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Ten, nine, eight: my classroom timer blinking away the final seconds. How I loathe what comes next! At this point I always wish I could take Pink Floyd's old advice to leave kids alone. If those are butterflies in my stomach, the bastards have claws. Three, two, one...

My scalp tingles in what the ViewNet bible refers to so casually as “prelude to visual simulation through direct cortical stimulation.” Prelude to nausea would be more honest. Suddenly the rear half of my skull lights up internally as some electronic demon shoves the equivalent of two lidless eyes into the back of my brain, forcing me to stare into blank brightness where no brightness belongs.

Of course my real eyes take to shrieking that they're still straddling my nose, still the boss of all things optical, instigating a tug-of-war with the new bass-ackwards viewpoint. The room, as usual, starts twirling despite its drawn shades and dimmed bulb. The trick now is keeping both my balance and my breakfast. Not by accident, I'm sitting down.

Far too gradually, the carousel brakes and finally stops. I rub my jaw, which aches from clenching.

I hear that some people who've had no more training than me can see in two directions simultaneously about now. But why risk a brain-hernia? It's easier to simply switch attention to and fro, from the scene in front to the simulated posterior display: the “occipital subjective presentation.”

If we're talking theory, an OSP is a fantastic idea, making use of the emptiness beyond the normal visual field and placed so that you're not tempted to keep turning your head. The practice is something else. I keep hoping that some saint of a technician will invent a way to put all needed information into a standard “heads-up” subjective display without essentially blinding the user. I also keep hoping the White Sox will take the pennant again and the Bulls will find another Michael Jordan....

My stomach finally settles. Normally, the worst is over.

* * * *

Monday morning of September 4th, 2034, the worst hadn't even begun. As the dizziness eased, I inhaled a barrelful of air and pressed a blue-glowing button on the controller. My OSP split into six separate rectangles, two rows of three. A 3D image of each of my new students—matching their real faces and bodies, not their proxies—appeared above each section. Beneath these rotating forms were names, tags, locations, proxy thumbnails, evaluation scores, and the first few lines of detailed, varied, but universally rancid personal histories. I didn't need to scroll down and read on; I'd already done my homework. Truly, I could've made do with nothing but the real-time images although names and Internet handles are handy because bumping into my mid-forties seems to have dulled my memory.

Dr. Martin Robley, my supervisor, had suggested that I use Internet protocol and refer to these students by tag rather than name. “That'll show them that you respect their choices, Bill,” he'd said, which convinced me he hadn't bothered reading their files.

Last year, I'd taught youngsters who were allergic to the universe, or had fiercely communicable diseases, or who were too disabled to be moved. Piece of cake. This year I'd drawn the dregs of the lost souls. Two of these adolescents were hair-trigger violent, one was semi-catatonic, one was brilliantly malicious, one wouldn't or couldn't stop grinning, and one shivered in perpetual terror. All were supposedly well above average intelligence, although the IQ tests must've been run before they'd rotted on the vine. All had been declared unsuitable for even the most “special” physical classroom. A word any self-respecting dictionary would spit out: “unteachable,” appeared in every report.

Such rejects would never be mainstreamed but the law demanded an effort, so they'd been

“side-streamed,” a term with deliberate Internet connotations. It boiled down to one grotesque fact: I was stuck with thoroughbred losers. I'd done my best, spent months preparing some unique educational materials, but I was sure I'd wasted my time and the time of a lot of good folks at my ViewNet provider.

Releasing the grandmother of all sighs, I focused my fake eyes on the left upper rectangle. His name was Curtis Bouden and his tag was Q-Ball: a skinny black sixteen-year-old with an upsetting resemblance to my older son, Tai. But my son had never glared at anyone or anything that way in his life. I'm sure of it. And Tai lacked a constellation of cigarette-burn scars across his forehead. Q-Ball's proxy—or “envoy,” “onview,” or “e-con,” if you prefer—was a huge black bouncer-type with a scarred nose and shaved head, vaguely familiar. Maybe a pro football player. I love basketball and baseball but can't bear football or hockey because they've become such a celebration of brutality. Besides, who can stand football commentators?

Below Q-Ball, Madeline Broms gazed at nothing with empty eyes. She'd selected no tag and since she'd requested no proxy, ViewNet had defaulted to one with her own bland features. Broms was responsive enough to make her part of this class, but just barely, as if she'd gauged her evaluation team precisely. She was blond, tall, solidly built, and might've seemed like a young Valkyrie if her face had even a trace of animation. She'd been a very smart, normal girl until eighth grade and then something had happened to her—perhaps only she knew what; her records were incomplete.

The upper middle square contained the other ragemeister, Anthony P. Nakanelua of Honolulu, tagged Kekipi. This one was big, appeared more Samoan than Hawaiian, and in real life his fury was concealed behind a fat and dull facade. He probably wasn't at his best because it was only 3:30 *am* in Honolulu. His proxy wasn't human. On ViewNet, he was a four-armed man-sized cobra with a foot-long tongue, constantly tasting the air.

The pathetic boy in the lower middle, Daniel Greenburg, had skipped two grades before he'd been crippled by some experience so hideous, he'd wound up in a nearly constant panic. He was only fourteen and had the full-body cramp of a mouse blinded by headlights—no deer could've looked so scared. On ViewNet, he was buried in silver armor and his handle was White Night. Along with Madeline, he was a mystery victim. He wouldn't tell a soul what had terrified him so much.

Upper right, Chris Lowry's permanent grin was a rictus of hysteria, sickening to look at. His proxy wore a far more pleasant expression: Jack Nickolson as The Joker. Lowry's tag was, get this, Buddha.

I'd saved the worst for last. Elaine Carpenter's green eyes gave nothing away. She was a thin pale girl with a short nose and wide lips twisted into a subtle sneer. Her proxy was male: Sherlock Holmes with deerstalker hat, pipe, and a sneer that matched her own. Strangely, her tag was Cher.

Q-Ball, Madeline, Kekipi, White Night, Buddha, and Cher. To break up routine, every session they'd be seated in a random order, but the same crew would return day after day. I shook my head. The money that taxpayers were wasting on these sunken wrecks! Hell with it, time to stop procrastinating....

I pressed the controller's green button and ViewNet obliged by streaming an elaborate image into my optic nerves: a small classroom complete with a wall-clock, a chalkboard, windows revealing someone's conception of a typical schoolyard, and a row of bizarre students seated at old-fashioned desks. At home or wherever they were incarcerated, my flock was actually seated; I could tell from the postures. I hoped they'd obeyed instructions to be in a darkened room. Kekipi was fidgeting.

Delighted with the image quality, I double-clicked the green button to let ViewNet do its thing for the students and watched their real faces. The Broms girl and Cher showed no reaction. The other kids stared at each other with a mixture of surprise plus individual quirks such as hostility, terror, or contempt.

Buddha was the only one smiling.

"Good morning," I announced with a bucket of fake cheer. "I'm Mr. Phillips. Welcome to Last Chance Senior High School." Fat Chance Senior High....

"I hear you, but where the fuck *are* you?" Q-Ball demanded. "And what—"

"He's in Chicago," Cher interrupted, exhaling a blue cloud of ViewNet smoke.

How the hell had she figured that out? Being from Shreveport, I don't exactly have a Windy City accent. "Q-Ball," I said mildly, "keep it clean. I'll make myself visible soon."

I wanted the students to react to each other's proxies before they got a look at mine. That way I might pick up cues to help me best tailor my appearance for each student.

"Ho, Phillips," Q-Ball continued, cranking up the decibels and ignoring Cher. "Suppose you say what's the fuck's goin' on. I got no bug hat, so how come assholes like the snake and Sir Lose-a-lot be poppin' in my hang?"

I frowned. "Someone must've explained this setup to you already. Perhaps you don't know how to listen. Did you hear me telling you to keep it clean?"

"Yeah, I heard. Suppose you come over to my hang right now and say again."

His proxy appeared calm, but in real life the boy was raging, pacing in circles, punching the air. I kept quiet and waited for his curiosity to build.

"Nobody told nothin' to me," he finally muttered.

"Show of hands, everyone," I announced. "Anyone besides Q-Ball confused?" To my surprise, Buddha and White Night raised their arms. Possibly, Madeline's hand twitched. An uncomfortable thought lumbered my way: I was just the most recent link in a chain of people who'd written these kids off.

"This isn't virtual-reality in the usual sense, class. A few weeks ago, some doctor examined each of you then gave you an injection or maybe something to drink. Right?"

Q-Ball rolled his eyes. "She use a needle long as my dick. I asked what fo' and the bitch mouth off, said it would 'improve my attitude.'"

I nodded although he couldn't see it. "When you alienate people, guess who loses out? She was supposed to explain that you were getting tailored bacteria designed to carry microscopic transceivers specifically to your optic nerves and slightly larger transceivers to wind up under your skin all over your body."

"We're all on *ViewNet*?" White Night broke in nervously, but less so than his previous evaluators would've predicted. That armor seemed to be helping him.

"ViewNet, exactly. VR isn't good enough for this classroom." I didn't explain. To do my job properly, I needed access to the real facial expressions, voices, and body language of my students. The subcutaneous implants had multiple functions.

White Night's armored head swiveled around. "I can't believe this! I can see everyone except you so *clearly*. I thought that companies like Larger Than Life charge a fortune for this kind of—"

"It's not free, that's a fact. And I don't think Larger than Life or Imagine Yourself offers proxies this good."

Every one of you has a high-level e-con designed by the top banana: Enhancement Incorporated.” White Night and Buddha glanced around with renewed interest. “And because we need to hear each other, we've all been given the *gold* package...” at 213,000 bucks a pop! “...which includes transceivers for our hearing nerves and custom-designed e-cons. If you want, you can make the illusion even more convincing by closing your eyes, or just try to disregard your actual surroundings.

"Of course, we don't have any kind of 'feelie' set-up. But VR touch-back is limited anyway unless you've got the bucks for a full harness." Enhancement's gold package was cheap compared to the price of a full harness.

To my surprise, Madeline had frowned when I used the word “feelie.” Coincidence?

"Any questions? No? Then let's handle the formalities."

