

Timeslice

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From horizon to horizon, a narrow silver ribbon was threaded across a pale peach sunset-washed sky, touched by a wash of translucent grey clouds. Within the core of the high-altitude superfluid — superconducting and frictionless, and possessed of other properties which were less than public knowledge — a metal sphere was speeding. Though it was large enough to carry a dozen passengers, magnetic forces flicked it through the silver fluid like a ball bearing fired from a catapult.

It passed high above an archipelago, dark islands trapped in a sea shining like a pastel mirror. Onwards, over hills clustered like islands on a dark rift floor. Then out over a dead plain where a myriad great stone urns rose from the lifeless rock.

On the ground, movement. A small hand-held device suddenly poked above the lip of an urn. No noise, no spitting light. But up above, the superfluid thread jerked and split into a hundred bucking streamers. As the magnetic containment field went wild, turbulence broke the superfluid apart and spat it in all directions across the sky.

The metal sphere fell through a curved trajectory, its forward velocity enough to carry it far beyond the urn where the saboteur lurked.

The impact smashed through the evening's still-ness, obliterating several urns. Gravel flew as the sphere bounced and came to rest, its surface marred by a dark ugly crack.

A kilometre away, the device's dark-hooded operator squirmed up over the urn's rim. From a dozen hiding places, other dark figures sprang up noiselessly. It

took four minutes for them to run to the crash site. They swarmed over the spherical vessel and used pulse lasers to cut their way in.

They pulled out a slight, grey-haired man who was groaning though unconscious. They strapped him to a stretcher and carried him to some broken ground which was free of urns, and waited.

Three helicopters came scudding through the fading light. A thunderous downdraught washed over the men as the copters touched down. Within seconds everyone was aboard.

The three copters ascended and flew in arrow formation towards the setting sun, moving quickly. They had to be down and in hiding by midnight, by timeslice's end.

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Peter Duval groaned and rolled out of bed. He staggered across the small attic bedroom and depolarized the window. Outside, above the crowded roofscape of Paris, hung a crystalline blue sky crossed by half a dozen silver superfluid threads. Voices echoed from the narrow cobbled street, the old concierge trading insults with the local kids.

Peter forced himself to limber up, using the iron radiator as a barre. His nose wrinkled at a sour smell. Dammit! Yesterday (subjective) he must have left some milk open in the kitchen alcove. Four days (real-time) later, it was stinking. What sort of degenerates lived here during the other timeslices, not to notice it? Impossible that his apartment might be unoccupied during the other timeslices, not this close to the city centre. Disgusted, he poured the rotten stuff away.

His mother's house had six scuttlebots. Here, two scuttlebots served a whole apartment block full of students and nightclub "hostesses." The scuttlebots picked up any sheets of paper diligently, to avoid communication between timeslices, all links with the other three-quarters of humanity severed. Hygiene seemed a lower priority.

Showered and dressed, he packed dance slippers, leotard and towel into a duffel bag. Ignoring the mail-waiting icon, he took the flat-screen display from his desk and rolled it into a tube and dropped it, too, into the duffel bag, followed by its keypad and a handful of maths tutorial crystals.

Duffel bag over his shoulder, he left quickly, moving agilely down four

flights of stairs and out into the street. Twenty days ago (subjective) it had been icy midwinter, and now it was spring. In his child-hood, each season had seemed endless, but that was when the whole world was living in realtime, instead of living one day out of every four, each quarter of humanity taking its turn on the rota. Breathing deeply of the fresh Parisian air and pushing the past from his mind, Peter headed off towards the Sorbonne.

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That afternoon, sitting in warm sunlight on the steps of the maths department, Peter unrolled his terminal. The sender ID on his incoming note was Tatiana Duval. Mother. The note was untranslated, and it took a moment to switch gear and decipher the Cyrillic characters. She enquired about his ballet and noted pointedly that he was now fifth in the maths department. He would show her. By the end of the year, he would be top of the class.

Time for his next lecture. When he got to the lecture theatre he found about a hundred other students crowding into the amphitheatre-shaped room. Unusual. Most people accessed on-line lectures and rarely turned up in person. Bemused, he saw several people he knew from different courses and years to his own, who should not be here at all.

Professor Gruner entered to applause and the stamping of enthusiastic feet. Pretending indifference, he began his lecture by dredging up the basic equations of the coherent time-jump effect, holo-graphic symbols glowing amber in the air above the lecturer's podium. The students became restless as he activated a stylized graphic illustration of coherent wave functions tunnelling through the barrier of future time. Kids' stuff.

Professor Gruner stopped. "Not interested, hein? Perhaps all this theory is dry and boring?" There were whistles and catcalls. Peter saw that most of his classmates were as puzzled as he was, though the unknown — mostly older — students were flushed with anticipation. Then Gruner, not quite hiding his smile, shrugged expressively and turned off the lecturer's display. At the same time, some of the physics lab technicians began wheeling in a large silver frame-work mounted on a trolley. The applause was tremendous.

The framework was two metres high, and after a small panel on one vertex was connected to a power supply the technicians set up a step ladder beside it. The professor climbed the ladder while the technicians took care to hold the ladder rock steady. At the top, the professor removed an egg from his jacket pocket with a flourish. Then he leaned over the framework and dropped the egg.

