

Rough Draft 6.17.99

## **HEADCRAASH 2.0**

A novel by Bruce Bethke

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### **DISCLAIMER**

This book is a work of fiction. The governmental agencies depicted in this novel are intended to represent no agencies or offices now in existence or expected to exist in the foreseeable future. In particular, this novel concerns the actions of the Federal Department of Investigation, which should not be construed as a literary stand-in for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The real agency is the FBI: this book concerns the FDI. The characters in this book are entirely fictitious and their words and actions should not be construed as a reflection on the behavior or character of the heroic men and women of American law enforcement. Above all, under no circumstances should the inquisitive reader attempt to substitute the letters FBI for FDI in any Internet URL or Web page address that may be depicted in this book.

Well, okay, if you really want to try it, it's your ass...



**CONFIDENTIAL E-MEMO**

TO: ALL FDI REGIONAL & FIELD OFFICES  
FROM: DIRECTOR, INTERNET SECURITY DIVISION  
DATE: 15 JUNE 2010  
RE: UNSOLVED CASE REMINDER

PRIORITY: **URGENT**

All officers and special agents are reminded to be on the lookout for **JACK BURROUGHS** (aka **MAX\_KOOL**), still wanted in connection with repeated serious violations of the Corporate Data Privacy, Internet Non-Violence and Decency, and Federal Embarassing Data Secrecy acts committed during the period of May - June 2005. Subject is a Caucasian-American male, at present age 28, and an accomplished computer expert with a long record of antisocial attitudes and behaviors. His last known location was Hawaii, although this intelligence is now more than three years old and is no longer deemed 100-percent reliable.

Any suspected sighting of Burroughs should be reported immediately to the FDI National Computer Crime Center at <http://www.fdi.gov/compcrim.htm>.

DO NOT, REPEAT, **DO NOT** forward leads or information to the National Infrastructure Protection Agency! Dammit people, this is an FDI case, and we will crack it without any more help from those smug bastards at NIPA! That's all we need is for Director Jackson to come

walking into the next Senate appropriations hearing with... oh my, this thing is transcribing everything I say, isn't it? Um... strike that. Begin new paragraph, emphasis on, all caps.

**DO NOT, REPEAT, DO NOT ATTEMPT A SOLO ARREST!**

Burroughs is a known associate of **JOSEPH LEMAT** (aka **Gunnar Savage**) and **INGE ANDERSSON** (aka **Don Vermicelli**), the notorious international arms smugglers, con artists, and Internet marketing consultants. LeMat and Andersson are also wanted on outstanding state, federal, and Interpol warrants too numerous to mention here: for a complete list updated weekly see <http://www.fdi.gov/mostwant/tenlist.htm>. Agents encountering LeMat and Andersson are advised that these two are considered heavily armed and extremely dangerous, and that no arrest should be attempted without tank backup and air support.

For what it's worth, there are persistent rumors on [alt.conspiracy.nutcase](http://alt.conspiracy.nutcase) that Burroughs, LeMat, and Andersson have either joined or been executed by **SCARW**, the Secret Cabal that Actually Rules the World. Our liaison at OSS assures us no such organization actually exists, for if it did, Secret Cabal that Actually Rules the Earth would make for a far better acronym.

Finally, a special advisory to all FDI personnel within driving distance of Quantico: c'mon, people, we're a multi-billion-dollar Federal agency. Let's coordinate the department picnic this year, okay? Last year we wound up with enough potato salad to feed Georgetown and not one bottle of ketchup. Surely there is room for improvement, no?

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "John Doe" or similar, written in a cursive style.

DIR-INTSEC

# 1

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## TABULA RASA

When I was about five years old and first learning to ride a bicycle, my father gave me some advice. He said, "Son, never worry about where you've been. It's where you're going that knocks your front teeth out."

With that thought firmly fixed in mind---it's either that or Dad's one other piece of worthwhile advice, which was, "Never bet on a horse named Lucky"---we can discard all that has gone before, and begin in one bright, shining, omniscient and retrospective moment:

- June 23, 2010 -

The Earth hangs like a big blue aggie marble in the silent vastness of space, a fragile island of life and liquid water in the cold, unforgiving, and for all practical purposes infinite cosmos.

But that's not my problem.

In London it's already one o'clock in the morning of the next day, and a pack of knuckle-dragging Aryan skinheads have just finished kicking the tar out of an aging Pakistani shopkeeper in a

deserted tube station. As he lies there on the cold concrete platform, coughing sticky bubbles of bright blood and drifting in and out of consciousness, he wonders: What's wrong with the security cameras? Where are the Police? He doesn't know that two vagrants have built a fire under a Thames River bridge, in the process accidentally melting through a main fibre-optic trunk line and knocking out all police surveillance west of Bermondsey.

But again, that's not my problem.

In central Brazil it's 10 P.M., and the panic-stricken Voörtanga'en colony in the Amazonian rain forest has once again turned its main bioreceptor towards Gamma Virginis. At last, from the home world, comes the message the colonists have waited more than a thousand years anxious to hear: the Colonial Office has reviewed their report on the dangerous bipedal anthropoids running riot on this world, and funding for a relief expedition has been authorized. As the signal fades into the background hiss of interstellar hydrogen, the colonists spread their stillia and exude a collective aspiration of relief. (As if, being a lungless group-mind, they could do anything else.) Now it's just a matter of hanging on for the five or six millennia it will take their war fleet to arrive, then---payback!

But amazingly enough, this is also not my problem.

In Dallas it's 7 P.M., and the President of the United States is sitting in a blast-shielded lavatory in the basement of the Texas White House, fondling the briefcase that contains his missile launch codes and wondering what's the point of having all

these nuclear weapons if he never gets to use them. In Pasadena it's 5 P.M., and the NASA Jet Propulsion Lab has once again intercepted the Voörtanga'en transmission and misclassified it as unintelligible random noise. In the Gulf of Alaska it's 4 P.M., and a pod of bottlenose dolphins are urgently but unsuccessfully trying to explain to the fisherhumans who've kidnapped their relatives that mackerel are hard to find these days and they need more time to come up with the ransom.

But again, all of these things are not my problem.

Instead, let us focus in on a few tiny bits of volcanic rock jutting out of the blue Pacific, just east of the International Date Line and a hair south of the Tropic of Skin Cancer. To be specific, let's look down on Maui---on the south coast, at the end of Highway 31, where the Wailea Shores run into the Puu Olai lava fields. There---Ahihi Bay---that tiny brown speck, floating on a red-and-white-striped surfboard, about two hundred yards offshore: that's me. And if you were to break open the glove compartment of my car on the beach, and dig through the avalanche of fast-food napkins, misfolded roadmaps, and paper-wrapped beverage straws, you'd find a wallet full of carefully forged ID cards that claim my name is Bob Sanders.

But instead of pursuing this topic further at this time, please allow me to redirect your attention to another point about a quarter-mile due south. There, that long, dark, ominous shape, knifing slowly through the shallow water. That is a fifteen-foot-long tiger shark.

And it's about 3 P.M., local time, and in just slightly over two minutes, that shark is very definitely going to become my problem.

Let the realtime begin.

#

It was a beautiful day for daydreaming.

And a piss-poor one for surfing.

Not surprising, that. The two activities are pretty much mutually exclusive. I mean, usually the business of surfing is way intense. Like, totally Zen. I mean like, you start with the daydreaming thing while you've got your stick up there on the lip of a serious curl, and next thing you know you are playing harbor dredge and sucking up a major faceful of kelp and sand.

But not on this day.

No, this day could have been spec'd out by the Tourism Board. An air temp in the mid 80's; a warm and gentle offshore breeze sifting slowly through the palm trees on the beach and whispering softly of hibiscus and plumeria; a low and gentle swell rolling into the bay from the northwest, with just enough energy to make the little breakers run in laughing ripples and long, rolling sweeps along the gently curving picture-postcard-perfect white sand shoreline.

And not one damned wave worth the effort of pretending to ride.

I didn't mind. Honest.

The Serious Surfer Dudes would have minded. That, and they



would have given me an extra ration of crap for being out at all. "A day like this," one of them would be sure to say, "is fit only for kooks and [haoles](#)." And then some sun-bronzed dolt with the body of a Greek god and the brains of a meatloaf would be almost sure to quote the legendary Mark Foo at me:

"If you want to feel the ultimate thrill, you have to be willing to pay the ultimate price."

**Haole**

An old Hawaiian word which originally meant simply *foreigner*, but which now has a perjorative value comparable to the Japanese *gaijin* or Ebonic *whitey*.

But of course the Serious Surfers Dudes weren't there that day, because they all thought Foo's "ultimate price" was a cryptic reference to tickets on Air Aloha, and they'd all packed their quivers and jetted off to Oahu, to chase monster curls on the North Shore. Whereas the legendary Mark Foo had actually meant something quite different...

Which is why the legendary Mark Foo's ashes are now scattered on the waters of the equally legendary Waimea Bay, and why yours truly, the totally non-legendary Bob Sanders, is content to kook around a nearly deserted Ahihi Bay, just splashing his bare brown toes in the sweet blue Pacific and soaking up that gorgeous Hawaiian summer sun. For as Surfboy Sanders has been known to say, at least three times weekly:

"A bad day of surfing still beats Hell out of a good day at work."

Damn right. I liked being Bob Sanders. And on this particular lazy, sunny, summer afternoon, I was deeply into the mode of soaking up sun and thinking about why.

There was my new job, for starters. It was a nice, mindless, undemanding gig at a totally unimportant third-rate tourist hotel. Plenty of free time to flirt with the local wahines, or more importantly, surf. Three or four decent sticks in my quiver (depending on whether you counted my Aipa Stinger as a functional surfboard or a novel wall decoration), including this really really nice Merrick Thruster I happened to be sitting on at the moment, which I'd bought for a moldy old Don Ho song off some schmuck mainlander who'd come out here and suddenly realized he wanted a brand-new Parmenter Keelfin. (And then he bought one, at Kahului prices, yike! Not that it helped his surfing any: he'd have done just as well with an old balsa longboard, or for that matter, with a redwood picnic table with the legs sawn off.)

But I digress.

It was a good day for digressing.

Ergo, I continued with the smug inventory of my new life. Sickeningly positive attitude? Check. Obnoxiously healthy diet? Check. Zero consumer debt? Cash only, tee hee. The sort of broad chest and deep-fried dark brown skin that'd get me suspicious looks and poor service in any Denny's restaurant back home in---where was that miserable, frigid place I'd originally come from? Minnesnowta?

