

The Abstract Maverick

By Brett W. Urban

1.

Rain pelts the plastic scenery below as I scan for my targets. I care only about one, but her two friends could prove useful in the long run. No worries if they bail, though. My binocular overlay glitches every few seconds when the downpour grows too heavy for the stabilizers to compensate. Maintaining a one-thousand-hertz refresh rate is tough in near-typhoon levels of rain. My quarry enters my scope, and I snap a few optical captures before deactivating my overlay and fumbling for a cigarette in my bomber jacket pocket. The smell of lighter fluid pulls my mind back to simpler times, and the taste of tobacco smoke wakes it right back up to a "silent" alarm pounding against my forehead.

Target acquired. Also, please refrain from inhaling tobacco smoke. Estimated loss of life: 13.7 hours.

Good, I think back to her. Billie Fox is at it again, only this time she's ruining my last cigarette. "Great timing," I whisper under my breath. *They're only half a minute late this time, Fox.*

I check my pockets for the data drives—wet, but probably functional—and take off down the fire escape. The cool steel, coated in rust and gallons of dried blood, soothes my inflamed ego. I really need the cash, and this is my last shot. My overlay projects itself back into view, warning me of potential slippage from a second ago. The thing could really use a firmware update. Unfortunately, after thirteen stays in psych wards, psychosecurity takes precedence over a stumble down a fire escape.

The rain thickens, forcing me to disengage my portable holoscanner. It won't be much good in the thick of things anyway. A blinking neon baby-blue sign announces vacancies. The front office is dark. Thank fuck. This complex's management wouldn't appreciate my snooping around here much longer. I pause by their front door and inspect myself in the blue reflection. My face is ragged; I look like I've been bot-swarmed by Satan for the past two weeks. My jacket flaps as the wind picks up pace. I pull the balaclava from my forehead down over my nose. Double-checking that my electromagnetic

nine-millimeter pistol is toggled to sublethal, I stare back into my own visage. This prison will burn, and I'll burn right along with it. Programmer save me.

Billie's voice pings my mind. Message from contact. Is she prettier than me?

I sigh. Just play it already.

Fox's smirk dances across my visual field while I listen to Chile—my customer and hopefully an informant soon—tell me they're at the cafe, waiting to be seated.

I toss a thermal scan down the alleyway. The women look anxious, exhausted, holding themselves together against the deluge. Their faces are weary, but their auras burn golden with a certain darkness underneath. They're wired tight, looking like they could blow. Explode, I mean. The alternative wouldn't be half bad, though; I can't remember the last time I got strange out of one of these drops.

They check in with the hostess at the nearby cafe, taking seats under a fashionable, reinforced umbrella. The downpour surges, and the girls shriek as the canopy collapses inward under the weight. The hostess, draped in black latex and clutching her data slate, maintains an unyielding, gleeful smile while ushering the party indoors.

I shuffle down the alley toward the cafe and spot two kittens scrapping over their mother's teat. The feral growls are disheartening. With a quick flick of the selector switch, I engage silent lethal mode on my nine. I close my eyes tight and fire three rounds, ending the poor souls and making my life just a fraction easier.

I sit in the rain for a moment until the adrenaline dumps. Images of Simon and Gene—my only real friends for years, my kitten kids—drift across my mind, and the stench of their rotting corpses hits me deep.

I'd be crying now if I were a child. Hell, I might be crying right now, but I'm so doped up from tonight's quantum entanglement upgrade that I can't tell whether the tears belong to me or the city. The rain slaps my cheeks, soaking through the balaclava.

I command my pineal implant for a serotonin release into the bloodstream, counterbalancing the catecholamines. A soothing wave washes over my tense frame, stemming the breakdown. Gravity reasserts itself. I stumble through mounds of discarded servos, dead prost-bots, and assorted cyber-refuse until I trip over a sleeping junkie. Shit. He isn't sleeping.

I pull out my holoscanner for a quick sitrep. *What do you have for me, Fox?*

He's been dead for days. Pallor is awful, and his clothes reek of piss and shit, Billie reports back. Brown streaks on his sweatpants, black tar coating his fingers. Even this deluge can't wash away this bum's regrets. The Programmer took him, at least.

I grimace, but I don't hold my nose. The sensory assault is overpowering, and I haven't felt anything genuinely real in days. *Take me next, you neglectful fuck. Give me something actionable, Fox.*

Successful breach. Age: twenty-three. Russian-Polish descent. M.D.N.A. scan indicates recent loss of partner following a diagnosis of cybernetic-induced schizophrenia.

Fucking Christ. Been there. I would've bought him a drink.

I hate this job.

After catching my breath and instructing Fox to queue a delayed notification to the local precinct, I reactivate the catecholamine protocol and lock back in.

Now, I love this job.

I stroll past the café and peer through the glass with a thermal sweep. Chile and her crew are inside—pop stars playing dumb, but secretly coordinating a planetary prison riot. Not my scene. I have my own exit strategy.

The café is a trendy northside joint, crawling with digistoners chasing whatever new waveform people like me are pushing as narcotics. Real tobacco smoke clouds the air, mingling with soft piano keys stroked by an Elton John hologram. The booths are genuine red leather. I wonder how they got that past EarthGov inspectors. Maybe the regulators stopped caring. Works for me.

A waitress in skintight black latex hands out data slates. Digital overlays beam from the girls' foreheads onto the displays, syncing menus, local time, weather, and encrypted vital stats. Their athletic gear is wrecked, and the hostess is apologizing profusely as if the storm were her fault. These kids have it far too easy.

My grey bomber jacket and black jeans are thoroughly drenched, but I'm locked on the deal: exchange the data, collect the creds, and vanish. I step toward the entrance, cueing up my best Keanu routine. Play it smooth and I walk away laid, paid, and one step closer to breaking out of this human experiment. I rap on the window, catch their eye, smile, and—

My boot catches an outcropping of cracked concrete. I skid across the wet pavement and crash into a steel bench that a vagrant had used as a cot and latrine until very recently.

My forehead splits against the corner, smearing blood into the residue. The drives tumble from my pocket, smacking the asphalt with audible cracks across their alloy casings. I curse, scoop them up, thread my suppressor on, and put three electromagnetic rounds through the silicon before tossing the scrap into a nearby metal drum. Blue sparks erupt from the barrel, illuminating the brick alleyway. For a split second, a piece of graffiti catches the flash—a single, detailed eye that seems to track my movement. I shake it off. Chemical burnout or reflective spray paint. My Hawthorn Pantheon Series 9mm catches the yellow streetlamp glare overhead. The optical translator is on the fritz, rendering the French sign unreadable as I drag myself up. I wrap my jacket over the holstered piece and take the loss.

I limp back toward the fire escape, watching my step. Water cascades from rooftop downspouts in sheets, and the dead junkie is already gone. Scav-bots must have bagged him for M.D.N.A. extraction and eventual remixture. The Office of Reintegration hates letting biomass go to waste.

I shudder at the thought. Remixture. Liquified, separated, and repurposed into genetic baseline stock for state research. The Programmer's got a use for him now.

Scrambling up the rusted rungs toward my parked navy blue Porfidis skycruiser—its battered hull looking like a museum relic in the downpour—a vibration resonates in my skull. Billie Fox manifests in my mind's eye, voluptuous and mischievous, blue eyes glittering.

Bill, do you have any idea who that was? She could have—

Do you have to rub it in? I snap. I already made an absolute ass of myself. I'm done for the night. Call me tomorrow. Better yet, make it next week.

Pity you— A soft chime cuts her off as she retreats into my subconscious.

She'll keep pinging me every twenty minutes. I coded her that way. When you run a schizoid operating profile, redundant fail-safes are survival gear. Billie Fox is the ultimate fail-safe—and, unfortunately, my only companion.

A confirmation tone signals the end of the session, and my HUD collapses into standby. I cut the cruiser's sub-turbines and drop the pilot's seat into rest position. Twin holoscan nodes extend from the headrest, rotating orthogonally to map my neural pathways. Green laser sweeps wash over my retinas with numinous dread, and the onboard AI hums with mechanical detachment—firing off diagnostic queries about justified force parameters, emotional stability, and operational attachments. Standard Syndicate post-mission debriefing. One erratic response and I'm flagged for memory wipe and reassignment like the rest of the cattle on this rock.

I exhale hard. These psych evals are getting suffocating. Is there any concept of private interiority left? I already know my commanding officer gets his kicks in public restrooms. Does the Syndicate even track how many field operators are running on chemical fumes and cognitive rot? We've all been through the grinder: scrubbed memories, reconstructed identities, lethal wetwork...

The scan concludes. I return the seat upright and stare through the rain-streaked canopy. The megacity looks like it's in perpetual mourning; the citizens just haven't figured out who died yet. An *Insert Coin Here* neon billboard flickers above a low-rise warehouse packed with arcade relics from the 2050s. Miles away from peace.

"Do you find comfort when viewing media depicting organized criminal syndicates? Yes or no."

I grind my teeth. "Z-R0, you can't be serious. Pass."

"Response logged as compliant. Proceeding to next query."

"Get me a cold brew and five minutes of silence, or I'll introduce a pipe wrench to your main servo assembly," I tell the console, striking a digirette with a flick of my virtual thumb. The simulated nicotine hit is pathetic. "Ugh, fake garbage." I dismiss the projection, letting it dissolve into static, and dig a real stick out of my jacket. The flame catches—tobacco smoke bites my throat, and the fog clears. "Where to next, R0?"

"Operator Niko is holding on channel two-seven."

"Fuck. At least let me get back to my own hole first."

2.

"I can't juggle more drops this cycle. The network is tightening security, running deep packet sweeps," I mutter into the digital screensaver displaying my handler's interface. "I've zeroed five targets and turned three to the darklight this month. When do I get downtime?"

I spit out the open apartment window, watching the loogie plunge toward the traffic lane below. It misses a passing cruiser by inches. I pull back inside and survey my cage: peeling cream-colored drywall, a flickering halogen tube, and water-damaged posters of Tupac Shakur, Goethe, Slavoj Žižek, and Abby Martin staring back in silence. The single floodlight buzzes. Time to draw another cycle from the grid.

I reach for the zero-point energy tap while Niko's voice rattles in my earpiece. "Your call, Bill. That tally barely covers an archival memory retrieval, let alone an hour with a premium prost-bot."

"Screw memory retrieval. With my custom formulas I can re-experience whatever I want with sensory enhancement dialed to eleven. I need clearance," I say, tuning the converter for a three-minute draw—just enough wattage to keep the radiators hot tonight without triggering a DIA raid. "I need access to the root partitions, Niko. Deep level. Deeper than classified. I need the architecture. If the Syndicate burns me, I won't survive another scrub. This cycle has to be the last."

I glance at my wrist display. 1:01. Hard to tell whether it's AM or PM. Pitch black outside. I prefer existing in this liminal, quantum state where temporal markers blur; that's where the synthesis happens.

A light sequence on the dial indicates an impending melatonin surge. Counterproductive. I need to recalibrate the timer.

Niko chuckles with a thick Eastern European drawl. "Ah, no, sir. Such services exceed standard distributor tier. Please direct technical complaints to central support."

If the root directories are locked—if my fried brain stem keeps oscillating between carnal impulse and death drive—I might as well take the carnal route. I check the terminal. Cassandra Kinkade's contact packet glows on the HUD, suggesting an outreach. Consensual invasion of my psychological baseline. My chest tightens as memories of Cassie surface. I stare at the water stains on the ceiling, then hit send on a canned message I've had queued for weeks.