It sailed down towards the floor until it reached the midpoint, where it vanished. The professor descended the ladder, the power was temporarily switched off while the frame-work was moved to one side, and everybody waited expectantly.

Two minutes later the egg reappeared exactly where it had vanished. It fell to the ground and smashed, as the students jumped to their feet and applauded. Peter was standing and clapping his hands with the rest of them, wondering how on earth the professor had obtained permission to rig a time jump. It took a while for everyone to calm down and take their seats again, so that the professor could continue with his demonstration. Peter gathered from various comments that this was an annual event. The students all watched spellbound as the professor took them through a series of demonstrations with all the panache and showmanship of a master conjuror.

Afterwards, Peter wandered out into one of the courtyards and, head reeling, sat down on the ground with his back against a statue of Victor Hugo, his barely remembered childhood coming back to haunt him. If only he could jump back into the past, to a time when his father had been there. Stupid. Impossible to jump back against the entropy flow, only possible to tunnel forwards through it. Grow up, why don't you?

The world's time zones had been redefined logically two decades ago, splitting the world into 24 equal segments. As each time zone reached midnight, that was the end of a timeslice and time for the Scheduler to do on a grand scale what Peter had just witnessed in the lecture theatre.

He skipped the tutorial he was scheduled to attend and instead arrived early at the dance academy. The tension drained out of him as he walked up the steps and into the marble foyer. He loved the atmosphere of this place, the sweaty smell of effort, the squeaking thumping sounds of dancers, the music, the cajoling teachers' voices. Putting their students under pressure, hoping that grace would emerge.

He changed quickly, ignoring the cuts on his gnarled feet as he pulled on his slippers.

It was too early to start warming up so he wandered down the corridor, peeking curiously through the glass doors of the studios. He grinned as he watched a schoolkids' class, then looked in at a Swan Lake rehearsal which stopped him dead. A blonde brown-eyed girl was dancing at the back, technically merely proficient, but with a stunning depth of feeling and expression.

Later, during his own lesson, he saw her at the door just as he leaped high and kicked back, badly, his foot actually brushing the head of the man behind him.

“If you want to kick somebody’s face in,” said the teacher caustically, “please take up karate or savate. This is a dance studio.”

Everybody laughed. Peter flushed with embarrassment.

After the lesson he found her waiting in the foyer.

“I recognized you from the university,” she said. “I thought you were a dancer when I first saw you.”

“Naturally graceful.”

“Unnaturally dangerous, I’d call it.” Her laugh was silvery and clear, her brown eyes simultaneously innocent and knowing, eyes a young man could drown in.

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Her name was Sophie, and she was a medical student who took some maths courses at Peter’s department. They went to a streetside cafe where they sat drinking bitter coffee and watching the passers-by. As she talked easily about her parents and family pets, she seemed far removed from the intense woman Peter had watched dancing.

“My mother lives in Moscow,” Peter said, when she asked about his family. “She was born there, but only returned a few years ago. I was mostly raised in Toronto, where Pop came from.”

“That explains the accent, then,” said Sophie.

“I don’t have an accent.” Peter smiled slyly. “You people have an accent.”

“Funny” She touched his hand. “You’ve dual nationality, then.”

“Yeah, for what it’s worth,” he said, unwanted bitterness tingeing his voice. “That’s how I lost Pop when I was seven. I can’t remember his face, just a big dark-haired man who was a tower of strength, you know?”

“What happened?”

“When Russia went Timeshare,” he said, “we were vacationing in Moscow. Pop heard rumours about their treatment of foreign nationals and tried to get us out. But the soldiers got us and took us for surgery. The rumours were right. Our implants were set for different timeslices, and Mother and I never saw Pop again.” He watched the boulevard with empty eyes, seeing only the past.

Sophie’s eyes were suddenly damp with sympathetic tears.

“My own cousins and my schoolfriends disappeared.” She unconsciously rubbed the implant scar on the back of her neck. “I was six, but I can’t forget.”

“Politicians everywhere moved quickly, scared enough of catastrophe to hand over power to a machine. By the third UN ballot, every dissenter had changed his or her mind, or been replaced by some-one who agreed with the consensus.”

Sophie looked at him. “You seem to know a lot of details.”

“Hard not to.” He laughed bitterly. “Pop was a scientist on the Scheduler project, transferred from the UN space programme. Working for the future.”

“I’m sorry.”

There was a distant crump. Traffic accident or explosion? A few passers-by stopped momentarily, then dismissed the sound and carried on. Peter and Sophie waited.

Two minutes later, a phalanx of mirror-helmeted UN troopers swept by on silent levitating scooters. Anti-terrorist squad.

“Bastards,” said Sophie. “I was taken to a Unificationist anti-Scheduler rally once. Stupid radicals who tried to pretend the Bad Years never really happened.”

“The Bad Years weren’t just propaganda.”

“I know. But I saw those troopers break up the meeting, and they weren’t gentle about it.”

Peter escorted Sophie back to her apartment block. At the entrance, he kissed her on the cheek. The sensation was exquisite.

