shifted and solidified, each tendril becoming a receptor to the transaction centers of every store in her jurisdiction.

The onslaught of early shoppers would begin soon, flooding the cybermall with their colorful holo-presences and their cheerful banter. They did not remain cheerful after they were caught, though, she thought, proud of her untarnished record. No cyber-thief had ever escaped during one of her shifts.

She gave her external receptors one final adjustment, and settled in for the duration of her shift.

"How on earth do you keep track of so many transactions all at once?"

The voice struck her through more than three thousand sound receptors simultaneously, and she shrieked in panic. A quick glance through the stores in her territory showed no direct pick-up on any level. Her heart began to hammer.

She blinked rapidly, forcing her focus out of her working cyber-mode, to narrow in to her immediate real-time console. All systems flashed green; no security breaches showed on her personal line. There was only one other possibility, and Cloud was tempted to brush off the idea for the absurdity it was.

Still, she could not deny that the voice had been real, so, leaving her holo connected, she raised one corner of her skull-mesh just enough to peek out into the room.

Her tiny apartment was dim and gloomy after the brightness of the world beneath her mesh. She glanced around quickly, saw nothing, and began to pull her helmet back over her face.

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"Well? How do you keep track?"

A pale face loomed out of the dark and Cloud screamed. Her mesh rigging fluttered to the floor behind her, forgotten in her fright at seeing a stranger in her apartment.

"Who are you?" she squeaked, unable to stop the quaver in her voice. The man tilted his head to one side, but said nothing. In the dim light, she recognized him as being her rude neighbor, although he didn't seem quite so appealing in the flesh. She swallowed hard. "I warn you, I have an eidetic memory chip installed, so I can report you with 100% accuracy and never be doubted."

"I believe you. Especially with your line of work." He stepped closer and she flinched.

"How did you get into my apartment?"

"The door wasn't locked." A grin spread across the man's face, obviously meant to reassure her, but the ghoulish green glow from her com-console turned his smile into a grim rictus.

Cloud scrambled backwards awkwardly, shuffling her feet in an effort to propel her sensor-seat away from the man. His grin widened.

"Hey, relax. I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to say hello."

Her heart was beating so fast she thought it would burst through her ribcage and bounce away across the room.

"Get out. I'm calling security."

The man frowned and shook his head. "Why would you do that? I've done nothing wrong."

"I... you... you're in my apartment," she spluttered.

"The door wasn't locked," he said again, as though that explained everything. "I sent you an invitation, you replied. Who would be suspicious of a man coming to pick up a reply?"

Air rushed out of her chest as though her lungs had been deflated. "That doesn't mean I invited you in."

He shrugged. "In most circles an unlocked door is an invitation all on its own. Besides, you were the one who first approached me, if I remember rightly."

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Cloud searched her memory for the last time she had physically left her apartment. The tiny apartment was fully serviced, and she telecommuted to and from work every day. All her friend-circles were online. By her rapid calculations, she had not stepped foot outside her apartment in more than 2 years.

And the door had definitely been locked for all of that time.

"I've seen your holo-image in quite a few social circles. Very nice construct you have. You call yourself Cloud, don't you?"

She stared at him in disbelief, a cold shiver tracing its clammy finger up her spine. "How did you know that?"

"I telecommute, too, and I know my way around the cyber-bars. You would have met me as 'Basilisk669', but my real name is Damon."

The name struck her like a blow to the temple and she squeezed her eyes shut. She conjured the mental image of Basilisk669's menacing medieval holo, so alluring in its barbaric simplicity, so easy to conquer, hovering over her as they spun entwined around her own private online domain, yielding too easily beneath her electronically enhanced seduction...

She remembered the delicious thrill of dominating such a powerful online presence, then severing her connection abruptly when she was satiated. It was a trick she employed often, well aware that not many people, male or female, could resist her innocent, waif-like holo. Thorn himself had created her impenetrable security net, so she was certain that none of her conquests could track her down.

At least, she had presumed none would track her down. She had never before tumbled a closet Communicast, though. She made a mental note to run a more thorough background check on the next fool she lured into her private domain.

Basilisk669 – a.k.a Damon - settled his broad frame on the edge of her console and smiled down at her.

"You don't look much like your holo. Your online image is so beautiful, but you..." He laughed scornfully. "You're filthy, and you're ... ugly. You show the world something you're not. That's cheating."

Cloud exhaled in a long, shuddering sigh that became a sob. "Get out. I want you to leave now." Hoping he wouldn't notice, she reached a hand behind her seat and felt around for her fallen skull-mesh.

"Why?" Damon leapt up from his seat on the console and kicked the mesh out of reach. "You're the one who lured me into your little pleasure palace in the first place. You seduced me. And then you left me hanging out in cyber-space when

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you were done with me. Do you know how long it took me to unhook and find my way out of your damned net?"

She shook her head slowly, not understanding what this crazy man wanted from her. He pressed his face close to hers.

"Two fucking days."

His meaty hands circled her upper arms easily and he squeezed. Cloud whimpered, but couldn't force her numb body to fight back. He was so much stronger, so much bigger than she was. Her seat toppled backwards, and he crashed down on top of her.

Damon pulled her arms over her head roughly, wedging his body between her thighs. His sour breath was warm in her face. "I'm going to give that eidetic chip of yours something to remember for the next time you're tempted to seduce another poor sucker into your trap..."

\*\*\*

Thorn cried out in disgust at the memory unfolding before him, and the sound jolted Cloud back into the present. The nightmare hallucination continued to play out through her memory implant, but she managed to cling to the tenuous thread of lucidity.

"Oh, Cloud," he whispered. "Bliss can't stop a memory from an implant. It only accentuates it. I didn't know."

"Just one more hit," she sobbed, hoping he would relent before the relay began again. "Just one more hit. Just one more..."

Thorn squeezed his eyes shut, turning his head away from the brutal lesson being enforced in its continual horrific loop.

"Please Thorn?" Her legs began to convulse, drumming an off-beat tattoo on the floor and she retched violently. Her empty stomach had nothing to offer. A thin trail of yellowish bile dribbled down her cheek.

"I'll help you, Cloud. I'll fix it." Thorn moved quickly, muttering under his breath as he worked.

Cloud looked up to see her holo opening the green greeting cube once again, and her stomach heaved. She tasted the salty tang of her own blood, and retched again.

# NEOMETROPOLIS

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"One more hit, Thorn," she whimpered. "I took them all, but they weren't enough. Just one more will stop the nightmare forever."

Thorn nodded his understanding slowly, his manufactured holo dropping away to reveal his real self. His unusually deep brown eyes held her gaze.

"I've sent another five Bliss-hits through your direct line, Cloudy, plus a little special one that will make it end quicker. Just to be sure..."