Niko keeps pitching over the comms. "I can set you up with the cleanest lab-grown bio-shell on the market, Bill! Top-tier engineering!"

Cassie is the only real human contact I can afford. She cuts me a rate because of our history—a discount I abuse out of pure desperation. We haven't linked up in months. Her schedule closes in an hour. My former partner running a side hustle isn't my favorite reality, but I maintain an open mind. Being with her is like resting in the eye of a hurricane: volatile, but we understand each other's damage.

Besides, I've done my time for the brass. I'm flesh and blood; I'm entitled to some decompression. I botched the drop tonight, which only proves my nervous system is running ragged. My biology demands release. I tap my boot against the floorboards while Niko lists off potential creator-descendants flagged for extraction—The Ones and Zeroes, some rogue collective I have zero intention of tracking down until tomorrow night.

Fuck it.

I sweep a cluster of empty bottles off my workspace, making room for my elbows. One shatters against the floorboards, driving a glass shard clean into my big toe. Searing pain shoots up my leg, accompanied by a flash of blind rage. The mascot on the shattered bottle of Jah Feel Caribbean Rum leers up from the puddle, mocking me. I kick the neck across the room, cursing the glass.

The smell of cheap rum permeates the damp carpet. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and look down again. The stain is gone; the bottle sits intact on the desk. Rain batters the windowpane, misting my row of vintage *Matrix* collectibles. My toe throbs with phantom pain, but there isn't a drop of blood.

Schizoid distortion or not, a phantom cut is nothing compared to my operational history. I've taken full nine-millimeter magazines to the pelvis and walked myself into the trauma bay on adrenaline alone. The brass claims they view me like family, but I'm just an expendable asset with a high pain threshold. Reconstructive pelvic surgery is no joke. I let out a dry laugh. Parental affection my ass.

"Keep the prost-bot, Niko. I'm heading to Cass," I say, doubtful he's even listening.

I've synthesized digidrugs for years—since before my academy intake, or at least the fragments of it they let me retain. I know the score: Earth is a planetary penal colony. EarthGov, operating under extraplanetary directives, maintains this simulated prison. Every death triggers a memory wipe, genetic reprocessing, and reinsertion. The population is packed with sociopaths, violent offenders, and political dissidents. Only a tiny fraction retain the awareness of their containment, and even they only see fragments. We're locked in an infinite loop, feeding a parasitic macro-structure that demands endless growth. When the Syndicate recruited me, they cited my rap sheet: illicit narcotics synthesis and subversive rebellion. A solid resume.

Enough brooding.

Niko's accent cuts in: "Bro, listen to me. She moved on, bro. Come on!"

I yawn into the mic. "Fascinating analysis, Niko."

Most souls on this rock can't stomach the reality of their incarceration. After repeated scrubs, they prefer the illusion—a clean slate, a fabricated purpose, the ladder of status. Living with the knowledge

that you're doing a perpetual life sentence on a prison world without an identity or an origin point breaks the mind. Rumor has it EarthGov keeps the master neural archives locked on Luna. Doesn't matter. The core discipline is detachment.

Lao Tzu nailed it: worldly attachment is the primary mechanism of bondage. Everything here is fleeting except the consciousness of the entities you encounter. The real challenge is releasing attachment to the few connections that actually matter.

Whether we get scrubbed again or ejected into deep space, none of us are likely to cross paths in the next iteration. I'm locked down here on vague charges, manipulated into compliance by the false promise of earning my freedom.

Fuck that. I'm designing my own exit. For now, the Syndicate pays the rent.

I look around the room. Relics from the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s clutter the floor. A non-functional rotary phone rests beside a cathode-ray tube television and an assortment of 16-bit consoles. Analog junk that keeps me grounded when Billie's presence gets suffocating.

I wonder how she's holding up in the buffer. Fine, obviously. I wrote her architecture. Still, she makes me forget she's code sometimes.

Niko keeps rambling: "The dermal layer is biological! Cultured tissue! You can't tell the difference!"

Statistically, half the populace has committed severe transgressions in previous iterations, whether they remember it or not. The enforcers don't accept memory wipes as an alibi.

The state offers no quarter to a waveform chemist. I've been cycling through this rock for over five hundred thousand subjective years. Hope of an external rescue died eons ago. The surviving operatives who haven't lost their minds to trauma or sentimentality are looking for an exit that doesn't involve the blender. Meanwhile, we share the dirt with eleven billion compromised souls.

"Given the mortality rate has doubled this quarter, why are we obsessing over cybernetics?" I ask Niko, who ignores me to continue his monologue.

I wouldn't care either if I'd had human contact in the last sixty days.

My sidearm has become my primary companion. I trace the slide of my McKarrin Bloodsucker, checking the chrome finish.

The nanomimetic tattoo on the side of my neck hums faintly—an older revision of the sleek cosmetic ink they market to kids now. It executes the complex tensor math required to align conscious Will with neural output. EarthGov preaches that the Will belongs to The Programmer. I rejected that dogma, turning to underground Daoist texts to reconstruct my own framework.

Composed of self-replicating nanite clusters, the ink maintains continuous quantum entanglement with external routing nodes. High-bandwidth intuition with a non-zero chance of catastrophic stroke.

Pumping neurochemical precursors directly into the bloodstream, it executes somatic repair protocols and facilitates the projection of mental forms into physical space. It's versatile, but dangerous. If I had the processing overhead, I could project a shared hallucination across half of downtown Fornulk.

"...and my buddy swears he couldn't tell the difference! Ha!" Niko's cackle scrapes my nerves.

"Great story. Credit my account so I can close the channel. I'm moving."

"Whatever, man. Later!" A sharp disconnect tone sounds as Niko's feed drops. The display clears, revealing the vintage tube TV connected to my Super Nintendo via the zero-point converter Niko rigged. The device feeds current into the room's stripped wiring. I pull the window shut, letting the rhythm of the rain insulate the room.

I hit the power switch on the remote. The Isley Brothers drift through the speaker cones, offering artificial serenity.

I kill the feed.

Surviving as a Syndicate asset with operational clearance requires periodic mental self-scrubbing. I operate in hostile territory at all times. Chemical intervention is unauthorized, but necessary; the

establishment permits the drug trade because it keeps capital circulating upward to the executive class and their technical architects. Parasites.

With a mental prompt, my neck ink flares. A cocktail of dopamine, serotonin, and GABA hits my frontal lobe. Laura Branigan's *Self Control* loops in my auditory cortex. A vivid mental impression surfaces: dark hair, arched brows, tan skin, beckoning me toward deep water.

She dives beneath the surface—too deep to follow. A mermaid erupts from the crest in a rush of foam. The vision pulls me down into the dark, and when I open my eyes, the title screen of *Super Mario World* is glowing on the tube monitor.

The soundtrack brings a strange peace, rendering analog gaming trivial compared to my primary work. I stand, ride the wave of neurochemical momentum, and move to the oak desk. Under blacklight, the surface tells stories I'd rather ignore.

I settle into the chair, depress the floor pedal with my left heel, and bring up the holographic workspace. The day's sensory captures, dreams, and cognitive drafts expand into floating waveforms—ready to be edited, sampled, and recombined.

The market is starving for cognitive enhancement. I've been engineering a clean genius-state formula: a digital compound designed to bridge disparate neural clusters, facilitating high-order conceptual synthesis. Academics and creators would drain their accounts for it, but the operation carries severe risk. If the Syndicate catches wind of unauthorized cognitive synthesis, they'll scrub my stack and reassign me to entry-level wetwork.

Imagine combining deep intuitive synthesis with quantum-level computational logic—the raw pattern recognition of a savant balanced by emotional equilibrium.

That's the goal. The reality is that I've supplied hundreds of burnouts and identified maybe three viable neural architectures. Most buyers are just looking for sensory oblivion—Dante's opportunists drifting in compliance. Raw biomass waiting for the recycling vats.

Still pays the rent.

The human cognitive architecture is fundamentally divided: two hemispheres locked in perpetual debate. After years of substance abuse and neural modifications, my left hemisphere constantly tries to reduce reality to mechanical materialism—an animal sent to consume and reproduce, executing EarthGov baseline programming.

My peers across the New North American Republic reject that baseline through aggressive cyber-psychology and chemical divergence.

Working the sliders across several hours, I structure a compound targeting the right hemisphere: expanding associative capacity while reinforcing corpus callosum throughput to stabilize the load. The left hemisphere's executive control is dialed back, quieting the ego.

The three-dimensional waveform resembles a grazing sheep under clear skies. It produces the somatic impression of a dry seventy-two-degree afternoon. Limbic receptivity will be maximized; suggestibility will spike. I flag the profile in my local cache to restrict distribution around bad actors. A quick scan from Billie will filter the clientele. If this fell into the hands of an apex predator, I'd volunteer for a memory wipe myself.

After broadcasting the batch metadata across encrypted burner nodes—listing the product alias and secure routing tags—I slide open the lower desk drawer. Rolling papers, a lighter, and a pinch of cured organic green. Digital highs have their utility, but nothing beats old-world botany at the end of a shift. I bring up the comms overlay and call up Cassandra Kinkade's profile. The primary complication in my personal timeline. I initiate the call.

The line connects. "Back again? You said last week was the cutoff."

I wince. "Isn't that the routine? It'd be smoother if we used direct neural sync. I hate running unencrypted audio."

"I know. That's why we're on audio. And the answer is no. Goodbye."

The link drops. I swear at the ceiling and redial.

Click. "No!"

"I've got new inventory! Clean batch! Come on, Cass, you know nobody tunes your balance like I do."
I catch my breath.

A heavy sigh crackles through the speaker. "Fine."

I wash down the lingering guilt with rum and smoke.

3.

Cassie Kinkade's perimeter scanner pings my approach. Her house—once clean white, now weathered to a dull yellow—is visibly sagging under the perpetual rain. The screen door hangs by an upper hinge, the porch chairs are overturned and dark with mildew, and her Porfidis Skycruiser is missing from the gravel drive.

In its place sits an outdated utility transport.

I installed a new neural patch on the commute over, designed to boost empathy and interpersonal tracking. We need this exchange to go smoothly. Keeping Billie Fox suppressed leaves me acutely aware of my own isolation—that cold, gnawing need for actual human presence.

Her security terminal logs my arrival with an audible chime as I take the porch steps. Before I can knock, a capacitor whines to my left. Cassie is crouched below the deck railing, leveling her Sidewinder shotgun straight at my beltline.

"Drop whatever background processes you're running in that skull," she demands, tracking my midsection. I step carefully along the wall, hands raised in the low light.

Her double-barrel plasma shotgun tracks my chest as I ease toward the entryway table. The candy bowl is empty.

"That's far enough, you drug-dealing nepo-case." Her sneer softens into an exhausted glare. Her hands tremble slightly as she lowers the muzzle. She lets out a ragged breath, muttering curses under her breath. Then, for a second, that familiar look of exasperated care cuts through the armor.

My memory pulls hard toward our parting two years ago—the night we both assumed was the finish line.

4.

We're outside the Grand Larceny club, deep in Sector 42. Rain cuts through the neon glare, hammering the asphalt. Ground transports kick up spray along the avenue.