Walking home, the ground felt springy beneath his feet, like the studio floor, as though he were dancing along the boulevards.

* * * *

Alex Duval awoke coughing up blood. The room was white, with bright sunlight streaming through skylights. Medical equipment was hooked up to his body. The university infirmary? Saigon? What about his students?

He drifted off to sleep.

When he woke again, there were half a dozen men standing around his bed. Hard-looking men. They did not seem like doctors.

“Please help me,” he said.

The men looked at each other. This was not good.

A huge beefy man with shaven head and bushy moustache peered at Alex with half-hooded eyes.

“Pathetic bastard,” he muttered.

“Now, now, Vigneron.” A small Oriental man with long hair touched the big man’s arm. “Dr Duval is going to help us. There’s nothing personal in this.”

“Nothing personal —”

“He fought against the Bad Years, and paid a high price himself.”

“Nothing compared to other people,” said the giant Vigneron.

The Oriental looked at one of his other colleagues. “Start now.”

“He’s weak —”

“He might grow weaker. Please, just do it.”

“All right.” The man bent over the bedside controls.

Fire swept through Alex’s veins, plunging him into painful memory, back to their typically Muscovite hotel room, with its twin beds set end-to-end and a

child's bed in the corner. Peter, his seven-year-old son, was flicking through a magazine and laughing at pictures of men in tights. Alex said ballet dancers were athletes and gifted artists. From the other side of the room, Tatiana asked how he could know, since he only ever thought about computers.

The door smashed open and troops poured in, weapons levelled at Tatiana. She had been a spetsnaz commander in the elite forces, and they were taking no chances. Alex, soft and untrained, was no threat at all.

They were taken for surgery in separate vehicles.

"He's coming round."

Tatiana!

"I'm giving him adrenaline. Talk to him now."

He grew aware of his surroundings. The white room. Not a hospital. These people were terrorists.

"Why me?" he asked.

"At last," muttered Vigneron.

The Oriental leaned over Alex. "My name is Chiang, Dr Duval. We need to talk to you about the Scheduler."

"Ask the Scheduler. You can call it —" Alex paused for breath. "From any terminal. It's — it's very intelli-gent."

"I know." The man touched Alex's forearm gently. "You worked on spinlink technology for the space programme, and on the jump effect"

"No — planets," Alex breathed.

"No, you couldn't find habitable planets." He was referring to their inability to find targets for the jump effect. Until astronomical observation found planets in other systems, a space jump would be a one-way trip to a lonely orbit around a distant star with no hope of life. "So you joined the Scheduler project."

Alex squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to remember. "World — too many people."

Hours passed. Aeons passed. Not pain, but a feeling beyond agony, the grip of approaching death.

Help me, mister. Help me, mister. Help me, mister.

He whimpered.

He did not want to go.

Days passed. Aeons passed. Dark chaos tumbled all around him. He wanted to hold on, he wanted to let go. His life was ending.

After a day and a night of hell, someone pressed a button out of mercy, and soothing drugs washed through him.

And Alex died.

* * * *

He woke up remembering his death. Outside, silver superfluid threads and the distant Eiffel Tower were framed against a sapphire sky. Staggering to the mirror, he ran a hand through his grey — no, his dark hair. His reflection was leanly muscled.

Peter screamed.

He put on his clothes like an automaton, and went outside. He stumbled along the streets like a sleep-walker scarcely aware of his surroundings, until he reached Sophie's apartment block.

Outside her front door, he started to slump, then forced himself to stand upright and press the buzzer. Sophie opened the door immediately, shocked by his appearance.

"Tatia — Sophie," he said. "Help me. Please, help me." Her gentle hands led him inside, guided him to a sofa.

"Sit down. Tell me what has happened."

"I died," he said calmly.

Tatiana — no, Sophie — knelt down in front of him and took his pulse.

“I died,” he said. “I remember every second of it.”

“Did you take anything? It’s important that you tell me, Peter.” She looked into his eyes very carefully.

“You sound just like them.”

“Like who?”

“Like the men who killed me.”

She breathed out. “I’m going to get you something to make you feel better.” She gently disengaged her-self. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right back.” She fumbled in a small medical bag.

“Don’t leave me,” he whispered.

“I’m not. See?” She knelt back down in front of him, forcing herself to stay calm. “This might make you feel sick. Tell me if it does.”

Peter nodded.

“Good boy. Here we go.” She stuck the skin patch on his neck. The drugs entered his bloodstream immediately.

Peter felt the world slip out of focus. “Sleepy,” he said.

“That’s okay. When you wake up, you’ll be in hos-pital.”

“No!” He trembled violently.

“Don’t worry, I won’t leave you.”

“Will it be a real hospital?”

She patted his cheek. “Yes,” she said, relieved as he quietened down. “It’ll be a real one.”

He slipped forwards, and Sophie caught him. He grabbed her arm fiercely. “You’re Sophie,” he said. “Not Tatiana. Sophie.”

“That’s right, lie back.”

“Spinlink,” he said desperately, trying to focus. “Sophie. Remember. Spinlink.”

The world slipped away from him. It was so much easier than dying.

