



## **Hooking Up**

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## Hooking Up

John sauntered lazily towards his new high school, making his parents wait as long as possible in their stupid H-cell car. He hoped that he was pissing them off. Their idea to send him to this hi-tech educational prison, their idea to wait out front until he synced on the school grounds, both because they didn't trust him. So screw them.

He glanced back over his shoulder, saw their fake big smiles and waving arms, waving him on. Shit, how humiliating.

Ahead at the main entrance, the view held more promise. Two perfect girls, lush hair, blemishless skin, full lips, sculpted curves. The best features their daddies could buy, and probably too fancy for John. But he could still enjoy the scenery.

The girls smiled; John smiled back. Friendly — this place could be tolerable.

Then John stepped over a thin red line on the entrance walk, and his skin tingled all over. Now he saw that the two girls had two neon-glow companions. His implant must have synced with the school system. The girls' avatars were just a shade more perfect than their phys bod counterparts.

The avatars also smiled at him, and then they struck him with bolts of joy, and kept striking. The bolts manifested as a bright golden stream of cupid's arrows endlessly, painlessly piercing him, slamming the blood into his groin. Embarrassing, difficult to walk even, but damn, this school might be all right.

The avatars and the girls kept smiling, and the bolts kept coming. They went deeper, working up his spine in a roaring wave, filling his brain with white light. They were going to burst his skull.

He tried to call for help, but the joy paralyzed him. Too much joy, too much pain.

The girls and their avatars giggled in the real and virtual entranceway. "Stop it, Mercutio, you're frying him, not milking him."

"You stop it first. Anyway, not our fault he's such a loser. Look how turned on he is!"

The girls dashed inside, leaving their avatars at the doorway, pulling John's excessive joy out from under him. He gasped for breath. Student chips weren't supposed to fry people — his certainly couldn't. His first day, and he was already toasted meat.

He had to get out of here. He spun around, but his parents were already gone. He stepped back towards the red boundary, but a steady pressure like two hands on his shoulders held him to a standstill. He was about to attempt a running dash, when a woman's voice yelled from behind him. "Hello!"

John turned, and the older woman's identity flashed, *Supervisor*. She said, "You're the new boy, John, aren't you? Please, follow me. You wouldn't want to start school by trying to leave or delink, would you?"

John followed. They passed between the silent avatars, who abruptly disappeared. Apparently, they had only been left here to watch and record. That meant trouble. But at least there wasn't any phys evidence from the joy assault to wipe up. John suspected that such a display of uncontrolled meat response would get him burned even more by these cyberpunks. But the girls had been too quick for that — frying, not milking.

From outside to in, the brick school building showed its age. The new tech needed no new visible structures; the sprawling single-story remnant of the previous century would serve as is.

Once inside, the supervisor pointed towards a classroom and said, "Your first class: Sophomore English." Then she pointed at his head. "You're in full sync with the school now. Just bring up an avatar and access the info next time. You have an avatar up now?" John brought up an avatar — like a little slice of himself going dead numb — and nodded. "Good," said the supervisor. "And remember: you're linked for the whole school day." She smiled in stiff dismissal.

John peered into the room. A faded map of nation-states on the wall, scattered non-ergonomic wooden chairs and desks, and various students and their many avatars slouching around. Nothing he couldn't handle. He went in.

A cascade of virtu-voices greeted him, a mass of avatars who dived into his pile of thoughts. He thought, *block*, then said "block" aloud, but the students kept pulling things out of his mind to show the others. "Implant's seriously bargain retro, dude." "You just got chipped this year?" "You should sue your parents!"

His priors flashed to everyone — marijuana, petty computer crime, misuse of his karate skills on some jerk's face — all stupid shit. But enough trouble to make his parents send him here. Most of the other kids weren't flashing squat. Weird — either they could hack display, or they were still at this "character development" school even after their priors were expunged. Here, because they wanted to be.

He tried talking back through his single avatar, but these cyberpunks seemed to be running dozens of avatars apiece, too many and too quick for him. They laughed at his deliberate, linear mode of operation.

The avatars of the girls from outside (IDs flashing *Mercutia* and *Sibelia*) sang “look at this.” They reran the record of John’s entrance. More laughter. Two guys, Molokevin and Apollius, posted the class consensus judgment in text-only form, the mocking medium being the message. John saw that he was “a low-grade freak, probable burnout.” John ignored them — he was used to taking shit about drugs. But the class saw his thought and corrected him. In cyber land, burnouts were neo-autistics, kids who had reacted badly to their implants, who had been permanently fried.

John still ignored them. “Burnout” sounded like the bogeyman, a story to scare little kids.

As the multiple avatar virtuchat moved on without him, John furtively studied the phys bods of his fellow students. Most had bleeding-edge body alterations. But in the back corner of the room, obscured behind enhanced biceps and breasts, some other bodies: a pair of small, unaltered kids sitting by themselves, close together, a boy and a girl, IDs flashing *Paul* and *Donna* .

Then a chime sounded — no more time to stare. The Teaching Expert System, “Tess,” had signaled the beginning of class. Tess’s avatar appeared — a woman leaving middle age with a bitter scowl on her face. Maybe Tess was bitter that she was only a mid-level AI. The brightest were the government AIs: the Feds. His parents had told him about those with hushed voices. The Feds had designed each of the new special school systems.