I dunno. It was all starting to look like freeze-frames from

someone else's life, now. For here, in this perfect moment, this boy Sanders is possessed of a deep, clear, nearly Zen happiness. When I am on my board, on the water, I am brother to the wind, the waves, the sea--

And the sharks. Mustn't forget the sharks. The really big ones churn the water when they pass. If you spend a lot of time in the ocean, and you're really tuned in to it, and you happen to be sitting on a floating chip of urethane foam with your bare feet dangling in the water, you can actually feel the subtle change in temperature gradient when a big one swims by underneath you.

At a little after 3 P.M., on the sunny afternoon of June 23, 2010, I felt it.

## What To Do

### **If You Believe You Are Intruding on the Personal Space of a Shark.**

**STEP  
1.**

Don't panic! Sharks are naturally inquisitive, and your newfound aquatic friend may simply be curious. So don't shout or thrash the water. Instead, slowly and calmly grasp your surfboard with both hands, then tuck your feet up under your butt, just as tight as they can possibly go.

**STEP  
2.**

Next, look down into the water around you, and try to determine which species you are dealing with. *Great Whites* have gotten a bad rap over the years and are neither as numerous nor as vicious as some uninformed people would have you believe. *Whitetips* are almost close to completely harmless. *Reef Grays* can be unpredictable, but they are also territorial, and if you can locate their "home turf" and vacate it, they generally won't follow you.

**Hint:** Remember, most shallow-water sharks are pretty well-camouflaged from the top. So if you are having trouble spotting the shark proper, try looking for its shadow on the sandy bottom.

**STEP  
3.**

We hope your shark encounter will be fun and educational and leave you with a lasting appreciation for these magnificent creatures. But if it does go less than perfectly, remember: direct pressure almost always stops arterial bleeding.

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**PEOPLE FOR ETHICAL SHARK TREATMENT**  
WWW.CHOMPCHOMP.ORG

**PEOPLE FOR ETHICAL SHARK TREATMENT**

CONFIDENTIAL MEMO

TO: Don Beckham, President, PEST  
FROM: Rob DuPre, Chair, Fund-Raising  
DATE: 3/16/05  
RE: Kaneohe Shark Petting Zoo

Don, look, I know we've been through this a million times, and I know I've been voted down. And yes, I understand that the tourists go gah-gah over licensed Disney characters.

But seriously: Captain Hook as the mascot for our shark petting zoo? I mean, call it a hunch, but I think we're talking major wrong message here.

Worried,  
RD

The dorsal fin broke the surface about twenty yards away from me. It was circling me slowly, propelling itself with lazy strokes of its long, tapered tail. The shark didn't seem to be motivated to eat me immediately, which was good, but it wasn't going on its fishy way, either, which would have been better. I had plenty of time to size it up.

Length? About fifteen feet, which made it a monster. Color? A mottled brownish-gray. Head shape? Wide, with a blunt snout...

Oh, sweet bungee-jumping Jesus. It was a tiger shark.

Tiger sharks suck.

Okay, if you want to get technical about it, remoras suck; tigers bite. And what, the casually interested observer might ask, do they bite?

Name it. Fish, sea turtles, porpoises, aquatic birds; basically anything smaller and slower-moving than the shark, and sometimes anything larger, too. I once saw a fibreglas catamaran hull a tiger had decided to try for taste. Left a big hole.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention.

They're especially fond of surfer al fresco.

#

- **INDEX, in the space of heartbeats** -

- Q.** Do you often see tiger sharks on the surface in the daytime?
- A.** No, they typically stay in deep water during daylight hours and only come into the shallows to feed at night. Which, incidentally, is why you should never go for a midnight skinny-dip anywhere except Waikiki, where the washed-off tanning oil from the tourists forms big cholesterol slicks and puts Mr. Tiger there right off his diet.
- Q.** If you do run into a tiger shark, how can you keep it from attacking?
- A.** Frankly, the best defense is prevention. Don't thrash the water; don't appear helpless or unaware; don't wear flashy jewelry, expensive watches, or show large amounts of cash - wait a minute, that's how to avoid getting mugged. Then again, all these rules do apply to tiger sharks. Except for the bit about cash, of course.
- Q.** If a tiger shark is exhibiting aggressive behavior towards you, what's the best way to discourage it?

**A.** The U.S. Navy has had great success with proximity fuses and one-kilo bricks of DuPont C4.

**Q.** What if you happen to be fresh out of high explosives?

**A.** In a pinch, low explosives will do.

**Q.** Is it absolutely necessary to kill the shark?

**A.** No. In point of fact, many subspecies are now classed as endangered and are protected by international treaty and law, and it would be a serious crime to kill such a shark. For, as a number of courts in California have ruled, just because an animal is trying to gnaw your leg off, that is not sufficient excuse to permit injuring a member of a protected species.

**Q.** Oh. So if you don't want to - or can't - kill the shark, what then?

**A.** You could try talking calmly to it, reasoning with it, or giving it a nice tummy-rub.

**Q.** Will that work?

**A.** No.

#

Ding!

(My imagination supplies this sound. It is the sound of an oven timer going off, and signals the start of dinner. All this flashing back and indexing of advice and such rot had taken the merest matter of seconds, as the shark completed one last long circle around me. Then...)

Ding!

And I was the target of a fifteen-foot-long organic torpedo. With teeth.

They say your life flashes before your eyes in moments like this. What I saw instead was an old rerun of Flipper, the one where he saves Chip and Sandy by butting the shark in the gills. I mean, hey, I had to see something, and as Jack Burroughs I'd never had a life. As Bob Sanders I did have a life, and a pretty darn good one at that, but it hadn't been long enough to make even a coming-attractions trailer, much less a movie.

Somewhere in there, far too late, my forebrain finally got a wake-up call through to my voluntary nervous system and I lunged forward, to drive my arms deep into the water and start paddling like a palmetto bug in a bucket of pool chlorine. A small wave stole up behind me, then, and added a touch of desperately needed speed, but the shark saw my movement and readjusted its attack vector. I suppose if I'd been really thinking I could have tried something tricky, like slipping off my ankle leash, bailing off the board, and hoping that the shark was homing in on it, not me. But there wasn't even that much time to think.

The onrushing monster broached the surface about thirty feet away, just exactly like a happy baby humpback whale. I saw those ancient, pitiless, gimlet eyes staring at me; watched in sickening horror as that gaping maw opened wide and the beast closed those final, deadly, yards---

Hydroplaning on its pectoral fins? What the Hell?

I stopped paddling. Sat up straight on my board, staring at



that incredibly weird sight. The shark's mouth was continuing to open wider, as its head rose higher out of the water, and it dumped its forward velocity into a great, sloshing, bow wave...

Five feet away from me the shark came to a dead stop, nose pointed straight up at the sky, tail almost touching the sandy bottom, bobbing gently on the swell. I sidled over the bow wave as it surged past, then backpaddled to slow my forward momentum, and put my feet down to kill my drift. From the back edge of its gills forward, the shark's head was completely out of the water.

And still, the mouth continued to open wider. The upper jaw began to bend, too, in blatant defiance of known anatomy, until at last the mouth was an impossible, flat, perfectly circular opening, lined with a fringe of jagged teeth.

The gills vented water, then snapped shut. There was a kiss of compressed air, a high-pitched electrical whine, and the sticky, sucky, whoopee-cushion sound of complicated rubber gaskets unsealing. A human head popped up in the shark's mouth. It looked at me.

It spoke.

"Hey, aren't you Max Kool, the guy who wrote Silicon Jungle?"

Oh please, God. Not him. Not here. Not now...

## 2

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### HOTWIRE REDUX

The human head in the shark's mouth cocked slightly to one side: probably squinting at me, although it was hard to tell through those mirrorshades. The sunglasses seemed to be held in place by tiny silver bolts threaded through eyebrow and cheekbone piercings, and the top of the head sported a mohawk's crest of either hair or well-chewed saltwater taffy, in a shade of orange not often found in nature. The mohawk was counterbalanced by a thin wisp of greenish-purple billy goat's beard on the chin.

Ah. Male, then, unless female facial hair was back in fashion on the mainland. The hair and beard were both somewhat matted down by the cramped and damp quarters inside the microsub-disguised-as-a-shark, and whatever stealth value the ship may have once possessed was no doubt entirely negated by the sheer mass of metal the guy had piercing his ears, lips, eyebrows, and nose. There were two parallel lines of fake IC chips studded along the sides of his head, halfway between ear and mohawk; the chipsets were joined by a complicated tracery of pale blue tattoos that I abruptly realized were supposed to resemble printed circuits, and which trailed off down the back of the guy's neck.

Okay, I could name the fashion modality. TotalTekno is what the trendy magazines called it. Me, I thought Frankenstein: The Next Generation got the concept better.

We bobbed over another swell or two together, while I tried to sort out what I was feeling. Relief? No. Apprehension? No. It was more of an itchy, emotional rash, which I vaguely remembered from my previous life as a corporate drone...

Oh yes, that was it. Annoyance.

The head in the fish grew impatient. "Come on, don't play coy with me. I've had people watching you for weeks. You are Max Kool! Or should I say---" He paused, for painfully obvious dramatic effect.

"Jack Burroughs!"

I shook my head. "So solly. No habla Inglis."

The face frowned. "Save it, chum. I've found your little autobiography out on the Net. Everyone has. Not much of a disappearance there, eh Jack? I mean, why not post your bleedin' pager number while you were at it?"

I shook my head again, and cupped a hand around my left ear. "Vas? Ich kann nicht sie verstehen."

"And that name, for chrissakes. A. A. Milne, innit? 'Winnie the Pooh lived in the Hundred Acre Wood, under the name of Sanders.' Was that your idea?"

I gave up trying to act ignorant, and resorted to the sort of ignorance that comes to me naturally. "Hello, Hotwire." I blew out a heavy, resigned sigh that lifted the damp hair off my

forehead. "That's the real you, isn't it?"

The face split into a broad grin, with just the faintest tinny chiming of lip jewelry. "In the flesh and sand, Jack! But hey, I go by the handle of Firmware now!"

I nodded. Firmware. It figured. I sighed again. "How long has it been? Four years? And now you've come all this way, and spent all this time," I paused, to bob over the crest of another small wave, and cop another look at his shark-sub, "and all that money, just to track me down again. Why?"

Firmware's grin subsided into a sly smile. "Would you believe, I'm here to rescue you?"

I leaned back, and spread my arms in a gesture that took in the sea, the surf, and sun and everything. "Do I look like I want to be rescued?"

Firmware kept smiling. "Then how about I'm Silicon Orpheus, here to bring Max Kool back from the dead?"

I pursed my lips, and shook my head. "Don't bother. Won't happen. Max Kool is dead, and he plans to stay that way."

"Are you sure?"

I looked Firmware right square in the mirrorshades and nodded with all the conviction I could muster. "Yes, absolutely. Max Kool was a major pain in the ass, and being him made a shambles of my realtime life. I don't miss him one bit."

"Not even a little?"

"Nope."