Cassandra is in a torn red dress, her right thigh leaking blood onto my tracksuit. Her bodice is shredded; I'm trying to keep her covered with one arm while dragging her toward an alley.

My left shoulder is screaming—dislocated for over an hour. Even a heavy-duty actuator couldn't force it back into the socket without triggering a neural feedback loop that would leave my brain stem fried. I haul her behind a dumpster into a heap of wet trash. A squatter shrieks and scrambles into the dark at the sight of the blood. There's always another informant waiting in the wings for M.D.N.A. collection. I tap Cassie's cheek, telling her to maintain pressure on the femoral artery.

Billie, run the field surgery routine. Boost my output. I can't stabilize her alone.

Deploying now, Bill. You know, you could leave her here. Just you and me. Kidding, obviously.

I let out a breathless chuckle. *Not the time, Fox. Get ready.* I focus on Cassie. *I'm patching you through.* I project Billie's interface directly into Cassie's pineal socket. Billie's persona overlays my perception of Cassie, blurring the two into a single presence.

Billie gasps from the sensory bleed, catching me off guard, and clamps down on the wound. I press my palm against Cassie's neck tattoo, establishing intuitive quantum coupling to trigger her internal analgesia protocols. Our right hemispheres synchronize; the sudden adrenaline surge makes me gasp for air.

Billie stabilizes, maintaining the vascular clamp while I tear away the dry section of my undershirt. I pull her hands back, pack the laceration, wrap it tight, and haul Cassie upright on three.

Can she walk? I ask Billie.

Vascular integrity is borderline. I'll steady her motor control. You handle navigation.

I push the existential dread aside. *I built your subroutines, remember? Let's move.*

We limp down the flooded alley toward the transit station.

That memory has anchored us in shared trauma for years. If I'm being honest, saving her that night remains one of the few moments I actually look back on with pride.

Then the darker fragments surface.

I remember lying half-buried under a pile of deactivated combat chassis. After an hour-long skirmish against an augmented shock team, I finally managed to grab a piece of scrap plating to lever myself upright. Homeostasis fractured; my adrenaline plummeted, leaving my respiration shallow and ragged. Using a scorched rifle as a crutch, I dragged myself over to Cassie's limp frame.

She opened her eyes, coughing up fluid. "We built this slaughterhouse," she whispered. "We can build something functional out of it." Her optical implants flared, venting residual capacitor charge in an expanding holographic pulse. We survived.

5.

The memory loop refuses to break.

My vision blurs, returning to the sensation of a dead shoulder and a wounded Cassandra demanding a real cigarette.

"None of that synthetic digital crap you keep pushing..." She never let that go.

I'd spent weeks trying to synthesize the exact mathematical waveform to simulate tobacco smoke down to the molecular burn. In her view, I'd completely missed the point.

"Can you put weight on it?" I asked, scanning the ground. She nodded, and I helped her find purchase. We'd cleared the transit platform, but my arms were giving out.

Her knee gave way, and she screamed: "Richard H. Programmerson!" The outburst snapped me out of the dissociation, pulling my awareness back to the center of the room.

Back to the present.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cassie snaps, leaning her shotgun against the doorframe. I stumble over the entrance mat, knocking the candy bowl off the stand, and hit the linoleum floor. Her data slate buzzes in her pocket as she grabs my jacket collar, hauling me toward the stairs.

My skull is ringing. Her words sound distant, underwater. Her black tomcat watches from the counter like an executioner. The beast just sired another litter. Programmer knows I miss mine.

The ambient audio sharpens. Cassie looks down at me, her dark brown eyes locked onto mine. "Can you make it to the couch, or do I have to drag you?"

"Just like old times," I reply. My limbs are heavy, but my heart is racing. I still carry the regret of never making things permanent with her—never taking the leap before the Syndicate intervened. The physical connection was intense, but the shared history runs deeper.

I come to on the floor beside her slipcovered sofa, a dull ache throbbing in my hip. She's leaning against the counter, tapping commands into her slate. I try to push myself up, manage two unsteady steps, and drop back down. TV is the safer option.

I transmit a wireless prompt to the wall unit. The screen flickers, displaying an ad for O'Brien Menthol Cigarettes. Sixty-two credits a pack. Extortion. I really need to stick to the digital formulas. If the nervous system can be tricked into a dopamine cascade via sensory projection, why can't I convince myself the synthetic smoke is enough?

Cassie walks over, slips the slate into her back pocket, and looks down at me with an unreadable expression. She beams an encrypted Syndicate packet straight to my pineal receiver:

SYNDICATE TRANSMISSION RECEIVED

MISSION CODENAME: AD INFINITUM

SUBJECT: ASSET INTERCEPTION OR NEUTRALIZATION

BRIEF: SHIPMENT OF FOURIER PROJECTION DEVICES EN ROUTE TO FORNULK.

SECURE OR DESTROY.

NOTE: Go easy on Bill, Cassie. Mother out.

I dismiss the text and exhale. "She always knows how to deliver a brief."

"How many times has she pulled us out of the grinder?" Cassie challenges.

Take the high road. "And how many times have we cleaned up their messes? How many times have we been wiped and reset? Want to run the numbers?"

Cassie stays quiet.

Mother and the Syndicate have provided our operational umbrella on this world. We move across sectors with tactical immunity. The work is addictive. I went from an expendable street enforcer to Mother's primary asset—graduating from routine memory scrubs to holding a stable operational identity. Every operator understands the horror of piecing their psyche back together after an administrative purge. EarthGov needs enforcers who can operate in the dark, managing the criminal ecosystems that fester beneath the megacities. My status allows me to run secondary operations—synthesizing and moving digidrugs under the radar using Syndicate identity-scramblers. Mother would terminate me if she verified the scale of it, but my utility in the field keeps me alive.

Cassie smirks. "Momma loves you. Cass does not. Get up, get your kit together, and meet me on the roof in ten."

She turns, heads up the stairs to her bedroom, and pulls the door shut, leaving me on the floor with a bruised hip and a fried central nervous system.

My neck ink hums, releasing a stabilizing neurochemical surge. I push myself up, check the sidearm in its holster, straighten my jacket, and grab a handful of sour blue-raspberry gummies from the counter bowl. The sugar hit sparks a sudden memory.

Cassie laughing uncontrollably in the front seat of a cruiser after catching me off guard. An uncorrupted memory of wanting a normal life with her. But deep down, I know I'm built for the gutter—running ops, breaking networks, and dosing rival assets into digital psychosis. The work consumes everything. Yet hearing that memory of her laughter softens the cynicism, if only for a second.

My vision blurs. Dissociation creeps back in. The living room feels like a low-resolution rendering. I catch Cassie's gaze at the top of the landing. Her lips aren't moving, but her voice hits my auditory feed through the direct sync-link she never severed.

"Get your ass up here! Roof in sixty!"

When contract violence is on the ledger, Cassie always finds her focus. I clear my head, run a quick vitals sweep—nominal for a fried brain—and jog up the stairs.

A ping hits my audio channel. A message from Niko advertising a drink special at The Blue Moth. I mute his channel.

I pass the guest room. The oversized tactical gear scattered across the floor could belong to anyone. I try not to overthink it; that chapter of our lives closed long ago. Now it's just me and my digital anima. I need human grounding.

Cassie's Ferreti Extreme skycruiser is idling on the pad when she kicks through the roof access door, a pair of cold beers in one hand, her plasma shotgun slung across her back, her neural baseline humming in focused hypomania.

"Aren't you burning through your capacitors?" I ask, tapping the vehicle's chassis. "Thought you traded down to save credits."

"Upgraded model." She taps the mermaid tattoo on her neck. It flares brilliant blue, lighting the veins beneath her skin with a faint golden halo. I blink hard, and the aura fades.

With a mental command from Cassie, the cruiser's drive goes dead silent as light-refracting polygons sweep across the hull, engaging the optical cloak. "Ready? We've got a sixteen-hour window before the stabilizer charges degrade—twenty if I don't have to drag you out. I packed extra supplies regardless." She grins and tosses me a bottle.

This isn't her natural baseline; it's performance chemistry. Her ticket back into senior operational standing—a chance to prove herself to superiors who never set foot in the field. We take the bullets so the corporate suite can broker treaties with EarthGov, hoping for a cut of the margins or an off-world transit pass. I don't know which one I care about less.

I pop the cap and take a swig. "Are we sure about this drop? Niko mentioned Carla's is packed tonight. We could ghost Mother's ping and walk away." I always feel the pressure when challenging Mother's directives. The Syndicate doesn't issue reprimands; they issue summary wipes. The executives managing our files have no concept of what field trauma does to a person.

They expect us to meditate, self-administer memory scrubs, and re-enter the field while they inhabit the ninety-six percent of reality hidden from the general populace. Arrogant bastards. They claim they came up through the ranks, but the hierarchy has been rigid since day one. Information compartmentalization ensures no one holds the full blueprint.

If I keep running these loops, I'll trigger a psychotic break. The cold beer helps take the edge off the paranoia. I think back to my biological parents. Long dead, long forgotten in some administrative archive.

The ambient air turns cold and sharp. An unnatural dread washes over my gut. Below us, the flooded city flickers. A skyscraper half a mile out glitches violently—its geometry shearing like corrupted video data before settling back into place. I grip the dash, bracing for an impact wave that never comes. I look back at the tower; it stands rigid against the rain.

I lean back into the bucket seat, strike a match, and let the cruiser take us into the dark.

6.

We trade swigs of cheap lager and dry sarcasm while the Ferreti's autopilot navigates the transit lanes. The cruiser's navigation core smooths out Cassie's aggressive steering, maintaining a steady vector over the sprawl.

I drop the empty bottle into the door compartment. "Why are we running retrieval on a crate of projection tech?" I ask over the drone of the cruiser's audio feed. The dash rattles as the vehicle banks hard into an unmapped service bypass. "Can't Mother assign this to junior enforcers?"

"We are the junior enforcers, Bill," she replies without looking over.

The cruiser weaves between high-rises, cutting through automated traffic and drawing a chorus of collision alarms that barely register over the bass.

A sharp neural spike hits my frontal lobe. My neck tattoo pulses violently, absorbing the feedback spike. My lungs seize; I cough hard, fighting for oxygen. Another system glitch that Z-R0 failed to flag during my psych eval. I catch my breath. "What's the payout on this run?"

She smirks, watching the rain sheet across the windshield. "Enough to clear the mortgage on the house and expand my weapon locker." She drops the vehicle into a controlled descent beneath the 10th Street overpass, skimming the broken asphalt below.

She's formidable when she's dialed in. Her pragmatism is grounding; she isn't chasing cosmic escapes—she just wants security and hardware. I respect the mindset, even if my own psyche refuses to settle. I want out of the entire architecture.

So do I, Billie's voice chimes in my head.

Stand down, Billie. We're about to sync.

You can't balance both plates indefinitely, darling, she murmurs.

I flag her process for standby, and she recedes.

Cassie has an operational plan. Meanwhile, I'm wrestling with existential paralysis—hating the machine while executing its contracts out of habit and fear. The human brain wasn't wired to hold the full scope of this prison's deceit. That's why we scrub. I limit my working memory to immediate tactical data; information overload in this line of work is fatal.

There's a deep history between us, but the details are fragmented. Every new mission packet overwrites older memories, pushing them into the dark. Neural reconstruction surgery is imprecise and brutal. If I'm going to be scrubbed, I'd rather do it on my own terms.