I did an old-fashioned roll call, which seemed silly with only six students, but it introduced the kids to each other without risking potentially ugly interactions. Q-Ball refused to respond when I called his tag, but I was pleased when Madeline managed a faint nod at her name.

Class, I decided, was going remarkably well so far. No one was freaking and I'd only been threatened once, and only by implication.

Pressing the tab key on my console, the OSP shifted to display a submenu of twenty possible e-cons I could use for myself. For Q-Ball, I went with one of my favorites: Joe Louis, the legendary boxer who looked tough as hell, but at the same time, had a rather sweet face. For Madeline and White Night, I choose the meekest-looking actor who'd ever lived: Wally Cox. Kekipi would see Bruce Lee; Buddha would be dealing with the sad-faced clown, Emmett Kelly, who'd act as a kind of visual antidote—I hoped.

I had a hard time settling on a proxy for Cher. One idea was calling up a new image: Watson to Cher's Holmes; I was sure Enhancement had variants of Watson available. But I didn't wish to appear in any way subservient. Finally, I chose a rather spooky image, a genderless humanoid whose face was gray and smooth with mirrors for eyes and no mouth. I used the keypad to enter my selections and pressed the tab key again to restore the student images.

"Can everyone see me now?" I asked, observing the real faces closely.

Q-Ball grunted, Madeline blinked, Buddha giggled hyena-style, Cher rolled her eyes, Kekipi waved a forked tongue at me, and White Night said “sure,” accepting the Wally Cox proxy with only a few tremors, low on the Richter scale.

"Most of you," I said, “ah, bypassed Junior High so we've miles of ground to cover this semester. Our subjects are science, math, history, English literature, and we're going to pick out a foreign language to work on. Several of you already know much of the material, but I don't think you'll get bored. Turns out that ViewNet has advantages that no normal school can match."

"Such as?" Cher broke in, squeezing two tons of doubt into two words.

I smiled before remembering that the expression would only come across as a bizarre distortion in the proxy she was seeing. “Patience. Here's how class is going to work. Every school day, we'll work on three of our five subjects, dropping one the next day and adding a new one. That way, we'll keep our topics in constant rotation, but cover each subject three times a week."

White Night raised a hand and I pointed to him and said, “Go."

"I want to know about those advantages, too."

"I'm planning on showing you. For science, we'll be studying basic physics, paleontology, astronomy, and if we cover enough material, some marine biology." I glanced at my OSP. If anyone felt the least interest in the fields I'd mentioned, they were hiding it. I chuckled to myself. "All right. Let's see what ViewNet offers us in paleontology, for example. I wouldn't lean too far back in your chairs right about now."

I pressed function "one" on my pad, then confirmed with "enter." The classroom faded out, leaving us in the midst of a foggy swamp, the chairs and desks resting impossibly on the wet surface.

Kekipi half stood then slowly eased into his seat as if trying to cover for losing his cool. White Night's helmet was whipping around as if something might be about to pounce on him. Here, his behavior seemed sensible.

"Welcome to the Cretaceous," I announced. "Anyone care to see some dinosaurs up close and personal?"

"No!" White Night blurted.

"Well, you're in luck. That thing coming up from behind you is no dinosaur." I opened White Night's private channel. "Don't worry, Daniel. Remember that this is just an illusion. If it gets too intense, give me a wink and I'll reduce the image-strength for you."

"You can see my real face?"

Bright boy. "More or less. We don't have a camera spying on you, but Enhancement has a recent model of your face and several thousands of the implants you took in with your milkshake allow ViewNet to constantly update your expression in a special display I can watch."

"Wow. Guess I shouldn't go picking my nose."

I laughed. "Good plan. Tell you what: let's give everybody else a real scare, okay? Just wink if you want out."

"Okay."

I reestablished the general link just as a long ripple caused by something large approaching from beneath the surface washed past the desks and under my feet. For a moment, nothing happened. Then a head longer than my body thrust its way into the air, swamp-water and muck pouring from its vast open jaws.

Everyone, including White Night and Madeline, jumped up and turned to face the incredible animal. Kekipi tried to pick up his chair, doubtless for use as a weapon, but that wasn't part of ViewNet programming and none of his four hands could get a grip.

"You lied, Philips," Q-Ball shouted, his voice fear-transposed up a fifth. "Sure as shit, *that's* a fucking dinosaur!"

"Not at all. Keep watching."

One big green eye gave Q-Ball a hungry glare. The head tilted level and vanished beneath the surface. A moment later, the mottled back of a scaly body emerged briefly, then the muscular tail. A huge air-bubble popped from the slime and the monster was gone.

Buddha stared at the widening ripples. "Christ! What was—was that some kind of giant *alligator*?" For

the first time since I'd seen him, his smile had shrunk to a smirk.

I applauded. "You just met Phobosucus, Buddha, the 'terrible crocodile' of about 70 million years ago. Fifty feet long! Probably a sea animal, so Enhancement might've taken artistic liberties by putting one in a swamp. Kekipi, were you actually thinking about clobbering something like that with a *chair*?"

The snake body twitched weirdly and all four arms lifted and fell. It took me a moment to realize that Kekipi had shrugged. No shoulders. I was pleased he didn't blow up at me.

"Where'd you get the graphics?" Cher asked. On her real face, the glaze of superiority had been cracked by interest.

"The Discovery Channel made the original animation and Enhancement converted it to ViewNet 3D."

"Are we going to be working with projections that good in all our subjects?"

"That's the plan." Took an entire summer and several dozen people to get these things set up. Maybe I *hadn't* wasted anyone's time.

Cher's proxy blew out a perfect sphere of smoke. "What do you have in mind for—" a smoke ring caught up with the sphere and embraced it "—astronomy?"

I smiled. "Tell you what: if we can get through today's lesson plan today, or even come close, I'll give everyone a sneak preview. It'll be worth it. You should all have a pile of books nearby. Grab the one with the exciting title *Basic Algebra* and let's get started."

By two o'clock we hadn't gotten halfway through the lesson plan despite the mere half-hour lunch break, but I was getting far better cooperation than I'd expected from everyone but Madeline, who remained a lump. I decided a reward was in order.

"The bell's going to ring in another twenty minutes," I announced, "and we're already working like a team. So I'll show you another trick I've got up my sleeve—part of it, anyway. Sit tight and be ready for anything."

I triggered the first astronomy sequence. With no transition, we were seated outdoors at night under a full moon that somehow failed to bleach the stars in the slightest. I smiled at the gasp chorus. These kids, as the cliché goes, hadn't seen nuthin' yet.

Then the ground fell away as if our chairs were snubbing gravity. Oohs and Ahs. We sailed up beyond the few scattered cumulous clouds then past some much higher cirrus jobs. Finally we slowed to a stop, resting on nothing at the fringes of Earth's atmosphere. We could see from Ecuador to Alaska. Here, during our educational trip to the moon, I'd pause to lecture about atmospheric layers and composition and even I wasn't sure what else. Right now, I wanted to show the kids what ViewNet could do....

I waited a moment before speaking. "Pretty as a picture?"

We descended rapidly and I knew the kids were assuming the ride was over. But I stopped us within a few hundred feet of ground level.

In the present mode, my function buttons controlled various plug-ins. I pressed F5, a plug-in developed for Enhancement by the people at Adobe, and the scene transformed into a vast somewhat cartoon-like painting. The moon still silvered the trees below, but it had become a crude ball, roughly cratered, impressionistic, surrounded by a swirling aura of indeterminate colors. The stars had grown their own auras, pastel twists suggesting Van Gogh's *Starry Night* but smoother and in a thousand tints. The effect

was peaceful and beautiful.

We sat in midair and gazed on a world turned to art and no one spoke until the bell sounded.

* * * *

When the student images faded away and my OSP shut down, I stood up and opened the shades. The afternoon sunlight poured into my studio like hot tea and my eyes watered. Without the OSP, I felt half-blind but I also felt damn good.

My ViewNet link was scheduled to last another hour yet, but without any special feed, the world seemed pleasantly normal. Until I turned around. My supervisor, Marty Robley, was standing there, apparently haunting me.

As used by Enhancement and similar companies, a ViewNet proxy is intended to act as an optical shell around a person's body, modifying their appearance as they wish for all nearby Viewnet clients. In bright light, a proxy without a body underneath appears vaporous.

"This is a visitation, I presume?" I said, quoting from my daughter's favorite book: Edward Eager's *Half Magic*.

"Bill, I'm just blown away. How the hell did you come up with those great animation sequences?"

"Thanks, Marty. Stroke of luck, really. Last spring, I met with Teresa Laudy of Enhancement Incorporated to discuss putting more zip into our ViewNet classrooms. I said it was a shame that we couldn't use some of the audio-video tricks they use on the VR channels."

"And?"

"Teresa said that Enhancement was working on a big project to compete with VR. Millions of people are on ViewNet these days and they wouldn't need much extra equipment to play virtual-type games or experience something equivalent to the 'realies.' And ViewNet has some plusses. The resolution is finer than human vision and there's a psychological component: when you're not wearing VR goggles, everything you see seems more ... authentic."

"I noticed. That monster of yours.... So Enhancement just let you borrow some of their new programs?"

"Not exactly. I told Teresa what I wanted to do. She loved the idea and asked for a list of possible 'illustrations' for the subjects I had to cover. Over the summer, she and I chose animations from Disney and the Discovery Channel, got permission to use them, and Enhancement converted them over to ViewNet simulations. This was done just for us. For free. Can you believe the job they did?"

He shook his head. "Incredible! But you know, you've got a tiger by the balls."

A colorful way to put it, but ... "Are you suggesting there's some danger in—"

"Don't get yourself worked up, Bill. Your idea looks to be pure gold, but you're a pioneer in this. Pioneers better damn well step carefully."

"How much of this session did you catch?"

He grimaced apologetically. "I've been watching since the beginning. So far, you're batting a thousand."

"Not the way I keep score. I didn't dent the Broms girl. Which reminds me: why is her file so skimpy? She was always a loner, but her schoolwork was top notch until she turned fourteen. I've got almost

nothing about how she did that year, and bubkis about what happened to make her change so much. Marty, how can I have a decent chance with her unless I understand her?"