"But surely there are times, late at night, when you lie awake in the stale night heat and realize that it's midnight somewhere, and the Net is calling out to you in a seductive whisper as it speaks in dreams of lambent fire---"

I splashed some water in his face to snap him out of it. He sputtered and shook his head. When I had his attention again, I asked, "You write that line yourself?"

He nodded quickly. "Yes!"

"Thought so. It sucked."

His smile switched off with an audible ping. "Well, actually---"

"Look," I said, interrupting. "Hotwire, or Firmware, or VegeMatic, or whatever the hell you want to call yourself these days; I did it, and it was fun, but now it's over. I've been offline for four years, and I'm happy. I don't even own a pocket calculator now."

Firmware looked crestfallen. Literally. "But Jack---"

"This," I grabbed the rails of my Merrick Thruster, "this is what I'm about, now. I surf reality."

Firmware shook his head. "But---"

"I mean, listen to me. I can talk normal now. No more of those nested parentheticals inside parentheticals---"

"Those were cool," Firmware demurred. "It was like trying to solve an algebraic expression, to figure out what the Hell you were saying."

I shook my head. "I don't do that no more."

He looked at me, raw shock playing on the portions of his face that were visible. "What about your [infonuggets](#)?"

I shook my head again. "Don't need 'em, dude."

**InfoNuggets**

Okay, so I lied to Firmware. Sue me.

Firmware stared at me, and his mouth fell open in a pained gasp. "Aw, man, those were your trademark!" He looked at me a moment longer, then set his fuzzy little chin in some sort of resolve. "That settles it. I have got to bring the old Jack Burroughs back! Man, the world needs you!"

I pulled together all the contempt I had handy and dumped it all into one devastatingly Stallonesque sneer. "Buddy, as far as I'm concerned the world can go fuck itself, in alphabetical order, starting with---"

Actually, I didn't have all that much contempt bottled up, and it petered out halfway through the idea.

"---the Amazon basin," I finished, rather lamely.

Firmware looked up at me. From the rapid twitching of the skin around his eyes, I guessed he was blinking. "That made absolutely no sense," he observed.

I shrugged. "Yeah, well..."

"Look, Jack," he said, "as a friend, I've got to tell you, this exile has not been kind to you. You've lost your edge."

I shrugged again. "But I'm happy."

"A happy doormat it still a doormat. Look, what you need is a challenge."

"I'm well-adjusted," I pointed out.

"So's a hamster when he's in his exercise wheel. But you, my friend, are destined for something bigger."

"My diet is ninety-percent papaya and avocado," I protested.

Firmware paused, and considered me. "Jack?" he said, and there was something in the way he smiled at me then that made my blood run cold and all the little vestigial hairs on the small of my back stand at rigid attention. Oh no, he couldn't; he wouldn't---

"What," he said, still smiling like a real-estate agent, "if I were to tell you that I really came all this way for just one reason: to make you an offer---

"That I can't refuse?" I blurted out. "Been there, done that, read my lips: No! There, I just refused."

Firmware cocked his head in the other direction, and from the torsional stress around his cheekbone piercings I guessed he was narrowing his eyes. "Don't be so hasty, Jack. There's something else you need to know. Cyberpunk is mainstream, now."

I shuddered. "Oh? And here I heard it was dead."

"Dead, mainstream: what's the diff? I mean, when Days of Our Lives can run a six-week subplot about Fernando using VR goggles to spy on Victoria while she's having an affair with Lance---

"Okay," I said, fighting down a series of dry heaves. "I get the picture."

"No, you don't," he said, still in that slimey voice. "Like I said, cyberpunk is mainstream now---and Max Kool is famous!"

A cold chill shot through me, which was pretty remarkable

when you consider that it was 80-plus degrees and the ocean was like salty bathwater. "Really?" I said nervously. "I thought he was notorious."

"Famous, notorious: again, what's the diff?" Firmware smiled, and shook his head. "Y'know, so many people downloaded that little online autobio of yours that Darvon Schnitzel even reviewed it for Kirkus."

That, I must confess, got me right square in the ego. "No kidding? What did he say?"

"That it was either brilliantly post-deconstructionist or just plain awful, he couldn't decide."

My ego experienced explosive detumescence. I scratched my head. "Post-deconstructionist?"

Firmware shrugged. "I think it's kind of like post-literate, only different."

We bobbed over another swell together, while my ego fell back to regroup and Firmware pondered semiotic literary theory.

"My point," he said at last, "is that Max Kool has become the quintessential post-modern cybercounterculture antihero. There are people out there who say that you are the guy who took down BritTel for that week last January, and you did it with just two trunk calls and an Oscar Mayer weiner whistle."

I finished sorting through his stack of verbal qualifiers and started to laugh. "Oh, I get it now. You wanted me to admit I was involved in that mess. But, hey, even if I was---which I was not---I'm not nearly stupid enough to claim credit for it."



Firmware chuckled with me. "Of course not. The whole idea is patently absurd. Anyone who's ever had to use BritTel knows what a tottering wreck the thing is; they probably just lost another backbone packet switcher and didn't want to have to admit to how crappy their hardware infrastructure is, so they cooked up that story about being attacked by 'a rogue gang of international cyberterrorists.'"

Firmware's expression took a sudden sharp turn towards the deadly serious. "But, Jack: if those are the sorts of rumors that are being made up about you, don't you think it's time you go back and tell the whole world the truth?"

I thought it over for---oh, two seconds, at least. "No. Never. Bad idea."

"Not even if it means becoming the King of Heaven?"

Well, well, whadaya know: Firmware had succeeded in surprising me after all, and even in getting me to smile for a picosecond. "What, that place still exists? Geez, I expected the NetCops to shut it down years ago."

Firmware went back to his disturbing real-estate agent's smile, as we bobbed over another small swell, and I took a quick look out to sea. Hmm, there, and maybe three hundred yards off...

"Oh, the NetCops found Heaven, all right," Firmware said lightly. "But they're not quite as dim as you seem to think. Instead of shutting the site down, they put a counter on the gate and started keeping track of who was going in and out. Eventually, they even planted informants in the joint."

My general muddle of emotions took a sudden wrenching twist towards the paranoiac. Heaven was the illegal online virtual reality nightclub where I'd first met Firmware, back when I was Max\_Kool and he was calling himself Hotwire. Did what he was telling me now mean that back then...?

"At first," Firmware prattled on, not noticing my reaction, "the NetCops stuck to taking notes, and turning up the occasional clod of interesting dirt. For example, did you know that Rapmastah MC Ruthless is actually the son of the founder of the New Jersey Aryan Christian Militia?"

I didn't answer. My thoughts were whirling like a bullfrog in a blender.

Firmware timed out on waiting for a response from me, and went on. "Well, that's not important now. The important thing is, everything was rolling along just fine, nothing remarkable, until the day your little autobiography file hit the Net. Then..."

Firmware paused, and grinned.

"Then, we're talking batshit berserk! Forty thousand hits the first hour! People waiting in the queue for two days just to get in and be seen there! By the end of the week your favorite pirate chat room was number one with a bullet on the Peter's Picks, Flyman's Finds, VirWorld TopTen, and Websight Hot Hundred lists! The InfoMall sysops were going stark drooling bug-eyed nuts!"

I finished my turmoil of thinking and reached something that felt somewhat like a decision. With a quick splash or two I

flipped the nose of my board around and pointed it right down the shark's throat. Seen from the front at eye level, a Merrick Thruster can look pretty intimidating, provided you don't know it weighs just six pounds and is mostly plastic foam.

"Who are you?" I demanded, in my best clench-jawed guttural growl. "A NetCop?"

Firmware's smile faltered slightly, as he tried to shy away from the point of the board. "No, Jack. Honest. I'm one of your biggest fans."

I puffed up my chest and brought my hands forward, as if ready to dig them into the water and deliver a sudden, lethal, pelvic thrust. "Who do you work for?

The FDI? The CIA?"

Firmware gulped, and what was left of his smile vanished. "Really?" he

asked. I nodded, with the fierce and deadly serious glare I usually saved for tourist kids I caught throwing ice in the jacuzzi. Then I leaned forward, glowering like Michael Dorn, and tensed my pecs. Firmware's already-pale face finished blanching the rest of the way to dead-fish-belly white, and he tried to lick his lips but got a tongue stud caught on a lip loop.

"Megasoftware Edutainment," he said at last, when he finally got his mouth hardware sorted out. "I'm Byron Cuivre-Boulé, the Marketing Communications Manager."

My chest deflated like a punctured whoopee cushion and my hands dropped limply to my sides. "Huh?"

**Lethal Thrust**

What, and risk dinging the nose of my board? Are you *nuts*?

"The InfoMall didn't know how to handle all the Net traffic Heaven was generating. So they sold it to us."

I repeated my earlier observation, this time with wrinkled nose. "Huh? Sold? But---but that was a pirate room!"

From wherever it'd gone, Firmware's horribly ingratiating smile popped back with a vengeance. "YES! And do you know what kind of demographic it drew?!"

I was still sputtering fragments. "But--- how---"

Firmware shook his head in a friendly, genial, paternal, Brian Dennehy sort of way. "Shouldn't go leaving your VRML source code lying around where just anyone can find it, Jack. It was a piece of cake of us to reverse-engineer Heaven and turn it into something marketable."

I downsized my vocabulary to blubbering. "Bu---"

"Not to mention copyrightable, and licensable. And now, thanks to you, my friend, Megasoftware Edutainment Group has exclusive rights to the family recreational franchise for the 21st Century!"

All the emotion I had left went into one word. "**WHAT?**"

"VR HEAVEN DOT COM<sup>TM</sup>!" Firmware crowed. "The ultimate synthesis of prepackaged theme park reality and multimedia entertainment! We are opening up VR Heaven Dot Com nightclubs in every major shopping mall on the planet! You can pop-in through the Net; you can drop in for food and adult beverages and rent your VR gear there. It's a nightclub where the fun never stops, because it's always midnight somewhere, and you can forget cover

charges, because we bill by the minute just for soaking up the ambience! And Jack, we owe it all to you!"

He paused, grinning at me expectantly.

I looked away, out to sea, as we rose and fell on another swell. There, and barely a hundred yards off, now.

I turned to look at Firmware again. He was still grinning at me. Not a clue...

"So," I said, smiling gently. "Then you're here to give me my royalty check?"

Firmware's smile switched off with an audible click. "Er, not exactly. There were some, uh, issues with the IPO. And the shareholders, Jack, well---"

"Then tell you what: why don't you just fuck off?"

I imagine stunned steers in slaughterhouses have about the same facial expression as Firmware had in that moment. I flipped the nose of my board around with a quick splash and aimed for the beach.

A second or five later, Firmware began to recover. "Hey, it's not like you and Bret and Captain Crash copyrighted your code or anything."