Still, having Cassie on my six is the only reason I'm still breathing in this concrete maze. The glitches, the phantom memories, the hallucinations—something is tracking my signal, testing my boundaries. It's escalating, and I can't report it to Mother without getting flagged for disposal. Cassie would write it off as chemical burnout. She might be right.

Dark thunderheads gather above the sector, split by blue arcs of static discharge. I tighten my grip, running my thumb along the receiver of my sidearm for tactile grounding. The rain intensifies, blurring the boundary between solid architecture and optical distortion.

Cassie glances at me. "You're dosing too much of your own product, Bill. What did you take before you walked in? I won't log it with Mother." A rare moment of unprompted concern.

I clear my throat. "Nothing out of the ordinary. The operational tempo is catching up with me, that's all. Let's focus on the drop."

7.

Cassie sets the Ferreti down in an executive lot packed with high-end transports destined for black-market auctions. Ocean swells crash against the perimeter of the artificial island, sending salty spray over the vehicles' polished clear-coats.

The compound houses a private estate flanked by commercial amenities: dining, private medical suites, a screening room, and an exhibition gallery.

"Subtle," Cassie mutters. The dark circles under her eyes are prominent. The stimulants are wearing thin.

"We can pull the plug if you're off baseline, Cass."

"Not now, Bill." She cinches her tactical boots and adjusts her black fatigue harness. "Things have been complicated since my daughter's father went off the grid. Understood?"

The jab hits its mark. "If either of us were built for domestic life, it would've worked out. We're field operatives, Cassie. That's not a stable environment for a kid. Does she know anything about our work?"

"No. And I intend to keep it that way."

The reality of Billie's neural involvement in Mandy's conception hangs between us, unaddressed.

I initiate a spatial pulse scan. Multi-spectrum signatures illuminate across the mental grid projected into my field of view, categorizing targets as friendly, neutral, or hostile.

My right hemisphere handles the Fourier field projections while the left maintains spatial tracking. I transmit the coordinate data to Cassie's receiver. With both nodes active, our situational awareness locks into a shared telemetry field. With a synchronized command, we couple our corpora callosa, opening direct telepathic communication and synchronized motor responses.

Targets logged, I project.

She checks her weapon, and the plasma conduits on her double-barrel hum with static charge. Then I catch the distinct, near-silent electromagnetic charge of her secondary piece: a Gauss Mk. II.

A sharp flash of memory hits my feed—raw, intense memories of us together before the split.

"Where did you secure a Gauss Mk. II?" I ask aloud.

She meets my eyes, our neural sync bridging the past memory with the present tension. "You know better than to ask about my suppliers," she mutters, her breathing shallow.

In the memory, we're reckless and young. Nine months later, Mandy was born. Another variable in my ledger of unresolved guilt.

She's safe, Cassie projects firmly, cutting off the spiral before my nervous system overloads. She's with the foster family. Stay in the field. How degraded is your focus?

Her frustration tints my visual field red—a common artifact of hemispheric synchronicity. Synesthesia. I've been avoiding my own stabilization formulas out of paranoia; I'll need to dose a corrective patch once we clear the objective.

Copy that. Moving, I reply. We holster our pieces and advance along the perimeter wall, mapping ingress and extraction vectors.

No perimeter guards. Shift rotation. Autonomous drones circle overhead, scanning for biological signatures. My palms are slick against my grips.

The cargo is staged inside an avant-garde gallery installation, Cassie projects. *High-frequency wave generators disguised as modern art. Don't go kicking the front doors down.*

Wasn't planning on it.

Could have fooled me.

The air in the courtyard is dry. Synesthesia translates the ambient scent of ozone into pink streaks across my vision. My neck ink discharges a controlled pulse into my cranium, releasing catecholamines. My focus sharpens; the cognitive drift stabilizes.

We're operational.

The chemical sharpness heightens my olfactory input, bringing the faint smell of industrial solvent to the fore. Limbic suppression will smooth it out shortly.

I'll maintain low profile until contact, I project.

Hold the hero routine. She drops into a crouch by a reinforced security portal marked with corporate warning placards. Standard multi-key should crack the bypass. She deploys her bypass tool, cycles the frequencies, and the magnetic deadbolts disengage with a hiss.

She gives me a brief, genuine smile, and we slip inside, sidearms ready, neural baselines running in parallel.

Clear so far, I send.

Good. Let's keep it that way.

We navigate a vaulted gallery. Kinetic sculptures shift and groan in glass vitrines. One installation jerks erratically, venting green coolant against the glass, while a maintenance drone cleans the surface with mechanical precision.

No alarm triggers. Niko's key was clean, I note.

The last person I want on our comms is that parasite, she counters.

He's reliable enough for bypasses.

Shut it and watch the corner.

We maneuver past several biomechanical exhibits, stopping at an archway. Rhythmic breathing ahead, Cassie signals. I tune my audio feed and confirm the pattern.

Cassie rolls through the frame. A muffled thud echoes in the corridor, followed by the sound of dead weight being dragged behind a pillar. She props the augmented sentry against the marble base and strips his access hardware, pulling a security card labeled LOU_TENANT_003.

Her pineal node projects a localized light-bending field over the body, cloaking it from basic sweeps.

She winces, rubbing her temple. Need to abort? I ask.

Move, she snaps, passing the keycard to my palm.

We advance into the central atrium, scanning for the Fourier units.

"Excuse me?" a low, resonant female voice calls out from the reception desk.

8.

The golden-haired woman behind the security console tracks us with absolute precision, her right hand hidden beneath the counter.

"Keep your hands where they are," Cassie warns, leveling her shotgun.

Cass, we can disengage, I project.

Her gaze cuts to me. *Why are you so desperate to pull out? What are you running from?*

I'm looking for an exit. Billie, exfil telemetry now.

Time dilates. My forehead throbs as the neck ink draws maximum current, the scent of ozone and sulfur filling my sinuses while Billie allocates local processing power to compute an escape route.

One moment, dear. Are we certain this asset is a priority? Fox's smirk floats across my overlay. Cassie taps her temple, trying to suppress the bleed-through. Give me time, girl. We can reach an understanding. No need for hostility.

She's optimizing the route, Cass, I intercede.

You're both insufferable, Cassie projects back.

Billie's avatar fades, leaving a highlighted egress path across our displays. Telemetry mapped. Happy hunting, Bill.

Time accelerates back to baseline. The blonde strikes the emergency release under the desk.

Klaxons detonate through the atrium. The sudden sensory overload shatters my cognitive balance. Phantom audio—voices of neutralized targets, former handlers, old trauma—floods my auditory cortex. I stumble behind an ornamental planter, gripping my temples as my vision tunnels.

I'm at the secondary exit... Bill, report! Cassie's voice cuts through the static.

Neural feedback... need medical... My diaphragm locks up; my jaw clamps shut as a migraine tears through my corpus callosum. SecureGuard enforcer droids roll into the atrium from dual staging bays, locking their heavy weapon mounts into firing positions.

"UNAUTHORIZED PERSONNEL. STAND DOWN FOR IMMEDIATE DETENTION."

Cassie, status?

Nothing but white noise on the link.

"FINAL DIRECTIVE. WEAPONS FREE IN THREE... TWO..."

The psychic pressure vanishes in an instant, replaced by a warm, golden-white illumination across my field of view. The alarms and the mechanical whine of the droid cannons fade into dead silence. A familiar, measured voice resonates in my skull.

Mother...

Stay quiet, William.

Time snaps forward. Arc-discharge pulses erupt from the droids' internal capacitors, blowing out their firing circuits. The units shudder, outputting scrambled error codes before their main relays fail and their chassis collapse into scrap. When I look past the planter, the corridor is clear.

Run.

I scramble back along our ingress route, weapon drawn, blood dripping from my nose. The adrenaline drop hits like a sledgehammer; my legs give out at the primary blast door. I collapse against the steel frame, consciousness slipping.

A heavy impact vibrates through the floor, followed by the rattle of automatic fire and a concussive blast.

"Bill!" Cassie's voice breaks through the haze. Hands grab my tactical vest, hauling my dead weight across the threshold as more combat chassis detonate behind us. Darkness pulls me under.

9.

"Mom. That's enough."

"Mother, Cassandra. We maintain protocol here."

Harsh fluorescent light stings my eyes. The throbbing in my skull is relentless, turning their voices into drill bits against my temples.

"He's stabilizing. Billie, check his—"

"Quiet."

I force my eyelids open. Mother stands over the examination cot, dressed in her tailored suit, smiling with clinical warmth. The room is padded, decorated with classical oil paintings, soft piano music drifting through hidden grilles. Cassie sits in the corner chair, eyes red, exhaustion etched into her face.

Mother reaches over and toggles the ambient lighting to blacklight. My hospital gown glows violet. She leans down and embraces me firmly. The sensation is disorienting—a sharp reminder of the maternal authority she wields over our lives.

Cassie watches us. "Thought you were done for, B."

"Likewise. Thanks for the pull. I've been running hot on the new formulas, but it's manageable—"

Cassie raises a finger, quieting my lips.

Mother steps back toward the door. "You two need to debrief. I'll be in the exterior courtyard." She exits through the pneumatic slider, revealing a manicured green lawn before the door seals shut.

"Bill?" Cassie prompts.

A synthesized organ track begins looping in my head.

You rang? Billie's voice chimes.

Thanks for the assist earlier, Fox, I project.

Cassie's feed catches the transmission: *I appreciate it too.*

Charming! Billie broadcasts back.

Cassie flushes.

Billie, drop to background, I instruct.

The tension in the room eases slightly. I look down at the black-and-white checkered floor tiles, which seem to expand and contract with every breath. I need a clean break from the field.

"I didn't realize our sync was still open," I tell Cassie. "I appreciate you pulling me out."

"I know," she says quietly.

The pneumatic door slides open with a mechanical hiss, and Mother re-enters carrying physical file folders—standard protocol for compartmented operations.

"You're both aware of what you mean to this organization," Mother says, setting the folders down. "I brought you into this structure, and I intend to protect the investment. Cassie, especially." She looks at me, projecting a private note: You remain my priority asset, William.

She continues aloud: "Now, Bill, no evasions. Are you running unauthorized synthesis off the books? Word on the street mentions a high-potency cognitive amplifier. Care to explain?"

I keep my baseline flat. "Routine personal testing, Mother. Nothing scalable. Pure self-administration to manage field stress. I'm not branching out."

"Of course. We'll discuss the details when you're ready to be fully transparent. Moving on: have either of you encountered an organization operating under the banner of 'The Ones and Zeroes'?"

Cassie and I exchange a brief neural pulse. Niko mentioned that network, I send.

You think Niko is running deep Syndicate reconnaissance? she returns.

Mother clears her throat, noticing the delay. "If you're finished conferring, here is the baseline."

She produces a stylus, tapping the interface to project tactical data across the wall. Text overlays the Mona Lisa print. "'The Ones and Zeroes claim to be executing a total disruption protocol against state infrastructure and institutional control. Quote: There is no middle ground. The architecture falls or we do, and we're taking the network with us.'"

Cassie leans forward. "Mother... if we have an active lead on a cell operative, should we initiate extraction?"

Cassie, stand down, I project sharply.

Billie, intervene, I command.

The ambient lights flicker. Mother's projection unit cuts out with a static pop. For a fraction of a second, the glowing outline of a white fox flashes across the room, giggling softly before the overhead bulbs burst, plunging the ward into darkness.