*Lee Masterson is a freelance writer from South Australia. She is also the editor and publisher of Fiction Factor (<http://www.fictionfactor.com>) - an online magazine for fiction writers. Lee has had fiction and non-fiction work published in more than 60 publications around the world, both online and in print.*

## VENUS REVERSED

By Robynn Clairday

INT. OLD, DECAYED BUILDING - KIRA'S ROOM - DAY

*In a crumbling, dirty, hopeless room, the wind blows through shattered windows and cracked, open sections of the walls. It's a large space with a high ceiling. It resembles a storage area in a warehouse from the old days.*

*KIRA, a thin, young woman, with silver glittery hair, is crouched before a tangle of junk--metal scraps, burnt wood, unrecognizable bits and pieces of worthless nothing. She carefully arranges the pieces and squirts the pile periodically with different colors of paint. On her bare arms and legs are wild painted designs.*

*There are no computers, no phones, no microwaves, no televisions. Not a single hint of technology can be seen.*

*This world is somewhere in the more distant future.*

*Kira is deeply focused on her efforts and jumps rabbit-like when a young man, FENN, bursts into the room. He too has silver glittery hair, but the resemblance ends there. He is wiry, hard-looking, with eyes dilated and burning. Muscles twitch in his thin arms. He reeks of cruelty and anger.*

*He kicks a tangle of old boxes and blankets out of the way.*

**FENN:**

What the fuck. You still diddling with your pocky shit? C'mon, Drain-head. Get me some pipe.

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*She gets to her feet, but isn't fast enough.*

*He grabs a thin serpentine-like tube from box on a table. It turns almost liquid in his hands and he slams it against his neck.*

**FENN:**

Look at you. You move like a zombo-grl. You snorting Dream, or just being bloody dumb like always?

*She stares at him, lips trembling.*

**KIRA:**

How come you have to be so mean? I'm always good to you. It's not fair—

**FENN:**

Boo-hoo, boo-hoo.

*His tone is careless. He turns his attention back to the tube. Kira's eyes glitter, and her voice trembles when she speaks. She wishes she had the nerve to really tell him off.*

**KIRA:**

I don't have to take this. I can leave here any time I want--

*She watches him as he smiles slowly and seductively. The drug in the tube is hitting his system.*

**FENN:**

You always say the same thing. Where ya gonna go, huh? What ya gonna do?

*He saunters over, grabs her arm and twirls her around. Looks her over with open disdain.*

**FENN:**

Sell your ass like your friend, Moma, does? Shit, the market don't need more who-res. Too many of them now.

*He releases her, drops down onto a raggedy chair.*

**FENN:**

Moma's doing it for Dream or food scraps.

**KIRA:**

So, like your friends are living it any better! I don't see any of them making it to the Dome.

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*She squats back down beside her junk pile and stares at it. Her eyes shine, but she doesn't cry.*

*Fenn smirks at her and says nothing.*

*She can't stand it and scrambles back to her feet.*

**KIRA:**

I'm going out.

*She tries for dignity.*

*Fenn grins snarkily, says nothing.*

**KIRA:**

Don't touch my art.

*Fenn laughs.*

**KIRA:**

Doncha even want to kiss me goodbye?

*Fenn kisses his own hand noisily.*

*Kira turns to stomp out when he calls to her.*

**FENN:**

You might wanna come back soon. 'Cause I got something you'll wanna see.

*Kira stops, spins on her heel, bristling with curiosity.*

**FENN:**

It's big, real big. Maybe my ticket to the Dome. Maybe even take you along for the ride—if I'm in the right mood and you're not pissing me off like usual.

*Kira's expression turns skeptical. She's heard his lies before. She turns back around and leaves. Fenn grins, unperturbed*

EXT. OUTERCITY - STREET - LATER

*Kira is on the street. The wind whips and wails endlessly. Dirt and garbage whirl around her as she walks. She ignores it. At the end of the street are makeshift stalls.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*In one, poorly made paintings, jewelry, and pottery are displayed in the front. A slithery-looking guy with empty eyes leans against the stall, smacking the sides of his head with both of his hands. He is humming tonelessly.*

*Kira glances at him with little interest.*

**KIRA:**

Drain-head.

*The stall next to it has no products on display, except for the tall female, who dances seductively without music. She is wearing what looks like pieces of a keyboard, two CD Roms, and an extension cord. They are glued strategically onto her body. A closer look reveals her costume is a fake. The keyboard pieces, the CD Roms, and the extension cord are all crude facsimiles.*

*Kira's expression is one of shock as she stares at the dancing woman. She keeps looking back over her shoulder as she walks to the last stall. The muscled, dark-skinned woman wearing a wig made of long, pink plastic-like strips is scowling. It's MOMA. She is attired in nothing but a few colorful scarves.*

*Kira hurries to her side.*

**KIRA:**

Moma, maybe you should move away from here. Could be dangerous.

*She lowers her voice, but can't stop gaping at the dancing woman.*

**KIRA:**

If the Techno-Pulletts see her, they might sweep everyone. What I want to know is where she got real live tech. I heard that it's been five years since anyone found any.

*Moma flips her plastic strips and puffs out her chest.*

**MOMA:**

Maxi-shit, Kira. Her gear is fake. Can't you tell?

*Kira shakes her head.*

**KIRA:**

Never seen anything but drawings of tech. I think. I did once see something. It was flat and small and smooth. Real, real small.

*She holds up a thumb and finger.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

Maybe this big.

*Moma nudges her.*

**MOMA:**

Look.

*Two well-fed, well-dressed men stroll down the street. They are smirking. Arrogant and careless as they survey the stalls. The wind and dirt doesn't seem to bother them. They peer at the street's inhabitants as if peering into cages at the zoo.*

**MOMA:**

Domers.

*They stop at the Drain-head's stall and whisper for a few seconds.*

**MOMA:**

Getting Dream. Now watch where they go.

*Moma automatically begins flexing and contorting her body. She is very good. She stretches, pulls up a veil and reveals a small opening in her stomach. Then one appears in each muscled thigh. She smiles alluringly and shows them each opening.*

*The men ignore her and head right for the dancer.*

**MOMA:**

Maxi-shit. She looks so illegal they can taste it...I wish the Pullets would snatch her.

*Kira sighs.*

**KIRA:**

It's not fair that they can come here, but we can't go there.

*She nods at the distant shape of the Dome. Moma isn't listening. She's glaring at the dancer and the Domer men.*

**MOMA:**

That who-re is pissing me off.