"It was an illegal room, dipshit."

"And you didn't exactly stick around to defend your intellectual property rights."

"We were on the run from the law, asshole." I wasted a glance on him. His face was showing the early warning signs of panic.

"Now, just hold on a minute, Jack. You haven't heard my offer." He looked down; all sorts of mechanical noises started to come from inside the shark as he apparently tried to power it up again. I took a look out to sea, as we crested the next swell. There, definitely, at fifty yards and closing.

Firmware's voice shot up an excited octave. "All we want you to do is lurk! I told you, cyberpunk is mainstream now, and Max Kool is a legend! There are at least fifteen half-assed copies of you running around the Net these days, but if we can get out word that the original Max Kool hangs exclusively at VR Heaven<sup>TM</sup>---"

One last look behind me; thirty yards. I levered forward and stretched out prone on my board.

"It's a classic whisper campaign, Jack! First we spread more wild rumors about you, to build your rep! Then in two months you come out of hiding to judge the Gunnar LeMat Look-Alike Contest and Memorial Splatball Tournament at VR Heaven<sup>TM</sup>\San Francisco! We stage an arrest for the international newsmedia; you get sprung on bail and skip the country. Then we set you up on a villa in the south of France, just like Michael Jackson!"

I cleared my mind, put my arms in the water, and focused on what my hands and inner ears were telling me. No, not this wave...

"Then, we're talking product endorsements! Infommercials! A made-for-cable movie of your life! There is a goddam fortune out there, just waiting for the original Max Kool, and all you have to do is step up to the plate!"

Another sort of noise came out of the shark then; a bubbling hiss I guessed as a venting ballast tank. For a moment I wondered if Firmware knew something so retro as how to swim.

Then I caught the incoming message from my fingers and toes: an upwelling of cold water; a shift in balance. Ah yes, this was the one good wave I'd been waiting for all day. I threw my arms and shoulders into a strong, deep, butterfly stroke.

"Jack!" Firmware screamed, somewhere rapidly receding behind me. "We can get you on talk shows! World-wide chat sessions! Why, the t-shirt rights alone could be worth millions!"

With a deep, throaty, rumble, the wave rolled up behind me, and I bounced up to kneeling position and kept stroking. I felt the lift, the power, the increasing speed. I opened my eyes and got to my feet.

"Jaaaaaaaaack!" Firmware's voice was little more than an anguished wail in the distance now. "You can meet beautiful women!"

Sigh.

If I were an active duty Christian, I probably would have looked over my shoulder then and shouted out something really pithy, like, "Get thee behind me!" But instead, I'd become a devoted practitioner of Beachboy Zen.

Catch a wave, and you're sitting on top of the world.

### 3

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## BETWEEN A ROCK AND A WORKPLACE

Life is full of difficult decisions. This wasn't one of them. I rode the wave until it broke, and then---well, I could either kick out, paddle back, and pick up where I left off with Firmware, or else I could bail for the beach and call it a day.

I bailed.

What the hell, I was supposed to be working the four-to-midnight shift at the hotel this week, anyway. No harm in going in to work a little---shudder!---early. And besides, that run-in with Firmware had me feeling just a touch uneasy.

Okay, acid-dipped-raw-nerve-endings raw honesty time. It had my stomach doing double-axels with a backflip.

I mean, yeah, sure, I could accept, in an intellectual sort of way, that Max Kool's disappearance wasn't totally untraceable, and that some day my past might catch up with me. You spend four years going around always watching over your shoulder, always checking for cops in the rearview mirror and always breaking into a cold sweat whenever some penny-ante civil servant takes a few seconds too long to scrutinize your driver's license, and you do tend to develop a certain level of fatalism.



But on the other hand, I'd also always had this vision of myself as sort of being in Stealth Mode, just sliding quietly below the radar screen of life. Hand in hand with that, I'd developed this idea that the end, when it finally did come, would appear in the form of the FDI agent knocking politely on my front door---or else, God forbid, in another of those patented midnight abductions by SCAWR. To realize that I'd been tracked down by a third-rate putz like Firmware...

Well, I felt just about as stupid as that sysop at the CIA who forgot to chmod -w their web page.

And of course, there was also the other thing Firmware had brought up: the rhinoceros in the corner. The name I'd been blocking from my mind for more than four years; the "best friend" who'd left me holding the bag and wearing the handcuffs back in Minnesota.

Gunnar LeMat.

And that name indexed into so many more depressing possibilities that I finally decided to deal with it in the same way I deal with almost everything unpleasant: by focusing all my attention on the tedious minutiae of getting through the moment, and retreating so deeply into denial that I needed heliox breathing gear. Meaning---

I hit the beach.

Picked up my surfboard and trudged barefoot across the burning, gritty, coral sand.

Got to my Bajaj, leaned the board against the tailgate,

pulled my towel off the roll-cage, and started drying off.

Dug out the bottle of Kiwi Kwencher™ I'd been saving for the post-surfing thirsties, cracked it open, and downed it in three or four long gulps.

Belched from the very bottom of my heart.

Brushed away the stray bits of sand and dried salt that had adhered to my skin, moved my board up to on top of the roll cage and made sure it was securely bungeed down, and donned my baggy shirt and sandals.

Unlocked the glove compartment, dug through the avalanche of paper crap to find my (cheapo, non-designer) sunglasses, which I carefully unfolded and applied to my face...

For a moment I looked out to sea, and noticed that Firmware had disappeared. For a very brief instant I wondered whether he'd managed to get the shark-sub's mouth closed before it went under. For an even briefer micro-nano-instant, I wondered why I cared.

Then I climbed into the driver's seat, stuck the key in the ignition, and took a spin at Bajaj ignition roulette. There was a Zen aphorism I'd picked up somewhere along the line, probably from a fortune cookie: be here now. Whenever I feel myself teetering on the brink of a panic attack I push all my worries outward and concentrate on the business of being here, now.

In that regard, a Bajaj is a wonderful Zen reinforcement tool. You drive a Bajaj, you can't help but focus all your attention on your immediate environment---especially that disturbing grinding noise in the right front end it's been making

for the last week or so, and the distinct zzzzing sound of a starter clutch that's missed engagement again.

On the third try the starter caught, the motor turned over, and at least two cylinders farted to life. A third cylinder joined them a few seconds later, but the fourth apparently felt it needed a bit more rest before going to work.

Fine. I decided three was good enough, crunched the tranny into first gear, and headed out onto Highway 31, chugging up the coast towards Kihei, and work. Along the way, the off-kilter throb of the motor made for a sort of automotive mantra:

Be here now.

Be here now.

Be here now.

#

My Bajaj deserves some words of description, or perhaps eulogy. It was another one of those oddball Pacific Rim imports we got out in the islands that never made it to the mainland. A sub-sub-miniature Indian bucket with no doors, canvas seats, and a roll-cage in lieu of a proper roof: the salespeople called it a MicroSUV, or Beach Fun Buggy, or some such lie like that, but the truth was the engine would have been seriously underpowered on a riding lawnmower, and as for the creature comforts---well, there just weren't any. So don't think of a Bajaj as a tiny car: think of it as a golf cart, with delusions of adequacy. I mean, if anyone were ever crazy enough to try driving a Bajaj in, say, Chicago, they'd be like dead in five minutes.

But hey, this is Maui we're talking about. The whole rock is barely fifty miles long, from Honokawai to Kauiki Head, and out here, a Bajaj is damn near perfect. Cheap to buy; economical to drive---doesn't drink gasoline, more like sniffs at it with upper lip curled in disdain---and when it wears out you simply drag it up to the top of Haleakala and sacrifice it to the Volcano Goddess...

Just kidding on that last one. Everyone knows Pele lives inside Kiluea, not Haleakala. No, when your Bajaj wears out you do the right thing, the green thing, the ecologically correct thing...

You sell it to some dumb surfer. Who then really does try to drive it up Haleakala, with three other people on board, and they wind up having to get out and walk the last half-mile because the Bajaj's wheezing little rice-grinder of an engine pukes its lung out at ten-thousand feet above sea level.

It was not one of my more successful double-dates. But on the other hand, on the way back down the mountain, I really did coax the little bucket of bolts up to 50 MPH. And if there truly is a merciful God, I will never be in a Bajaj going that fast again.

To which the engine replies:

Be here now.

Be here now.

Be here now.

#

Hmm. Here I am, in memory driving past bikini-covered Wailea Beach, and I'm thinking about my car. How...Minnesotan. Just goes to show you can get jaded by too much of anything, I guess. So, let's see: insert some scenic description here, maybe?

What flavor? Maui is the Baskin-Robbins of microclimates, and all of it packed into just forty-eight by twenty-six miles. You can go from tropical rain forest, to verdant farmland, to dusty cattle country---

[Seriously, you want a major knock in your cultural assumptions sometime, come out here in July and catch the Makawao Rodeo. Yippee ti yi yay!]

---to parched volcanic moonscapes that make the Sea of Tranquility look downright hospitable by comparison---

And you can do it all in a drive of about ten miles. Or rather, you could, if there were any such thing as a straight road here. And sorry, no snowcapped mountains, either: for those you have to go over to Mauna Kea, on the Big Island.

Or you can stick with me, the surfer formerly known as Jack Burroughs, as I drive north along coastal Highway 31 and describe the lovely scenery from Ahihi to Kihei as I see it:

Beach

Hotel

Golf course

Beach

Hotel

Golf course

Beach

Hotel

Golf course

Occasionally there's a little sign, stuck by the side of the road in some place that threatens to look slightly like a public access point, and it says:

PRIVATE BEACH - FOR HOTEL GUESTS ONLY SURFERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT
--

So you keep puttering along, listening to the squeaks and rattles of your old Bajaj, wondering if that fourth cylinder is ever going to warm up enough to kick in, and after awhile you start wishing for a bunch of tacky little shops selling puka shells and shark's teeth, just to break the monotony. Then you begin to start thinking that maybe golf isn't that lame a game...

Barely in the nick of time---just as the names Arnold Palmer and Tiger Woods are swimming up out of the murk of your collective cultural subconscious, and you're beginning to develop an overwhelming compulsion to go out to a driving range and whack a bucket of balls---with hardly a moment to spare, you reach the outskirts of Kihei, and heave a vast sigh of relief as you spot the first true signs of modern civilization:

McDonald's

Burger King

Captain Calimari's

Wendy's

Taco John's

Kenosha Fried Goose Lard

Kodak

Pepsi

Mama Vitale's Original Old World

Family Style Hot Curry Sushi...

California über alles.

Kinda makes you proud to be an American, y'know?