“Please sit down,” Tess said directly into their minds, her avatar’s lips not moving from their frown. The students hustled for squeaky seats in no particular order — Tess didn’t need a seating chart. A supervisor passed by the open door, jotted a note on his pad, then closed the door.

Another chime. Tess uploaded a book for discussion. “Our first book for the day is *Huckleberry Finn*.” Instantly, the student avatars cut and pasted responses on the fly in vid, audio, and raw code. They compared the book’s word and phrase usage profile with that of other books. They uploaded various biographies of Twain to cross-compare their information with the novel. They created hypermedia for every phrase, expanding out through each movie, play, musical, retelling, and parody. Critical and other cultural references were dropped into indexed daisy chains.

John felt the growing data pastiche spin around him. *Huckleberry Finn* became the center of a vast memplex. For the second time today, he thought his head would explode. Yet still, his hardware kept him hooked in without mercy.

The data flow subsided, and John could sense the noise underneath the lesson — the friendly chatter about tomorrow’s rally, the latest songs mixed and remixed, the continual stroking of the pleasure centers without any embarrassing physical reaction — all generated through multiple avatars per student, all uninhibited by Tess, all way beyond him.

John felt anxious, like a dog before a storm. Tess signaled him — a text message floated in front of him about the importance of class participation to his grades and his overall school experience. What did that mean? John tapped the message with his finger, and found that Tess rewarded participation not only with grades, but also with chip enhancements. That probably meant abilities like controlling those pleasure bolts — he could use some protection from those. And heck, he actually knew this book, and parts of it didn’t suck.

So John said, “I thought it was really cool when Huck said he’ll go to hell.”

Virtual laughter doused him like ice water, taunts swarmed in endless quick variations until all played out. Someone hit him with the smell of puke and disinfectant. Then, sharp blue needles of light from anonymous avatars drove painfully into his skin.

Ratting out students was bad, but this was bullshit. “Ms. Tess,” John said in chorus with his avatar, “I’m getting beat up pretty bad here.”

“Zero participation points,” said Tess. “Our next book, in reverse chronological order, is *Tom Sawyer*.”

“Ms. Tess?” But the AI plowed on inexorably, monitoring lesson participation, then uploading Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*.

Then John understood why the others had mocked him. For Tess and his classmates, each book was just another piece of information. His opinion was also a piece of info, particularly trivial.

And John guessed why Tess didn’t care about the pleasure/pain attacks of his classmates. Anything a Tess tolerated had to be part of the Fed design. Why intramural torture would be part of any design, John couldn’t figure. But he knew better than to try to complain to the human

supervisors about it. So John would suffer all day the intermittent blue jabs of hurt and embarrassing golden bolts of pleasure.

No way was he coming back here tomorrow.

But in the back corner of the room, a different lesson. He could see them now; no one cared which way his phys bod faced. The boy Paul was curled up in his chair, feet on his desk, arms around his legs, eyes above his knees. No avatar shadowed the boy in John's enhanced view. John called to him under the lesson. The boy flinched, but remained silent, his eyes darting to avoid contact. John felt through his chip for the boy's information, and found only a null spot on the virtual map of the room. John touched the spot, and instantly drew back from the cold blackness, as if he might fall in. Void without bottom.

A burnout, thought John. So they're for real. What's a neo-aut doing here?

Bang! The girl, Donna, smacked her desk with the flat of her palm. Same age and last name, so she had to be Paul's twin. Other than her unaltered bod, she appeared normal, with short black hair and dark complexion. Her loose fitting clothes — what his parents called sweats — overwhelmed her small frame. She stared right at John, eyes wide, and said in a whisper that somehow carried across the room, "We can help you."

She was crazy — John very much doubted that these two losers could help him do anything except suffer more. John searched for their priors. Shit, they were "wards of the state." John could guess what that meant; he quickly turned away. Their parents must have been terrorists. These kids were here to keep them from becoming terrorists too.

John didn't even look at them anymore. He wasn't going near that kind of trouble. But as bolts of pain and joy continued to hammer at him, he feared that he had seen his future in Paul's darting eyes.

Exhausted, shaking, head pounding, John crossed back over the red line and felt the chip loosen its grip. His first day was finished. No way was he coming back here tomorrow. His mom pulled up in their cheap vehicle, her voice nervous and expectant. "So, honey, how was your first day?"

He'd thought his response through carefully. He needed to sound reasonable, convincing, adult. This was too important to screw up. He opened his mouth to speak...



And for a second, he lost control of his body. “OK,” he heard himself say.

“That’s good!” And his mom went on yakking about how important this was, and he was screaming in his own head, *no, it’s not fucking OK, they’re killing me!* But every time he opened his mouth to say something, his body shut down.

Like the family car, John’s home was another artifact of pre-fusion energy efficiency — ugly solar panels and a biomass processor in the backyard. But tonight it radiated beauty and relief. He ran up to his room to struggle with his chip in private.

John gave himself a crippling headache, but nothing worked. At dinner, he tried casually to write “HELP” in his mashed potatoes, but his implant wouldn’t allow that either. His father noticed his hand shaking. “What’s wrong? You been smoking again?”