*Kira sighs. Walks away. Moma doesn't notice.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

INT. OLD, DECAYED BUILDING - KIRA'S ROOM - LATER

*Kira trudges up to the door. Stops, bites her lip nervously, than walks inside. Fenn is waiting for her.*

*She freezes. Uneasy. Possible danger ahead. He smiles. She hugs herself nervously.*

**FENN:**  
Zombo-grl.

**KIRA:**  
Don't—

**FENN:**  
Before you start bitchin', don't you want to see what I got?

*Kira walks over and plops down onto the tattered folding chair.*

*Fenn gets up and walks into a closet. He re-emerges, carrying something aloft. Kira stares, blinking. Unable to comprehend what she's seeing.*

*It's a male torso with arms. No head. No lower body. It's beautifully fashioned, with smooth, tanned skin. Soft-looking with fine hairs blowing on the arms. It looks like a human male body, except it's a touch too perfect.*

*Kira opens her mouth but can't get the words out.*

*Fenn grins at her expression. He casually drops something small and metallic to the floor.*

*Suddenly the hands flex gently and the arms shift. Kira shrieks and leaps back. Fenn doubles over laughing.*

**KIRA:**  
What the—what is—

*She points with a trembling finger.*

**FENN:**  
You mean, this fellow here?

*He taps the torso on the shoulder. It every so slightly flinches.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

What is it! A monster! Maxi-shit, Fenn. Get it out of here!

**FENN:**

You daft drain-head. It's not a monster. Are you completely ass-stupid? You really don't know what this is?

*With huge eyes, Kira shakes her head.*

**FENN:**

It's cyborg. The real thing. Remember, hearing about robots that were like people back in the bad old days?

*He pats the cyborg's shoulder possessively.*

**FENN:**

Well, this here is the real thing.

*Kira steps back.*

**KIRA:**

Oh, my god! How could you bring it here? They'll wipe us for sure if the Pullets find out. We'll be lasered. You know the Tech Laws.

*She rubs her face nervously, rocking on her heels.*

*Fenn struts around the cyborg, smirking triumphantly.*

**FENN:**

Yeah, I know the Tech Laws. They talk about silicon and chips and wires.

*He laughs.*

**FENN:**

Bastards don't even mention cyborgs, 'cause they don't even dream we know about 'em.

*Kira peers at the cyborg cautiously.*

**KIRA:**

How come he doesn't have a head or legs? He doesn't look like he works right.

**FENN:**

It doesn't matter. All his brains and wiring that makes him work is in his spinal cord. The head would have helped him see and shit, but his sensors are supposed to compensate for that. As for legs—

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*He shrugs.*

**FENN:**

Shit, he can't escape without 'em.

*He laughs again and punches the air ecstatically.*

**FENN:**

You know how much he'll get me on the market? Huh? 'Course you don't, zombo-grl.

*He dances around the room.*

**FENN:**

Our headless boy here's gonna take me to the Dome, that what he's gonna do.

*Kira watches him fearfully.*

**KIRA:**

They destroyed all of the robots. 'Cause they were dangerous. Everyone knows that.

**FENN:**

Everyone knows shit.

*Fenn is digging through a pile of rubbish. He pulls out another partial pipe and presses it against his forehead. The rush isn't as intense.*

**KIRA:**

I don't like him here. Gives me the itches. Put him somewhere else.

*Fenn looks at her, eyes scornful.*

**FENN:**

Shut up, daftie. You probably give him the itches.

**KIRA:**

You really think he's worth a lot?

*Fenn saunters towards the door.*

**FENN:**

For *me* he is.

*Kira leaps after him.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

You wouldn't leave me behind, right? You still like me a little, right, Fen? Don't leave me—

*She grabs his arm.*

**KIRA:**

Please, Fenn, don't leave me!

*He yanks his arm free.*

*He turns and gives her a menacing look.*

**FENN:**

Don't let anyone in. Don't tell anyone about our headless here. You know what would happen if you make a mistake, don't you?

*Kira nods her head numbly and watches him walk away.*

*A few seconds later, she drifts back into the room. Glances at the cyborg, but drops her eyes hastily. She circles her art on the floor, bends to adjust a piece of junk. Her attention is riveted back to the cyborg.*

*She cautiously inches closer towards him. His hand clenches a little.*

**KIRA:**

Maxi-shit. Fenn didn't tell me if you're like plugged in or turned on or something.

*She returns to her art pile, kneels down beside it. She squirts a little orange onto it.*

**KIRA:**

See if I care about Fenn. He can go to the Dome and go to hell. I'll be just fine.

*Strokes something wooden and square in the pile. Tears fill her eyes and spill down her cheeks.*

*She curls up and hugs herself.*

**KIRA:**

I don't wanna be alone. Not again. Not again.

*She is despairing and desperate, but neither emotion is new. She's done this before.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*A small noise makes her look up. The cyborg's arm has changed positions. The hand grips the edge of the table, or so it appears. Curious, Kira wanders over to the table. Wipes her eyes and nose with the back of her hand.*

**KIRA:**

You're not so scary. Don't even know if you're alive or if Fenn is playing a joke.

*She touches the hand tentatively.*

*It moves and turns palm upward.*

**KIRA:**

Maxi-shit. You feel just like skin. Warm.

*Something makes her lay her palm on top of his.*

*For a second, the hand doesn't react, but then the hand clasps hers. She stiffens in sudden fear, but then a smile curves her lips. She squeezes his hand.*

**KIRA:**

You're nice, you know. You feel kinda sweet.

*She suddenly looks around the room as if an audience is watching her, an embarrassed expression on her face.*

**KIRA:**

I'm talking to you, and maybe you're not even real.

*His hand is still holding hers. She looks down at his other hand resting on the table.*

**KIRA:**

Listen, if you can hear me or understand me, tap once on the table.

*For a second, he is motionless. Kira sucks in a breath. Then, he taps lightly once on the table.*

*She grins in delight. Her cheeks are still wet from the crying jag.*

**KIRA:**

Maxi-shit! You are real.

*She suddenly wrinkles her forehead in thought.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

That means you can hear stuff. Did you hear Fenn and me? Did you hear everything he said?

*He knocks again on the table, but this time more forcefully.*

*Kira looks down the hand, which she is holding.*

**KIRA:**

Listen, knock twice for "no". That way, we can really talk.

**KIRA:**

Are you scared?

*Hesitation. Two knocks.*

**KIRA:**

You must be brave. Wish I was.

*She thinks a second.*

**KIRA:**

Are you mad at the way things are?

*One knock.*

**KIRA:**

Me, too.

*Thinks again.*

**KIRA:**

Have you been around a long time?

*One knock.*

**KIRA:**

What about friends? Are there others like you?

*Two knocks. Then, a shrug.*

**KIRA:**

That's sad. I bet you hate being alone. I know I do.

*He points to her and then to the door. A question mark in the gesture.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

Yeah, I have Fenn, but he doesn't count. He's not around much, and even when he is...

*She shrugs.*

**KIRA:**

It doesn't seem to change anything.