But there isn't time to dwell on that, because about five minutes later, if you've followed the little minimalist map on the back of the brochure correctly and your travel agent is a totally unprincipled scum-sucking crook, you take right turn off Kealaikahiki Drive and pull into the car park of the Royal Princess Lili'uokalani Hotel. Which is where I, Jack Burroughs, disguised as mild-mannered cabana boy Bob Sanders, simulate the appearance of working, for sometimes as much as thirty hours in a single week!

# The Royal Princess Lili'uokalani Hotel

## Welcome...

To the *perfect* retreat for those seeking a quiet, inexpensive getaway well away from the beaten path!<sup>1</sup> Featuring a spectacular and unique beachfront setting,<sup>2</sup> loads of authentic Old Hawai'i charm,<sup>3</sup> and a restaurant you'll be raving about for years to come,<sup>4</sup> a stay at the Royal Princess Lili'uokalani is truly an *unforgettable* experience!<sup>5</sup> When you visit the "Princess L,"<sup>6</sup> our cheerful staff will bend over backwards<sup>7</sup> to make certain your every need is met!

Conveniently located ice machines,<sup>8</sup> coffee, and continental breakfast<sup>9</sup> with each room.

- 1 Especially congressmen, senators, and businessmen traveling with women other than their wives. Hourly room rates on request.
- 2 Just downshore from the new Kihei Municipal sewage plant.
- 3 We haven't painted or redecorated since 1970.
- 4 You'll be trying to warn people, especially about Chef Francisco's authentic Portugese delicacy, *Arroz de Lampreia*. (Lamprey over white rice boiled in fish blood.)
- 5 Electroshock may help.
- 6 We suggest the Cockney pronunciation, e.g., "Princess 'ell!"
- 7 In particular Melea, Daphne, or Biff. Ask for them in the Tiki bar.
- 8 Rooms *not* adjacent to ice machines available at substantial extra cost.
- 9 Note that we say absolutely nothing that sounds even remotely like "complimentary airport shuttle." If you aren't part of a tour group and did not arrange to hire a car before you left the mainland, prepare to receive a radical wallectomy at any one of Kahului Airport's many fine cab stands or automobile rental agencies.



Or perhaps I should just refer you to our handsome color photograph, which you can find in all of the better budget-priced tour guides. There, that little picture, the one about the size of a commemorative postage stamp:



See the wide sky, the gleaming turquoise water, and all those waving palm---eh? What's that? Where's the hotel? Well, you see that tiny bit of white peeking out from behind the leftmost tree?

What, are you serious? You mean, you really can't tell a thing about the hotel from the photo? At least, not without a jeweler's loupe?

Good. We paid a professional photographer a load of serious money to achieve just that effect.

#

Me and the Bajaj came chug-chug-chugging up the road, rolling along the last stretch. Kealaikahiki Lane kind of wends and winds and dipsy-doodles all over the place, but none of the places it goes are particularly interesting, so the traffic as usual consisted of me, two Sewer Department trucks, and a carload of desperately lost tourists, who no doubt thought they were on Kealaikahoolawe Lane, en route to see the World's Largest Pineapple.

[This linguistic confusion is sadly understandable. There is a legend the natives tell, which speaks of how their ancestors sailed across the ocean to Hawaii in the Great Canoe of the Gods, only to be stricken in mid-voyage by a terrible storm that washed all their consonants overboard.

[Thus, the secret to pronouncing Hawaiian names is to enunciate all the vowels. The real purists even insist on peppering the written language with diacritical marks---e.g., Hawai`i---and, while this does produce a somewhat more accurate rendering of how the kama`āina (indigenous people) actually speak the language, it also has the unintended side effect of making everything look like it's been translated into Old High Vulcan.

[Ergo, with your permission, I will skip that crap, and use the conventional English spellings. I mean, if you want to get really anal about it, any transliteration of spoken Hawaiian is a botch from the start, as the only form of writing the old ali`i ever developed was a system of rudimentary petroglyphs.

[As for those twits who suggest that the culturally correct thing for modern Americans to do is to learn and become fluent in primitive glyphs, I can only answer: >:-P ]

The Sewer Department trucks turned off at the treatment plant. The tourists pulled over to the side of the road and began wrestling with their road map. (The international sign for, "We're strangers here! Mug us!") I left them to their fate, took the last bend and bob around Kukui Point, then hung a right into the hotel parking lot access drive.

Now, to properly understand what happens next, you must know that the parking lot is on the north end of the hotel grounds, and separated from the hotel proper by the orchid garden, the koi pond, the bamboo grove, the post-luau vomiting area, and a whole lot of other dense, green, things. Which means you can't actually see the hotel from driveway, or vice versa.

Meaning, I pulled in. There was a large, dark blue panel truck I didn't recognize parked sideways in the drive, blocking it. I kicked in the clutch, tapped the brake, gave the engine a shot of gas to keep it from stalling, and meeped my little clown-car horn. Some asshole in or near the truck responded by flashing a glaring red laser straight into my eyes.

"HALT!" commanded the amplified voice of a minor god.

I went on blind reflex. Slapped the gearshift into neutral, stomped the brake pedal down as hard as I could, and yanked the parking brake handle back for good measure. The Bajaj came to a shuddering, squealing stop, with the usual dramatic veer to the right, and the motor farted once and went into its typical, agonized, diesel-like death rattle.

The motor died like the star in a bad community theatre production of Hamlet. I let go of the steering wheel and tried to blink the red spots out of my eyes, but with no luck. There seemed to be dozens of brilliant red polka dots, everywhere I looked. On my shirt, my arms, my legs; man, that was some bad retinal after-imaging...

Whoops. Wait a minute.

Those weren't after-images.

"OUT OF THE CAR!" the Voice commanded. I reached for the seatbelt release. "KEEP YOUR HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!"

I raised my hands to face height, tried to block the glare of the lasers, and struggled for a glimpse of The Voice. It was slowly starting to seep into my thick skull, what was happening here. No, not the polite knock of the FDI after all, but...

"I SAID OUT OF THE CAR! NOW!"

And then it hit me. Firmware, you obnoxious jerk! You said you were going to set up a staged arrest!

I lowered my hands. "I'm wearing my seatbelt!" I shouted back. "If you dolts will for Christ's sake give me a---"

Something burst out of the ornamental shrubbery to my left. I caught a quick flash of black body armor, black facemask, black goggles, and a black coal-scuttle helmet. God, I thought, he must be roasting in that costume. Rough, black-gloved hands seized me, as someone else charged in from the right and whacked my seatbelt latch with the butt of his black submachinegun. Then Urban Ninja #1 yanked me out of the driver's seat and threw me face-first onto the lawn, where I fetched up against one of the ugly fake carved tiki's we put out for the guests to steal.

That pissed me off. When this take was over I was definitely going to have some serious words with Firmware. I mean, talk about your amateur actors getting way too into the role...

"ON THE GROUND!" the Voice bellowed, apparently failing to notice that I was already there. "HANDS IN FRONT! FEET APART!"

He was a middle school gym teacher in his day job, I decided. Next we were going to do some pushups, then maybe jumping jacks...

No, next someone pinned me with a hard and sharp knee between the shoulder blades, and another two or three someones started frisking me. Gee, considering their thoroughness, maybe they did think I kept plastic explosives in my skivvies. After the frisk they dragged my arms around behind my back and cuffed my wrists tightly together, then flipped me over like a nice big mahi-mahi steak on the grill. At last, I got my first good look at my newfound friends.

Ee-yuw. Definitely, these people needed major help in the wardrobe department. I mean, that black jackboot and body armor look---especially with the big white word, **POLICE**, stencilled on the front and back---was just so passé. Like, where did they find this stuff? Sylvester Stallone's Judge Dredd garage sale?

And then it hit me. Again.

These were real cops.

Firmware, you bastard! I didn't say yes so you turned me in!

Urban Ninja #1 grabbed me by the hair, dragged me up to a sitting position, and shoved a large black automatic pistol in my face. "WHO ARE YOU?" he demanded, spittle spraying through his black face mask. "WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?" He shook my head like a big maraca.

And then it hit me. For the third time. Frankly, by this point I was starting to get a little punchy. But maybe, just maybe---

The cops were looking for someone else.

I thought it over a few blinks, decided what the hell, and went for it. Before I could get the words up to my lips, though, another black-gloved hand flashed in and seized Ninja #1's wrist. "Back off, corporal," a new voice that I immediately recognized as The Voice ordered. "I'll take over here." With an almost-human grunt of protest and a last threatening wave of his gun in my face, Urban Ninja #1 abruptly let go of me, bounced to his jackbooted feet, and stomped off. I started to fall over sideways.

The Voice grabbed me by the hair, dragged me back up to sitting position, and shoved another, even larger, automatic pistol in my face. "WHO ARE YOU? WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?"

I gulped, licked my lips, took a deep breath, and blurted it out. "Bob Sanders. I work here." I briefly considered adding the word 'asshole,' but decided not to push my luck.

"Oh yeah?" the Voice said, his words fairly dripping with a rudimentary form of sarcasm, not to mention saliva. He let go of my hair, grabbed me by the front of my shirt, and hauled me one-handed to my feet. "Then in that case, what do you call---" He spun around dramatically and laid his red laser targeting dot on the object in question, "---that?"

"I call it a surfboard," I said.

"I know it's a surfboard!" the Voice shrieked, as three other ninjas descended on my car and started tearing it apart. "What I want to know is, what are you doing here with it?"

"It belongs to a hotel guest," I lied. "It's a very

expensive Merrick Thruster, which I'm bringing back from a repair shop in Lahaina, and if one of your ham-handed goons puts so much as a scratch in the skin or the bottom rail you'll have to answer to the Tourism Board!"

The Voice froze. There was a sharp intake of breath. You could almost see the rusty little gears turning 'round in his tiny, vestigial brain. His grip on the front of my shirt relaxed slightly, and his massive black pistol seemed to fall limp in his hand.

This is Hawaii.

Nobody fucks with the Tourism Board.

The Voice turned to the other ninjas, who were tearing my car apart. "Akagi? Kahuna? Back off. Wakabayashi, you find anything yet?"

The one who'd broken the lock on my glove compartment looked up, then held up a fistful of paper napkins and my wallet and hotel employee ID badge. "Yeah, Sarge. His name is Bob Sanders. I think he might work here."

The Voice absorbed this bit of information, then apparently decided he wasn't done threatening me yet. The grip on the front of my shirt went tight. The pistol leapt into my face, and the glaring red laser flared on again. "So, Bob." I blinked, winced, and tried to squirm away from the laser, but he tightened his grip. "Is that your real name, Bob?" If he'd had some kind of Truth-O-Meter on me in that moment, he'd have found out what the Tilt setting looked like.

But another moment later, through the grace of whatever god looks out for fools and surfers, a new player came onstage and blew the scene wide open.