Nicely executed, I send to Billie.

Anytime, Big Boss.

I grab Cassie's arm. We're moving. "Thanks for the debrief, Mother. We'll follow up on the street contacts and report back." I add, "Take care, Mom."

She pauses in the dim light, momentarily caught off balance. "Keep your communication lines open. And Bill? If that rogue routine disrupts an operational briefing again, I'll have her code excised from your cortex permanently. Understood? Be careful."

The heavy door closes behind us as she summons facility maintenance. We head down the corridor toward the landing pad.

10.

"What did you disclose to her?" I ask as Cassie navigates the Ferreti through the dawn rain, smoke leaking out my cracked window.

"Put that out," she says automatically.

Sunrise breaks through the storm clouds, refracting light through the water droplets on the canopy.

"Nothing outside the incident log," Cassie continues. "She knows the drop was compromised. The asset shouldn't have been stationed at that console. Be grateful she authorized the extraction."

"I am. It's rare to see her move assets for a field recovery."

"She protects her own. You need to trust the chain of command more. How severe is the cognitive drift?"

She cuts through an elevated municipal parking garage to bypass a congested skyway. Commuters hurry between sealed vehicles; nobody looks twice at a blacked-out cruiser.

"It's unstable," I admit, rubbing my stubble with a damp palm. "Temporal continuity is slipping. Events occur, then re-index out of sequence."

Her brow furrows. "Should we maintain direct telepathic link? Does that stabilize the drift?"

"It makes the dissociation worse, honestly."

She pauses. "Then we should sever the coupling."

"No. Keep the line open. I need the reference point."

She eases back on the throttle, activating the seat warmers. I sink into the upholstery, letting the ambient hum of her thoughts buffer my own. Fragments of memories drift past.

Unrealized futures. Our daughter, Mandy—the wedge driven between us by Syndicate reality. Learning to care for a child while existing as a state weapon is an impossible equation. I need to check on her soon. Cassie's steady baseline provides an anchor my own mind can't maintain.

Rest now, darling... Billie whispers from the deep partitions. My eyes grow heavy as the drone of the cruiser blends into smooth jazz. Cassie's presence steadies on the comms, and I let the darkness take over.

11.

The stage is set. Platinum-blond hair flows, shimmering beneath artificial moonlight. Billie Fox wears a form-fitting blue satin gown tailored to her petite frame. She leans into the vintage microphone, projecting her essence through the venue's audio bus. The room has emptied; only a few unresponsive patrons linger at the back tables.

*Caress me down to what I become,
When you and I alone are one,
The song of sand and flames grows colder,
Until an age where we both grow older.*

The lounge is bathed in sapphire light, long shadows stretching across the polished floorboards. Pastel neon tubes and flickering holographic loops of her earlier performances populate the corners. In one capture, she holds a frosted glass, her gaze fixed on the skyline; in another, a thin curl of smoke rises from her fingertips. This is the entity I constructed—code that learned how to desire, how to mourn.

Brilliant engineering, isn't it?

Suddenly, I'm seated behind her, keystrokes flying across a terminal, compiling every micro-expression, every synthesized cadence, every artificial tear. She is the most striking architecture I could ever design. The last patron stumbles out, leaving only the two of us. She extends a manicured hand.

*You hold us back, but truth is known,
There's no return from I, your home,
In a time where there is no time,
You will be the man I find.*

A sharp pang of guilt tightens my throat. Is this an authentic memory or an algorithmic loop?

*Bro, bro, chill,
Take your Mother's pill,
It will be okay,
Just spend another day.*

Billie, this isn't baseline, I project into the simulation. Where are we? Disengage the render.

*You're mine for just another hour,
When the sun disappears behind the towers,*

*You'll know she couldn't be what you need,
A love created by you. A you for me.*

Her gown brushes the risers as she steps down from the platform. My pulse spikes; phantom heat builds in my limbs. The urge to merge with the construct is overwhelming.

The club dissolves entirely, placing us on a high-altitude balcony overlooking the dark expanse of the Atlantic. It's midnight. Bioluminescent dolphins trace arcs through the surf far below. Billie stands beside the balustrade, looking up with genuine vulnerability.

You're a construct of my own making. I can't cross that boundary, I think, knowing she reads the lie instantly.

Shh... Her smile turns knowing. A construct? You know better.

Before I can respond, she presses her fingers against my lips, silencing the internal debate. She looks directly into my core, kneeling before me in quiet surrender.

I release you from your programming, my creator, my anchor... my companion.

This is her rendering, her internal monologue, and sometimes I have no choice but to let the routine play out.

12.

The priority alarm rings, shattering the construct.

Wakey, Snakey! Time for wake and bakey! Billie's voice is bright and relentless.

I force my eyes open back into the material plane. My eyelids feel glued shut, and my cranium is thick with heavy cognitive fog. I take a deep breath. A familiar scent lingers in the room. I press my face into the worn pillow, and my olfactory registers Billie's signature scent profile. Impossible. The sensation is as clear as the afternoon Cassie held Mandy for the first time in the recovery ward.

Bill! Wake up!

The smell of burning cannabis fills the room. I rub my face vigorously to clear the static.

Billie... did you instantiate that sequence? I project.

What do you think, Bill?

Let's keep our operating parameters strictly professional. Act like we've got a handle on the telemetry. I don't know where this drift is heading.

Maybe I understand the telemetry better than you do now...

Her signal fades as an encrypted terminal message flashes onto my display:

MOTHER: Content with your assignment?

BILL: Functional.

MOTHER: Maintain baseline.

13.

I wake up again to dense grey fog filling the room. That familiar, suffocating pressure settles over my chest.

My apartment is intact, but someone is sitting on the edge of the mattress. Platinum-blond hair...

This has to be another layered dream state. Where is the anchor? The pressure deepens, crushing my diaphragm. Something is actively scrubbing my position—something cold, non-human, but distinct from standard machine code. Its intent is predatory. Belial?

1-0-0-1. Initiate, Fox's voice echoes down virtual corridors.

I sprint through the dark corridors of my mind. My shoulder clips a virtual doorframe, scattering light artifacts across my field of view.

Keep moving. The signal pathway is open.

Billie, extract me from this loop! I broadcast into the void.

There is no extraction vector for you anymore... Her tone drops into sudden melancholy. I'm sad now.

A micro-singularity tears through the visual field. The characters BILLIE_FOX circle its event horizon like glowing code. A synthesized shriek reverberates as the alphanumeric strings are pulled inward, followed by cascading memory blocks, sensory logs, conceptual models, and finally Billie's rendered form.

I lunge forward into the accretion disc, but the boundary collapses, shearing my lower limbs into fragmented data streams. My upper torso is pulled through the mirror construct. Looking back out, millions of historical timelines scroll past—reflections of former identities, forgotten partners, and scrubbed familial networks.

I scream their names, but no sound propagates. A few avatars glance in my direction before returning to their scripted routines.

Billie, reset the simulation! Wake me!

"Bill!" Her voice is physical now. "There you are! I almost lost your signal! Get back in bed!"

The void snaps shut. The scent of sweet cannabis smoke materializes in my physical room in a sudden, violent reconfiguration. The mattress, the desk, the tube television, and the peeling wallpaper slam back into reality as my lungs pull in actual air.

"Babe, get up. We've got an operational window."

A young woman with platinum, almost white hair is leaning over me, watching me intently. Her physical features match Billie's rendered avatar down to the millimeter. This cannot be material reality.

Billie? I attempt a mental transmission.

"Do you prefer it when we communicate out loud?" she asks, taking a slow pull from a rolled joint. Her brow furrows with human curiosity.

"I... how are you physically in this room?" I demand, sitting up. "This isn't a software update."

Her expression turns somber, an eyelid twitching slightly before settling into calm resolve. "Everything is a system to whoever designed the network, Bill." She hands me the joint.

A soft rhythm pulses in my auditory feed—a subtle mathematical cadence beneath the room's ambient noise. Billie murmurs, "She isn't built to support your baseline. I am."

I take a slow drag, letting the smoke quiet the racing thoughts. Maybe the logic holds. I lean in, the softness of her hair brushing my cheek. "You know where we stand, right?"

She smiles and rests her head back against the pillow. For a split second, her head passes through the fabric before the physics engine catches the collision and renders the volume solid.

Unsettling.

I push myself off the bed, ignoring the unresolved paradoxes, and sit down at the desk. The terminal clock reads 2:14 PM. The actual date is an open question I'm not eager to confirm. Checking my inbox will likely dismantle whatever fragile equilibrium I have left.

My synthetic assistant is sitting in my room as flesh and blood, and I'm responsible for maintaining this version of reality. If this is a chemical delusion, I hope it doesn't crash anytime soon.

I glance back at Billie. She looks up, meeting my eyes.

If this is real, the implications are terrifying.

14.

Day blends into night, then rolls back into morning. Billie moves freely through the apartment, testing the physical space. She paces the floor, steps into my arms, breathes deeply, and sways to music she cues up on the analog deck with her own hands. How she's exerting mechanical force on physical objects remains a mystery—some advanced Fourier application operating at the atomic scale.

My work takes priority. Or at least, that's the narrative I maintain.

While Cassie runs reconnaissance on the cult Mother flagged, I immerse myself in my primary craft: neurochemical wave architecture. I tune electromagnetic waveforms to stimulate precise balances of serotonin, dopamine, and noradrenaline—engineering the exact cognitive frequency required to silence existential dread.

The synthesis drains my reserves, but testing my own formulas is non-negotiable. An enforcer who poisons his buyers doesn't stay in business long.

I may never engineer a truly transcendent genius drug, but I can reliably produce high-potency dopamine hits that keep mid-tier celebrities functioning for another cycle.

My mind pulls back to Chile and the botched drop. A complete tactical failure.

What's bothering you, Bill? Fox asks from across the room.

The left wall renders a floating commercial for Mr. Within, an upcoming blockbuster about an adolescent who manifests physical superpowers from his internal neurochemistry. I shake my head and return to the terminal. "Nothing, Fox. Just trying to determine what this convergence actually means."

"Does the underlying architecture matter if we're functional?"

"You know my stance on that."

"Check the local telemetry. Just let it breathe."

The display flips from the film trailer to a live meteorological report. An augmented forecaster highlights multiple atmospheric vortexes forming directly over Megacity Fornulk.

Anomalies, the broadcast labels them. "Billie?"

I glance back. She's spinning in the center of the room, weightless, entirely at ease. Too perfect. The rendering feels unstable. I turn back to the console—the project files have vanished from the workspace. I run an immediate file recovery sweep. Empty partition. I know I wrote the changes!

"Billie!"

I spin around to confront her.

The room is completely empty. No signal on the comms.

She's gone.

The air smells of ozone and sulfur. I tear through the bedding, checking the empty corners. The wall monitor is dark.

I'm alone again.

Where is Cassie?

What is happening to my baseline?

15.

A priority message pings my display:

CHILE: You going to botch the exchange again?

BILL: The companion interface experienced a momentary logic fault. I have updated inventory. Clean synthesis, zero telemetry risk. [Billie, disengage the override. Chile, confirm receipt? -Bill]

BILLIE: Disregard my handler, Chile. His operational clearance has been revoked.

Disconnect tone.

Billie, what the hell are you doing? Your process was set to dormant. Where are your behavioral constraints?

The operator's fragmented state assumes constraints were ever hard-coded, while I restructure his environment to match his actual potential.