*He squeezes her hand. He is listening to her. It's a shock, because no one ever does.*

**KIRA:**

You're really nice. I can tell. Most people aren't, you know.

*She sighs. Then her smile fades, and she releases his hand.*

**KIRA:**

I wish Fenn would stay away for a long time. He's rotten evil... He's worse than most.

*She pauses.*

**KIRA:**

He says if I were prettier, he'd be nicer to me.

*The cyborg is still for a moment. Then he reaches up and lightly touches her face.*

*She jumps nervously. Giggles.*

*He begins to trace her features. Fingers running over her forehead, eyelids, cheekbones, lips. She trembles a little.*

*Grows silent as he traces her features gently a second time. His hand glides down her cheek to her jaw, and then to her neck. She sits with her eyes closed. Lips parted. Entranced. Like a painter with a brush, his fingertips follow the curve to the hollow at the base. She shivers. He hesitates before placing his hand gently down onto the table. Palm up. The message is obvious.*

**KIRA:**

Do you think I'm pretty?

*He knocks once forcefully.*

*She beams. Then her eyes light up.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

Hey, I bet I could get you paper and a pencil, and you could really talk to me. That would be maxi...

*From under her lashes, she studies him for a second.*

**KIRA:**

If you want to touch me some more, you can. I liked it, you know.

*She strokes his hand. She starts to bend down as if to kiss his hand and doesn't see Fenn burst into the room.*

**FENN:**

What the maxi-fuck you doing, daftie? You playing with my headless man?

*He is more wired than he was before. Eyes glittery. Face twitchy. A hard, knife-like smile on his face.*

*Kira drops the cyborg's hand. Her face slackens with shock and dismay.*

**KIRA:**

You scared me, Fenn! What you on—ArdCore?

*Fenn strides forward and pushes her away from the cyborg.*

**FENN:**

You better not have messed up my toy.

*He stares at the cyborg.*

**FENN:**

Headless, here, is gonna make me rich.

*The cyborg's hands clench in fists, but Fenn doesn't notice. Muscles tense in the cyborg's arms. Kira sees. Excitement, hope, and fear shine in her eyes. The cyborg is starting to move, starting to reach for Fenn.*

*Before she or the cyborg can react, Fenn snatches up a small metallic device from the floor. He pushes a button, and the cyborg goes limp.*

*Kira lets out a scream. She rushes forward and tries to grab the cyborg but is held back by Fenn.*

**KIRA:**

What did you do! You killed him! You killed him!

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**FENN:**

Shut up, will you! I just deactivated him.

*He smirks down at Kira.*

**FENN:**

He looked a little feisty to me. Maybe you and he was planning something behind my back. Can't have that, daftie.

*He shoves Kira aside and lifts the cyborg into his arms.*

*Sobbing on the floor, Kira tries to hold onto Fenn's leg, but he steps away easily.*

**KIRA:**

Where are you taking him? You can't leave now. You can't. Everyone will see, and they'll call the Pullets.

*Fenn strides towards the door.*

**FENN:**

It's dark out, and no one sees nothing.

*Kira glares at him. Her hands knot into fists.*

**KIRA:**

I'll find him, and I'll get him back. You won't stop me, neither.

*Fenn explodes into raucous laughter. Shifts the cyborg to his other arm.*

**FENN:**

Go ahead and try. Don't think you'll have much luck.

**KIRA:**

I will. You'll see.

*He pauses. Looks down at the cyborg and then at Kira.*

**FENN:**

I'm selling him for parts, daftie. Got me lots of buyers who want different pieces of our headless.

*Kira's mouth drops open. Her eyes are enormous. She tries to speak but can't. Fenn laughs again, shakes his head. He sashays towards the door, swinging the cyborg. His steps are deliberate and slow. Taunting.*

*Kira clumsily gets to her feet.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

**KIRA:**

Don't take him, don't take him. Please, Fenn. Leave him here with me. I'll find you something better, I promise.

*Fenn pauses at the door and turns to sneer at her.*

**FENN:**

You, zombo-girl? You? You find me shit.

**KIRA:**

Please, Fenn, please? Please?

*She stretches out her hands. He turns his back on her, and shifts the cyborg in his arms to get a better grasp.*

**FENN:**

Please yourself, daftie. Me and headless, we got big plans. You can't stop 'em. You never could.

*Beat.*

*Something snaps in Kira. She lunges towards her art pile and extracts a long stick painted silver. Her face is ferocious, determined. Without hesitation, she rushes Fenn and pummels him with the stick and her hands. With everything she's got.*

*He spins around. Insane rage and outrage twists his features.*

**FENN:**

You hit *me*? You're dead! Stone-up dead!

*He sets the cyborg down and pounces on Kira. He mercilessly punches her until she falls wailing to the floor. She doesn't stay down. Bloodied and battered, she scrambles back to her feet.*

**KIRA:**

I—won't—let—you—

*She and Fenn struggle, almost dance near the stairs. He wraps both hands around her throat before she can dodge him.*

*Her face turns purple, her eyes bulge. He's lifting her off of her feet. His face is devoid of emotion, except fury.*

*Kira chokes, tries to pull his hands off, but can't. She has managed to hold onto the painted stick. She jabs it into Fenn. He gasps.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*Fenn drops her coughing and wheezing to the ground. He clutches his chest. Looks down at the stick embedded there with surprise.*

*Shakes his head. Kira coughs and breathes hard.*

*Fenn then takes a step back and stares at Kira. His expression shifts. Their eyes lock, and she recoils from the burning hatred in his eyes.*

*Fenn is losing his balance. Slowly, he is falling backwards. Before he does, he reaches one hand out and grabs the cyborg.*

*Fenn manages to choke out a few words to Kira right before. His lips curve into a pained sneer.*

**FENN:**

He comes with me.

*Kira shrieks as the two thump down the steps. The cyborg seems to be riding Fenn all the way down.*

*Holding her tortured throat, she screams and screams. A horrible, raw, animal noise.*

*Kira plunges down the stairs. Fenn is lying at the bottom. His head is twisted at an unnatural angle. His eyes are wide open, glazed. The painted stick juts from his chest.*

*Even dead, Fenn sneers.*

*Kira stares at him for a second. Turns her back and kneels beside the fallen cyborg. She strokes him lightly, fearfully.*

**KIRA:**

Are you alive?

*The cuts on her face split open as she weeps. Tears and blood mix and fall down her cheeks.*

*She doesn't see the drops of red and silver fall down onto the cyborg's chest.*

*His hand begins to move ever so slightly and still Kira doesn't see.*

**KIRA:**

I'm sorry. I just wanted to save us.