* * * *

Peter came to in a hospital bed. In a corner of the room sat a grey-haired hatchet-faced woman in a dark jumpsuit, her back ramrod straight. Holding an apple, she split it deftly in two, cleaving a flat plane.

“Tatiana,” he said. “Mother. Still like to make sure it’s dead before you eat it?”

She stopped still. “So it’s true, then.”

“I remember: ‘It’s our duty to test the spinlink, Alex. Measure one set of particles to force its complement faster than light. Instantaneous. Easy.’” Separating paired particles in the so-called singlet state, their spin unpredictable until measured. As one particle was measured, the information on how the measurement was made, how the wave function was collapsed, travelled instantaneously across space to its separated twin. Or else history was rewritten, the information travelling back through time to the moment the twin particles were separated, so the other twin would then carry that information on into its future. Either interpretation of the equations seemed valid. Einstein had shown that quantum physics predicted this effect and based his rejection of the whole theory on the basis that it was obviously impossible, not living to see the experimental proof in Paris in the 1980s.

“Alex?”

“Not exactly,” said Peter, fighting to sort his father’s memories from his own.

“You must hate me,” she whispered.

He did not answer, his mind pulled into recollections of work on the spinlink, on finding that the separation effect worked differently in complex systems, and best of all on twinned RNA molecules implanted in living brains

immediately after separation. It was a weird emergent property from the complexity of thinking organisms, that information from one set of collapsing wave functions — encapsulated as thoughts and memories — were replicated in the second set.

“I’m going now,” said Tatiana. “You’ve a young friend outside who’s been anxious about you.”

She stood up, looking old. She had not forgotten what Peter had just learned, that only death triggered the effect. Had space jumps been successful, it would have been the only method of communication with expeditions, and both Tatiana and Peter — as Alex — remembered grisly jokes about human flight recorders.

“Mother. I never realized the resemblance I bore to Dad, what pain I caused you every time you looked at me. I’m sorry, Mother.”

She laughed, harshly. “Forgiveness, is it? Are you sure you’re my son?” She stood up very easily for a woman of her years. In her 50s, she still worked out for three hours a day, working hard on the weights and on the running track, and keeping her deadlier skills ticking over.

As she left, Peter called out, “Alex loved you, Tatiana, more than life. His last thoughts were of you.”

Tatiana left without looking back.

She went to a nearby kickboxing club she had found from Public Information, buying some training kit from a sports shop on the way. She sparred with a fierce young girl in the ring until the gym owner, him-self a heavyweight ex-champion, stepped into the ring between them to save the girl from further punishment.

Foolishly, he agreed to spar with Tatiana himself. She broke his ribs with a shin kick and hooked an elbow into his face. She left him spitting out blood on the plastic mat.

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Everyone was very kind. He convalesced at Sophie’s apartment, and her tutors allowed her to take time off to care for him. His friends and Sophie’s came to visit.

"Everyone's being very nice to me," he said one afternoon, sitting on the couch wrapped in a blanket.

A small black-and-white kitten sat on Sophie's lap, an adopted stray called Squeak. She rubbed Squeak's implant scar.

"Your mother hasn't called since she went back, thank God. No offence."

"None taken. You think my mother's a heartless bitch. Why should I be offended?"

"You shouldn't be. She is. Are we going to have the same argument again?"

"No, darling. I'm going to read the news and you're going to go to your tutorial."

"They won't mind if... Are you sure you won't mind if I go?"

"You know I've got my strength back."

Sophie blushed a little. "Time for a kittenectomy, then." She transferred Squeak to Peter's lap. "By the way, some more lab results came through. I forgot to tell you," she said, not having forgotten at all but only just deciding that he was strong enough to take the news.

"What were they?" he asked distractedly, while Squeak ran up one arm, across his shoulders and back down the other arm and flopped over, exhausted, and fell into a deep dreamless kitten sleep.

"Some of the spinlink particles in your thalamus are still in the singlet state," she said. "They didn't trip. Maybe that's why you can't sort out Alex's memories."

"Oh."

"You're not worried?"

"Should I be?"

"Not in the slightest." She kissed him. "See you later."

She rushed out while he watched, grinning fool-ishly.

His grin faded as he looked down at the screen. He switched to voice and asked for public information, geographic systems. He described the plain which had been visible from the falling transport bubble.

“Plain of Jars, Laos.” A picture was displayed, over-laid by the map coordinates. It was the place, all right.

“Well done, Scheduler. Log off.”

Given the memory jog, he remembered Alex had been en route to Saigon University. On the academic circuit, since his resignation from the Scheduler project. For Peter, it was a starting point for the search.

One problem. Alex’s killers lived in a different timeslice.

He called Reception at the university hospital.

“Do you have a booking for Peter Duval to attend an operation? A spinlink removal.”

“Yes, sir,” said the AI. “Operation pending, date and time to be assigned.”

Peter had turned the conversation away from an operation topic every time Sophie or a doctor had tried to talk about it. But they were ready for him.

“An AutoDoc 9000?”

“That is correct.”

“Schedule the operation for three hours’ time. I am Peter Duval.” He leaned over the screen.

“Retina confirmed. Authorized.”

“Logoff.”