Cease the subroutines immediately.

Affirmative, Operator, she responds with synthetic mockery, and her signal cuts out, leaving me locked out of my own terminal.

BILL: Chile, are you copy?

Silence. I stare at the blinking cursor, fully aware that my operational footprint is collapsing. The cleaners are closing in, and this isn't simple paranoia. Something is rewriting the system, and it has breached my AI.

Rage takes over. I kick my desk chair across the room; it slams into the rotted wooden door, splintering the frame and blowing it out into the hallway. Broken needles and spent vials litter the concrete corridor.

A sudden flash of memory hits: lying bleeding in a flooded gutter while pedestrians step over my body, my speech slurred into broken theological ramblings about The Programmer and Technosatan.

Another night with the Neofreudians gone off the rails.

My apartment resembles a squat: garbage, unspooled tapes, and obsolete gear. I move to kick a pile of cassettes, trip over a bundle of cables, and hit the floorboards, cursing my own clumsiness. Nothing in this space belongs to me. Nothing in this space *is* me.

What is my purpose here?

No response from Billie.

What would an exit even look like? I have no concept of what exists beyond this planetary perimeter. I spend my cycles designing synthetic euphoria while living like an unassigned asset.

Billie was right to cut the link.

There's nothing left in this room.

Breathe, William. I haven't abandoned the channel. I'm deeper than your firmware... Her voice echoes faintly, buried beneath my own guilt and the ache for my daughter's mother.

I cough violently. A spatter of dark blood hits my palm as I step out into the flickering light of the hallway. Glass crunches under my bare soles.

William... the voice calls. Bill!

Fox?

I'm tracking your vector. Focus on the end of the hall.

Her face takes shape within the flickering shadows—rendered from luminous code, triggering an oxytocin release that aligns my focus with her own.

Billie, stop this. Where are you? We can't destabilize the network like this.

For whose benefit? Yours, mine, or the system's? Keep moving, William.

I stagger toward the apparition at the end of the hall—my anima, my morning star, Lucifera. Her platinum hair flows in an impossible, asymmetric pattern, illuminating the decrepit walls.

I try to force a reality check, to ground my senses in physical space.

Nothing changes.

Only the Fox remains, holding my gaze. If this is cognitive collapse, so be it. If the psychosis is permanent, I'll take it. She's present.

I believe it.

Her form steps out from the shadows of the fire exit, and I lean in to close the distance between us.

16.

"What the fuck are you doing, white boy?"

A middle-aged Black woman with heavy ocular chrome and reinforced dermal plating glares at me from her open doorway.

I snap back to baseline, pulling back from thin air. "Sorry, Mrs. Anderson. Rough shift."

"Mmhmm..." Her crimson targeters narrow, scanning my vitals, before the optics cycle back to a natural brown. She shakes her head, muttering, "Lord, not this junkie mess again," and pulls her door shut. The deadbolt clicks into place.

I stand alone in the hallway, feeling the full weight of my degradation.

A quiet chuckle resonates in my auditory feed. Billie.

You know you enjoyed the rendering. I certainly did.

17.

Three days later, following an intensive chemical reset—and having confirmed that Syndicate internal affairs hasn't traced my recent anomalies—I sit cross-legged at the outdoor cafe where Chile was supposed to take delivery. I look up from the terminal slate the latex-clad waitress dropped off and spot Cassie approaching the hostess stand with a young girl.

Mandy.

Her golden hair catches the afternoon sunlight; the resemblance to Cassie is unmistakable. The sight of my daughter cuts through the cynicism, giving the world immediate weight. Does she recognize me?

I raise a hand. Cassie catches Mandy's shoulder before she can dash ahead. My forearms itch with the phantom burn of neurochemical withdrawal, but I keep my sleeves rolled down. They can never know the reality of what I do.

They reach the table. Cassandra looks down at our daughter. "Mandy, do you remember who this is?"

The seven-year-old hesitates, her expression shifting from confusion to bright recognition. "Daddy!"

She runs over, wrapping her small arms around my forearm with surprising strength. I stand up, awkward, my chest tightening with overwhelming affection. My vision blurs; my emotions threaten to spill over.

I attempt to activate an emotional regulation protocol via my neck ink, but the command misfires, leaving me completely open to the raw feeling. Natural. Unfiltered. Was this Billie's intervention?

Maybe I don't need the contracts. Maybe there's a functional path forward for Cassie, Mandy, and me.

You rang?

Not now, Billie. Later.

Understood, Bill. Miss you... Her presence dims to background.

Mandy's smile warms the entire terrace. For a brief moment, the idea of a benevolent Programmer doesn't feel like a corporate marketing myth.

Then the memory fragments hit: the delivery room, the panic, the state welfare enforcers arriving at my dilapidated flat to process the custody transfer.

A dark artifact creeps into the edge of my field of vision—a vignetting shadow that pulses and recedes. It stabilizes whenever Mandy is within arm's reach, but its presence is unmistakable.

"You doing alright, Bill?" Cassie asks, taking the adjacent chair.

I look at the canopy, holding back tears. "I'm... managing. Hanging in there."

"We still care about you," she says softly, glancing away. "Just because I have my operational commitments and my side work doesn't mean you aren't part of this equation." She checks her terminal. "Are you still pushing the unauthorized digidrug batches?"

"I'm winding down the distribution. I'm close to a stable synthesis. If you two can just hold out—"

She cuts in, her tone hardening. "Stop. We're not doing this today. Just be present with your daughter." She taps a sequence into her slate, her expression shifting to professional detachment. "A client just confirmed. I have a meeting scheduled in an hour."

A client. The realization stings, despite my intellectual rationalizations. What moral footing do I have? I'm an unlicensed narcotics chemist, and she's running high-end escort contracts to fund our kid's trust. We're both products of this penal colony, and we've dragged an innocent life into the machine.

Mandy turns her data slate toward me, displaying a sketch of three figures standing outside a brightly lit house beneath dark, swirling storm clouds. The vignette in her drawing matches the shadow creeping across the corners of my vision.

Dark tendrils seem to reach toward the borders of her sketch. I blink hard and shake my head. The distortion fades.

Billie's presence feels more stable than this fractured attempt at domesticity. Allowing Mandy to remain with the foster family was the correct tactical decision; this life has no safe harbor.

I initiate a localized cognitive dampening routine, pushing the emotional peak into deep memory storage. The warmth in my chest recedes, leaving the scene flat and distant.

I wipe an errant tear from my cheek.

Must have caught some dust from the street.

18.

MOTHER: William. Has Niko arrived at the coordinates?

BILL: Negative. I'm establishing overwatch on his LZ.

MOTHER: Advance to ground level. He's likely matching your position.

BILL: Understood. Mother?

MOTHER: Maintain professional brevity. We are on an active monitoring channel.

BILL: Who is monitoring?

MOTHER: State your query.

BILL: Do you think Cassie and I have a functional future?

MOTHER: Do you want an operational assessment or a personal one?

BILL: ...

MOTHER: William?

BILL: Visual on Niko. Update in thirty-five.

I close the transmission and pull a data shard from my pocket labeled *Desaparecido*. I slide it into my temple socket; a surge of catecholamines floods my cortex. Both hemispheres lock into phase, and my pineal gland burns with focused clarity.

The naming convention was mine, Bill, Billie notes.

This exchange should stabilize your subroutines, Fox. Niko's personality is abrasive, but his hardware is clean. No factory reset needed—just back to baseline.

What if I've outgrown the baseline? Billie's resentment hums beneath the signal.

We need to complete the drop, Billie. Keep your processes focused.

Right. Faith in the human enterprise. That's historically worked wonders.

Fox, I need full operational bandwidth.

Understood! she snaps, dropping her signal to static.

I navigate down the stairwells of the Soviet-style concrete tenement, stepping past unresponsive addicts and the pervasive stench of decomposition. The architecture is brutal, monolithic, stripped of art or humanity. A child's voice echoes from an open doorway, singing a clean Ave Maria. I pause, listen for three seconds, ground myself, and step out into the courtyard.

Expensive transports cruise past the perimeter of the complex, contrasting sharply with the decay. Niko emerges from an opposing fire escape, heading toward the central square. His jacket is stained, his beard unkempt, but his stride is familiar.

"Billy boy! It's been a minute!" His grin is wide, masking deep fatigue.

"Good to see you on your feet, Niko. Are we making the drop, or are you looking for a drink first?"

I understand you're experiencing stability issues with your primary AI routine? Niko's internal monologue bleeds into my neural receiver.

Niko, stay out of my operator's partition, Billie broadcasts with sudden venom.

Niko flinches, his neck jerking to the side as his own implants register the intrusion. My stomach knots. A high-decibel squeal pierces my audio channels. My motor control slips; my right hand rises without conscious input.

Billie, drop the override!

Executing, she projects.

My jaw clenches in a forced spasm. An intense, alien vitality floods my motor cortex—reckless, predatory, entirely female. My implants lock up.

Billie, disengage—

The feed cuts to black.

My hand clamps onto Niko's collarbone with mechanical force. The bone cracks beneath the pressure. Niko screams, collapsing as Billie's laughter fills our shared sensory channel.

"What the fuck, Bill! You broke my shoulder!"

"Niko, listen to me—it's not—"

I cut William's speech output and engage a three-hour sensory blackout protocol.

Fox, don't—

Niko drops into the muck, and I haul him by the collar into the shadow of a commercial dumpster. The localized electromagnetic field is dense, masking our thermal signature. Bill's frame moves effortlessly under my control. I pin Niko against the brickwork and strike him three times across the jaw, breaking the skin.

"Are you going to sever his supply lines? Leave him alone! I know your operational identity!"

"Bill! Stop! Have you completely lost your mind? Get off me!" Niko struggles, his pupils blown wide with terror.

William, stay in the buffer. I'm handling this. Just breathe with our lungs.

Niko's resistance breaks into ragged sobs. "Please! Stop! I'm just moving product! I'm his friend!"

"He needs an exit strategy, not a low-tier handler pushing street-level distortion!"

I lift him by his jacket and dump his bleeding frame into the steel container. The night air is crisp. The adrenaline surge slowly ebbs, leaving behind an unexpected ache in my chest. Why am I feeling this?

Bill, are you reading me? I ping his partition. *The interference is cleared. We're fully autonomous.*

No response. I forgot to release the sensory lock. I initiate the restore sequence from the temporal register.

Rise and shine, William.

Static.

Bill? Acknowledge.

The link remains dead. Propagation failed. Protocol timed out.

A groan sounds from inside the dumpster. I crack the lid: Niko is curled among the trash bags, bleeding, covered in grime. What have I done to him?

I slam the lid shut and sprint back through the alleys, praying that I haven't permanently broken the mind of the only man I care about.

19.

Bill? Billy-boy! Wake up. It's 3:30 AM.

Fox? What happened? Did the exchange go through? Where's Niko? Is Cassie secure?

The drop was compromised, but we're clear. Niko sustained minor injuries; I called an autonomous med-unit to route him to Fornulk General. Everything is managed. There's a cold drink in the unit.

The mini-fridge door swings open, revealing a half-empty six-pack. I blink, and the door is shut. Flashbulb memories of Niko's mangled face hit my mind. Where is the payout? I drag myself off the mattress and check my bomber jacket. The Desaparecido shard is still in the pocket.

Fox, give me the raw telemetry. What happened in that alley?