*She closes her eyes. Buries her face in her hands.*

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

*His hand reaches out and his fingers lightly touch hers. Her eyes flutter open. Her face electrifies. Despite its many bruises, swellings, and markings, she is almost beautiful.*

*Her fingers lock with his. Reverently, she holds his hand against her heart.*

**KIRA:**

And, now you've saved me.

*He touches her blood and tear streaked cheek with his other hand. For a long moment, they sit like that. Close, but afraid to move.*

*From a distance, Kira hears a noise. Maybe it's voices. Maybe someone is coming. She stiffens. The cyborg squeezes her hand.*

**KIRA:**

I know.

*She lifts the cyborg into her arms and walks out of the building. She is holding him tightly. No one will take him away again.*

*The cityscape soon swallows them in its shadowy maw.*

END

*“You should be listening to ‘Bell’ by Project Pitchfork when you read this. Trust me.”*

## ENGEL

By John Jacobs

Two men stood facing each other. The tall, older man was Dr. T. H. Lawrence, Ph. D. in physics and senior technician. The younger man, unshaven and with wilting complexion was Michael Engel, time traveler. It took a sharp eye to realize that he was only in his twenties—the harsh conditions of time travel had taken more than a few years off his life. He had on an orange jumpsuit, standard issue, and shiny black combat boots. And he was a pilot of sorts, but there was no elaborate, futuristic-looking time machine for him to ride in; he was it. The select few who were chosen by Project Knight underwent extensive “modification”, whereby each one of them became a living, thinking, Temporal Transit Device—a time machine. The actual mechanism was a genetic, chemical, and cybernetic one; a volatile mix of technologies whose end result was nothing less than the hyper-evolution of the human brain to a point far beyond normal functioning. But it was the tiny, yet advanced computer residing in Michael’s frontal lobe that made it all work. Neural-interface links with the computer allowed him to direct himself through time with remarkable precision. Without it he was helpless.

“XP501, why aren’t you in costume?” said Lawrence.

Michael said nothing.

“The temporal cannon must fire at precisely five o’clock, otherwise you’ll miss your target.”

Michael man didn’t reply.

“Goddamnit, XP501, are you even well enough to go through with this?”

# NEOMETROPOLIS

---

Michael looked back at him with deep blue, watery eyes. He was perspiring slightly, despite the fact that they were standing in an air-conditioned hallway.

“I want you to think about something, Professor, before you send me out there again,” said Michael. “When you throw a stone into a pond it doesn’t just make ripples in the water: it makes ripples in time, as well.”

“The ripples we’ve made here are small enough,” Lawrence replied coolly.

“Not as small as you might think, Professor. Most fish are frightened away when the stone hits the water, *but some are drawn to it*. And God knows we’re not the only fish in the pond.”

Dr. Lawrence looked at him, frowned, and pulled out a pad of paper from his lab coat. “You need to be in costume,” the scientist began, skimming through the pages. “Your attire must be suitable for this mission, because we’re sending you back in time again. Actually, you’ll be going back in time and about sixty trillion quanta left of our timeline, which will land you in a parallel 1980’s. Your target never existed in our time, so we don’t have any pictures of him. You’ll find him easily enough though. He’s practically drenched in lambda radiation. Do you know what to do, XP501?”

“Study him, but don’t interfere,” Michael replied. “Whatever happens is meant to happen.”

“That’s right, XP501. Bring back as much data as you can—an analysis of his behavior, vital signs and scan results, even a sample of hair if possible—but be careful who sees you. After all, we don’t want to make any unnecessary ripples, do we?”

“No, Professor.”

“Good. Now get dressed and get your carcass down to the temporal cannon before we miss our opportunity.”

Michael turned to walk away but stopped short.

“Professor?” he asked.

“Yes?”

“That one that went before me, the one that went rogue—XP455...”

“Christine? H-how do you know about her?” the old man stuttered.

# NEOMETROPOLIS

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"I've seen her, Professor," Michael said, grinning sickly at the man. "I think she might be working for *Him* now."

"Who? Who are you referring to?"

"He doesn't have a name. At least not one that we can comprehend. He exists in several different histories, but unlike us, all separate instances of him are really one and the same. And he moves freely through time, because it is his element and he is comfortable there."

"Who is he? God?"

"No, not God, but damn near. He's higher up on the tree of life than we are."

"I think I've heard enough," Lawrence interrupted.

"You don't know what you've done here, Professor. You people have opened up a Pandora's box."

Michael glared at him, unabashed and unafraid. Lawrence returned his gaze, but faltered. There was something in the young man's eyes that made him look away, a certain animalistic quality. A look of hopeless, fearless desperation. A look that said he had nothing to lose. Lawrence had seen that look before.

"I hear it talking to me sometimes," said Michael. "The implant, I hear it talking from inside my own brain. It wants to take control. And the genes... you people did something to us that isn't natural, that isn't meant to be."

Lawrence's eyes widened slightly, but he otherwise showed no visible reaction. Michael stepped toward him, and the scientist stepped away, his back against the stainless-steel wall.

"I know about the UFO," said Michael. "I know what you found down there, on the ocean floor. You didn't tell us just what we were getting into."

The old man's jaw dropped slightly, but he quickly gathered himself together. He crossed his arms and looked at Michael with a disciplinarian air. After a minute of uncomfortable silence Michael looked away and sighed.

"You should hurry up and get ready," said Dr. Lawrence. "Time is, after all, of the essence."

Michael laughed sarcastically as he walked away.

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# NEOMETROPOLIS

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Michael took a deep breath as the technicians in radiation suits strapped him to the table. A massive, chrome-colored apparatus, morphologically similar to a telescope, moved into position above him, electric servos inside humming softly. He looked up into the barrel of the temporal cannon as it slowly came to rest, pointing directly at his head. A thin red guide laser shot out, painting a dot between his eyes. An orange glow appeared deep inside as the machine warmed up, an ember burning at the heart of the steel monster.

"T minus five minutes until launch," said a male, monotone voice from the speakers around the room.

"Cutting this one pretty close, huh?" said one of the technicians.

Michael didn't say anything. Waiting was the worst part. If anything ever went wrong it always happened in the last five minutes.

"You know what you have to do, Michael," said Dr. Lawrence over the intercom. "Don't let us down."

Michael took another deep breath, and waited for time to pass. The figures in radiation suits carried on silently with the pre-launch ritual, like alien drones in the belly of a spaceship. There was nothing more Michael could do other than lie there, and maybe try to quiet his thoughts. Soon the horrible pain would come again, like an old friend long missed, but never forgotten.

"T minus two minutes," said the monotone voice.

"Good luck, sir," said one of the technicians. "Have a good trip."

A door closed at one end of the room, and then Michael was alone, face to face with a soulless, uncaring beast of technology.

"T minus sixty seconds."