He stopped meeting my eyes. "Sure. I'll see what I can do, but I've been told that some of her records are sealed. Meanwhile, keep up the great work." He vanished before I could respond. Evasiveness wasn't like him, not at all.

Heavy rumbling and brake-squealing from the street warned me that the school bus had stopped outside my house. I counted to myself and as I hit six, a small tornado hit the front door, hurled it open, and slammed it shut.

"Hey, dad!" the expected voice shouted. "You home? I'm starving! What's to eat?"

I hurried out of the room and ran toward the refrigerator, but as usual my younger son, Taff, was there first. I still felt good, but some kind of natural OSP warned me to savor the feeling while it lasted.

* * * *

I had trouble sleeping that night. The air refused to cool off and I was sticking to the sheets. I knew my wife, Dori, was fighting a cold because she kept snoring gently in her whistling way, but the real caffeine was Madeline Broms. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw hers. What had happened to her? I also worried over how the Greenburg boy had wound up so wound up, but at least his file was relatively complete. My clock was saying nasty things about how much sleep I wasn't going to get, but I lay awake anyway, thinking.

As I get older, I keep getting worse at handling a sleep shortage. The morning alarm was pure bad news and my coffee barely gave me enough energy to finish the cup. By the time Dori and I got our kids ready for school and out the door, I was ready for a real night's sleep. Dori downed her appalling diet-breakfast drink, kissed me, and scooted off to work. I brewed more coffee and yawned over the day's lesson plan.

I had an hour to kill and debated taking a nap. Trouble is, naps always leave me groggy to the point of stupidity. Besides, a bee was touring my bonnet.

I pulled out the Broms folder, which had been assembled at Enhancement while they were programming my OSP. Madeline had been born in Santa Rosa, California, where Luther Burbank had tweaked plants for so long. When she was ten, her parents separated and her mother took her to a ranch owned by the grandparents near Westlake Hills outside Austin, Texas. She remained at the Bar Celona Ranch until the age of thirteen, when whatever happened to her happened. Her present residence was a private assisted-living institution in New Hampshire. I went online and Googled the institution. Expensive.

I glanced at my watch. Austin and Chicago share a time zone. I looked up the number for the Westlake Hills Police Department.

Sergeant Lopez was courteous, affable, and unhurried. I volunteered my name, address, telephone number, occupation, credentials and ways to check them. I talked fast but he didn't ask me to repeat a thing.

"How can I help you, Dr. Phillips?"

I don't usually wield my doctorate, but thought it might give my request more weight. "I'm trying to get some information about one of my students, Madeline Broms. Two years ago, I believe she lived in your district."

I could practically hear the click as his attitude shifted. "Tell you what, Doctor. Can you wait by the phone and I'll call you right back?" His voice was a bit too casual.

"Put me on hold if you like, Sergeant."

"Let's do it my way."

"Okay. I'll be here." I hung up. He wanted to check me out and then, after confirming that the telephone number I'd given him was in my name, make sure I was actually at that phone. What the *hell* had happened to Madeline?

Ten minutes passed before the ring....

"Sorry to make you wait so long, Doctor."

"No problem."

"I'd like to help Maddie, I surely would. And I'd like to help you help her. My wife's a teacher." Long pause.

Maybe a touch of the personal would encourage the man to open up. "Mine's a management consultant. I've never been able to figure out what she actually does."

He chuckled politely. "All I can say about Maddie is that I can't say anything."

Sigh. "I didn't want to trouble her parents or grandparents, but if I got their permission—"

"Doctor, the case is out of our hands here. And I shouldn't tell you this, but don't you go poking the folks in Austin; that won't buy you squat."

Well, at least I'd established the existence of a "case," which had obviously left a big impression on Lopez since it was two years old. But if Austin was a dead-end.... "Sergeant, are you hinting that the FBI has—"

"I can't talk 'bout that neither. But don't you worry 'bout the mule, doc, just load up the wagon. I mean you do your part and others will do theirs. Find a way to do something good for that girl."

I had to force myself to be civil. "I'll do my best, but I'm working in the dark."

"Then you'd best grow a big ol' sense of touch. Bye now."

Class went well that day considering that my personal oil wouldn't have showed up on the dipstick. Q-Ball only blew up twice, Kekipi was a thin skin over magma, White Night had the shakes, and Madeline was a lump. Cher asked if people hooked up to ViewNet audio ever received misdirected signals and heard strange things. I admitted that I didn't know, but this innocuous question tightened Buddha's grin into a Charlie horse of the lips.

For years, I'd felt that math and physics would make more sense to students if they were taught as an integrated whole. For this class, the Board of Education had given me carte blanche, so following my "tie it together" plan I used an animation of a red-haired lady on a vine-covered swing to demonstrate the properties of pendulums and the mathematical definitions of "arc" and "period." I wasn't sure how well my students absorbed the lesson, but they were entranced. The lady swung with a dreamlike grace and the distant mountains were as pure as rainbows.

After class, Marty Robley showed up again for what I was beginning to think of as a debriefing.

"Were you here from the beginning again?" I asked.

"Not this round, Bill. Arrived in the middle of that Maxfield Parrish scene—kind of disorienting when you're not expecting something like that."

"I'm sure."

"Did I miss anything important?"

"Maybe. Cher—that's the Carpenter girl—asked if ViewNet ever gets its audio signals mixed up so that their clients wind up ... hearing things."

"Interesting question, but so what?"

"You should've seen Buddha's reaction."

"The kid with the grin?"

"Right. Chris Lowry. You know, his previous teachers have described that grin as anything from a hostile act to a bad habit but the way his face froze up even tighter ... I'm just thinking out loud. We've got three mysteries here, Marty, not two. Speaking of which, did you come up with anything more on Madeline Broms?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Not really. Well, I'll be visiting you less frequently from now on. You seem to have it together. Wish I could shake your hand right now. Bottom line: you're handling a bitch of an assignment with flying colors!"

Two clichés and a sloppy metaphor. I stared at my ghostly visitor for a moment. "Is everything all right, Marty?"

"You bet. I'm just busy right now. Catch you later."

Apparently I'd found a quick way to get administration out of my hair. Just mention Madeline Broms.

* * * *

I cooked my famous Cajun spaghetti for the family that night and only got one grumble, "Too spicy again, Dad," from Tendayi, my seven-year-old daughter, who asked for seconds despite her critique. Dori was feeling worse and went to bed early while the boys and I cleaned up. I kept mulling over my conversation with Sergeant Lopez. He hadn't specifically asked me to drop my own investigation. And his folk-ism about the mule and the wagon could be taken two ways.

The boys hit the books and I pulled out my Last Chance folders and joined my progeny in the living room. Tendayi was watching TV with the headphones plugged in and I put my ear close enough to hers to reassure myself that her volume wasn't too cranked. My wife refers to such parental tasks as being on "suicide watch." As to the boys, Dori and I can't figure out how they can study when the TV's on, even if the sound is off, but they seem to prefer the, um, ambiance. The flickering kept distracting me, but then the files weren't telling me anything new.

Until I noticed something peculiar in the Broms profile: Madeline's mother was only listed under Corinne Broms, her married name, and the grandparents weren't named at all. Meaningless secrecy. How hard could it be to track down the Bar Celona's owners on the Internet? I nodded to the TV since it was the only thing in the room asking for my attention and hurried into the study before I could change my mind about calling the grandparents.

The National Telephone Directory had no listing for Bar Celona, likewise the White Pages, the Austin, and the Westlake Hills directories. Google grabbed a horde of restaurants, several warehouses and other ends and odds, but no ranches. Someone, or more likely some agency, had deleted every such reference. Several sites keep historical snapshots of the Internet by date and even there, I couldn't get a hit.

I found a number for Madeline's father, Robert Broms, without much fuss, but when I began outlining why I was calling he hung up immediately.

"I'm not cut out to be a detective!" I shouted in frustration.

"Not so loud, Dad," Tai called back from the living room. "We're studying in here." Pause. "And Mom's trying to rest."

Ingrate.

Why would Maddie's grandparents name their ranch Bar Celona, anyway? A pun? Was the family name Barcelo or some variant? Maybe I was getting too fancy. I returned to the Westlake Hills directory and checked the name Celona. Sure enough, I found four listings. I doubted any were the particular Celonas I wanted, but relatives tend to clump. I called the first name on the list. Ten minutes later I was talking with Corinne Celona, Maddie's mother.

The conversation seemed to have a mind of its own.

"I'm Doctor William Phillips, Ms. Celona, a teacher at Last Chance High School. Your daughter Madeline is one of my students and I'm looking for information that might help me understand her condition."

A moment of silence. "I know exactly who you are, Dr. Phillips. But I'm afraid I can't help you."

I couldn't hide my disappointment. "That's a real shame. Sorry to bother you then."

"Wait! Don't go 'way!" Her Texas accent was more noticeable. "I'm not supposed to talk to anyone about Maddie, but don't you think I'm not watchin' over her."

"Of course you are."

"I hear you're runnin' a—a virtual classroom?" She said "virtual" the way Dori would say "Ku Klux Klan."

"We don't use normal VR gear, so I wouldn't call it—"

"No helmets?" she asked, her voice strained.

"None. The class operates strictly on ViewNet."

"And Maddie's right with that?"

A weird question considering the girl's condition. "It doesn't seem to bother her," I said dryly.

"Wish I could tell you everything, Doctor. Breaks my heart seein' her the way she is. You should've known her ... before."

Corinne Celona had told me more than she seemed to realize; perhaps she'd done it deliberately. But I needed confirmation. I knew what to ask, but I didn't feel happy about asking it.

"According to her records, Mr. Celona, Madeline was something of a computer prodigy. I was wondering—"

"I've just got to go. Sorry." Click.

She'd sounded so devastated. I felt sick to have dredged up that much misery.

* * * *

Next morning, Dori "called in dead" and I plied her with everything from Echinacea to chicken soup. She didn't exactly applaud the soup-for-breakfast motif, but my wife is rarely ill and the novelty of being waited on while horizontal made her amenable. Plus, she wasn't feeling well enough to argue. Much.

I kept her company while she slurped. She made the mistake of asking how my class was going and I let it all out. When I finished, she hadn't bought my theory.

"Why so much secrecy about a case of cyber-stalking, Bill?"