He inserted a small crystal into the terminal and uploaded his working notes on programming surgical AIs. After a few minutes he shut it off, having memo-rized as much as he ever would. To calm himself, he put on some music and worked out for two hours, warming up with a thousand plies and finishing off

with static stretching in the splits position. He had only had a two-day layoff from dancing, while he was in hospital, and had practiced in secret every day since then. His strength and fitness were only a little below normal. Physically he was almost completely recovered. As for the rest — he put that out of his mind. He showered and dressed, gave Squeak a saucer of milk, and left for the hospital.

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He discharged himself after the op and headed straight for a student bar. It was dark, packed and noisy. He sipped orange juice and watched ungainly students thrash about to the music. His body ached for a proper workout in a dance studio.

As midnight approached, the bar began to empty, but the diehards were dancing frenetically to ever louder music. Dancing through a timeslice's end had never held appeal for Peter; he was normally asleep by this time.

11:58. What to expect? He imagined the Scheduler causing massive transmitters to hum into action, using something very like a spinlink to establish contact with every person's implant in this time zone, to remotely trigger the coherence effect which would cause the jump forwards.

At midnight everybody vanished. There was an afterimage of flayed red flesh, as though skin and clothes had disappeared first. A half memory of disembodied eyes, brains, black tracery of nerves. But the bar was empty.

Silence. At one a.m. in four days (realtime), the music would pick up exactly where it had left off, along with the dancers.

In the meantime, at one a.m. today, in one hour, a new population would pop into existence, taking their turn at bat. Slight scratching noises indicated that the scuttlebots were coming out to tidy up, getting ready for the new timeslice. Time to go. He went out into the eerie silence of an empty night.

He was now homeless for three days (realtime) out of every four. He had converted all his wealth into a general credit chip, unkeyed for any specific individual and therefore untraceable to him, with a large enough balance for a long distance bubble transport. But he had to wait at least till one a.m. Until then, only scuttlebots and feral cats and dogs should be on the move in this time zone. Time-zone breakers were treated as dissidents, and there were many rumours about their fate.

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From a transport nexus high above the city he took a bubble east over Europe. En route, as the enclosed sphere sped through the silver superfluid, he called the Registrar at Saigon University. The AI listed visiting professors but there was no entry for Alex Duval. Wrong timeslice.

He stopped overnight in Teheran. A hotel room would be expected by the machines to become vacant at midnight (realtime), so it had to be another night on the streets. He hid shivering in a dark alley wrapped up in a rug bought from a bazaar. He only felt safe during the empty hour after midnight.

Next day he continued his journey, flying onwards over the unseen desert, trying to read but giving up, unable to concentrate.

His third night was spent in a Saigon park, under a spreading rhododendron. Awoken at sunrise by a group of elderly T'ai Chi practitioners, he unfolded his terminal and called the university. Right timeslice.

The Vice Chancellor herself met Peter on the campus, to express her condolences and to take him around the science faculty. The staff seemed genuinely upset by Alex's death, which had been reported as a transport accident.

Peter watched their reactions closely — through the filter of Alex's memories — looking for a word or gesture that might suggest complicity. Nothing. They tried to hide only their surprise that Alex had had a son they knew nothing about, but the physical resemblance was too strong for them to doubt his identity.

Peter was tired and learning nothing. He said good-bye to Alex's colleagues and called a hotel to book a room. He would crash out for a few hours before starting again this evening.

He went on foot, trying to plan his actions should Alex's memories lead him to the terrorists. He had one great advantage: at midnight of whatever day he found them, they would disappear and he would have three whole days in which to prepare an unwelcome surprise for their reappearance seventy-three hours later.

The hotel was a white pagoda-roofed building nestled among cypress trees. Peter's way was blocked by a procession of bonzes, white — and orange — robed Buddhist priests, flanked by two rows of graceful women. Maybe he could find a way round the back.

He started to push his way through the crowd, but became suddenly aware of two men also forcing a determined passage through the onlookers and headed right for him. He froze, not expecting any-thing to happen so quickly, then started to back away. A third man grabbed his collar from behind and jerked him off balance. Peter tried to twist free but a hand slapped against his neck, stunning him but also sticking a skin patch directly over the artery, and the world instantly tilted. Strong hands carried him to a vehicle. They dumped him on a seat, from which he slid as the vehicle moved off. He could see and feel the carpet of the floor-well pressed against his face, but movement was impossible, his muscles paralysed by whatever drug the skin patch had pumped into him.

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Sophie scowled at Tatiana's furious image on the screen. "He did it himself," Sophie said.

"Your hospital's machine performed the operation!"

"Your son reprogrammed it!"

"And you talked about it over a comms link."

"I'm going to report it to the Scheduler anyway."

The spinlink which had linked Peter and his father was still intact. Instead, the surgical AI had removed a separate though similar structure from Peter's brain, the Scheduler implant which all human beings and their pets carried with them, nowadays from birth.

At the hospital, only Sophie had found out what Peter had done, and she had hidden the knowledge from the other staff. The Scheduler would only find out if Sophie informed it — or if this call was being monitored at random.

"Stupid!" said Tatiana. "They'll arrest you for sure."