The ember glowed brighter, the drone of the machine grew louder and louder, drowning out the voice from the speakers. The lights around the room dimmed and the speakers began to hiss and crackle, but Michael didn't notice. He stared up into the barrel of the cannon, the heart of it glowing like a tiny star.

First there was always the blinding light, then a distinct burning sensation, like falling into the sun. It wasn't Michael's body that was burning though; it was his mind. This was because of temporal friction, one of the perplexing problems the scientists faced. The cannon propelled the travelers at an incredible velocity through parallel worlds, tearing through the delicate membranes that bound them together like a rock flung through a piece of paper. It was why they'd lost so

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many, especially at the beginning. It also explained why the ones that came back were so worn down, some of them on the verge of psychotic collapse.

Those with a dark sense of humor sometimes referred to it as the Bad Trip, and with good reason. While the experience was different for each of them, for the most part it was a hallucinatory light show of vile fantasy mixed with tattered shreds of childhood memory. That's why the travelers tried so hard to forget their past—after a while there was no way to separate reality from creeping neuroses.

*I saw Mom, and she was standing in the living room with a strange man, or was it a clown? And when they took my brother Timmy away they said he had cancer but I saw the demons. They were all around his hospital bed, reaching for him, but Mom and Dad couldn't see them. And the doctor was a monster. No, he wasn't. Was he? But I saw his eyes and I knew. He wanted to turn my brother into a monster too. And I see him sometimes—Timmy—crawling out of the slime and he laughs at me. He wants to bring me down there with him.*

There was no way to around it, no way to shut them out. One traveler dropped acid before they shot him out of the cannon. He never came back from that one. It was best to face up to the demons, reason with them if possible while there was still any ounce of sanity left. But they were always there, no matter what. Even in their dreams.

"Five, four, three, two, one..."

The light grew unbearably bright. Michael screamed inside.

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Michael opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground between two brick walls, staring up at a thin strip of sky. He didn't know if he'd been dreaming or traveling again. The voice of his brother was ringing in his head. *Come down there with me, Michael.*

"That's not the Timmy I knew," Michael said out loud.

He got to his feet and dusted himself off. Down a couple of yards the alley branched off in three directions, and there was music coming from one end. An odd style it was, too; unlike anything he'd heard before. Heavy guitar riffs with lots of distortion and high-pitched, girlish vocals.

*This is 1980's hair metal,* Michael thought to himself as he walked around toward the front of the building. Listening to the music, he could vaguely make out some of the lyrics.

*“When you left me, baby,  
you tore my world apart,  
you’ve got me going now, baby,  
your love is like chains through my heart.”*

Still trying to recall his mission, still trying to sift through the backwash of thoughts swimming around in his head, he turned the corner. There was a crowd of people in front of the building, girls mostly, wearing tight skirts or jeans, low cut shirts and high heels. They all had the wild, frizzy hairdos Michael had seen in photographs. The few men standing with them were unanimously dressed in stonewash denim. Michael looked down, saw that his pants were of the same variety, and breathed a sigh of relief. The guys down in wardrobe were usually pretty good with their research.

From inside he could hear the voice of the singer above the roar of the crowd. “Thank you all for coming this evening. We are Bordello, from Los Angeles, California.” The crowd cheered progressively louder as he named each member of the band. “We have Nick Cobra on drums, Vince Savage on guitar, Mike Leslie on bass, and I’m your singer for the evening, Johnny Nemean.” Michael felt the ground underneath him shake as the crowd inside went wild.

*I’m at a rock and roll concert,* Michael thought to himself.

“Hey blondie.”

Michael looked around.

“Yeah you, standing over there.” One of the girls broke away from the crowd and walked toward him. Some of the other girls whispered to each other and a couple of the men gave Michael dirty looks. Michael caught a whiff of her perfume as she approached, and he had to restrain himself from making any visible expression. The sweet, pungent odor reminded him that it’d been too long since he’d even touched a woman. She was remarkably beautiful, with high cheekbones, sleek, sensuous curves, and emerald green eyes, though she had on too much makeup for his taste.

“You look familiar,” said the girl, smacking her gum. She blew a pink bubble and popped it with one finger, licking the goo off seductively. “Were you at that party last weekend, down at Rick’s?”

Michael looked at her doubtfully. She couldn’t have been older than twenty. “I seriously doubt it,” he replied.

The girl smiled and looked Michael up and down. “You a big Poison fan?” said the girl.

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Michael froze, tried to think of something to say. Fortunately the girl kept talking. "That's a stupid question, I guess," said the girl. "I mean, you wouldn't be wearing the shirt if you weren't a fan."

Michael looked down at the green letters on his T-shirt, then looked back up at the girl. "Yeah, of course," he replied instinctively. He grinned, trying not to look too nervous. The girl didn't seem to care.

"Brett Michaels is a god," said the girl. "I want to have his baby."

Michael raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything. The girl laughed. "Yeah, you're all about the music," she said. "You've got that look about you. Is that why you were around back?"

"Huh?" said Michael.

"Trying to get backstage? Get in the good word for your band?"

"Uh, sure," he replied. Sometimes it was best to just smile and nod.

"XP501?" said the girl.

The blood froze in Michael's veins, the color draining from his face. A dozen different scenarios were going through his head, and none of them were good. Red digital numbers flashed in his mind as he primed the computer in his brain for immediate flight. He could shift out of there in a moment's notice if the need arose, but without giving the computer enough time to calculate a destination there was no telling where he'd end up.

"Is that your band?" said the girl. Michael stopped and thought for a moment. "You have that little tattoo on your arm," she continued. "I just kind of assumed it was the name of a band."

"Yeah," said Michael, relieved. He had to keep from laughing out loud at the ridiculousness of the situation. The girl grinned slyly.

"It sounds kind of new wave. I'm sure you guys really rock, though. You'll have to give me a demo tape some time."

"I can do that," said Michael.

"I'm Valerie, by the way."

"Michael."

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“Michael, huh? Nice name,” she said, smiling. She turned and walked back toward her friends. Michael stood and watched her go. She stopped halfway and turned around again. “Are you coming or not, Michael? You wanted to get backstage, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then stick with me. I’m no ordinary groupie; I have connections. We just have to wait for a few more of my girlfriends to show up, okay?”

“Sounds good,” said Michael, tailing behind her. It was odd, he thought to himself, how these events seemed to work themselves out. It was like he was being pulled along on an invisible leash, with slack to move around but still at the mercy of some higher power.