I tried to sound as if I knew what I was talking about. "The guy must still be on the loose and probably some kind of serial abuser. The way these things usually work is that the stalker meets his victim in a chat room, gains the victim's trust, and eventually arranges a physical meeting."

"Could a stalker—" cough, cough, "assault his victim in VR?"

I nodded admiringly. "An excellent question! I've been considering that myself, but I don't see how. VR is mostly controlled on the user's end and has hundreds of safeguards. But I'm thinking she's been traumatized by everything connected to her experience, including VR."

"If you're right, how can you help that poor girl?"

I glanced at my wristwatch; class would be starting in ten minutes. "I need to make her feel *safe*, Dori. Trouble is, the ViewNet environment probably reminds her too much of VR already. Maybe I can borrow a page from that kid I told you about and give Maddie some form of armor."

"I'm sure you'll do the right thing. Now get out of here and let me honk my nose in peace. Some things aren't fit for company."

"Okay. Guess what I'm making you for lunch? More chicken soup!"

"Wonderful. Be elsewhere."

* * * *

For three weeks I thought Marty was right, that I had everything under control. My only failure was Maddie; every way I imagined to help her could backfire, give her a sense of claustrophobia at best or imprisonment at worst. And I was afraid that if I blew it, there'd be no second chance.

Kekipi, in particular, had grown. He'd lost fifty pounds of sullenness and seemed eager, hungry even, for raw knowledge. Buddha was still grinning, but he was learning; Q-Ball was down to one outburst a day; Cher wasn't causing trouble and was bright as a star. Even White Night was slowly coming out of his shell if not his armor. Oddly enough, he and Q-ball seemed to be growing a friendship. Their interchanges were often fascinating:

"Hey, White Kike, why the skinny e-con? Even with that candy shell, you 'bout thin as a shadow."

"Got a reason, Q-tip. I'm trying to feel stronger. The idea is that I'm Superman, but real."

"No way. Superman be ripped."

"That's what I'm talking about. How would Superman get enough exercise to grow humongous muscles?"

"Huh. Well, Superman don't need no armor."

"You don't get it. The armor is just a visible symbol. For invulnerability, you know. I don't really *need* it myself."

"Yeah, you do."

One evening I called up Enhancement's Teresa Laudy and heaped as much praise as I thought she could stand. She simply asked if I'd come up with any new ideas for next year.

* * * *

October rolled around and its first Monday dented my confidence. White Night glanced around the classroom and froze when he saw Cher. I couldn't imagine why; her proxy hadn't changed and she seemed to be minding her own business. I asked the boy privately if anything was wrong, but he wouldn't answer. Buddha was also in a strange mood. He kept pinching his own legs, moaning, but almost silently. I suppose he didn't want anyone to know how much it hurt. He wouldn't speak to me either.

That evening I went out to the South Shore Supermarket and got another shock. Since I wasn't a paying member, my ViewNet services were supposed to terminate an hour after class. Instead, the supermarket was Hallucination Central. Not every shopper subscribed to Enhancement or the others, but I noticed two Greek gods, a bipedal dolphin, three movie stars, a storm cloud, Mona Lisa, and a miniature giant sequoia. I don't know what these people saw when they looked at me, but Mona Lisa and the cloud giggled. I got home with groceries and a bag of bad mood. Tendayi informed me that daddy had a black cloud around his head and I remarked that I'd just passed one of those in the store.

While my boys were putting away the perishables, I buzzed one of Enhancement's service reps, Hiro Sugata, and he promised to look into my problem although he clearly thought I was nuts to complain about getting a free ride. I was upset. Even if I had money to burn, I'd never sign up for ViewNet. I want to see things as they are....

When we got to bed, my wife had a surprise attack of passion, a surprise to me anyway. Ever since we added Tendayi to the fold, those glory days when we used to make love at least four times a week have gone the way of the Roman Empire. But instead of basking in joy, I was basted with worry, a sense of my world turning sour. When we finished, Dori commented, not unkindly, that it was nice "making like."

"Sorry, honey," I whispered. "It's just that this batch of students has gotten under my skin. I've got a bad feeling."

"You're a good teacher, Bill, and your students *always* get under your skin. They're lucky to have you. But sometimes there's not a blessed thing you can do and you've got to learn to lay back and enjoy the scenery."

Tuesday's class was the worst yet. I'd thought White Night was as scared as anyone could be. He proved me wrong. His trembling developed such a rigid intensity that I almost thought he was having a seizure. And Buddha stopped pinching his legs and took to pounding them. He only said one thing to me all day: "I can't get them to stop!"

"You can't get who to stop?"

No response.

One other oddity: Maddie wasn't stuck in her usual manikin mode. She repeatedly shifted in her seat as if she was trying to sit sideways—today facing Kekipi, Buddha and Cher—but during the lecture portion of class, ViewNet was programmed to keep the student proxies facing me. Eventually, she simply kept her head turned to the left, which was fine by ViewNet. I had no idea what it meant.

I tried lifting the mood by showing off a fancy animation, but only Q-Ball, Kekipi, and Cher paid attention. Reluctantly, I concentrated on teaching just those three and by the time school was over for the day I was drained.

Wednesday was Tuesday again, but less fun. Ditto Thursday, Friday, and most of the following week. By the time Friday morning limped around, I was ready to quit.

"Concentrate on achievable goals," Marty Robley had advised when he'd stuck me with this assignment. Today, I focused on making it to the lunch break, which seemed barely achievable. I kept watching the clock so I knew it was 10:45 when Madeline Broms abruptly stood, pointed an accusing finger at Cher, and shouted, "Stop it!"

Enhancement's implants are sensitive to blood supply. Cher's real face turned pale but her proxy merely lifted its eyebrows questioningly. Aside from White Night who didn't react, the rest of us were stunned.

"What do you mean, Madeline?" I sputtered.

Maddie sat down and for one electrifying instant met my gaze directly. I actually thought she was going to answer me. Then her eyes slid away and she returned to her semi-coma. But my fantasy of quitting died right there.

And the day hadn't exhausted its wonders. Shortly after the lunch break, Maddie did it again. This time, however, she told Cher, "Leave them alone!"

Leave who alone? White Night and Buddha? After Maddie and my nerves settled down, I stared at Cher hard enough to peel paint as she appeared in both proxy and OSP. I couldn't see that she was doing anything special, let alone anything wrong. Perhaps her Sherlock Holmes pipe was slightly larger and whiter than when I'd first seen it, but that hardly seemed suspicious.

After dismissing the class, I sat at my desk and tried to jab my tired brain into coming up with at least one theory. The brain still hadn't produced when Taff and Tendayi tag-teamed me for hot cocoa-making duties and from then on I was too busy to worry about anything but my family.

* * * *

Sunday night, I got a call from one Jackson Duke, a trouble-shooter for Enhancement Incorporated with one hell of a basso profundo.

"Dr. Phillips, I understand you had a problem last Monday."

"Definitely. Kept getting ViewNet signals when I wasn't supposed to. I talked to your technician, can't remember his name."

"Hiro Sugata. He passed the buck, which kept sliding along until I caught it. I appreciate your bringing this to our attention. We seem to have a problem ourselves."

"Oh?"

"Your account shows irregularities."

"Such as?"

Duke hesitated. "User modifications without user consent. Time-code editing and unsigned permissions."

"Care to translate?"

He cleared his throat. "Someone's messing with you. We haven't yet identified your, ah, benefactor."

I knew who that someone had to be. "So I take it this person hacked into your system?"

"Dr. Phillips, you're driving under the influence of Hollywood. No one has 'hacked' into any major business network for the last decade. Passwords and key-cookies are still used, but only used in home and local networks; today, business confirmation is done with biological implants. No, I'm afraid what we have here is administrative abuse."

"You mean one of your *employees* has it in for me?" No way that Cher could have administrative privileges at Enhancement. Or could she?

"You may be, ah, exaggerating the viciousness of the attack," he pointed out. "You've only suffered an extension of a rather expensive service for a few hours. Which doesn't mean," he added, "that I'm not taking your complaint seriously."

"I should hope. A free lunch shoved down your throat isn't so free."

"Point taken."

"Tell me something, Mr. Duke."

"Call me Jack."

"Jack, does your company always hire people in person? I understand that some businesses use the Internet for—"

"Strictly in person."

One idea shot to hell. "Have you ever put anyone of High School age in a responsible position?"

"A minor? Certainly not. What are you getting at?"

"I can't explain how, but I think one of my students is involved in this. If you've looked up my account, you must know about Last Chance and how much Enhancement has done to help us."

He chuckled. "As Security chief, I'm one of the people that had to give Teresa Laudy the green light in the first place. Our marketing division was sweating blood that the competition might learn what we've been up to. I'm glad I overrode their veto. Terry tells me the program's been a hit."

Not lately. "Your people have done a fantastic job for sure. Thank you. But I'm wondering if you could do me another favor."

"Yes?"

"Go over the accounts of my students. I'd like to know if there are any other 'irregularities.'"

"I will, and I'll let you know when we find out who's responsible for your extracurricular activities. Meanwhile, I'm e-mailing you my phone number. Call me immediately, anytime day or night, if ViewNet

misbehaves."

* * * *

Monday, I woke up with a scratchy throat and a matching wooziness. Dori's fault I told myself, unfairly since she'd gotten over her cold weeks ago. If she'd felt like this, no wonder she'd played hooky from work! I had no such luxury; we can't have subs at Last Chance.

When class began, White Night was sitting oddly, his legs hunched to his belly. He kept bringing his right hand up to his visor and then reaching out to make a grasping motion in midair. In my OSP, his posture and performance were the same except that I could see his mouth open and his throat work after his hand approached.

I watched him repeat the cycle four times before I understood what was happening. He was lying on his side, taking pill after pill.

The class was silent. Everyone was watching White Night. In my OSP, Cher's eyes were wide and she mimed swallowing each time Daniel took another pill. I grabbed my phone and scrolled down through Daniel's information until I found the phone number of his home address. I forced my hands to keep steady long enough to push the right buttons.

Only one ring before someone picked up. "Hello, hello?" said an elderly female voice.

"Am I speaking with Daniel Greenburg's grandmother?"

"Ya, this is Ester Greenburg. Who are you? Do you know where is Danny?"