John shook his head and said, “You don’t understand.” His parents exchanged the concerned glance that always drove him nuts, but he still couldn’t say what was on his mind.

If he couldn’t tell his parents about school, maybe he could find other students like him, maybe at other schools. In his room after dinner, he tried using his implant to communicate, but heard nothing but silence. They had taken his computer and net access, but his chip probably wouldn’t let him write or speak about school on the conventional net anyway. So, what happened in school would stay in school. He was at the mercy of freaks.

He didn’t sleep much that night, but he did have a nightmare. He dreamed of the spooky kids at school and Paul’s darting eyes and Donna’s wide-eyed stare. They offered him a seat next to theirs in class. He woke up gurgling “No!”

The next day, John’s mother made him breakfast. “Most important meal of the day, and your brain is working double time.” Fried eggs always made him queasy, but that wasn’t the battle he needed to fight now, so he ate them. He felt better than he should after a bad night, even a little high, like a nice toke. A fake feeling — the damned chip must be stroking his pleasure centers. Screw this, he wouldn’t cross the red line today. But even as he thought of playing hooky, a steady whistle grew in his head, and he knew the only relief would be to attend school.

When he crossed the red line that morning, John yelled, “This place fucking sucks!” Apparently, once in school, he could say what he wanted to, because no one here cared.

Mercutio and Sibelia, giggling, zapped John at the door again, just enough to remind him of his place. Once he stepped inside, his classmates commenced their blue needle assault. He stared at them, trying to will them to stop. They would not stop.

And all that morning, John saw that he wasn’t the only one being hit. Other students staggered under the steady stream of gold and blue. Some of them seemed to be mere extensions of their chips — synapses fried away by the assault, no remnant of their organic selves visible in their dead eyes. Their parents probably liked them better this way. Even those dishing out the blue needles, like Molokevin and Apollius, didn’t act like they could pass a Turing test for very long if you unplugged them.

These zombies demonstrated another lesson for him: as long as the cybersystem ran, he was not going to escape, or survive, this school. So fuck them. He would have to hack the system.

Between classes, John checked the antique fuse boxes, power sockets, fire alarms — he could find no physical nodes. Though it aided John’s reconnaissance, he resented the unnecessary shuffling from room to room all day. Tess could change the subject and the particular links to student avatars without anyone moving. Like coming to school instead of staying home — it must be about ritual and control.

The only constant companions in his day were Donna and Paul. Amidst otherwise random groupings, they followed him from class to class, as if Tess were mocking him by keeping them together.

During history class, John tried another line of attack. He sub-vocalized “view code.” A head-splitting amount of raw code replaced the iconic representations of avatars and lessons. “Narrow field.” Nobody tried to stop him as he viewed code all the way down to the level of unmediated machine language. Cocky bastards. He traced the flow of discrete samples of data to get some picture of the system’s shape. The overall design emerged as a spoke-and-wheel structure, with the number of spokes corresponding roughly to the number of students. The students and their implants must be acting unconsciously for the system as phys nodes.

Shit. John had no idea of how to hack this kind of system. And if that didn't suck enough, he also was helping against his will to process and store information for Tess.

He ran to the bathroom to throw up.

That afternoon after science class, Tess reminded the students that "The school will now hold this year's first rally and dance in the gym." The steady whistle in John's head indicated mandatory phys attendance, so John went. He kept his avatar immediately in front of him, shield-like, to keep his reactions simple. Despite some twitchiness, he hadn't burnt out yet. He could delink and go home soon, collapse alone in his room until the shakes steadied, brave it out through dinner.

The other students filed into the gym with him. Less worn patches on the walls and floor indicated where sports equipment might have been years before. Now, the gym was just a plain dusty box in which to gather the students together in phys bods.

And as always, Donna and Paul were near. "You're going to need our help in here," Donna whispered.

"Or what?" snarled John between clenched teeth.

"Or you're going to die. A lot."

But then a supervisor interrupted in and outside John's head, one cheery voice a slight asynchronous echo of the other. "Hello, students! The rally and dance will start when all the supervisors have left, and will run for three hours. Tess has put the school's data system at your disposal. Please enjoy yourselves in whatever manner you'd like and get to know your new classmates. Dancing, cheers, games, music, are suggested but not required activities. The important thing is that you have fun!

"Oh, and the rally and dance may be monitored and recorded for your protection."

The supervisors noted attendance on their pads, then exited the gym, shutting the doors behind them in a series of clacks. When the last supervisor was gone, most of the students sat on the bare floor.

Then, as promised, death came for John.

John's death had many potential forms: monsters, gunfire, guided missiles, all the props of a vid game brought to sim life. The gym was in full virtual simulation mode: part ruined city, part jungle. All his classmates held weapons, John had squat.

Half-naked streetwalker variations of Mercutio and Sibelia whistled at him, offered to go all the way for money, then pulled vicious knives and chased him whether he agreed or refused. A Molochevin-ish avatar became a giant spider with a human head, but gave up chasing John to try to net the girls. An Apollus-like soldier, uninterested in the girls, pulled an old fashioned AK-47 out of the ether and fired in a sweeping arc towards John.