## 4

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### BOUILLABAISSSE (Or, A Fine Kettle of Fish, Brought to a Rolling Boil)

"Sergeant?" the new voice asked gently. "What is the name of Jack Lord do you think you're doing?"

The laser winked out instantly, and the Voice spun to face the new challenge. "Lieutenant McCabe!" he said, in a loud but deferential tone I'd not suspected him capable of. "I was just interrogating this suspect, sir!"

"Suspect?" McCabe said, with an audible wrinkling of nose. I blinked the laser dazzle out of my eyes---again---and caught a quick glimpse of the lieutenant. He was a tall guy, mid-30ish, from the slender-but-muscular mold. Haole skin, blue suit with white shirt and tie, and a thick shock of black hair that seemed to be generously pomaded with Valvoline.

"Sergeant Blinderman," McCabe said, "you knuckle-dragging cretin. Can't you see that this man works here?"

I must admit, based on just that one statement, I developed an instant and powerful affection for Lieutenant McCabe.

Sgt. Blinderman turned back to me. "Sir? He could be a terrorist disguised as a hotel employee! That ID badge could be fake!" For a micro-moment, all the little hairs on the back of my

neck went to red alert.

McCabe blew out a snort of frustration, then shook his head sadly. "Just, release him, okay?"

Blinderman's gaze strobed back and forth between me and McCabe, perhaps evidence that his brain was attempting to work. "Sir? I think that would be inadvisable, given the present situation."

McCabe caught the sergeant's eye and made his head stop twitching, then returned his look with the beginnings of a deep and smouldering glare. "Did I ask you to think? No. I told you to release this man. Now."

Blinderman wasted one more blistering look on me, then holstered his pistol and let go of my shirt. "Don't think you're getting off this easy," he growled at me, sotto voce. "I'll be watching you, punk." He took a step back.

"The handcuffs?" McCabe suggested. Blinderman snarled something else unintelligible, then stepped around behind me and unlocked the manacles. I brought my hands back to their normal orientation and began massaging my wrists.

Thirty or so excruciatingly slow and tense seconds crawled by, like a line of differently abled snails. Okay, so the hotel grounds are crawling with cops. I can see that now. And they clearly are not hunting for a hotel employee named Bob Sanders.

So what gives?

I have this theory I've developed, while trying to surf the north shore of Oahu. Large, dangerous, and essentially mindless

natural phenomena---such as cops, 20-foot curls, and any tourist from a state whose name begins with New---should be treated with deference, respect, and if at all possible, a certain blank and innocent smile. So I decided to play this scene as if I'd just taken a bad, pile-driving wipeout, or a 50-cent tip for moving a boxcar full of luggage. I willed my muscles to go limp, focused all my attention on my calm center, and waited until the wave had washed over and I could bob back to the surface again.

A certain blank and innocent smile crept onto my face.

Sergeant Blinderman and the rest of his SWAT ninjas finished vanishing noisily into the shrubbery. Lieutenant McCabe watched them go, sighing and shaking his head the entire while. When the last one had disappeared, he turned to me, took a step forward, and offered me a handshake.

"Lieutenant McCabe," he said, flashing a badge. "Hawaii Six-O."

I arched an eyebrow.

"We upgraded."

I accepted the handshake. It reminded me of how much my wrists still hurt. I went back to rubbing my sore joints, while McCabe snapped his badge holder thingie shut and slipped it into an inside breast pocket of his sportcoat.

His hand came back out with an opened pack of Marlboros.

"Cigarette?"

I shook my head. "Thanks, no. I don't smoke."

"Neither do I." The Marlboros went into his lower right

outside pocket, and a moment later his hand reappeared with a crumpled brown paper bag. He offered it to me. "Gummi Bears?"

I shook my head again. "No thanks. I avoid refined sugar."

"Me too." He chucked the bag over his right shoulder, then fished into his lower left jacket pocket and came up with some plastic smartcards. "Free long-distance minutes?"

After a long, long pause, I slowly shook my head. McCabe started patting down his other jacket pockets. "So, lieutenant," I said, hoping to stop him before he'd driven the good cop/bad cop shtick right into the ground. "What's, uh, the deal?"

McCabe had come up with baseball cards, chewing gum, and free samples of SkinBaste™ tanning oil. "Mr. Sanders?" he said, looking up. "Can I call you Bob?" I nodded. "Well, Bob-O, what we've got here is what Sergeant Blinderman and the SWAT boys call a situation. This afternoon, at approximately 3 P.M., our office received an anonymous tip---

He corrected himself. "A reliable confidential lead---

He tried again. "A report from an unimpeachable undercover intelligence asset---

He stopped short, and looked at me. "Say, Bobster, how long have you been working at the Princess Lili--- Lilio---?"

"Lili'uokalani," I said. "About two years. Why?"

"So you're familiar with the grounds and buildings?"

I nodded. "You could say that."

"We could even say you're an expert on the physical plant and architecture?"

I thought it over. "No." Wherever this conversation was leading, it was starting to make me nervous, so I decided to revert to Surfboy Sanders. "I just like, clean the pool, dude."

"Oh." The lieutenant's face sagged, and he looked away from me. Then his face did a flat-out cliff-dive into a deep frown, and his eyes locked on something incredibly horrible and hideous behind me. "Oh, shit," he said, as if he had a mouthful of it. "Not them. Not here. Not now." I turned around.

There was a plain, white, domestic boat wallowing up the driveway: a Ford, I think, with no trim and blackwall tires. You know, the kind of car that makes you slow down 10 MPH whenever you see one in the rearview mirror, because it practically screams out UNMARKED CAR!

The Ford bounced to a stop, missing my Bajaj by mere inches. The motor died; the doors opened. Two more haoles emerged: the driver was a short guy with a big nose and a serious communication problem with his hairstylist, while the passenger was a tall, leggy, red-haired babe with major gazongas. They both wore matching gray pinstripe suits (his with trousers, hers with a skirt), matching dark Ray-Ban sunglasses, and matching long trenchcoats.

Good airconditioner in that Ford, I guessed.

The two suits took a moment to check each other out, then advanced on us. The driver stopped in front of McCabe and flashed a badge. "FDI," he said to McCabe, in a clipped monotone. "We came as soon as we heard. Thanks for securing the scene."

"We'll take over, now."

#

When two dogs meet for the first time they perform a sort of olfactory ballet, dancing about each other in ever tighter circles, each trying to be the first to sniff the other's---

Cops, fortunately, just flash their badges.

"Special Agent Smith," the guy in the gray suit said, showing off his FDI credentials with a casual, insouciant flair. "And this is my partner---"

"Special Agent Jones," the yummy redhead completed, in the same monotone, and with the same practiced badge-flip. Man, you could tell, these people were professionals.

McCabe tried, but he clearly was not in the same league. "Lieutenant McCabe," he said, "Hawaii Six-O." Agent Smith took off his Ray-Bans and gave McCabe's badge a hard stare, then turned to Jones and shot her a blue-eyed quiz-in-a-glance.

"They upgraded," she said.

Agent Smith nodded, then turned on me. "And you are...?"

Luckily I'd picked up my wallet and stuff from where the SWAT ninjas had thrown it, and I'd had two demonstrations of the proper flash and monotone technique. I flipped open my hotel employee ID badge.

"Bob Sanders. Pool Cleaner."

Smith's china blue eyes went a microscopic hair wider. He blinked a few times, turned to Jones, and shot her another quizzical glance. She shrugged.

Smith started to turn back to me with a question on his lips, then clearly thought better of it and went for McCabe instead.

"So, lieutenant. What's the tactical situation?"

"Our SWAT team has the hotel cordoned off," McCabe said. "No one has gotten in or out since we established our perimeter."

Smith nodded. "Good. Media containment?"

"My department has just issued a statement denying that there's a race riot in progress at Cook's Landing. Air Traffic Control reports every news helo in the islands is now airborne and heading for the south coast of Kauai."

Smith nodded again. "Excellent. That should buy us---oh, two hours, at least." He stroked his perfectly chiseled five-o'clock shadow chin, glanced at Jones again, and apparently had another telepathic exchange with her.

Jones took a step forward. "Have you been able to establish contact with," she paused, and made a significant nod in the general direction of the hotel, "them?"

McCabe shook his head. "Not yet. My technicians are still working on it."

"That's important," Jones said. "We've been through this sort of thing before, lieutenant. Believe me, it is critical to the success of this operation that we establish a dialogue with them before..." Her voice tapered off.

McCabe jumped into the gap. "Before they start kicking corpses out the front door?"

That got my attention. Corpses? As in dead corpses?

Jones caught herself in a startle reaction, then looked to Smith, and both of them started to crack up. "Christ, no!" she said, fighting back a snicker. "Before the ATF shows up!"

My brain went into spin cycle, and McCabe's jaw dropped to thump on his sternum. "ATF?" he said. "Why on Earth would they claim jurisdiction?"

Smith shrugged. "There's a bar in the hotel, isn't there? And a smoking lounge?"

"Two out of three," Jones added.

McCabe tried to protest. "But---"

"Listen," Smith said, "you don't know what it's like back in Washington. The budget wars are sheer hell! If the ATF gets wind of a made-to-order photo op like this, they'll be out here with a pack of major network reporters faster than you can say Princess Liliukelele!"

"Lili'uokalani," I corrected. All three turned to stare at me. "Sorry," I mumbled.

The three of them looked at each other a long moment, then decided to go back to ignoring me. McCabe picked up the thread of the conversation. "That's ludicrous. Do you really think the ATF would---?"

"Yes," Smith said.

"Absolutely," Jones agreed.

"Or if not them, the Secret Service," Smith continued.

Jones touched a bright red fingernail to her chin. "Or the DEA, the NSA, the CIA..."



Smith: "The INS, since these are foreign nationals."

Jones: "The EPA, if they've got lead bullets."

Smith began counting on his fingertips with the earpiece of his sunglasses. "The DIA, the IRS, the FWS, GSA, GAO, OSHA, HHS ---am I forgetting anyone?"

Jones thought it over. "The OSS," she said at last.

Smith shuddered, and looked at her. "Oh, God," he said. "Not them. Not here. Not now."

McCabe's gaze flipped back and forth between Smith and Jones a few times, until it became evident that their character-revealing interplay was over and they'd fallen into a stunned silence. "OSS?" McCabe asked.

"Classified," Smith said.

"Forget we mentioned it," Jones added.

"Now," Smith said, deftly changing the topic, "let's see what we can do about opening a dialogue with," he paused, and made a significant nod in the general direction of the hotel, "them. Is that your mobile command center?" He pointed at the blue panel truck parked sideways in the drive.

McCabe nodded, and the three of them wheeled in formation and started walking towards it. And I just stood there, with my mouth hanging open, feeling like---

A discarded toy? A total dork? The kind of guy I always felt like back in school, when a bunch of people I tangentially knew were going someplace interesting, but didn't even think to ask if I wanted to come along?