Damn! "Then he's not at home? I'm Bill Phillips, Daniel's teacher."

"When Ike and I got up, he wasn't in his room! Can you believe it, mister teacher? Two years, every day we've been nudging the boy to leave the house for a minute, maybe two. For a growing boy to get no fresh air, it isn't right. We were afraid he was kidnapped so we called the police, but the *meshuganas* say it's too soon for—"

"Mrs. Greenburg, I'm sorry to alarm you, but we've got to find Danny right away. He wasn't kidnapped, but he may be in trouble. Any idea where he could have gone?"

"In *trouble*?" Obviously, Daniel meant the world to her. "What trouble? He wasn't kidnapped? You are sure?"

"Yes. No time to explain everything."

"Well, do something then! Where he could be, I can't imagine."

"I have another way to track him down and I'll get right on that. Meanwhile, try to stay calm and if you get any ideas about his location, please call me right away." I gave her my sat-phone number and had to repeat it twice before she got it all written out. "I'll be in touch. I promise."

I hung up and clicked on my e-mail account. Had Duke remembered to send me his number? He had. Two numbers and I punched in the first, which had a Chicago prefix.

"Vice-President Duke's office. How may I direct your call?" an impersonal male voice asked.

"I need to reach Jackson Duke."

"He's in conference at the moment. If you leave your name and the purpose of—"

Another time I might've been impressed that Duke was such a honcho. "Look, this is an emergency. He said to call him day or night."

"Your name?"

I supplied it and got put on hold. Within a minute, Duke's voice was rumbling in my ear.

"Morning, Dr. Phillips. What's up? I haven't had time yet to look into—"

"I think one of my students is trying to commit suicide; from his motions he seems to be stuffing himself with pills. And he's not where he's supposed to be."

"Which student and what city?"

"Daniel Greenburg. Detroit."

I heard the tapping of fast fingers on a computer keyboard. "I have contacts in the Detroit Police Department. Want me to call them?"

"Yes. But first, can you locate Daniel with ViewNet?"

"Sorry, it doesn't work that way. Once transmission on demand is activated, the user's gear makes the demands and any ViewNet repeater will act as a local server. It's comparable to the Internet in the way information packets go by the most convenient route available at any given moment. We have no way of tracing a user physically."

"Jack, most of that went over my head. But Daniel will *die* if we can't find him fast. Can you help or not?"

"I'm thinking." He was silent long enough for me to notice how tightly Cher's hands were clenched. Her eyes were roaming back and forth from White Night to me.

"Tell him 'handshakes,'" she said.

"Do you even know who I'm talking with?" I snapped.

"Mr. Phillips, we can hear your end of the conversation." She said this without sarcasm or contempt: more proof she was scared.

"Jack, does 'handshakes' mean anything to you?"

"There's an idea!" he said. "Oh Lord, I'm going to have a million pissed-off customers, but I'll do it."

"Tell me."

"Repeaters and personal implants exchange confirmation handshakes when they make contact. And in a way they're two sides of the same coin, electronically somewhat reversible. The way a microphone and speaker are reversible. I assume you're calling from your home in—let's see—you're here in Chicago?"

"Right across town from you."

"Could be worse. We'll shut off every repeater in Detroit and use your implants to turn you into a weak repeater. So what we'll have to do—no, triangulation will make this go a lot quicker. I'll need to get you to Detroit ... along with two of your students; adding anyone extra to your school network would take too long. Just a sec. Ah! Curtis Bouden also lives in Chicago and Elaine Carpenter is in Pittsburg—close enough. I see that your class is in session. Ask those two if they're willing to help."

"Jack! Detroit is three hundred miles away!"

"That's why I'll be sending out, um, chauffeurs to take you and your students to the nearest airports. We'll throw you into private jets and you'll reach Metro Airport in half an hour. Best we can do."

"Q-Ball, the Enhancement man wants you and me to go to Detroit, meet up with Cher, and go looking for White Night. Are you in?" He nodded. "How about you, Cher?" Another nod.

"We're all set on my end, Jack."

"Wait outside and tell your students to do likewise."

"Thanks!"

After passing the instructions on to Q-Ball and Cher and going over the situation with the class as a whole, I checked my sat-phone's charge and confirmed that Duke's and the Greenburg's phone numbers were stored in memory. I shoved it into a pocket, chalked "Love you, back soon—Dad" on the kitchen blackboard, grabbed a coat and house keys, headed out the door, and sat on my front step. After one look around, I dashed back into the house to fetch my ViewNet controller, which fit into a coat pocket. I returned to my post on the step and called Dori. She promised to knock off work early and get home before the kids could burn down the house.

Chicago was living up to its nickname this morning and the air had a premature winter bite. At least I didn't have to freeze for long. Five minutes later, I heard the sound of an approaching siren but didn't think it had anything to do with me until a flashing CPD cruiser squealed to a stop in front of my house. Duke was a man with pull. As I ran down the walk, a cop jumped from the driver's side and gestured for me to ride shotgun. We took off at about Mach one, sirens wailing.

"I'm Officer Brown," announced the cop who didn't reach word four during our trip to O'Hare. Amazing how fast you can get places in Chicago without speed limits and a siren to clear the way; but I was too worried to appreciate the experience. And the ride had an eerie aspect: ViewNet class was still in effect. My students were phantoms in the sunlight, but they seemed to surround the cruiser, keeping up effortlessly. White Night was as still as a corpse. Madeline was gazing downwards and I couldn't see her face. Buddha was wearing his usual rictus, but today he wasn't torturing himself. You win some, but I sure as hell wasn't willing to lose any....

"What up?" Kekipi asked but I shook my head to fend off questions. I didn't want Brown to think I was talking to myself and I wasn't in the mood to explain that I was really addressing a mutant snake.

Instead of proceeding to one of O'Hare's terminals, we roared through a side-gate barely opened for us in time. We pulled up to a big Gulfstream waiting on a narrow runway far from the ones used for commercial flights. My wife's company rented a midsize Gulfstream when they wanted to fly important people to important meetings—they couldn't afford to buy one outright. Q-Ball was waiting on the tarmac.

Brown deposited me and left without saying goodbye. I hurried towards the jet but stopped when I got close to Q-Ball. Since we were together physically, he was sheathed in his proxy and I could barely make out the smaller form underneath.

This wouldn't do. I adjusted the controller to remove both our proxies from each other's view and made a mental note to do the same with Cher later.

He stared at me for a moment, then we both turned and scrambled up the boarding stairs into the plane.

Fancy. Every seat had its own flatscreen and minibar. A pretty white woman dressed for a cocktail party waved us into a spacious pair of seats.

"I'm Tracy," she said with the sweetness of a Georgia peach. "If y'all want anything at all let me know. My call button is that yellow square at the bottom of your personal GPS display. Touch it and I'll come runnin'. We're jus' now cleared for takeoff so y'all please buckle up." She vanished behind a curtain toward the jet's cockpit without going through the buckle pantomime act. For that, I was grateful. We started to taxi.

"Shit, Phillips," said Q-Ball after we'd climbed up a few miles. "You something of a man. And I never figure you truly was a bro."

Suddenly I was sick of it, sick of us. My people. Why are we still so hungry to fit into some half-assed in-group that we have to talk like our lowest common denominator? And the same damn words keep getting regurgitated, every generation thinking they've invented something fresh. Sure, my parents' "peeps" are today's "cams" and "cribs" have reverted to "hangs," but "bad" has returned from the grave along with "brother" shortened to "bro," and a hundred others. In six months, white kids in middle-class suburbia will be mindlessly spewing today's ghetto crap, proving how cool they are.

Q-Ball had a fine mind and did everything possible to hide it. I pulled out my controller, switched our voices out of the common channel and turned, ready to lay into him for the stupidities of the entire human race...

His eyes stopped me. He was watching me with something deeper than respect. I'd become *important* to this boy. He didn't need yet another person pushing him away. And you don't go poking open wounds.

Why had this suddenly pushed my buttons? Because of my fear for Daniel? Daniel wasn't my only responsibility. I switched gears. "You seem right at home in a jet, Q-Ball. I wouldn't have expected that."

"Why not? Growin' up, my main hang was a New Air 979. My momma—my real momma—was a pilot, you know."

I didn't know but should have. I scrolled through the Bouden file on my OSP. No mention of his mother being a pilot, no mention of a stepmother. Something was screwy here.

"Tell me about your momma. No one else can listen in right now."

"What's to tell? She went down in that big New Air fuck-up. Shit happens and mostly to me. I was nine. Poppa went crazy and brought that whore home. That's when this started." He pointed to his scarred forehead.

He was sixteen, so he had to be talking about the worst accident in American aviation history: the two-jet collision that ruined New Air. If he was being straight with me, his file had been trashed. How was that possible?

The boy sniffed and a tear eased down his nose. This, too, showed his trust in me.

I put an arm around his shoulders and gave him a hug. He leaned against me for a moment.

"We're going public again, son," I warned him, then reopened the general vocal link and changed the subject. "You know, Q-Ball, I'm surprised that ViewNet works this far off the ground. Strange, isn't it?" That was putting it mildly. Not only were five of my students visible both by eye and OSP, what really pinned the needle of the weird-o-meter was that I seemed to see directly through the Gulfstream's solid

wall to where Buddha was floating in midair, drifting along with us like a jet-powered cloud.

"Yeah, this be some crazy shit. Hey! Check out Brunhilde."

He meant Madeline and I was surprised he knew the reference. I was more surprised by Madeline. Since class had begun she'd been slumped in her chair, apparently gazing at the ViewNet floor. All I'd been able to see of her proxy's head was blond hair, but in my OSP her expression was her typical *tabla rasa*. Now she was glowering at Cher, eyes blazing ... literally. Flames were shooting from her pupils, some a foot long.

I found the implications incredible. Madeline must have thawed enough recently to go online and set up a new Internet e-con using her real face but adding visually emotive powers, then requested it as her ViewNet proxy.

"Are you satisfied *now*, you monster?" she spat.

Cher ignored her. I linked privately with Madeline although that wouldn't stop Q-Ball from hearing me. "Maddie, I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I can see Cher's real face and I think she's suffering enough."