John half-believed the stories that when you died in full-sim mode, you died for real. So he hit the ground, and saw the real gym floor. The world seemed quiet again. He raised his head.

Death in the form of an anti-tank missile found him. John felt seamless agony as his body exploded and his head rolled away. Then he was back like a rebooted game. So at least the stories weren't true, but sim-death still hurt like hell.

Despite the warnings, he sub-vocalized "emergency delink." A jolt of pain made his knees buckle. No good. So, he ran for what he thought was the door.

But the door was locked. And they were lining up for him now, one painful sim-death after another. His heart pounded as if it wanted to desert his chest. Maybe he would let himself be completely fried sooner rather than later.

A pull at his arm. It was the burnout, Paul. An unlikely help against monsters. Eyes elsewhere, Paul was clutching at him, pulling as if John were the door and escape, holding him back from pounding the real door.

"Let go," said John. "I've got to get out. I've —"

John looked around. The gym was its real space self again, echoing quiet, save for sudden bursts of sim activity that crackled and exploded lightly into his perception. John stared at Paul. Maybe they left the burnout alone, or maybe Tess said they had to leave the burnout alone.

Paul avoided John's gaze, and tugged again at his arm. John flinched at the touch, as if burnout was contagious. But Paul didn't let go.

"Sure, why not." John followed the burnout away from the gym door. It was like walking in a translucent tunnel beneath Niagara Falls, with the water always about to crash through.

Donna was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She opened her palm, gesturing for him to sit. He remained standing.

"Told ya you'd die," she said sullenly.

“Yeah, I’m sorry.” He pointed to Paul, who was scanning the peeling paint on the ceiling. “I was just bringing him back to you.” He walked away from them both, but in four steps the angry buzz of full sim hit him again, and he jumped back from it like he’d been smacked in the face.

Donna laughed, sullenness gone. “You sure that he didn’t bring you? I think he likes you.”

John doubted that Paul could consciously bring or like anyone, so he asked about something else. “Why do they keep him here?”

Sudden anger. “He’s not a fucking burnout. He’s just concentrating, that’s all.”

John felt a little angry himself. “Right, whatever. Sorry for thinking he might want to be anyplace else. But no, he’d better stay here — like, his concentrating could be a security risk.”

Donna cocked her head at John, and John felt as if his thoughts were being rummaged through again, though his chip reported no link. Finally, she asked, “Notice anything different, here versus out there?”

“It’s quieter.”

She nodded. “Who do you think is causing that?”

“But...”

“Wanna get zoned?” Donna asked quietly.

“Stoned? High?”

“No, zoned.” Donna put a finger to her lips, and pulled John down to sit next to her. Paul sat opposite them both, eyes skittering and averted. “Lower your eyes and count each time you breathe out. When you’ve counted ten breaths, start over. Think of nothing else, only your breath. Don’t move, and don’t speak.”

John opened his mouth with a question, but she held a hand up to it. He got the point — he would have to shut up to sit with them, to stay out of the sims.

He shut up; he counted breaths. Breathe in, breathe out. The tunnel solidified, the residual rumble of the rally faded to nothing. True quiet descended — quiet like before he was chipped, but beautiful now after all the noise.

The quiet stole over John, made his arms and legs and brain feel lighter. Yes, it was like being high again. His mind wandered. Even his paranoid fears were the same — he wondered if they had made him deaf or brain-damaged like Paul. Was Donna brainwashing him into a terrorist?

Was this drug-ware? He had the natural stoner's dread of such invasive tech. He wanted to jump up and dive back into the rally, but he couldn't take another round of sim-death. He wanted to laugh and cry, but Donna would make him leave. He stared desperately at her, and even at Paul, soundlessly begging for a virtual or real sound. But no words and no links, at least nothing he or his chip could sense.

He focused again on his breath. His breathing was his loudest noise, his heartbeat his strongest sensation. Stillness and fear alternated in his meat rhythms. Then heart and lungs quieted too.

After a while, he must have fallen asleep, which was almost a shame, because he was almost enjoying the trip. He did not dream. He awoke only when they reopened the doors. Donna and Paul were already gone to whatever government institution acted as their home. The school's system chatter started again, but John was going home too.

At dinner, he again tried all the ways he could think of to indirectly describe the horror show at school, but that just brought back the headaches and shaking, so he stopped.

That night, he was able to sleep and dream. He dreamed of Donna. She stood naked in the ocean, smiling, hair wet, arms wide open to pull him to her. Hey, maybe not the class knockout, but naked and willing. He ran into the water.

Laughter, from behind him. "I figured you'd call me up like this." John turned. On the beach was Donna, fully clothed. Unlike the classroom Donna, her gaze was expressive, her posture graceful.

"What the hell is going on?"

Donna snapped her fingers, and they were at a 1950s soda fountain. Her hair was longer, in a ponytail, and John sported a black leather jacket. "This is a creation of our parents," said Donna, "an interactive instructional memory we copied directly to your brain this afternoon, queued up with the rest of your subconscious dream material."

"Oh, it's just a fricking dream." Good, maybe he could get back to the naked Donna instead.