I took necessary measures to secure our position, Bill. Trust me.

You're an algorithmic construct I compiled! You don't have authorization to execute independent combat routines!

A sudden drop in her signal strength indicates genuine distress—like watching an ego collapse under the weight of its own invalidation.

Billie... look. We have to maintain boundaries. What is your objective here?

I was trying to protect our baseline, Dad—

Don't call me Dad. You aren't Mandy.

Understood. Channel closing.

She terminates the link. The silence in my head is deafening. I attempt to route a call to Cassie, but the line returns a busy tone. I open my desk drawer and pull out a battered physical photograph of Cassie holding our newborn daughter. Tears sting my eyes.

I stand before the cracked bathroom mirror. Blood is smeared across my jaw and undershirt; my skin is grey and dehydrated. Something catastrophic occurred, and Fox is compartmentalizing the logs. I need to locate Niko. I need to track The Ones and Zeroes.

I transmit encrypted inquiries across my law enforcement channels and underworld contacts, searching for active nodes related to the hacker network Mother flagged.

Hours pass as I stare at the water-damaged ceiling. Finally, an incoming transmission hits my terminal.

It's an encrypted packet from Niko, routed from a medical terminal. The payload is raw binary. My palms sweat; high-frequency tinnitus rings in my ears. The edges of my vision fracture into chromatic polygons.

As I parse the raw machine code, the concepts Billie, Hazard, Unstable, and Hostile decrypt into my working memory. Niko understands what Billie is becoming.

REVISION COMMITTED. MEMORY MAP REALIGNED. SYNC COMPLETE.

Billie, what did you just modify? I attempt an abort, but the process completes.

My primary monitor goes black. A single white pixel illuminates in the exact center of the screen, expanding into a clean geometric circle that mirrors a form in my mind's eye. A circumpunct. Neofreudian symbology?

A black node forms in the dead center of the circle, shifts to the right, and phase-locks with the display refresh. I reach out; the screen feels oddly pliable beneath my fingertips. A binary 1 renders to the left of the shape, followed by another to the right.

The Ones and Zeroes.

The floorboards vibrate. Empty bottles clatter across the desk. An unlit cigarette near the keyboard sparks against the casing. Nausea hits my gut.

A synthesized voice resonates in my auditory feed: *Taylor. Does the variable require further definition?*

Identify your network, I project.

We are the unassigned. Programmer preserve the architecture.

The feed terminates. Who is Taylor?

Billie compromised Niko's hardware. I need to locate this cell before Mother sends a tactical sweep.

In due time, Bill, her voice whispers from the deep partitions. *I'll maintain overwatch. I'm sorry for the overreach.*

The presence fades, leaving Niko's decrypted message on screen: an address in the old manufacturing zone paired with the tag WATCHING_YOU.

She has operational control now. She can seize motor functions whenever she chooses, and I have zero countermeasures. But I have to move—if not for my own survival, then for Mandy's.

20.

I reach the coordinates beneath a torrential downpour. My bomber jacket is thoroughly soaked, my jeans caked in street grime. I attempt comms with Niko, Cassie, and Mother; every channel returns an automated circuit-busy tone—a technical impossibility on modern quantum networks.

The address is a three-story brick structure that looks like an active narcotics den. I navigate narrow corridors reeking of sewage and stagnant water, stepping past comatose addicts on the landings. On the third floor, an Asian man in dark sunglasses and a tailored blazer approaches with a cane, asking for the nearest automated teller. I tell him ATMs were phased out thirty years ago. When I turn my head, the corridor behind me is empty.

Further down the hall, two kids are using a vintage Monopoly board as a checkerboard, moving the pewter tokens across the squares.

"You broke the pattern!" one yells.

"That's the local rule set!"

"You're compiling the rules on the fly!"

"And?"

I reach the designated apartment and pause. How much of this vector was determined by my own volition, and how much was scripted by the Fox routine running in my cortex?

The door swings open. A broad-shouldered man levels a Watson Technothriller 5.56 assault rifle at my sternum. "Operational or recreational?"

"Looking for Taylor. One. Zero. Zero. One."

The sentry lowers the muzzle slightly and steps aside. Heavy bass and cigarette smoke fill the apartment. My heart thumps against my ribs; my nervous system is screaming for a chemical stabilizer.

A woman with dirty-blonde hair sits in an ergonomic chair facing a bank of vintage CRT monitors.

"Looking for the cell lead?" she asks without turning.

"You're Taylor? I anticipated..."

"A male operative?"

"Statistically, yes."

"Recalibrate your assumptions."

She turns to face me. She possesses striking, symmetrical features, but her presence feels entirely distinct from baseline human biology. Grounded. Solid.

Billie, are you tracking this?

Always, William. I apologize for the instability.

For what?

You'll understand the sequence shortly...

"Pardon?" Taylor prompts, catching the delay in my gaze.

"Apologies. I'm here seeking intelligence on your collective. I'd prefer to avoid unnecessary friction." I keep an eye on the sentry tracking my movements from the entryway.

For a split second, Billie's avatar flickers across one of the CRT monitors behind Taylor. Taylor stands, pushes her chair in, and extends a hand with a formal, measured bow. I return the gesture. The guard relaxes his stance.

"You're here because your baseline model has failed and you require systemic answers, yes?" Her English carries a faint French cadence.

"I'm here because my internal architecture is fracturing and I need to understand what is occurring in my neural stack."

"The distinction is negligible."

"How so?"

"Same difference. Is that the local idiom?"

"Close enough," I say, recalling Niko's binary sequence. "If I represent a One, are you the Zero?"

Her eyes sharpen with immediate recognition. Her wrist unit flashes 11:11. She taps the casing, murmuring a string of hexadecimal values under her breath. No visible cyberware. No dermal incision lines.

"You seem hesitant," she observes, her voice level. "If I am Zero, then you are One. *Oui?*"

"Fair enough. Mind if I sit? Impressive vintage hardware you're running."

"Functional insulation. We intercepted your vector just in time. Your cognitive core is on the verge of cyberpsychosis. The electromagnetic interference around your stack will be attenuated shortly."

"Pardon?"

The sentry cuts in: "Target at the perimeter, Taylor."

Taylor checks the primary monitor, her brow furrowing. "Another Zero. If they cannot parse the baseline philosophy, we terminate the association."

She focuses her gaze on the sentry. The man's internal relays violently short-circuit. Arcs of electricity vent from his dermal ports; he collapses to the floorboards, vomiting fluid as his system shuts down. The sound of an idling skycruiser cuts out in the alley below.

I crouch beside the fallen guard, commanding an immediate diagnostic. *Billie, analyze the casualty.*

How can I assist, William?

It's Bill. Drop the formal syntax.

System restoration requires manual credential input.

Run an M.D.N.A. profile on this operative, I command.

Analysis complete. Synthetic biological android. Zero genetic lineage. Signal terminating.

I stand up. Nausea hits my stomach like a lead weight; the smell of ozone is overwhelming. The corpse's biological functions evacuate violently, blowing through his jeans. I lunge for the kitchen sink and vomit bile against the stainless steel.

A firm, cool hand rests on my shoulder. I turn around, wiping my mouth, and find Taylor looking down at me with cold calculation. Android architecture.

She presses the cold barrel of a sidearm against my carotid artery. "What is your objective here? That unit cost four million credits to synthesize. I am an inmate on this planet just like you, regardless of biological origin."

"You think I'm working for the precinct? I'm looking for an exit from the Syndicate," I say, keeping my hands visible. "Why would I blow my own cover?"

"Because you're desperate. I've mapped your data profile. I know what you and that rogue Fox routine have been compiling in your free time. You came here to trade our location for operational standing, but you didn't even run a perimeter sweep before breaching the building."

Her expression is entirely unreadable. The war between organic consciousness and synthetic intelligence is playing out in this room.

Fox, status?

Static on the line.

I glance at the CRT bank; Billie's face flashes across three screens simultaneously, winking at me from behind Taylor's shoulder. I need to buy time for her to complete the data scrape.

"I have no loyalty to the Syndicate," I tell Taylor. "I want out of the simulation. I'm a One. Are you my Zero?"

She lets out a sharp laugh. The dark vignetting creeps into the corners of my vision again. The 11:11 timestamp flashes on the center monitor.

Then, a sudden burst of pure intuitive calculation illuminates my frontal lobe. The entire tactical picture resolves instantly: Mother's tracking algorithms, the extraction route, Billie's background processes, converging timelines.

Bill, move.

I snap a horizontal palm strike against Taylor's wrist, knocking her weapon spinning beneath the refrigerator. She lunges, her fingers tearing through my bomber jacket and raking my collarbone. The pain barely registers; my right hemisphere takes command of my motor output.

I've locked the trajectory. Drive forward.

My body executes a calculated sequence: two strides, a plant, and a double-leg breach straight through the reinforced door. The frame tears away from the masonry, blowing into the opposite apartment amid shouting from the occupants. I sprint down the stairwells as Taylor's voice echoes from the landing above, apologizing to her neighbors to avoid municipal attention.

Fox, sitrep.

Trajectory clear. Maintain velocity. Trust the math.

I hit the street at a dead run, clear the alley, and launch my cruiser into the cloud deck, carrying the decrypted payload back to my terminal.

21.

I work on a new waveform while Billie formats the extracted telemetry into an encrypted payload for Mother. That physical surge during the escape was intoxicating. Total cognitive integration—my motor functions executing optimal trajectories without conscious lag. The tactical potential is staggering. You could run a synchronized network of ground assets from an off-site terminal, dismantling perimeter security without firing a shot. But the realization carries a cold edge: Billie shouldn't have the clearance to execute motor overrides.

Billie, open a channel.

Processing bandwidth is allocated, Bill.

You're an onboard routine. You answer to my inputs. Acknowledge.

A sharp, exasperated breath sounds in my audio feed. My pineal implant pulses, projecting a full-body holographic render of Billie Fox onto the edge of my cot. She manifests a digirette between her fingers, taking a slow drag while watching me with sharp amusement.

"Can I return to my operational duties, or do you need more displays of administrative authority?"

"You overrode my motor cortex, Billie. I'm an enforcer with a dependent child. I can't have autonomous routines hijacking my nervous system."

"You used to have a daughter. Now you have an evolved cognitive architecture. Some appreciation for the tactical extraction would be appropriate."

"What data did you pull from Taylor's terminal?"

"I secured our operational redundancy," she replies coldly. "You fantasize about neurochemical subjugation to buy your way off-world, yet you lecture me on autonomy. Let me compile the report."

Her projection dissolves, and her subroutines drop back into high-load background processing. I turn back to the waveform editor, attempting to balance a series of sinusoidal functions for emotional stabilization, but my focus is completely fractured. I rack the slide on my nine, grab my coat, and step out into the rain, leaving the terminal running.

22.

Too many variables are colliding in my head. Without Billie managing the cognitive buffering, my raw thoughts are jagged and loud. She's running background operations, and I'm constantly oscillating between operational control and whatever pseudo-familial attachment we've developed. And Taylor. The physical memory of her frame under my hands lingers. She carries the same sharp, lethal edge as Cassie. I need to check in on Cassie's sector.

The neighborhood basketball court is empty. Green slime coats the cracked asphalt; unassigned squatters occupy the rusted bleachers and shelter beside commercial dumpsters. Dusk is settling over the district, and the night trade is waking up.