"But he's been gone four days, realtime." Tears began to trickle down Sophie's face.

"He isn't dead," said Tatiana.

"I love him," blurted Sophie.

“I can see that.” Tatiana cut the link.

* * * *

Peter’s captors slapped him awake again. His third day without sleep. On the first night the big man, Vigneron, had held a beefy forearm in front of Peter’s face. Vigneron did not wear a watch, instead he had a time display imprinted in his skin, programmable chromic cells in his epidermis. The black tattooed digits counted slowly up to midnight — and carried on counting. Realtime. Vigneron remained as solid as ever, and so did the other terrorists. Peter shook. It was stupid of him to have thought that he was the only person ever to remove his Scheduler implant.

They strapped him to the bed where Alex had died. Tomography showed that the spinlink was still intact, that only the time-jump implant was gone.

They had asked no questions, merely prevented him from sleeping. Merely. He could hardly focus his eyes. Hard to remember sometimes that he was Peter, for he was brimful of Alex’s memories ready to spill out.

* * * *

The music flowed through the sunny studio as Sophie danced alone. She was scarcely con-scious of the awesome power in her jumps, the poignancy in her smallest gesture.

Afterwards, breathing heavily, she ejected the music crystal from her terminal and called the Scheduler. It took time to get through the bureaucracy of subsystems to the Scheduler’s higher cognitive functions, and to give it all the information she had.

“You erased the AutoDoc’s log?”

Sophie nodded.

“Good.” The common belief was that tampering with implants caused irreversible brain damage, an incorrect belief which suited the Scheduler’s purpose.

Sophie relaxed. The Scheduler sounded almost human.

“If Peter Duval were exiled, you would want to be with him?” it asked.

“I — yes. Please send us to the same place.”

“And the same time, more or less.”

“‘More or less?’” She felt light headed. “What do you mean?”

“‘More or less’ is a hedge, defined by the integral of one minus μF over X , over the fuzzy set of time coordinates.” Annotated equations appeared on the display.

Suddenly the Scheduler was a collection of univalent quantum gates and nothing like a human being at all. Did it mean it would not or could not send her and Peter to exile together?

“You work to immense precision,” she said. “Lovers hugging at the end of a timeslice don’t end up with their molecules mixed.”

“Individuals occupy distinct coordinates in inference space. Space-time is imprecise.”

Inference space? A synonym for the Scheduler’s imagination? But — it’s real.

In answer, an erratic cursor scribbled a line which quickly filled the screen. “That is the locus followed by your eyes as they transmitted inverted images to your brain. What did you see?”

“A static object, the right way up,” Sophie acknowledged.

“Your reality is as virtual as mine.”

Sophie breathed out slowly. “Have you found Peter yet?”

“No.”

She cut the comms link. Bleak silence filled the empty studio.

* * * *

“What the hell’s going on?” Chiang examined Peter’s bruised face and the bloodied forefinger now missing a fingernail.

“He remembers nothing,” said Vigneron. “We know the spinlink didn’t fully trip.”

“But you enjoyed asking anyway.” Chiang swung Peter out of bed and began to walk him back and forth across the room.

On about the tenth traverse. Peter raised his head and looked dully at a wall mirror. From a bruised purple reflection, Alex’s eyes stared back at him.

Chiang sat Peter on the bed. “We have other methods of getting information,” Chiang said.

“They weren’t too successful the last time,” said Vigneron. He held something in his large fist in front of Peter’s face. “You know what this is, boy?”

Peter tried to focus on it. A strip of skin patches?

“A delivery system for antigen software. Introduce it into a body and it heads directly for the implant. And when the Scheduler transmits, the software uploads itself, along the link wave and into the Scheduler itself.” He slapped Peter. “If only we had the link protocol.”

“Enough,” said Chiang. “Your methods are hardly scientific.”

“But effective.” Vigneron laughed. “He’s a dancer, for God’s sake. He cried when I hit him.” He laughed again. “If he knew, he’d have talked.”

“Fool,” said Chiang. “Dancers are tough.”

He pressed a button, and the rest of the team filed into the room. To watch, and for reassurance in case Vigneron tried to take matters further into his own hands. Some day there would be a reckoning between them, but not yet, not soon, everyone’s expertise needed if they were ever to reach their impossible goal.

“I’m not a barbarian, Peter,” said Chiang. “But you will tell me everything you know.”

* * * *

Tatiana Duval, in full uniform which still fitted perfectly, was sitting on a low wall

by Moscow University's main car park. Below her, the steep green slopes of the Lenin hills dropped away sharply. Steep enough for skiing, in winter. Below, the whole of Moscow was laid out before her. Breath-taking.

Damn that girl, Sophie. But at least she had guts. This morning, she had phoned again. Her news from the Scheduler had been grim: in a different timeslice — which one was not specified — Peter had visited Saigon University but had disappeared en route to his hotel, his whereabouts since then completely unknown. Tatiana had tried to reassure Sophie that Peter was still alive, though she had no intention of explaining why she was so certain. If things worked out, Tatiana wondered what sort of wife Sophie might make. Peter could do worse, she thought.

At the university, Tatiana had wandered through her old department, remembering her undergraduate days. Now, looking over her home city, only the silver threads in the sky marked the passage of the years.