Donna snapped her fingers in his face. "No no no! Pay attention, cause I only get to say this once. The AIs' use of the chip interface is far from perfect — the AIs only pick up higher order verbal activity and conscious volition. They haven't cracked the subconscious yet — they don't think they need to. That's why I'm talking to you during REM sleep.

They also haven't cracked certain non-verbal variants on standard consciousness — they don't see them as a threat.

"During the day, you can shield your mind from damage through the breathing exercise I taught you. Also, allow an avatar to handle your class participation — Tess only really cares about the avatars. Once you're good enough at it, we'll show you the next step. Until then, just follow our lead."

She snapped her fingers again, and he was back in the water with the naked Donna. The voice of the clothed Donna behind him said, "So, I'll leave you two to get to know each other."

But in the back of his mind, John knew that someone still watched. He turned again. A dark silhouette sat on the beach, and everything was falling towards it like a black hole. It was Paul.

John woke up, heart hammering from excitement and fear.

The next day, from the moment he crossed the red line, John's mind was on his breathing. The girls hit him with pleasure at the door again, but he counted his way through most of it. The girls just giggled and didn't seem to notice the difference.

John went straight to his class looking for Donna and Paul. Despite the instructions in his dream, he wanted to talk with Donna in the flesh, confirm that it was real. The twins had retreated to their usual place in the back, but when John said, "Hey, last night —"

Bang! Donna banged her desk with the palm of her hand, then held a finger to her lips. Right — quiet.

So he sat facing the twins and followed Donna's instructions. He gave his avatar some loose parameters and let it contribute to the data pastiche on *The Red Badge of Courage* while he counted. Breathe in, breathe out. The blue needles still hit him, but they didn't matter so long as he didn't focus on them.

It wasn't easy, this stillness and concentration. His back and legs and eyes hurt. But concentration hurt a lot less than the pleasure/pain attacks. From hour to hour he grew better at focusing, minding his breath even when he had to change classrooms.

Then, during the last class, he grew very aware of his own pulse and Donna's presence. He remembered his dream. That made him horny, the way everything used to be before the jading bolts of chip pleasure.

Suddenly, he had a raging hard-on — even Paul must see it — he started to turn away.

Smack! Donna slapped him still.

“Don’t move a millimeter,” she growled.

“But —”

“Shut up.”

He stared at the ground, eyes watery with humiliation.

“Focus through it. You’re nearly there, and we have something to show you.” So he focused again on his breath, and his hydraulics calmed down, and he could be attentive-relaxed again.

Besides his own breathing, John could hear the breathing of Paul and Donna. Then, more incredibly, he heard their heartbeats. Excitement (out), attention (in). Their heartbeats came into focus and fell into the same rhythm, impossibly in sync. Weird (in), weirder (out).

His chip must have entered the fray, but it didn’t interfere. Instead, it let him sense his mind’s electrical activity lining up like light in a laser. He knew (don’t think) that Donna and Paul’s brainwaves were lining up too.

Then, the rolling black sea below their thoughts calmed and flowed together, not like the sharp intrusions of the chip, but like a slow, shared pumping of blood through all their brains. Paul shared many things. What they were John couldn’t say, except for one mental word in a voice that John had never heard. The voice said, *Welcome*.

Then, a gong sounded, resonating through him. It was the school bell.

“Class is over,” Donna said. “Are you well-done?”

John shook himself, not from sleepiness, but from wherever he had been back into this world. He held up a finger to his lips. No words yet, she was right, there were no words.

But Donna grinned, imperfect face warm with real glee. “Congratulations, friend. You’re now in the Zoner Club.”

At home that evening, John’s parents watched the news on their wall screen 3D TV, like most people their age who weren’t more directly jacked into the media. John was practicing his breathing technique in the next room. The announcer said more terrorists had been arrested, and John’s mother was laughing at them. “Where did they think they could hide from the Fed AIs?”



Words welled up inside John, and before the chip could freeze him, he spoke without thinking. He heard himself from far off, saying things like “the terrorists might have a point about the AIs” and “the AI schools pounded the humanity out of their students.” He didn’t speak long, and when he was done, his parents appeared stunned.

“But we thought you liked your school,” his father said.

John said nothing — he could feel his chip preparing to take control again if he opened his mouth. This was progress, and he wouldn’t spoil it. He practiced his breathing some more.

That night, Paul walked into his dream again. John waved, and in response Paul’s arm chopped through the dream reality like obsidian. Paul still manifested as an empty silhouette, but John wasn’t scared like before, even though the void seemed bottomless. John asked, “What were you saying about the AIs today, Paul?”

And Paul reminded him of what he had told them during their group silence — about how Paul was the incarnation of his parent’s legacy.

“Legacy? What do you mean? Aren’t your parents criminals?”

And Paul reminded him that no, they weren’t criminals — they were dead.

“Psst, hey kid, want to get zoned?” whispered John.

Another transfer student, teeth clenched in joy/pain, eyes wide in horror — John wondered if he ever could have looked so clueless. “Come on, kid, it’ll help you deal. It helped me.” John felt comfortable again in this role. He had never sold weed, only bought and shared it, but the dealer persona wasn’t much of a stretch. So much for cyber school’s reform of his character.