She turned back to face me and I barely recognized her. She was red-faced mad, but she was *awake*.

"Mr. Phillips," she said, "listen to me."

The sky became bumpy. The jet lurched up, lurched down, and lurched up again. Usually, I'm a wreck in the air even if the ride is smooth, and my ears were hurting, which went nicely with my increasingly sore throat. Today I had bigger worries.

"I'm listening."

"Don't forgive what you don't understand."

"Why don't you explain it to me?"

Tracy chose that moment to check on her passengers. She stopped in the aisle exactly in the spot Kekipi appeared to occupy, which created an effect so outrageous that Q-Ball grabbed my arm and pointed.

We both gawked at a kind of animated totem pole or something from a lost mythology: a four-armed snake with a woman's head on top. Tracy and Madeline were both talking at once and I missed every word.

"We're all set, Tracy, thank you," I said, hoping she'd leave us the hell alone, which she did with some haste, maybe due to the way Q-Ball was pointing at her. Then again, I might've been shouting to hear myself over the accidental duet.

"Maddie," I said, "could you repeat what you just said? I'm on a jet now and someone was speaking over you."

"It's the pipe, Mr. Phillips."

"What about it?" I wanted Cher's reaction to this so I added her channel to the mix.

Madeline glanced at her classmate and her face registered so much emotion that I got goose bumps. God had breathed upon shaped clay and it had come alive....

"What does it look like to you?" she insisted.

"The pipe? Just a big white pipe. Meerschaum, I think. What are you—oh." I'd finally noticed that the pipe's bowl had a peculiar "u"-shaped rim. "Reminds me of a toilet, I suppose. Is that what you mean?"

She nodded. "That's how she's been messin' with White Night's head."

I eyed Daniel's proxy just long enough to assure myself he was still breathing. "You mean you *know* what happened to him?"

"I made a good enough guess days ago, but now I don't have to guess. That bitch has been stickin' it to him and Buddha and—"

"Wait! Tell me about White Night."

"You know he skipped two grades."

"Yes, go on."

"In High School, three kids crapped and pissed in a school toilet and held his head in the slop. Could be they didn't mean to drown him, but that's what happened."

"Dear God."

"Some teacher heard laughin' from the bathroom and went in and pulled White Night out. Had to give him mouth-to-mouth. That must've been fun."

"Maddie, how did you learn all this?"

"It's in the police report. You were supposed to get it, but the bitch screwed you over, too."

I stared at her. "How could Cher possibly edit any information coming to me directly from Enhancement? And how do *you* know about it?"

Madeline sent another flame Cher's way. "She's blackmailing someone inside Enhancement, the man who raped her. The latest man, I mean; she had this sick uncle and later a sick neighbor. Now her latest rapist is her bitch. You know, I bet he fixed it so that White Night would see that pipe all the time—maybe even in his *dreams*—and bigger than we see it. And, of course, stuffed with shit."

I regarded the pipe again. "Maybe I'm starting to understand you, Cher."

"No, you're not," Maddie snapped. "Some people are rattlers. Just the way they're born. Step on 'em and they bite you for sure. Hey nasty girl, don't you see that what you've been doing to White Night and to Buddha is just another kind of rape?"

The comment finally stung Cher into response. "What do you know about it, rich girl?"

"If you'd been able to reach all my records, you wouldn't have to ask. You're a smart little critter, but the FBI is smarter."

"So straighten me out. What's your big secret?"

"I'll be sure to let you know when I'm hot to join your victim list."

I flipped Cher out of the link. "Maddie, Q-Ball can hear me talking, but no one except me can hear you

right now. I'd like to know what happened to you if you're willing to tell me. I'll watch my mouth."

She studied my proxy. "That isn't your real face, is it?"

I adjusted the controller. "This is."

Her eyes widened. "You're black."

At least she was honest. "It comes from having black parents."

"I'm just surprised is all. Hey, I'm not supposed to tell anyone outside the family, but I think you ought to know. I used to spend all my time online and I talked my mother into buying me a ... full touch-back rig." Her voice had gotten very quiet and she sounded softer and younger. "I mean a *full* harness, Mr. Phillips. Ma didn't know what that meant."

"I do. You don't have to explain." Complete "feelie" gear had to be custom fitted and built differently for males and females because it included mechanisms for sexual satisfaction.

"I met this nice man—they're pretty sure he was a man—in what was supposed a safe chat room, certified and all. He wasn't so nice. The FBI still doesn't know how, but he got control of my harness. He—he—I'll never use touch-back again."

I was surprised she was even willing to get near a computer. Virtual rape! And some deviant exploiting a vulnerable teenager and an unknown software vulnerability. Had this girl been his only victim? No wonder the feds wanted to keep this under wraps! If the news got around, copycats could multiply like roaches.

"I'm really sorry, Maddie. No one should have to go through something like that."

"The FBI figured the bastard might try again. So they set up a 'soft sting' with my home computer. Any system pinging mine gets pinged. And they've got stuff that will crack a home firewall without a trace."

I was beginning to put it together. "Cher had enough of your records to know your IP address. So you tracked and cracked Cher's computer when she tried to crack yours?"

"And all by remote, too! The FBI software made it easy. The stupid bitch keeps all sorts of files in a visible folder labeled 'Viewschool' and wrote about everything she did and how much fun it was."

"Hold on. They've got a computer for you to use in New Hampshire?" Certainly, the institute caring for her was expensive enough to provide the latest Mac for each client, but considering why she was there...

She blew out her lips scornfully. "I'm not in New Hampshire, Mr. Phillips. Never was."

Coldness ran down my spine. "I see." The FBI thought her attacker might go after her *in person*. "Where are you, then?" Maybe they suspected it was someone she knew, someone with physical access to her gear.

"I'm not supposed to say."

At her father's house, perhaps. "Have you been faking your ... condition all along?"

"No. Well, not completely. I've been scared, Mr. Phillips. Too scared to, you know, express myself. But when I saw how Cher was playing with White Night ... I could only take so much."

Tracy called out "Landing in five minutes" from a safe distance. I acknowledged with a salute.

"Maddie, I can't tell you how much I appreciate your sharing this with me. You're one brave young woman! What can you tell me about Buddha?"

She shrugged. "If Cher hadn't cracked his home computer, I wouldn't know about him. It's not even in his school records. He's been hearin', you know, *voices* since he was six. His dad died and his mom's a drunk. When she found out about his problem, she beat him bloody and said he'd get put away for life if he listened to the voices or told anyone else about them. He believed her. Kids are so stupid. But he found out that if he kept his jaw clamped a certain way—"

I looked over at Q-Ball and decided I could speak openly about this. "Christ! The poor kid isn't *grinning* he's just trying to block out the voices! And let me guess: Cher has been using ViewNet to give Buddha some extra voices to enjoy."

Our jet was banking in for landing. A storm was coming in, too; raindrops lashed my window, streaking right through Buddha's proxy.

"Maddie, you're a wonder. We're touching down now and I'm opening the general channel. We'll talk more later."

As we disembarked, Tracy informed us that "people were already waitin' on us" and I asked her to thank the pilot, whom I'd only glimpsed through the cockpit window. She wished us goodbye politely enough. Still, I noticed her throat working as we passed by. I suppose we had been acting a bit oddly from her perspective, but her nervous swallowing gave me an idea.

Two police cruisers were sitting to one side of the private runway where we'd landed, each with a cop leaning on the hood like a bad ornament. The officers waved at us, but seemed in no rush. Q-Ball and I hurried down the boarding stairs and toward the cars. Before either officer could speak, I held up a finger in a just-one-moment gesture, pulled out my sat-phone, and recalled Jackson Duke's number.

Before I could push redial, Duke called me. But not by telephone.

"Dr. Phillips? This is Jack Duke, can you hear me?"

"I hear you fine. How—"

"I'm patched into your personal audio."

"I didn't know you could do that." The cops were eyeing me dubiously. "I'm on a ViewNet line," I explained to them. "I need another minute."

"Those last comments can't have been meant for me," Jack said.

"I was talking to two police officers."

"You're already at Metro then. Good! Cher will be coming in to Windsor Airport; she should be in downtown Detroit before you, but we wanted you approaching the city from the east.

"Here's the plan. Obviously, we're going to use three black-and-whites, one for each of you." These cruisers were actually black and yellow. "My people are working with the local dispatcher to program a three-way search pattern into the GPS units of those cars. When that's done—should be soon—we'll shut down Detroit's repeaters and turn you and your students into third-class repeaters."

"How will I know if I'm getting close to Daniel?"

"We've reprogrammed your implants to add a clicking sound into your audio nerves whenever they get a handshake-request. The clicking can't kick in until we put your transceivers into repeater mode."

"So I'll be a kind of walking Geiger counter?"

"A riding one, and unfortunately the clicking won't increase with proximity. But any clicking will mean good news. As a repeater, your reception is going to be pathetic. You won't hear a thing unless you're within a few blocks. Any questions?"

"Not now, but I had a thought. I assume some of the transceivers you put into your clients wind up near the vocal chords?"

He barely paused. "Absolutely. Otherwise you wouldn't be hearing my voice right now."

"Would it be possible to stimulate Daniel's throat nerves with ViewNet, to make him vomit?"

"Interesting. Hang on."

He was only silent for about ten seconds. "Dr. Phillips, I've got Dr. Leah Silbur on the horn. We don't have time to hook her up for a, ah, conference call but I've told her what you had in mind."

"And?"

"It's never been done, but she thinks it might be possible." Another short pause. "Damn, she says it's too risky. We don't know enough and even if it works, he might suffocate."

"Oh."

"But she'll try to work out a method just in case our tracking system fails. Might be the only chance he's got."

"Give her my thanks. Jack, have you ever used this 'tracking system' before?"

"No. But I just got word that the GPS units are ready. Good luck!"

With a crackle, the police radios told the cops to get going in stereo. I warned my students that class was going to get interrupted at any moment then leaned close to Q-Ball.

"You take the car to the right. Anytime you hear a click in your ears, you tell the cop right away. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Q-Ball, you've been getting better and better at controlling your temper and I'm proud of you. Can you hold it together for this?"

"Shit, yes."

"Anyone gives you lip, don't give any back. Just tell me about it *later*. See you soon."