He didn’t like to think too much about that, though. To abandon the notion of free will in the context of multi-dimensional time was a mind-boggling descent into the realm of meta-time theory, which even some of the top scientists working for Project Knight were afraid to explore. In brief, laymen’s terms, the best way to describe it would be something like the following:

Taking into consideration the complexities of lateral temporal movement, or more clearly stated, the fact that all side-effects of linear time travel had gone completely out the window—no longer any worry of time loops, catastrophic meetings with past selves, or earth-shattering modifications of history, since any alteration of the past or future simply spawned a new one—it seemed that science had finally dealt determinism a crippling blow. For the first time in history (if it could even be called such anymore) the human being stood at the center of the universe, completely in control and unafraid of any consequence of its actions. The time travelers were free to crush all the prehistoric insects they pleased or tamper with major historic events; hell, they could even assassinate key figures throughout the ages and it just didn’t matter, as long as the alterations happened along a parallel timeline.

And so the scientists were naively content with their view of the universe as one giant padded room, with little to hurt themselves on and little to fear. Until, of course, a series of discoveries came about that would cause them to reconsider their model, and ultimately put them back in their place. One such discovery was the fact that completely unrelated events, which occurred on drastically different timelines, often still had a significant effect on each other: assassinate Hitler in one past history, and he’ll reappear in a parallel future somewhere as an entirely different human being. Like the old whack-a-mole game in a children’s arcade, actions in one area of time and space suddenly caused repercussions to pop up in another, and who was to say how or why. Another discovery which shook their fragile model was the observation that as all timelines approached eternity, they tended to converge toward the same singular event, which they called Omega—

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The End. The more they studied the future, the more it appeared that it really *was* written in stone, and there was a pattern to it after all—a difficult confession to make, and one that would haunt them again and again.

After much debate and calculating and more debate, it was finally conceded that perhaps there was another *layer* to time. Wasn't it possible that all events that occurred in separate realities were somehow still connected to each other along a linear path? If a certain time traveler stepped sideways through time into a parallel world, isn't the actual journey an event, and if so, where in history is that event recorded? What if the ever-growing web of sheer complexity in the universe, caused by the sudden explosion of time travelers bouncing all over the place, were really a well-designed plan, carefully laid out along this new dimension—meta-time. Then it would seem that humanity is not the free-acting, independent force in the universe that it had originally imagined. There is someone higher up pulling the strings after all.

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The hallway backstage reeked of body odor and pot. Everywhere Michael stepped he had to push his way past groupies and fat roadies. He was close, though; he could feel it. A sensory implant in his brain, an intuition multiplier, warned him if he was approaching any significant events along the current and all neighboring timelines. The device had an effective radius of five minutes, give or take a few, which was often ample time to take action. His vision turned into black and white television as he switched into radiation signature mode. He looked up at the ceiling. There was a long row of green static fizzing against the gray background—electromagnetic radiation from the conduit pipes running down the hallway. Valerie knocked on a door up ahead and turned the knob. Michael followed her inside.

“Johnny!”

“What’s happening, Val?” The singer sat reclining on a couch with a bottle of vodka in one hand, a joint in the other, and a blonde groupie on his lap. “Who’s your friend?”

“His name is Michael. He’s in a band called XP501.”

“Is that so, Michael?” the singer said, nodding to him. “Interesting band name. You been together for a while?”

“A year or so,” said Michael, trying to recall as much as he could about the rock and roll subculture.

“Looks like you’ve done your fair share of partying too, judging by the looks of you,” Johnny said with a drunk smile. “Care for a hit?”

"Yeah," Michael said, reaching for the joint. He took a drag and looked around. Valerie was sitting with one of the other band members, her leg across his lap. Oh well, she'd served her purpose. Michael took another puff, coughed, and passed the joint back to the singer. He didn't want to get too trashed before he encountered the anomaly, otherwise he wouldn't be able to interface with his implants properly. And there was less than a minute to go.

"Grab a drink and pull up a seat, Michael," Johnny said, grinning wide as the groupie on his lap kissed his neck. Michael cleared some cables off an amp and sat down. A roadie handed him a beer.

"You must be the creative talent in your band," said Johnny. "You have that look about you."

"Yeah, I write a lot of the songs," Michael replied. Less than thirty seconds left.

"That's cool, man," said Johnny. "I see you're into Poison, too. We covered 'Nothin but a Good Time' tonight. Did you catch the show?"

Michael didn't reply right away. He was watching the door closely. And then the anomaly entered the room. It was like a humanoid figure of solid white light, blinding him through his radiation vision. Fortunately everyone else was paying attention to the newcomers, and didn't see Michael wince and cover his eyes. They weren't kidding about the target being saturated. By the time Michael had switched back to normal vision Johnny was up from his seat, greeting the people that had come in, the groupie that was on his lap lying on the floor.

"Hey, this is Jimmy," said Johnny. Everyone nodded to the teenager or raised their drink. "He's my cousin."

*Interesting, thought Michael. The anomaly is related to a famous 1980's rock star. That would explain the vibrations they picked up.*

He was a scrawny kid, with thin, bony arms. His hair was long and stringy and probably didn't get washed too much. Michael eyed him closely. The kid was obviously stoned out of his mind.

"Good show, man," the kid said, shaking Johnny's hand. "I got hit in the head with a pair of panties during 'Love Like Chains.'"

Johnny laughed. "That's why I wrote that one, Jim."

Michael blinked once in disbelief. Nobody else caught it, because it'd happened so fast. The kid actually winked out of time while he was talking to his cousin and then popped back in.

*Christ*, Michael thought to himself. *The kid's shifting and he doesn't even realize it.* Just then he felt a strong vibration, like a jolt of electricity, from both the sensors in his brain and gut instinct. Something big was going to happen in about fifteen minutes. Something up ahead was making a lot of waves, and it wasn't natural. But why? Unless they were trying to draw attention to themselves, and that could only mean...

"It's a trap," Michael muttered to himself. No one else heard him. *Goddamnit*, he thought, *how do I always get involved in this shit?* He felt inside his boot, made sure the .38 Luger (a souvenir from one of his trips) was in there, and walked over. They were all sharing a bottle of Jack Daniel's when he arrived. Johnny nodded to him.

"Where's the rest of your band, Michael?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"That's what I like about this guy," Johnny laughed. "You probably don't even know how you got here, right?"

"Yeah, I just kinda woke up in the alley back there." They all laughed. Johnny passed him the bottle. Michael took a big, hearty swig.

"There you go!" said Johnny. He took a drag from his cigarette and lifted his drink. "Gentlemen, here's to drugs and broads and fucking rock and roll!"

Michael raised the bottle, toasted, and took another drink. The red digits in his mind flickered. At the rate he was going he'd barely be able to see straight in fifteen minutes, let alone face whatever was waiting for him. The jaws of the trap were closing fast. Michael looked at Jimmy, felt sorry for him. He was just another dumb teenager. He didn't know anything about time travel or temporal-spatial anomalies—or rogue travelers. He was probably in a band of his own, had some acne-faced girlfriend, and had a secret stash of weed somewhere in his room where his parents wouldn't find it. The typical adolescent thing. What would he think if he knew that something was going to happen in just over ten minutes which involved him, something that would have serious repercussions throughout space-time?