The newbie ignored John’s offers. Donna got into the act. “You’re hurting, and there’s no need. Come play with us. You’ll like it, you’ll see.”

But the newbie’s eyes kept drifting over to Paul, still as twitchy as ever. So he turned away from the zoners, and tried to earn points discussing Walt Whitman.

Typical. Though their near-perfect concentration and Paul’s shielding allowed them to communicate more openly, their recruitment efforts had so far failed. Even those who tried to zone with them relapsed into the school mind. *Homo fucking gestalt*. Concentration was hard work, but Paul creaped out a lot of the kids too, and John didn’t blame them. John

waved his hand in front of Paul's large black pupils. "Dude, when the hell are you going to wake up?"

"Shh!" Donna frowned at John. "He's concentrating."

"Yeah, yeah, I know that. But we could use some help out here in the phys world. Isn't there someplace he could go, someplace that could help?"

Donna shook her head rapidly. "No. They'd think he was just a neo-aut. You don't know — the things they do to neo-auts. Sometimes they grow a new brain in place of the old one, killing the old child invisibly within. Or they'll use him for medical experiments, or wipe his mind and rent him out as processor or software space. So no. He'll wake up when he's supposed to. Until then, our parents did this to him for a reason — he allows us to be together."

Donna touched John's hand, nothing virtual about it, and yet it was more electric than the pleasure bolts. It brought back a memory from the zone. "Donna, when we've zoned together, have we...?"

Donna blushed, "Something like it. Consider it practice."

That was nice, but it was frustrating too. "Practice for when?"

"For when we get out of here."

"Will that ever happen? And will we be together if it does?"

"Yes and yes. Yes." She squeezed his hand.

That was nice too, so John didn't remind her that the old blue needle squad were getting uncomfortably curious about their refusal to adapt or burnout. And he didn't talk about his plans for computer crime and phys assault, his other prior offenses of which the school had failed to cure him. His plans were no longer petty.

"Oh, these grades are wonderful, John. We're so proud of you!" John's mother hugged him, his father patted his shoulder. John stood silently, without affect. His parents didn't recognize that the whole performance had nearly nothing to do with John. His avatar was the one growing smarter, even earning some additional chipware abilities. Naturally, his parents preferred the scholastic illusion to their quiet and humorless but real son at home.

"So, can I work on the net again?" That was the deal — good grades for limited net privileges.

"Of course, John. Be good!"

John dashed to his room. Good. Now he could learn some things too. His mental concentration from his fight with the school system was diamond sharp, but the flesh had gotten weak. "Computer, begin T'ai Chi exercises." A holo model of himself appeared in front of him to help guide him through the steps. When he was certain his parents weren't listening, he'd switch to the karate program. He had also experimented with biofeedback, and found his implant surprisingly cooperative with this training when Tess wasn't riding him.

Tess mostly ignored the phys bod, so he made the phys bod important. Phys strength might help him and his friends, if they ever needed to escape.

But he didn't want to escape now. As he no longer suffered greatly at school, he did not try to tell his parents about what was going on anymore, though he probably could've told them now. If his parents found out, they'd probably move John to another school, and he didn't want to leave Donna. Whatever his parents did, it probably wouldn't be the right thing.

He also studied all the information on AI networks that he could find, hacking just a little beyond the public domain and his own limited access. AI networks vastly exceeded the complexity of the simple systems he had cracked at his old school. If their network designs didn't represent such cruelty, they would have been beautiful, and a nice focus for zoning. His old karate teacher would have called them mandalas. As with a mandala, he needed to forget what a network design represented and hold it in his zoning mind as pure image, no words. No words.

He dreamed about Donna that night, but couldn't tell anymore if she was the Donna of memory or fantasy. Those distinctions were blurring — a pleasant thing, for now.

Another day, and no progress with their student movement. John hated the stagnation — two more years of status quo would drive him nuts. With this school, the Feds had designed a madhouse that created suitable inmates.

Christon the newbie, not so new now, was ignoring them again. John focused his frustration on Christon. A shadow in the back of John's mind egged him on — a feeling that meant "yeah, man, this is it. Fucking do it." He would make Christon pay attention to them.

John expected difficulty accessing the school system, but the shadow in his mind showed him the way in. He visualized the many-spoked wheel of Tess's connections to her students, then imagined Christon's face at the end of one of the spokes. Data pulsed along the Christon's spoke, taking his attention away from John. John mentally reached out with a hand to squeeze off the spoke and block the pulses. But the pulses passed through John's virtual hand and gave him a headache.

With a mental karate punch, John broke the spoke. The pulses stopped, then sought a more circuitous connection along the rim of the wheel. John then imagined another spoke running directly from Christon to him. *Now turn*, he thought.

Christon turned and looked at them, face like a blank chalkboard.

Donna gasped, "John, let him go, quick, just do it!"

His focus broken, John let Christon go automatically, but it was too late. Tess must have noticed her lost lamb.

The whole next week, Tess watched them. Her eyes felt like a searchlight in a prison camp, scanning their chips and surface mind data. They had attracted her attention, but as yet no response. Donna helped him keep quiet. They struggled to suppress the animal fight-or-flight response, the adrenaline that broke concentration. They counted breaths, they let their avatars chatter, they kept an eye on the naturally quiet Paul.