[The fact that they were cops and I should have been relieved they were ignoring me never even entered my mind.]

Instead: like I said, I've got this rule I've developed, for dealing with unpleasant situations. Relax, go with the flow, and wait. But when all three of them turned the backs on me, I suddenly remembered my rule had an important corollary, which I'd inadvertently discovered while attempting to body-surf Makapuu:

Sometimes, all that relaxing and waiting gets you is a faceful of clamshells and sand.

So when McCabe and the others started walking towards the panel truck, I seemed to hear the rising roar of a wall of water, and the bitter taste of salt and rotting kelp grew very strong in my mouth...

My blank and innocent smile imploded. I dashed ahead, planted myself in their path, put my hands on my hips and assumed the aspect of an immovable obstacle.

"Now wait one God damn minute! Will one of you please tell me just what the hell is going on here?"

Jones caught Smith by the sleeve and helped him guide his half-drawn pistol back into his waistband holster. McCabe had taken a jump off to the side---to get out of Smith's line of fire, I realized belatedly---and he just stood there, watching the FDI agents for his cue. Jones made eye contact with the men, got a curt nod from Smith and a shrug from McCabe, then turned and took a step closer to me.

"Mr. Sanders?" she said gently, in a voice so larded with

professional compassion I felt like I was being buttered. "Do you have friends in the Princess Li--- the hotel?" She took her sunglasses off then, and turned the full intensity of her doe-eyed gaze on me. My legs became jelly and my knees started to buckle.

I fought it off and stood up. "Lady, I work there."

"Oh. So then you don't have any friends in there."

I tried again. "Wrong. I mean, I have lots of friends in there. And I demand to know---"

Jones pursed her full, red, lips, and turned up the heat another notch. "No one close, I hope?"

I paused; her question had triggered a sort of involuntary inventory. Well, there were Dale and Tetsuo, but they were more like bar buddies than actual friends. And of course there was Nalani, the scuba instructor, but with her it was more like intermittent mutual glandular need than---

Smith stepped to the fore. "Mr. Sanders? What Agent Jones is trying to say is, at approximately 3:04 this afternoon, the FDI received a reliable report that the notorious international cyberterrorist Eduardo the Jackal had checked into this hotel. Now, we don't know how he got into the country or what he's up to, but it appears he is traveling in the company of an outlaw Russo-Afghani arms dealer named Raisa al Haffez."

"Hey!" said McCabe, suddenly coming to life. "How did you know that? Have you tapped my phone, too?"

"The FDI has its sources," Smith said, in a tone that suggested there was a tax audit with McCabe's name on it if he

asked too many questions. McCabe quickly shut up and backed off.

Jones picked up the ball. "The FDI has been tracking those two for years," she said. "We're not sure what it means to find them here together, but we do know that both are stone-cold killers, and neither travels without a small army of heavily-armed bodyguards. So we have to assume that if we can see them, their gunmen are also here, and in control of the hotel. They'll already have hostages---that's their M.O.---and the minute they begin to suspect they're under surveillance..." Her voice tapered off again.

I felt a bone-deep, gut-empty, ice-cold, chill. Yeah. Kicking corpses out the front door. Charming image, that.

Apparently it was McCabe's turn to step forward. He laid a friendly hand on my shoulder and smiled at me in a saccharine way that made me just about want to punch his teeth in. "And now, Bobster, you know the rest of the story. So trust us; we're professionals. We'll do everything we can to get your friends out of there safely, but right now the best thing you can do is run along home and---"

"Wrong." Smith shook his head.

McCabe blinked at Smith. "Huh?"

"We can't let him go now. Sanders knows too much. You're going to have to put him in protective custody and keep him on ice until---" Smith frowned, checked his watch, then looked at Jones. "When does Nightline go off the air?"

This time it was my turn to start twitching nervously.

Sweating profusely, too. "Protective custody?" I managed to squeak, with a weak smile.

McCabe clapped me on the shoulder again. "Aw, nothing to it, Bob-O! I'll just have one of my boys take you up to Kahalui, book you and fingerprint you, and then it's all the doughnuts and Coffee Clear™ you can stand until---"

McCabe finished the sentence. I know he did; I watched his lips move. And he said lots of other stuff after that, too, but all I kept hearing was one word:

**FINGERPRINT!**

**FINGERPRINT!**

**FINGERPRINT!**

**FINGERPRINT!**

That, and the sound of a rising, roaring, bone-crushing mountain of deep green cold water...

Ding!

"Hey-y-y, lieutenant!" I said, throwing him a great big perfectly fraudulent grin and a gentle little buddy-punch on the upper arm. "I just got an idea! You know what you said before, about needing someone who's an expert on the hotel's physical plant and architecture?"

From the bug-eyed way Agent Jones was staring at me, you'd have thought I'd just sprouted a coat of shaggy fur and a set of dripping four-inch fangs.

## 5

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### IN THE VOICEMAIL OF THE DAMNED

Five minutes later Smith, Jones, McCabe and I were packed into the back of the blue police van, like a bunch of well-oiled anchovy fillets. (Jones's perfume was delicious, by the way, while Smith had definitely overdone the Old Spice, and McCabe was lying when he said he didn't smoke.)

Now I have to admit, on one level, I was pretty close to flipping out on the total high weirdness of it all. I mean, here I'd spent the last few years hiding out from the law, SCARW, and the 21st Century in general, and now I was voluntarily climbing into that truck and standing cheek-to-jowl with two Feds and a state cop? So deep in the back of my mind, some paranoid little corner of my personality kept screaming, "It's a trap! There aren't really any terrorists! The instant they close those doors they're going to slap on the handcuffs and shout out, 'Ha ha! Fooled you, Jack Burroughs!'"

But on the other hand: you know the expression, 'kid in a candy store?'

Right. Now imagine that Ridley Scott, Bill Gates, and Bruce Wayne had gotten together one weekend, and over cigars and cognac

they'd pulled out the Crutchfield Multimedia catalog and set out to create the definitive coolest set of electronics ever put on wheels. And then, to cap off the joke, they'd decided to pack the results in an unmarked blue GMC panel truck, such as might belong to a bakery, or a second-rate catering firm.

Yeah. Like, wow. Totally.

Jones was looking at me strangely. I think she thought I was reacting to the way she'd hiked her skirt up to mid-thigh to clear the step up into the van. Smith tried to help her find a place to stand, and wound up banging his head on a low-hanging rack mount. McCabe waited until we were all inside, then slid the door shut, slicing off the daylight with a guillotine-like tshook!

Jones gasped. I did too. I mean, talk about your maximum technogrotto effect! The inside of that van was dark, cluttered, packed and claustrophobic; lit only by the dim green glow of diodes and flat-panel readouts. Dead silent save for the soft susurrations of cooling fans, the faint and breathy mutter of open comm channels, and the weird, nearly organic creaking and groaning of---

A swivel chair. There was an armless swivel chair in the midst of all that hardware, and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized there was a skinny, black-haired woman sitting on the chair. She might have been pretty; between the baggy flannel checkered shirt, the ragged jeans, the bulbous earrings, the ridiculously oversized glasses, and the leaned-too-far-over-the-garbage-disposal haircut (real short on the top and



sides; ragged shoulder-length in back), it was hard to tell.

McCabe reached out to her. "Nora? I'd like you to meet---"

She cut him off with a karate-like wave of her right hand. "Not now, lieutenant!" She went back to the panel before her and tapped a keypad furiously, her long black fingernails clicking like canastas on the plastic keytops. Then she kicked off the panel and rode her chair backwards to the other end of the van. "I am just fifteen seconds away from satellite acquisition, so if you don't mind---"

She spun around and attacked another panel, the fingers of both hands flying dramatically like a concert pianist tackling a Liszt concerto. At first, I was impressed by her intensity. Then, as I looked more closely, I realized the equipment she was beating on had absolutely nothing to do with satellite comm.

Ah. Putting on a show for the boss. I could relate.

McCabe watched her in obvious admiration for a bit longer, then turned to Smith and Jones. His voice, when he spoke, was a reverent whisper. "Nora Kapoho is the best surveillance tech in the entire HPD," he said. "If there is anything we can learn from remote sensing, Nora will find it." McCabe turned back to watch her again, with a confident nod and a smug and---under the circumstances, rather idiotic---smile on his face.

There was a faint chirp from yet another piece of hardware. The satellite download, from wherever Nora was really getting it, was done cooking. She heard the chirp too, and rolled her chair over to a central panel that featured a large video display.

"Got it!" she announced. Smith, Jones, and McCabe tried to crowd forward and wound up jamming shoulders, so I hung back.

"This is a satellite thermographic scan of the hotel, updated ninety seconds ago." Something flashed up on her video display, and as I expected, was echoed on two smaller screens.

I looked at the cops' backs again, then leaned in closer to one of the small screens. The image looked like your basic bad tie-dye job overlaid with grape juice and ketchup stains, or else a Jackson Pollock painting.

A bullseye cursor popped up on the screen; I guessed Nora had activated a mouse. The cursor swept over to a fuzzy white blob on the far left edge of the screen.

"This hot spot," Nora said, "is a member of our SWAT team." She traced an arc up and to the right, connecting a line of white dots. "SWAT team, SWAT team, SWAT team---lieutenant, you really need to rethink those all-black outfits. I mean, everybody has infrared sensors these days, and those poor slobs must be roasting out there." She went back to playing connect-the-dots, and finished a rough semicircle around the central blue mass on the screen.

"What's that?" Smith asked, apparently pointing something out to Nora. The cursor jumped to a murky white blob in the middle of the blue area.

"Rooftop heat exchanger for the central air conditioning."

"And that?" Jones added.

The cursor moved up to a fainter, yellowish smear. "Exhaust fan for the kitchen."

"What about those?" McCabe continued. The cursor meandered down to a bunch of smaller white dots surrounding a kidney-shaped green blob that even I could recognize as the swimming pool.

"Hotel guests poolside," Kapoho answered. "I've had them under direct surveillance for twenty minutes." A window popped open on the thermographic image, showing what was clearly a live telephoto video shot of the pool area. "Lieutenant, if it's possible to conceal a weapon under that bikini, I don't want to know how it's done." The video window blanked and shrank, and the display went back to the satellite image.

"So, as you can see," Nora said, in what definitely had a certain conclusion-like quality about it, "there are no snipers on the roof, no lookouts on the balconies, and no one lurking in the bushes. Except for us, of course."

After a pause, Smith said, "I'm impressed. I didn't know you could get resolution like that off GOESS."

"I didn't," Nora said. "GOESS won't be in a good position for another two hours. But thanks to that mess in Chad, there's a perfectly good KEYHOLE-12 in a polar orbit."