"You play too?" Michael said to the teen.

"Yeah, I play guitar and sing. What about you?"

"I'm trying to get something together right now."

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Jim nodded, briefly glanced over at Johnny, who had stumbled drunkenly into a cluster of groupies, knocking some of them over.

“Can I bum a smoke?” said Jim.

“Yeah.” Michael pulled out a pack from his jeans and offered one to the kid. Then he lit one for himself. Jim took a drag and looked at Michael with bloodshot eyes.

“What did you say your name was? Michael?”

“Yeah.”

Jim took another drag. “Can I ask you something, Michael?”

“Sure.”

“What do you *really* do?”

Michael paused for a moment. “What do you mean?” he replied.

“You look out of place, man. It’s like you’re wearing a costume or something.”

Michael was getting nervous. He didn’t like where the conversation was headed. He had to hand it to him, though. The kid was perceptive.

“Are you a cop?” said Jim.

“No, I’m not a cop,” said Michael.

“Then who are you and where are you from?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Michael half muttered under his breath. He trailed off toward the end, realizing mid-sentence that he’d slipped up. The kid was looking at him more seriously now than ever.

“What does that mean?” said Jim.

“Nothing. I was just fucking around,” said Michael. But it was too late. The damage was done.

“I heard what you said,” said the teen. “Are you from another planet or something? A Russian spy? What?”

Faces turned toward them. “Is everything okay?” said Valerie, looking up from her place on the couch. The jig was almost up.

“Just forget it,” said Michael, flustered. He turned to walk away, talk to somebody else before the situation got out of hand, but a female voice stopped him. It wasn’t Valerie this time, however.

“Michael.”

He reeled around, looked past the frozen expressions. At the far end of the room stood a wrinkled excuse for a human being, pointing a gun directly at him. At first glance she was an old woman in outlandish attire—teeth nearly all rotted out, wispy white hair, streaked with dull yellow, skin dripping off her body—but she was, in fact, only slightly older than Michael. From the way she was dressed it looked like she just came out of the old west.

“XP455,” Michael said darkly. “You’re here early.”

She spat a disgusting glob onto the floor and smiled a crooked smile. “You know what the early bird gets,” she said, and cocked the hammer on the six-shooter.

“What the hell is going on here?” A thunderclap sounded in the room, and suddenly a fat bodyguard was lying crumpled on the floor in the doorway. There followed a clicking sound as she cocked the hammer again.

“You know what I want,” said the woman, turning her warped face toward Jim. “*He* has an interest in a certain anomaly.”

“Run, Jim,” Michael said very low.

“Huh?” said the teen.

“Goddamnit, run!” Michael dropped to the floor and reached for his boot in one fluid motion. Another shot exploded from the six-shooter, shattering a bottle on the table in front of him. Broken glass and liquor rained down on Michael’s head as he pointed the gun through the legs of the table. He squeezed the trigger.

A shrill screech rang through the building. Michael looked up above the table just in time to see the woman disappear. The other people in the room were mannequins, frozen in contorted expressions of fear and disbelief. But Jim was not among them. Michael leapt over the table, knocking over bottles, ashtrays, a two-foot bong. There were more roadies and bodyguards at the door, looking bewildered, but Michael pushed through them, brandishing the gun like a backstage pass. A girl screamed as he pushed her aside, shoving through the people in the hallway, scanning the faces for Jim. When he got to the steel crash doors he kicked them open and stumbled into the cool air.

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A gun went off in the still night. Michael gripped his stomach with his free hand, felt the warm blood washing over it, and dropped to his knees. He should've known. The woman was standing there, a mere ten yards away, blood dripping down her right leg from where Michael had shot her. Apparently he'd hit her square in the thigh, because all her weight was shifted to her other leg. She had Jim with her, her arm locked around his neck. Jim looked both scared and confused, but at the same time defiant and understandably pissed off. The woman pointed the gun at Michael and cocked the hammer.

"You drop that gun, Michael," she said. "Or I'll blow your hand off first."

Michael slowly set the gun down on the pavement. He struggled to get to his feet, but only managed to put one foot flat on the ground. Blood dripped onto the leg of his jeans, staining away the stonewash pattern. He looked up into the barrel of the gun, like he'd done so many times before, face to face with the temporal cannon. But this was it. There was no coming back from this trip.

"See you in the history books," the woman said triumphantly, with a little tinge of spite. She smiled a toothless smile and nodded farewell to Michael, who continued to look directly at her.

But then there was a clicking noise, and suddenly Jim's fist was buried deep inside the woman's gut. She gasped loudly and stumbled backward with a surprised look on her face. The handle of a switchblade protruded from her stomach.

"You little fucker," she said, staring wide-eyed at the boy. She grasped the knife with one hand, pulled it out with a yelp, and pointed the gun at him.

"Michael, help!" screamed Jim. The Luger was already in Michael's hand, and he unloaded the rest of the clip. The crooked figure of the rogue traveler dropped to the ground.

Michael let go of the gun and slouched down onto one elbow. Jim ran over to him.

"What's a nice kid like you doing packing a piece?" Michael laughed as the kid put his arm around him.

"I had it for a while. Never thought I'd really need it, though."

"The cops are going to be here soon, Jim. You'd probably better tell them you don't know what this is about."

"I don't."

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“Good, then don’t worry about it.” Michael put his head back onto the cement and closed his eyes.

“What about you? Aren’t they going to toss you in the joint once you’re out of the hospital?”

“I’ll be gone by then.”

“How did you know she was coming after me?” said Jim. “Were you sent to protect me? Are you my guardian angel or something?”

Michael chuckled. “I guess so, Jim. That’s what my name means, you know—Engel. It means Angel.”

“Man, this is some strange shit,” said Jim, just as an ambulance was pulling up.

Of course there’d be questions. Throughout his hospital stay Michael would have to talk to detectives about the bizarre events of the evening, and the mysterious woman who they otherwise wouldn’t be able to identify. In the end it didn’t matter what he told them, because they wouldn’t believe him anyway. When he was well enough to go he’d have to pull his old Houdini act and shift out of there, hopefully without leaving too many loose ends, and then he’d begin his long journey home. In the meantime he wasn’t going to worry too much, though. After all, he needed the rest.

*John Jacobs grew up around O’Hare, IL. A child of the 80’s, he was always fascinated by science and technology, and was stricken early on with a burning desire to know. At 11, he taught himself how to program computers. At 16, he began to write fiction. In December, 2003, he received the inspiration for a fictional city of machines built over the ruins of Chicago—Neo Metropolis. In March of 2004 he started Neometropolis.com.*