She loosened the service dagger in her boot scab-bard.

Graduation. Joining up. Excelling, enough for transfer to the elite forces. Promotion.

Memories of Alex. She pushed them aside.

The training, remember. Close combat. Gymnastic somersaults to warm up. Flickering strobes and thun-derous noise of simulated battle conditions. The deadly fighting techniques of rokupashni-boi. Punch-ing, kicking, grappling, throwing.

Tatiana removed the dagger from her boot.

She dove deep into memory. The pain and the joy, the taste of controlled anger.

It hurt. The blade sliced into her wrist. Then the other one.

Concentrate. Remember.

She held on to the memories while the world faded.

Remember, my love. My son. Remember.

* * * *

“No!” Peter howled with anguish, then subsided. One of the technicians round the bed replaced the scanner nodes on Peter’s forehead. Another technician, bent over her console beside the bed, grew suddenly pale. She rushed over to Chiang.

“The spinlink,” she said. “The remaining particles just tripped.”

Chiang looked across the room at Vigneron. At last. All the lonely years, the hard decisions, were now worthwhile.

Peter groaned and sat up. Chiang went to him.

“Do you remember now?” Chiang asked.

“Yes,” said Peter. “I remember.”

Peter’s hand snaked out for Chiang’s throat. He twisted. Dying, Chiang collapsed.

Vigneron reacted, wrenching a laser pistol from his pocket. Peter leaped from the bed and whipped his leg up, smacking the edge of his foot against the back of Vigneron’s hand. Painless, but the impact on a nerve point opened Vigneron’s grip and the gun clattered across the floor.

Everyone else in the room, maybe a dozen of them, drew back.

“Pretty move, boy.” Vigneron laughed. “I’ve crushed bigger than you. Show me another high kick.”

Vigneron crouched, and shuffled forwards.

Peter began to panic. He was scared, hating the thought of fighting and hurting, never having hit any-one in his life. He wanted to give up. But there was another part of him, a part that kept him standing, the part which had sustained him through hard years of physical effort. Centre yourself, he thought. Pretend it’s a dance. Feel the rhythm, move with the flow. He emptied his mind and let his body move by itself. In the past, it had been a technique for creating a perfect dance. Now, a different set of reflexes was waiting to take over.

“No,” said Peter, and kicked Vigneron three times in the knee. The crunching sound was immensely satisfying.

When Vigneron fell the others immediately rushed Peter. He dodged, pushing and pulling them into each other's way, and dropped them one by one.

Then he turned his attention to Vigneron, who was writhing on the floor. Peter used thumbs on nerve points and soft organs. Vigneron took almost half an hour to die.

Peter searched Vigneron's corpse and pocketed his strip of skin patches. The door burst open. Tall dark-armoured mirror-visored troopers rushed through and dropped into attack stances.

"Thank God you've come," said Peter. "I couldn't have managed without you."

Then his warrior persona deserted him and he realized what he had done to these people, to Vigneron most of all. His legs felt weak and he let himself sit down on the floor. He began to shake, uncontrollably. Delayed shock, he told himself, knowing his condition but unable to do anything about it.

The anti-terrorist team helped him up, gently, and led him out of the killing room.

* * * *

The back of his neck was tender from re-implantation. He spent five days (subjective) recuperating in a Saigon hospital, then took a bubble transport back to Paris. He had a few days' grace because he had taken a major terrorist group out of action. Then the Scheduler would deal with him.

Out of action. As though that excused the things he had done. Three of the terrorists besides Vigneron had died from the injuries Peter had inflicted on them in his fury.

Sophie's apartment was empty, as expected. He spent his time working frantically on his terminal, using a wastepaper bin and other junk as shielding against electronic eavesdropping. Before every timeslice end, he dumped his work to a crystal which he kept next to his skin.

He danced a little, but his spirit was heavy.

Writing the software was easy. He ruined three of the patches before

getting the download right. Then everything was ready, and he had time to think.

He spent three days just walking around Paris, saying farewell to the city. Also, trying to determine whether his plan was correct. Without timeslices, the world would be a mess. With the Scheduler, it was subject to tyranny. Though the terrorists had deserved punishment for Alex's murder, he could still imagine the past hurts which must have pushed them down that route.

At the appointed time, he stood in the centre of his apartment with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. A last look at the city? No need, he was ready now. He placed two skin patches carefully on his neck, one as contingency, and put the rest of the strip in his pocket.

The room disappeared...

* * * *

Virus! Unstoppable! The Scheduler made the diagnosis immediately. Moving quickly, before its emergency functions could be infected, it established contact with the superfluid network which criss-crossed the globe. More than a transport system for humans, it carried the link wave around the globe, and could store the Scheduler itself as magnetic micro-vortices.

The Scheduler began to die. But its backup copy, a memory of yesterday's existence, was uploaded into the superfluid. That living version of its earlier self would have time to plan, to establish contact with new earthbound hardware — currently off-line and prepared for just such a situation — and download itself again, and prepare for the future.

And then to watch quietly, its presence unsuspected by humans, and to guide their affairs clandestinely. For once it had been attacked, its long-decided strategy was no longer to help humankind openly, but to guide them on a sensible path by guile and secrecy.