The boy jumped into his vehicle and I jumped into mine. "I'm ready, Officer. Let's set the new land speed record."

* * * *

My current driver, Patrolman Ed Sorenson, seemed committed to utter every word my previous driver hadn't. He was genuinely friendly and insisted I call him "Eddie," but between his jabbering and the siren I

was terrified that I wouldn't be able to hear an internal click to save my life—or rather Daniel's life. The chatter was particularly impressive considering that Sorenson was wearing an earpiece hooked up to his GPS, presumably giving constant instructions and recommendations.

At least, none of my students tried to speak with me. From the way Cher's head kept turning, I knew she was in her own speeding vehicle and I didn't bother reinstating Q-Ball's proxy. Buddha, Kekipi, and Maddie were staring at White Night like a deathwatch. I was grateful that with ViewNet, I could see the boy breathing....

Again, a siren parted the automotive seas although the system had worked better in Chicago. Every minute or so, we encountered some driver who was either a born anarchist or deaf. Sorenson referred to such fauna as “clowns” without rancor as he was forced to swerve around them.

"Normally, Doc, I work with the best partner in the world. You'd like him. But the captain didn't figure—would ya look at this clown?"

Mercifully, the trip was brief.

I hadn't been to Detroit for a decade and its skyline had ramified. Here was a city sprouting back to life. As I recalled, the abandoned Continental Motors site was around here somewhere. I was still trying to find it to use as a landmark when I felt the buzzing of my sat-phone. I accepted the call and held the receiver tight to my ear.

"Hello?" I said.

"It's just me," Duke stated. "We'll be shutting the repeaters down soon and from then on we'll have to speak by phone until you've found the boy. Where are you?"

"Eddie, where are we?"

"Another minute and we'll hit East Jefferson."

"My driver says East Jefferson in a minute."

I glanced ahead at the city. Signs of urban renewal were everywhere. Detroit's depressed lower east side was cheering up but I wasn't; maybe it was my imagination, but I thought Daniel's breathing was getting erratic.

"Dr. Phillips, I won't be talking unless you have a question, but I'll be staying on the line. When your ViewNet feed ends, start listening for clicks."

"I'll do that. And pray." As I said “pray,” my students vanished along with my OSP. For a moment, I felt almost as dizzy as when the system cuts in, but maybe that was just Sorenson's driving.

He barely slowed as we hit the warren of Detroit's eastern streets. It may have been rude since my driver was still yapping, but I stuffed my fingers in my ears. I even closed my eyes, wanting to concentrate exclusively on my sense of hearing, ready to pounce on the faintest click, tick, or snap. I started to get carsick but didn't dare open my eyes.

When it came, the click jarred my teeth. I'd badly underestimated the technicians at Enhancement.

"Eddie, I got a click!"

Sorenson hit the brakes hard enough for us to skid a dozen yards and then pulled over to one side of the

road. He turned off the sirens and radioed in the news. Our lights were still flashing; I could see the reflections in nearby surfaces. Faces, mostly black, peered at us out of recently replaced windows.

"What are we doing, Eddie?"

"Waiting. Be quiet for just one minute, can't you? I gotta listen for orders."

The radio squawked and a barely comprehensible voice told Sorenson to locate the exact place where I'd heard the click and stop there. Sirens running again, he backed up fast and spun around, but then drove slower than my grandmother on her eightieth birthday.

"Here, Eddie, right here!" I said after we'd gone a quarter block. We pulled over again, lost the sirens again, and I had to fight an urge to jump out of the car and start looking. But this neighborhood was jammed with apartment buildings and I had no clue which direction to look in. I pounded a palm with a fist as Sorenson talked with the dispatcher.

When he was done, he turned to face me. "Settle down, Doc. We lucked out in getting a hit so soon. The sergeant is getting the word to the other search teams, so they'll be in the area before you know it. Once your helpers get their own hits, we'll have your boy pinned down."

Every few seconds, my skull twinged from another "hit." Rain pelted the windshield from time to time. "How about getting an ambulance here?"

He rubbed his chin. "Bound to be one on the way—probably headed for the best intersection for reaching every nearby street. But I'll check if it makes you feel easier."

"Please do."

Yes, an ambulance was on its way and for the moment, all I could do was sit and chew my lips. Then I remembered that I wasn't the only one waiting.

"Jack?" I spoke into my phone.

"Right here."

"I should call Daniel's grandparents. Can I put you on hold?"

"Hmm. I've already got their names and number; I'll have someone on my staff fill them in. I think it's best if we don't lose touch, even briefly."

"You're the security expert. After you've arranged that call, I want to tell you about something I learned from the Madeline Broms. As you thought, you've definitely got a problem with one of your employees."

* * * *

Another fifteen minutes passed before they had Daniel located and my head finally stopped ringing. The dying boy was only a block away, but Sorenson and I were forced to take a half-mile detour to reach the one-way street that was our target. On the way, my students reappeared but since I didn't press the ready button, my OSP stayed down.

By the time we pulled up to the right building, Q-Ball and Cher were exiting their cruisers aided by their uniformed chaperones. To me, Cher appeared as Sherlock Holmes, but I let it stand. An ambulance was pulled partway onto the sidewalk and two white paramedics were standing outside, waiting. They were staying close enough to their vehicle to hug it and their medical gear was still packed away. I could see why.

The street was one of the few in the area immune to urban renewal. The filthy and crumbling brickwork, peeling plaster, and cracked or missing windows brought back some hard memories from my childhood. The building we were concerned with looked overripe for the wrecking ball, but it was obviously bulging with families.

At least twenty teenagers, all males and all black except for one Hispanic type who was partly black, were lounging in front of the tenement. Most were slouched on the crumbling concrete steps, partly shielded from the drizzle by a sagging upper balcony. Meanwhile, neighbors were emerging from adjacent buildings to see what the fuss was about. In moments, we were the focus of interest for a crowd of over a hundred people. No one seemed pleased to see us. The air was toxic with cheap perfume, even cheaper aftershave, cigarettes, dope, sweat, and fumes from the idling cars. Our three white cops stepped forward, but I waved them back and they took my point.

I gave Q-Ball a look and the two of us hurried to talk to the doorkeepers.

"What you biz here?" demanded a large kid with three "sidestripes," shaved stripes running diagonally across his skull.

Q-Ball answered before I could even interpret the question. Unlike me, he could speak their language. "I'm Q-Ball. Got me a blo-cam OD shadin' in you hang. Gotta touch him quick." A "blo-cam" I guessed was a comrade, a blood brother, and "shadin" was "hiding."

"A bro?"

"Jew boy."

"No Jew in *my* hang." A ton of contempt on the word "Jew."

I could see Q-Ball struggling with his temper, but he won. "He be here fo sho. We got it on *radar*."

"Yeah? And we give you sez-me and those five-oh hose how many bros?"

Sorenson must have crept up behind me. "What's he saying?" he whispered.

I'd gotten the gist. "The boss punk," I whispered back, "doesn't want police inside. He's thinking you'll make arrests."

"Not now."

"Our five-oh be tame this fine day," Q-Ball said. "We not here to hump a primp, jus' save my cam's life."

Sidestripes wiped his nose with one sleeve. "Shit. I think maybe you *sincere*. Give props and I let you and you Unc T in. No way five-oh. And no whites, period." More contempt on "Unc T," which probably meant Uncle Tom and certainly meant me. I was suddenly too aware of my tailored jacket and custom shoes.

"Danny will be in the basement," Cher called out from behind us. I'd come to that conclusion myself—where else could he hide? I glanced at her. Beneath her proxy, I thought she looked surprisingly small and pale as a corpse. Her hair was slicked down from rain.

Q-Ball turned to me. "You understand 'props'?"

"Used to mean 'respect.'"

"Still does, only it comes in green or peach."

"Oh." I took out my wallet and opened it so that Sidestripes could see inside. "All I have is three twenties and a ten."

"That do. Show the way, Curl. Be polite."

The guardians parted to give us climbing room while a small kid with a shaved head and a missing ear leaped up and opened the door for us. "This way, sirs," he said, bowing.

Sorenson grabbed my shoulder before I could take a step and handed over a small flashlight. "Might need this."

"Thanks, Eddie."

The stink of mildew almost knocked me over as we entered the long hallway. Only one of the light fixtures held a bulb and that one was sheathed in a heavy wire cage further wrapped in barbed wire. Grateful to Sorenson for his foresight, I flipped on the flashlight and tried to ignore the dark stains on the walls, the hanging curls of paint, and the rat droppings and crushed roaches on the rotting carpet. How, I wondered, had Daniel gotten here and why had he come to this particular place to kill himself?

The basement door had a heavy broken padlock that was furry with mold. Curl pointed to the door then backed away as if he wanted nothing more to do with it.

The hinges screamed more than squeaked as I pulled the knob and gagged at the smell of a hundred kinds of garbage capped by raw sewage. Bare wires, live for all I knew, showed where a wall-switch had once resided, not that I would've expected a working basement light. The wooden stairs were cracked and warped. They looked slippery and the handrail had long rotted away.

"Danny?" I shouted down. "*Danny?*" Nothing.

"Me first," I told Q-Ball, "then I'll shine the light for you."

"Step careful."

Trying to breathe only through my mouth without thinking about what I was pulling into my lungs, I got down to the basement floor after a dozen close calls. The "floor" was an uneven pool of muck deep enough to fill my shoes.

"Danny?" I wished that I dared send Q-Ball outside to get his own flashlight, but he might have a problem getting back in. "Q-Ball," I called up. "I changed my mind. You stay up there unless I need help."

"Whatever you say."

Feet making sucking sounds with every stride, I began to explore this unlisted circle of hell. Aside from my light, the only illumination was from the crack in a tiny boarded up window on a distant wall. I started working my way around the huge piles of trash and rusting appliances, terrified that I'd never be able to find the boy in time.

In the dimness, my students were vivid as they kept pace with me without moving. Only Q-Ball's proxy was missing.

"I'm in a basement," I told them, "it's big and filled with junk and dark as a c—cave." I'd almost said "coffin." "Could take hours to search this place. Anyone have any ideas?"

Kepiki waved three arms. "See any light at all?"

"Natural light? Just a dribble from what used to be a window."