"KEYHOLE?" Jones blurted out. "That's Defense Intelligence Agency! Classified up the yin-yang---how did you get permission to access it?"

I turned around in time to see Kapoho slap her own cheek, lightly. "Oops. Silly me. I forgot to ask."

For the next ten seconds you could have chipped the air around Smith and Jones with an icepick. Me, it was everything I could do not to burst out laughing. And McCabe? Well, he looked like a candidate for a "before" picture in the rectal foreign bodies online photo gallery.

The icejam broke. "Well," McCabe said, far too forcefully, "I am sure we'll get this all sorted out later. But in the meantime: what about the weapons scanner?"

Kapoho turned back to her console, slapped some keys, and pulled up a false-color ground-level image of the hotel lobby.

"No go," Nora said. "Every time I get the millimetrix array stabilized, one of Blinderman's clods steps in front of an antenna and blows the calibration all to hell and gone again. I can't honestly tell you whether the targets I'm registering are guns, bombs, or the teeth of Sergeant Blinderman's zipper."

"That's in passive mode," Smith said, leaning over the console and apparently deciding to join the conversation again. "Doesn't your millimetrix have an active mode?"

"Sure does," Nora said, drumming her fingers on the console. "And I could start pinging the hotel with microwave radar pulses. That'd give us an exponential increase in differentiation."

Smith shrugged. "Well? Then---"

"Of course, if anyone in the hotel is wearing a cardiac pacemaker, there's about a thirty-percent chance that the radar pulse would shut their heart off."

Smith drew a long breath, and let it out slow. "O-o-k-a-ay, I see your point. Well, we'll just save that option for later, won't we?" He looked at Jones and McCabe, gulped audibly, then went back to Kapoho. "What else have you got?"

"That's it for remote sensing," Nora said. "My next idea was to tap into the hotel's closed-circuit security cameras." She turned to her console, banged in a few commands, and pulled up a four-way splitscreen.

I recognized that screen. It was the main security monitoring channel: four video windows, switching at random every ten seconds between sixteen concealed indoor and outdoor cameras. One by one, the familiar views ticked by: lobby, cashier's office, west stairwell, exercise room, men's sauna... (don't ask; don't tell). The familiarity of the views was offset by one disturbing thought: the security cameras were on a closed, hardwired, system. I knew that. I'd helped run the cables myself. So how had she managed to tap into them?

Never mind, I reminded myself. We're looking for terrorists, remember? I tried to get closer to the screen and study it, for evidence of anything that looked out of place.

Smith shouldered me aside and touched the monitor screen. "They're good," he said, nodding.

"Very good," Jones added.

"You can tell these people are pro's," Smith continued. "They've made all the cameras already and are staying out of the scan areas. Everything looks so...normal."

"Too normal," Jones completed.

"Yeah," Nora said, leaning back in her chair and chewing a thumbnail. "That's what I thought. So I started chasing oblique strategies, and here's what I found." She shot out a hand and froze the shot of the concierge's desk, then expanded it to full-screen. When Smith and Jones were slow on the uptake, she leaned forward and clicked a black fingernail on the glass. "See?"

Uh oh...

Smith and Jones exchanged glances, and both shook their heads. "No," Jones said.

Nora tapped the screen again. "That, is a CyberDyne Asuka M-1201. A multimedia personal computer, set up for full broadband network access."

Actually, it wasn't quite...

Smith and Jones exchanged glances again, and this time it was Smith's turn to speak. "So? So the staff plays Slaughter II."

Nora puffed out a snort of frustration, then set her elbow on the console put her forehead in her palm. "No. Multimedia. As in teleconferencing." She tapped the screen with her free hand. "As in, there is a microphone and a miniature TV camera built-into that workstation."

McCabe, surprisingly, was the one who made the connection. "Nora? Can you hack into their network and access that camera?"

My nerves went taut, and I bit my tongue. No, she couldn't, and I could tell her why---but what does Bob Sanders know about computers?

Nora was drumming her fingers on the console, and chewing her upper lip. "Yeah, I think so," she said at last, as she stopped drumming. "But the Supreme Court hasn't been real clear on the legality of this sort of thing, so without either a search warrant or a direct order..."

McCabe looked to Smith and Jones, and received a pair of nods. He turned back to Nora. "Ms Kapoho?" McCabe said clearly. "I am ordering you to hack into the hotel local-area network and access that TV camera."

"Thank you!" Nora said brightly. She punched a few more commands into her console, then leaned back in her chair and raised her hands as if about to worship an idol. The baggy sleeves of her flannel shirt fell back, exposing two thick, tight, jade bracelets. "I am going virtual....now." Her fingers began waving slowly in the air, like seaweed on a lazy current. For a moment I was puzzled, wondering how she was getting VR interaction without datagloves and video goggles. Then...

Omigod, on the screen display. I shuddered, with terror, and delight, and a long, drawn-out, hungry yearning---

Cyberspace.

Oh dear God, how I'd missed it!

I tore my gaze off the screen and looked away, as tears welled up. The emotional effect was like that of seeing my long lost puppy, and my first girl friend, and everything beautiful and wonderful that I could never have again all rolled into one.

I had to look again.

Nora was cruising something that I vaguely recognized as an updated InfoBahn, plunging through the Net traffic like a barely in-control rocketship, swerving and diving and rolling through coruscating whorls of violet fire, then plunging into a dank and slimey sewer hole and emerging---

High in the virtual sky over BusinessWorld.

"Don't drool on my console," she said to me.

I jerked back. "Huh?"

She smiled at me, her head still tilted back, her fingers waving gently in the air. "You've been in c-space before, haven't you?"

My brain misfired. "I--- uh---"

She smiled again. "Cool, innit?"

I nodded, then realized the effort that was wasted. "Yeah."

"Don't worry," she said. "I can see you." She brought her left hand back and tapped her oversized glasses. Now that I had a closer look at them, I realized they were tinted across the top, just like the windshield of my dad's old Pontiac.

"Heads-up display," she said. "Composite overlay, VR on top of the real world." She extended her left arm again, and went back to flying.

That's clearly what she was doing. Flying. Like a superhero.

I watched her a bit, then went back to watching the monitor, which was clearly echoing what she saw. BusinessWorld looked like---well, like what it always looked like. A dark, tangled



jungle where commerce was fought daily with bloody tooth and claw; a sprawling wilderness broken only by the occasional patch of lifeless desolation, evidence of some luckless corporation that had downsized to the point where it underwent gravitational collapse and turned into a financial black hole.

I went back to watching Nora. "You're wondering something," she said.

I thought it over, and decided it was okay for Bob Sanders to be curious. "Yeah. I always thought VR required, like, gloves or something." That sounded like an acceptably naive way to phrase what was on my mind.

She smiled again. I was definitely getting to like her smile. "Old tech, chum," she said. "Gloves are mechanical. Complicated." Nora extended her left hand, and gently tapped the jade bracelet on her wrist with her right thumb.

"Neural inductance technology," she said. "Why track the physical movement of your fingers when you can read the microcurrents in your carpal tunnel nerves?" She slowly brought her right hand back, and touched her earring. "Piezo earpuffs." Her hand dipped down to the delicate hollow of her throat, and she fished out a small crystal necklace. "Lavalier microphone. All connected by a wireless personal body network. That's not a pager on my belt, it's a cellular network hub." She slowly extended her right hand again and formed her fingers into a spearpoint.

"And now, if you'll excuse me: we're here."

I resumed watching the monitor. The aspect was changing; we were now far over the Western Rim of BusinessWorld, and it was a place I'd never visited much. Most of it was strange, unfamiliar ---of course, given how long it'd been since I'd last been in VR, even my own virtual backyard probably would have looked strange and unfamiliar.

A cluster swam into view. Just a tiny cluster; a little processing power, a little storage, with a half-dozen or so taps into various reservation networks. It looked, to be honest, like one of those electron microscope shots of a minor viral infection.

So that was what the Princess Lili'uokalani looked like from the virtual side. Pathetic.

I looked back to Nora. With a suddenness that startled me, she shouted, "Here we go!" She flipped her hands down.

I looked at the monitor. Then, I couldn't bear to watch. Nora had thrown her virtual self into a screaming, plummeting, power dive straight at the very heart of the virtual Princess L.

And in about five seconds, she was going to bash her virtual brains out on a brick wall with my name all over it. Crack her virtual skull open like a rotten watermelon; get her skinny little butt kicked back out to reality so fast---

"Ouch!"

I couldn't look.

McCabe pushed forward. "Nora? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I guess I am."

Well, okay, maybe I could look. Nora was sitting up straight in her chair, with a puzzled expression on her face, shaking her head like a cartoon rabbit who'd just taken a good solid bonk from a large wooden mallet.

The monitor, though, I couldn't help but notice, was still showing c-space. She hadn't crashed out after all. Odd.

Jones checked Nora over as if she were a doctor or something, then pointed at the screen. "What's that?"

"Oh, that? It's just a firewall." Nora finished recovering her composure. "The hotel must have hired some consultant to make their LAN hacker-proof."

I bit my tongue and stifled a maniacal cackle. Hired? Hired, you say?! Are you joking? And the beauty of it is, the hotel doesn't even know I put the firewall there!

"A firewall!" Jones repeated, with a breathy sort of awe. "You mean, we're locked out!"

"Not necessarily," Nora said. She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, then reached out again with her virtual hands. "Very often there's a way to pick the..."

I snorted, and then tried to pretend it was a sneeze. Pick my lock? Fat chance, lady!

Nora was still moving her hands like a Balinese dancer. "...pick the..." she echoed softly. Then she stopped short, sat up, and dropped her hands into her lap. "Omigod," she said, loud and clear. "It's an MDE Type 6 algorithm with the Holland variation!" She spun around and looked straight at me. "Tell

your bosses they got ripped off, Bob! This is a copy of an old Max Kool job!"

There was a sharp gasp---this time from Smith, I think. The legendary Max Kool?" he said. "You mean, it's that good?"

Nora laughed and shook her head. "No, I mean it's that lame! State of the art---three years ago! I know high-school kids who race each other to see who can crack these things the fastest!"

There was a loud, rushing, hissing noise in the van, that no one else seemed to notice. After a moment, I realized it was the sound of my ego deflating.

"I mean," Nora went on, "it's like they locked their safe with a wad of gum."

Go ahead, lady. Kick me, beat me, humiliate me...

"So now, if you'll excuse me..." Nora pushed her glasses back up her nose, cracked her knuckles, and went to it. "And a one, and a two, and---bingo! We're in."

"Yeah!" Smith shouted, punctuating it with a handclap.

I went back to the monitor. I couldn't bear to watch Nora cover herself with glory, so I watched her turn the guts of the Princess L hotel network inside out instead.

Then the icy panic struck. God, I sure hope I remembered to delete all the backups of my autobiography file...