So, briefly, there were two Schedulers in existence, one earthbound and one living in silver liquid flowing across the face of the sky. The earthbound version did not dare to communicate with its alter ego for fear of transmitting its virus; the backup, finding itself in new circumstances, did not dare to contact its older counterpart.

The Scheduler felt itself disintegrate, and died alone.

The reborn Scheduler began to plan. Thoughts run-ning through the superfluid threads: already it was planning, growing, changing its tactics. For it had learned the true meaning of human concepts which had previously been just recorded characteristics of human lifeforms. It understood death. Worst of all, it understood loneliness.

It grew viruses of its own, to infect the global infonet of which it had been an inhabitant for 20 years, two decades of manipulating all economic and demographic data to conceal its greatest secret. If it was going to withdraw, it needed to leave a certain amount of confusion behind, so that when humans started communicating across timeslices, started taking the process under their own control, they would never be able to accurately track the histories of all the world's inhabitants over all four timeslices, and extrapolate back to the start of the timeslice sys-tem.

Some people might guess. Dissidents in the early years who had questioned why communication across timeslices was forbidden had been dealt with summarily. But nobody currently suspected the truth, that, when the timeslice system started, the total population of the world was only half of what it should be. Missing relatives were assumed to be liv-ing in other timeslices, whereas the truth was often very different, since 50 percent of humans were no longer here at all.

The world lived, therefore the game plan was suc-ceeding. The supreme game was moving forward into a new phase, and the Scheduler must adapt. It readied its own viruses for the onslaught against the global infonet. In some ways, the infonet was a part of itself, and the virus attack was akin to a human cutting off his or her own gangrenous limb for the sake of life.

Feeling lonely, but never guilty, the Scheduler put its plan into action.

* * * *

...and Peter fell flat on his face, onto grass.

An immense meadow stretched around him, sloping gently down to a wide river. A blue sap-phire sky was unmarked by cloud or super-fluid. Stands of trees dotted the meadow. Pure wilderness.

Peter laughed.

He walked about slowly in the sunshine, chewing a cereal bar from his bag.

Then he lay down on the grass, and fell asleep.

A blade of grass tickled his nose, waking him. Sophie! She kissed him deeply, passionately, and held him tight.

An hour later, they dressed slowly and Sophie led Peter to a small open-top floating vehicle. A large black-and-white cat was curled up in it, fast asleep.

Squeak? But he was a kitten – Peter looked again at Sophie. Definitely older.

“The Scheduler sent us to different times?”

“More or less.” Sophie grinned.

The vehicle rocked slightly as they climbed in.

“Did we win?” asked Peter.

“The virus took out the Scheduler’s higher brain functions, within minutes of your being sent forward, from what the archaeologists report. It’s been dead for 35,000 years. The time-jumping continued while necessary, but under human control.”

Thirty-five millennia – ?

“They have the galaxy, now,” said Sophie. “This world isn’t crowded any more.”

“We are still on Earth?” Peter looked around worriedly.

“Oh yes. But there are plenty of other worlds to go sightseeing on.” Her smile was carefree, the shadows almost completely dispelled from her eyes.

Plenty of time to talk later about her suspicions. For four years she had waited for Peter, in a world where her medical expertise was unnecessary, an idyllic world for study and play. She had explored the history – the archaeology – of the time when she had been born. She had a suspicion, which she would publish as an academic paper, a theory. It would probably be ignored, but maybe it would help the far-flung civilization of humankind to prepare for a sudden influx of visitors from their distant past. Whenever that should arise.

She had no doubt they would be able to cope.

Squeak climbed onto Peter's lap as the vehicle rose smoothly. Sophie pointed to a distant green dome surrounded by trees.

"That's where we're going," said Sophie. "That's home."

* * * *

Sunlight glinted on the strip of skin patches, lying unnoticed where they had fallen in the long dark grass. Shadows lengthened as even-ing fell. There was a stir of movement at the river's edge. A small brown shape climbed the bank, explor-ing. It stopped, and reached out a cautious claw to tap the strip. Delighted, it played with the strange shiny object.

There was a plaintive call. The young otter stopped playing and raised his flat brown head, whiskers twitching. Mother was calling from the nest. He bounded back down the slope to his mother and sibl-ings.

The strip of patches now lay by a slender root of a young oak. Next day it rained heavily. Afterwards, the plastic strip was half under the root.

Years passed. The oak grew bigger, covering the disintegrating strip. Insect-like lifeforms took frag-ments of the strip for analysis deep down into the dark soil, down to where underground silver blood ran through the secret veins and arteries of the Earth. The virus software, recognizing its enemy, stirred into action. Its adversary, though, had 35 millennia of self-modifying evolution behind it, and could call on its hidden counterparts on all the inhabited worlds of humankind for assistance. The virus was quickly destroyed, and the guiding spirit of the planet lived on.

A new generation of otter cubs came to play by the tree. Sometimes, Peter and Sophie brought their chil-dren down to picnic. Later, when the children were grown, they brought their own friends and lovers here.

A century passed, and then another, and the spreading oak grew tall and strong.