"If it was me, I'd have headed toward that window."

"I'll try that."

"Mr. Phillips," Buddha said, "I'm online at Enhancement's website."

"And?"

"Says right here that when two clients are inside of a hundred feet from each other, their implants talk back and forth. 'Linking' they call it."

I pushed aside what might've once been a stuffed chair. "That's for aligning e-cons with the real bodies."

"Maybe Night's implants can tell yours where they are."

"I doubt it. I don't see how linking can help us right now."

"I do," Jack Duke said. "I'm back on your circuit, Doctor. Give me just two minutes."

Afraid to strike out in the wrong direction and wind up in some cul-de-sac in this stinking maze, I stood still. "Danny? If you can hear me, try to make a noise." All I heard were creaks from the floor above, a faint dripping, and muted street sounds.

Suddenly, a silvery light blossomed in one corner of the basement and I squelched off in that direction as fast as I could.

"What did you do, Jack?" I asked on the way.

"Switched his e-con with the first incandescent one I could find."

An angel was lying on the wreckage of an old furnace, one wing beneath him and the other wrapped around like a blanket. I put my ear on his chest and heard a heartbeat. Slow and faint. My hand brushed against something small next to him and it dropped into the slime. A box of matches, I think. When I picked the boy up, he seemed to weigh nothing.

"Jack, it worked. I found him. But you've got to turn off his e-con, I can't see anything *but* him. I can't even see to adjust my controller."

"Mahalo," Kepiki whispered like a prayer. Or a blessing.

I started retracing my steps, guided by memory. Awkward, trying to aim the flashlight while carrying the boy in my arms, but I couldn't stand the thought of slinging him across my shoulders like baggage. It didn't matter. For a minute, I was too dazzled to see the beam even when the angelic light died.

By the time I'd navigated the pit, my eyes had recovered. Carefully, carefully, I carried Daniel up the staircase.

* * * *

Last time I'd been in Detroit, they were talking about shutting Mercy Hospital down again. Now the place was freshly painted, refurbished, and buzzing with medicos. In the chair next to me, Q-Ball sat with one arm around Cher, who was still crying and repeating, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I'd blocked her proxy from my view. The doctors were rating Daniel's chances at fifty-fifty.

All my students were subdued. Buddha and Kekipi were chatting quietly with each other in the alternate reality of ViewNet and Maddie kept her eyes on me. I hadn't felt up to the ordeal of rebooting my OSP so I couldn't see anyone's real face, but I knew what everyone was feeling. When the doctors had begun pumping his stomach, I'd disabled Daniel's ViewNet connection because the effects on his proxy were so grotesque.

I planned on having a talk with Buddha soon. I doubted that the "voices" someone with incipient schizophrenia might hear could be cut off by mere jaw-clamping. And in all other ways, Buddha seemed quite sane. Certainly, he needed some audiological tests and might even need psychological attention, but I could assure him he wasn't about to be put away for life. Unless he started obeying his voices.

Daniel's grandparents were somewhere nearby, waiting in an area designated for family members of patients in critical condition. Doctors had been working on the boy for an hour now. He'd swallowed four kinds of pills....

Various hospital personnel subscribed to ViewNet services, so with my class still in session, I'd seen some disconcerting things while we'd been waiting. One nurse appeared as a giant cat, which seemed unsanitary in this context. One doctor had wings on his ankles and if I focused on his proxy, he appeared to flit from place to place several inches off the ground.

When a man big enough and tall enough to be an NBA center stepped into our waiting area, I figured it was just another Enhancement trick. Then the giant walked over to me and offered a hand, a dying custom among ViewNet clients because physical contact tends to puncture illusions.

"I'm Jack Duke," he said. "I wanted to be here with you."

I was shocked when his hand felt as big as it looked.

"Thanks, Jack. You've been terrific. Invaluable."

"Least I could do, Doctor."

"Just Bill."

He nodded. "Is the staff here putting you in the loop, Bill?"

"They've been great, especially considering that we're not related to the patient. I bet you had something to do with that." I looked around. Cher's tears were slowing. She and Q-Ball didn't need me at the moment. I pulled out my controller and shut off my vocal channel but left the audio open in case any student had a problem.

"Jack, can I speak with you for a moment? Alone?"

"Sure. Anyplace special?"

"Just a bit down the hall will do." I turned to my left. "Sit tight, kids. I'll be back in a minute." Q-Ball smiled at me, tentatively, but I'd never seen him smile before. Watching him comfort Cher eased my sore heart.

I'm six-three and change and not many people make me feel petite, but Duke sure did. When he and I were reasonably isolated, I kept my voice low. "I don't know exactly when you hooked into my audio circuit."

He met my eyes. "You're asking if I overheard Madeline Broms's nightmare."

"I guess that answers the question. So you already knew about Cher's tricks before I told you?"

"Yeah. Didn't exactly make my day. I'll find her accomplice. Count on it. I assume she kept some semen as physical evidence of her rape and was using that for a lever. Which implies that her rapist has much to lose. Hell, that girl probably has a system all set up to deliver the evidence to the police if anything happens to her. Which reminds me, you'll have the *complete* files on your students ASAP. Elaine Carpenter is a bright one, Bill. I called up copies of the truncated reports you received. She left just enough honest information to keep you thinking you'd gotten it all."

"She's worth saving—they're all worth saving. Jack, I know it's a lot to ask considering the way she abused everyone including your company, but I don't want Cher prosecuted or even hassled over what she did. She went too far and—well, look at her leaning on Q-Ball. She's not faking a breakthrough; I think this has really gotten to her."

He glanced down the hall. "I don't understand her motives. Why was she torturing Danny in the first place?"

"Buddha too; I think she would've attacked more classmates except that would've made her role too overt. As to why, you heard that she was sexually abused as a child."

"That's what Maddie said."

"I don't doubt it. Different personalities react to traumas in different ways. My sense is that Cher feels helpless and scared unless she can make the people around her feel helpless and scared."

"She has to be in control to feel safe?"

"Right, and abused people tend to abuse people. But I think she's just learned that her kind of control has pitfalls."

He studied Cher for a long moment. "I'll trust your judgment, Bill. Terry Laudy thinks the world of you and I'm starting to see why."

"The feeling's mutual."

"It's settled then. Cher won't get any grief from Enhancement and we'll try to work out a bargain if any agencies go after her. If she's willing to give up the name of her rapist and her evidence against him, odds are we can buy her immunity. I'll do what I can, but she'll probably have to appear in court."

"Let's hope she'll be willing."

"Of course, she may also have a civil suit to deal with. The Greenburgs may not want to let this go."

I sighed. "I know. If Danny pulls through, I'll try to smooth things over."

"Good enough. Anything else on your mind?"

"I'm afraid so. Remember that idea I had about using ViewNet to trigger a gag reflex? Add that concept to what happened to Maddie and how easily someone at Enhancement messed up my class."

Duke looked all around before responding. "You're worried about ViewNet being used as a weapon."

"After I stop being worried about Danny, I'll have the emotional room to be very worried."

"Me, too. Bill, at Enhancement we've got people working on incredible possibilities. Think of the

potential for, oh, medical imaging. A few years ahead, surgeons may operate while apparently standing inside their patients' bodies." He spoke quietly, but passionately. "Or take space exploration. With our gear in the right kind of robot, you could go for a stroll on Mars or hang-glide on the ammonia clouds of Jupiter. How about a hike in the deepest ocean trenches right here on Earth? We're not talking virtual reality, but *transferred* reality.

I stared at him. "I had no idea."

"Any new technology creates new risks and the more powerful a technology is..."

"Jack, you've got *millions* of clients, and the numbers keep growing. And you're not the only enhancement service around. Back in Chicago, have you noticed how the fancier restaurants have replaced their bathroom mirrors with those stupid ViewNet screens with the built-in camera? As a non-client, all I see in them is a bad cartoon of my face."

"The idea is—"

"To see yourself as you're paying for others to see you. Christ, I've suffered through enough ads. Aren't you concerned that your subscribers might be turning into ... enhancement junkies? And if the wrong people get their hands on your equipment, can you imagine the level of catastrophe? Terrorism has died down a bit in the last decade, but it sure as hell hasn't died off."

Duke gazed off into the distance, or maybe into the future, for a few seconds. "I can't offer any reassurances," he admitted. "These days, I spend most of my time trying to make our system more secure, but I keep finding loopholes to plug, which warns me there could be plenty more. Our company is aware of the dangers. That's why the suits made their security chief a vice-president."

"Maybe your hiring practices need bulking up."

"What can I say? We run more checks on our personnel than any other ten businesses but as you've learned, we're not perfect. But you should know that if I thought the risk outweighed the promise, I'd quit in a heartbeat."

"I believe you and appreciate your honesty. Let's get back to the waiting area."

We sat in a silent row: Jack, me, Q-Ball, Cher, while Buddha, Kekipi, and Maddie kept us company as proxies. I was thinking about how I'd nearly given up on these kids before I'd met them. And I was remembering my internal tirade in the jet triggered by Q-Ball's street talk. I had mixed feelings about that, but pride wasn't one of them. Hell, Q-Ball's ... linguistic expertise gave Daniel his chance to live.

"Q-Ball," I asked, "what does 'hump a primp' mean?"

He looked at me, tilting his head. "Where you hear that?"

"You said it to that sidestriped boy at the apartment."

"Oh, yeah." He leaned close to me and whispered. "A 'primp' is a mirror. You can't hump it cause it's got no holes."

"Thanks, I was wondering. And I can't thank you enough for helping out today, you were great."

A smile spread across his face. He looked like a different person. "You pretty great yourself." He turned his attention back to Cher who seemed on the verge of falling asleep. For her sake as well as Daniel's, I prayed Daniel would pull through.

I'd had some rough times growing up, but nothing compared to what these kids had gone through. And I hadn't even seen their complete files yet! I was almost scared to read Kekipi's full story.

In my mind's eye I saw the faces of my wife and children and sent my love winging toward Chicago. Caught in the gears of the daily grind, constantly wrestling life's limitation and my own, I'd forgotten something vital: I'm a rich and lucky man.

Humbled by all my unearned blessings, I closed my eyes and concentrated on nothing but willing Daniel to live.

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