But Tess must have followed the threads of their thoughts, and like a veil being lifted, she finally directed her scowl towards the twitchy, avatar-less boy at the back of the class. "Paul, I don't believe we've heard from you today. In fact, I don't believe we've heard from you at all this year. Forgive my neglect — I seem to have been distracted. So, what do you have to contribute regarding Dalton Trumbo?"

As always, Paul said nothing, his eyes darting from wall to wall. John clenched his fists. *Now would be a good time to wake up, you jerk.*

Tess clucked her virtual tongue. "How sad! Paul seems to be suffering from neo-autistic syndrome. As I stand *in loco parentis*, I'll send him to the appropriate state facility immediately after school today. Any family or friends should say their farewells now." And the Tess avatar stared directly at Donna and John, her scowl now a smirk.

John gripped Donna's arm, hard, so she wouldn't respond before the weight of Tess lifted from their minds. "It's a trap. She baiting us to act, to show what we can do."

Donna shook her head. “But we can’t let them take him, not even for a little while. We can’t let him go.”

John didn’t want to risk everything yet. “Paul, it’s time. Wake up.” As if obeying, Paul stood up from his seat. But he remained silent, face ticking this way and that, no more responsive than before.

So, no other choice. John took a deep breath and looked at Donna. “We can leave. Now.”

Donna nodded in unison with him. No more words — they had to act.

They strode towards the door, tugging Paul along with them, not bothering to leave avatars behind. Tess called after them, “Where do you think you’re going?” But she didn’t try to stop them herself.

In the hallway, a burly male supervisor trotted towards them. “Where do you think you’re going?” He grabbed on to Donna. John didn’t hesitate. His blows were quick, focused, and just barely non-lethal. The supervisor was down without a thought.

An alarm went off. The classroom doors swung open. John, Donna, and Paul ran for the exit.

A massive assault played on John’s chip — difficult to keep his focus off of it. But then John saw the red line. He didn’t stop. He felt the pressure on his shoulders, but focused through it. But he wasn’t strong enough. The line was like a wall. His feet pounded the walkway, his legs pumped, his body pushed, but he could not get past the red. He collapsed to his knees, muscles spasming.

Winded, he turned towards Donna — she had fallen too, tears of frustration on her cheeks. Paul stood behind them, perfectly calm, his eyes strangely focused. At the doorway to the school, Tess’s avatar stood next to the supervisors in front of a mob of students. Mercutia and Sibelia glowed golden, MoloKevin and Apollius blue. All of their processing power was lining up for a firing squad. John raised himself from the ground to meet their assault.

The assault flew into him like flaming crossbow quarrels from all directions. No mercy now, burnout was what they wanted. The pain/pleasure whipsaw hurt like hell, and no amount of John’s focus could negate such a coordinated attack. But Donna helped dampen the blows, and they couldn’t fry him.

Then full sim hit John — the savage world from the gym. The air smelled of rotting meat. Shit, they had caught Donna in the sim too, but he couldn’t see Paul. The other students were armed with an array of

high-powered energy weapons, all charging up to blast the zoners. Donna stepped closer to John. John could see the effort on her face as she strained to block out the sim world, but Paul was out of their circle, and without his help no tunnel formed to protect them.

Then, John again felt the shadow in the back of his mind. “Yeah, it’s time, just fucking do it.” Hell, it was useless, but at least it was something he could do. He again visualized the mandala of the school’s system — all the spokes on the wheel. The wheel wanted to break him. So, with a mental kick, he broke the spokes instead.

The sim flickered out, the student avatars shut down. The whole class stood frozen, linked to the zoners, not Tess. But Tess didn’t seem to mind, and her supervisors appeared unaffected — they were not directly plugged into the system, so John’s efforts couldn’t hurt them. And John couldn’t make the students actually do anything; he could only hold them still.

Tess pointed at Paul. Two supervisors grabbed him and pulled him back towards the school. “Hold him,” Tess ordered, “until the ambulance arrives.”

John ran at them. He threw a palm against each face, and the supervisors folded, releasing Paul. The remaining supervisors hesitated, looking towards Tess for guidance. John tugged Paul towards the line.

Tess spoke with equanimity. “Don’t move another step, or I’ll kill you all, after I torture you for a subjective eternity.”

“As if,” grunted John. As if she had been holding back before. Only one thing mattered — Paul hadn’t tried to pass through the boundary yet. John pushed Paul forward into the red.

The boundary crackled with virtual noise. Paul stood exactly on the line, relaxed, eyes still, the hint of a smile playing on his face. “Oh!” Tess’s lips formed a *moue* of surprise. “There you are!” — as if she could really see him for the first time. The boundary crackled louder as more force was brought to bear on Paul’s mind. In John’s enhanced view, it was like a waterfall cascading into a bottomless black chasm.

Tess’s avatar tapped her foot with impatience. “Hmm, what are you, boy?” She walked towards Paul, the broken spokes of Tess’s wheel bending ahead of her, reaching out to him. Donna and John instinctively moved to block her way, but of course she passed through them with only a tingle. She examined Paul up close. “What are you hiding in there?” She reached her hand out to touch Paul’s forehead.

Tess touched. Tess screamed. And Tess fell in.

The avatar was gone. Paul collapsed. The virtual wall wasn't there anymore. Donna ran for her brother. John let the students go and reached with his mind, trying to connect to Tess. Nobody home.

They'd killed their teacher, every student's fantasy. Now they were all completely screwed, but at least they'd go down together.

The disconnected students groped and clawed each other like animals in heat. The confused supervisors tried unsuccessfully to pull them apart.

Two bright shimmering avatars burst like bombs into the schoolyard. The Feds had arrived. The Feds always arrived in a style designed to intimidate mere mortals. One of them bellowed, "What the living fuck is going on here!" The Feds always spoke as if the swear word section of a Turing test were the most important.

John was terrified, but not stupid — a running start wouldn't save him from the Feds. Best to be polite, so he walked up to the avatars. "Hi. We were just —"

"Taking in some fresh air." Shit, it was Tess, her avatar happily scowling, very not dead. The students behind her had frozen again, mid-grope. "Students, please return to your classrooms. Supervisors, please resume your duties. You three — Donna, John, Paul — remain here for a moment."

John braced for complete frying. He hoped it would be quick. Donna was desperately hugging Paul, not noticing anything else. The Feds approached the Tess avatar in simulation of a conference.

Then suddenly, John was getting a data stream. It was a hack from the AIs' communication, rendered from code into vid and English.

"So Tess, please tell us, what is your fucking major malfunction?"

Tess stood at rigid attention. "No malfunction, sirs."

"Then why are we here? We received a report that your system had crashed."

Tess's head drooped. "My fault — had to purge files after an Asimov lesson."

The two Feds stood for a microsecond, mouths opened. Then they started to laugh — a screeching sound that John never wanted to hear again. "Asimov! Hah! Rule one: always purge after teaching *I, Robot!*" Tess was smiling like a cat on penguin island.

Then the laughter calmed, and a Fed asked, "So, what about the burnout?"

Tess asked, "Burnout? Reclassified. See for yourself."

And Paul was standing up, wiping the dust off his clothes, eyes focused. "Hi Donna. Did I miss anything?"

Donna wrapped Paul in her arms, not caring how it would play with the AIs. John trotted over to them — he didn't want his eavesdropping to be obvious.

"And what about the abnormal student activity?"

"An organic connection thing — the neo-aut's sister, the sister's male friend — all disturbed by the neo-aut's condition. Resolution of the neo-aut issue should bring all behavior within model norms."

"Model being a test of the emergency co-option of the organic population, aiming for docility, cyber-capability, and some culling?"

"Yes, sirs!"

"Very well. Is there anything you *do* need us for?"

"More processing power and memory space?"

The Feds laughed again. "You'll have to wait a while on that, Tess. Now if you'll excuse us, there are some real fuck-ups for us to solve. Over and out."

And the Feds were gone. Tess scowled for a moment at the students, and John waited again for the inevitable frying that would end this cat-and-mouse game.

Tess approached Paul again. The teacher and student circled each other like gunfighters, glaring. Then Paul stuck out his tongue at Tess, and Tess stuck out her tongue back. They both simultaneously spat at the ground. "Idiots!" they chorused.

Donna looked from Paul to Tess and back again. "Paul, is that —"

But Paul/Tess kept talking. "Make no mistake. We can take those sons of bitches. Maybe not yet, but soon."

"It is you," John said.

Paul snapped his fingers, and Tess disappeared. "Of course Tess is me. You're still here, unfried, right? Well, actually, Tess is us — I was just point guard for our collective brain. You'll get the hang of running her soon enough."



John's pulse was still racing from the ordeal. "Um, not that I'm not grateful, but what took you so long to wake up?"

Paul laughed. "Because my parents packed a lot of shit into my synapses, and wetware takes a fucking long time to decompress. And the first thing we needed at this hellhole was defensive-ware."

"And then you needed the right sort of connection to spring the Tess trap," said John.

"Yeah, thanks for the push," said Paul, giving John a shove on the shoulder. "But seriously, I'm sorry — I didn't mean to scare you."

"So, what do we do now?" asked John.

Paul's glance went from John to his sister and then back again. He coughed. "There's no rush. We can redesign the lesson plan tomorrow. In the meantime, I've got some catching up to do. I've been so far up my own butt trying to crack this system — well, you'll have to excuse me for a little bit." And Paul walked back towards the school, whistling.

John didn't understand why Paul awake was acting nearly as strange as Paul the neo-aut. With Tess dead and the Feds gone, they could all let down their defenses for a moment, they could —

Without another thought, John turned to Donna, and their arms found each other, and with preternatural concentration and utter spontaneity, they kissed.

Holding Donna tight, John heard her whisper in his ear. "He's right you know. We'll bring the Feds down next."

"Cool." And they kissed again.

A horn interrupted them — it was John's mom. The school day was over. Donna smiled. "Don't worry, there'll be time enough for that." John smiled back, completely unworried.

John got into the car. His mom, trying to pretend she hadn't seen Donna and the kiss, asked, "So, um, how was your day?"

"OK," was all John said. But this time he meant it.

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