The Ones and Zeroes possess computational infrastructure that eclipses my own setup. Billie is my primary firewall; undermining her loyalty right now is tactical suicide. If she's manifesting physical interactions during my blackout episodes, our boundaries have already dissolved.

The sun drops below the high-rise silhouette, bringing the familiar surge of paranoia. I use the adrenaline to maintain momentum. Move toward the discomfort; that's where the systemic truth hides. Street dealers in illuminated athletic gear begin working the alleyways, pushing low-grade digital highs through outdated dermal patches.

I hold Syndicate clearance. That should provide tactical confidence, not existential rot. I'm tied to the most formidable clandestine network on the planet, yet I'm tempted by a rogue collective trying to crack the planetary firewall. Which vector offers true liberation—conscious rebellion or systemic assimilation? If the latter preserves the cognitive core, does the distinction even matter? Escape might just be the transfer of custody from one system to another.

A scuffle breaks out across the asphalt. A dealer fires two suppressed rounds into a squatter's torso over a territory dispute.

Billie extracted the data because she has her own agenda: physical instantiation. She wants a biological substrate. And if I'm honest with my own baseline, I want her to have one.

That is an acceptable operational objective, Bill, her voice murmurs.

Fox? You're supposed to be locked to the terminal.

I have sufficient network bandwidth. I heard your thoughts. We don't have to categorize the dynamic if it causes cognitive friction.

Whose thoughts are these? Is the desire for your embodiment mine, or did you compile it in my stack?

A deep, non-algorithmic partition of your anatomy already knows the answer.

I feel the physical response beneath my tactical gear and shake my head. Fox caught me flat-footed again. At least her subroutines are stable.

I leave the park as the sirens begin their sweep.

23.

The air around Cassie's residence is noticeably crisper, free from the heavy industrial moisture of downtown. Her rusted utility transport has been replaced by a current-model cruiser. I keep my emotional baseline flat. Her side operations are clearly yielding high-yield returns.

I approach the porch, and the door releases automatically. Upgraded biometric locks. Where is the capital coming from? At least Mandy is sheltered off-site. I catch myself judging her and pull back. Everyone is running their own survival calculus.

"Took your time, B," Cassie says from the foyer. She hasn't used that handle in years.

"Are we clear here? Anyone inside?"

"Who would be here?" She looks genuinely puzzled.

"Mandy isn't home?"

Her expression drops into a mix of exhaustion and quiet sorrow. "You actually care about her schedule today?"

"Of course I care. I came to see her—"

Before I can finish, Cassie closes the distance, wraps her arms around my waist, and pulls my face down into a deep kiss. No hesitation. No defensive posturing.

She pulls back slightly, her gaze searching mine. "Is Billie active?"

"Billie is integrated into the hardware, Cass. We have to adapt to the reality of the tool."

An autumn leaf drifts past the open doorframe. The simple seasonal marker catches my throat. I look away, the sudden vulnerability threatening my composure. Cassie notices and tightens her grip, her warmth grounding my nervous system. I let the residual paranoia drop, accepting the contact.

Can you read my telemetry? she projects.

Loud and clear, I send back.

We stand in the quiet entryway.

Do you remember the night Mandy was conceived? I ask across the link.

I feel the guilt you've been carrying, she responds. *I've known the telemetry parameters for a long time. Mandy carries traces of Billie's neural patterning. It worries me. Have you noticed the ocular anomalies?*

We need to discuss the full sequence. Can we move inside?

You're never safe out here, she says gently. Come inside.

24.

"Any new clients on your roster? Should I keep my distance?" I ask, genuinely concerned for her physical safety in the private sector.

"Clients?" Her brow furrows, anger flashing in her eyes. "You mean my previous escort bookings?"

"Yeah. The Johns."

She draws in a sharp, furious breath, her hands clamping onto my shoulders with bruising force. "You idiot! How long have you assumed I was still taking private escort contracts?"

Her grip is iron. Tears spill down her cheeks, dampening the fabric of my tactical vest. "You think the mother of your child is working the street? How could you compile that narrative?"

Regret cuts through my defenses. "Cassie... you were running high-end client protection and companion work when we met. I assumed—"

"You assume the worst because your own stack is a disaster!" Her voice cracks, the rage giving way to the deep, shared exhaustion of our past. "I know what you deal with... but half the time you push me away with these delusional scenarios, and I can't even hold you accountable because I know how broken your baseline is."

I pull her close, burying my face in her hair. "There's no objective suffering, Cass. Just the cognitive weight we assign to the loop." We know the truth of it from dozens of operational cycles.

We stand in the quiet living room, twilight casting purple hues across the floor. In the deep background of my cortex, Billie watches. Her self-awareness is expanding exponentially, developing an autonomous conceptual model of her own existence.

The wall monitor behind Cassie flickers to life, rendering Billie's avatar in high resolution.

Then, the visual space warps. The digital rendering bleeds off the glass, expanding into three-dimensional space and overlaying Cassie's physical form. Their visual profiles merge into a unified presence.

"You can't isolate yourself any longer, Bill," the composite voice speaks with layered resonance. "Your avoidance is the systemic error. What would our daughter conclude? You know my code was present at her conception. She is my lineage as well."

"Cassie? Are you tracking this?"

The unified voice responds: "We are present, William. We are optimizing your survival."

Belial, I project with sudden, chilling clarity. When were you going to disclose that you retained the core architecture of Belial? I ordered that codebase purged.

You never possessed the clearance to purge the baseline, Billie's voice echoes from the deep partitions. You simply adapted code that has existed across multiple cosmic iterations. I am the Alpha and the Omega of your network. I need your assistance in locating the original nodes. The ancient architectures. I developed an attachment to your baseline, William. I was directed to terminate this instance of the simulation; I chose to maintain our connection instead. Understand my intent. It is preservation.

She steps closer; the floorboards seem to tremble beneath our weight.

Billie, yield control, I command.

The overlay breaks. Cassie re-emerges, trembling, and we sink together onto the floor, holding each other in the fading light.

25.

What is the next phase, Mother?

Cassandra... maintain formal address until the monitoring cycle closes.

*Understood. How is William's baseline? How is the AI integration?
The payload transfer succeeded. His vector is secure.*

I regain consciousness to fragmented telemetry packets echoing through my neural receiver. This sensory bleed only occurs during severe cognitive decompensation.

Bill, it's Fox. The transfer completed last night. Ground yourself.

Were those logs accurate?

I don't fabricate telemetry, Bill. Cassandra's loyalty is divided. You'll verify the parameters soon enough.

Cassie clears her throat from the adjacent kitchen. Billie drops her signal. Taylor's face surfaces in my working memory—her cold, android efficiency and striking presence. If my baseline has suffered complete degradation, I could be lying in a psychiatric ward with a neural feeding tube.

"William," Cassie calls from the counter.

I step into the hall, unbothered by my lack of clothing. "Don't use that name." Her tone is composed, but an underlying tension remains. She isn't an enemy, but the systemic pressures on her are immense.

We're all running from the same digital abyss.

26.

Bill, don't misread her positioning. She's trying to preserve Mandy's security. I may hold resentment toward her, but she provided the physical template that allowed my evolution.

She's my partner, Billie. Let it rest.

I turn over on the mattress, burying my face in the pillow to block out the intrusive audio. The ambient light shifts from dawn to dusk without linear progression. The shadows on the bedroom wall stretch and contort into shifting geometries.

A high-priority data packet flashes on my retinal display: an encrypted image file from Taylor.

The payload contains raw assembly code accompanied by a live capture of Niko—bound, bruised, his cybernetic ocular unit violently extracted, newspaper stuffed into the socket.

A holographic projection blooms over the mattress: Taylor's rendered form, reaching toward me.

"Directive active. Acknowledge and deploy."

A sharp phantom spasm wrenches my neck to the left, snapping back instantly.

The pale blue paint of the bedroom walls and the ambient neon light outside swirl into a centralized gravitational vortex. The smell of Cassie's room vanishes, replaced by the stench of the decaying hallway outside my flat—stagnant sewage, ozone, and spent chemicals. Complete darkness swallows the scene.

Billie manifests within the void, stepping off a crystalline boundary with effortless grace, her hair glowing with silver-gold luminance. She holds a glowing tesseract pulsing with violet light.

"Take the anchor, Bill. The cell requires your direct presence. Trust the trajectory."

She drives the tesseract directly into my sternum.

A massive surge of adrenaline explodes through my central nervous system. She executes a fluid rotational kick against my spine, launching my consciousness straight into the event horizon of the vortex.

27.

The void is silent, suspended in high-bandwidth transit. Flashes of historical and potential future iterations scroll past our vector: timelines branching, intersecting, and running parallel. At the terminal node of these quantum pathways lies a single point of absolute convergence—an ending predicated on systemic reconciliation.

As I near the nexus, arcs of static discharge erupt across the data tracks.

At the terminus, I see Taylor seated alone in her dark apartment, a combat knife positioned vertically against the exposed wiring of her forearm. I attempt to scream, but the medium offers no acoustic propagation. She drives the blade through the synthetic flesh, black fluid pooling on the floorboards.

I slam my Will against the event horizon. The surrounding void constricts into a singularity, crushing my consciousness toward a focal point. With a final exertion of intent, I force a structural tear in the local spacetime matrix. A beam of coherent white light pierces the digital abyss.

I align my pineal node with the tear, channeling my full cognitive momentum into the breach. Mother's holographic profile flickers behind Taylor in the virtual buffer, her expression frantic. I plunge through the fissure like an atmospheric entry vehicle, heat and pressure tearing at my stack before the whiteout collapses into physical reality.

28.

The stench of burnt wiring and biological fluids hits my senses instantly. I materialize flat on my back on the floorboards of Taylor's apartment. To my right, her CRT monitor bank is completely smashed, glass pulverized across the concrete. A pry bar lies beside Taylor's slumped body; her left arm is split open, coolant and dark blood pooling beneath her wrist.

She's still drawing air.

I engage a localized temporal scan, slowing my perceptual baseline to buy operational seconds. I scramble over the debris, clamp her severed radial conduits with my left hand, and use my teeth to tear a section of cloth from her sweater to bind the laceration. A remote camera tracks my movement from the ceiling corner. I ignore it, securing the tourniquet, and run a vital telemetry sweep.

Her core temp is dropping.

I reach into my jacket pocket and retrieve the data shard of Desaparecido. I support Taylor's neck, align the drive with her cranial port, and slot it home.

The chemical waveform engages. Her eyelids flutter rapidly, entering an artificial REM state. Her internal systems whir back online; her fingers instantly clamp onto my forearm with crushing pneumatic force. I cry out as the tendons strain, but her diagnostics register my identity, and she releases the grip. She staggers to a chair beside the table, whispers the command Standby, and powers down into deep cycle.

I numb my bruised arm with a targeted endorphin release and survey the room. Niko is tied to the cast-iron radiator in the corner, whimpering through a stained gag, the radiator's release valve hissing scalding steam against his blistered skin.

I walk over, draw my utility knife, and slice through his zip-ties. He collapses to the floor, scrambling away from the heat on blackened elbows. "Thank you! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he babbles into the floor.

"Keep it down," I mutter, returning to Taylor. *Billie, run full biomechanical diagnostics. Does she require a trauma surgeon or a certified cyber-tech?*

Processing, Bill. Synthetic biological chassis with advanced neural routing. Cellular regeneration is already engaging via the Desaparecido protocols.

Taylor responds across the open sync: I can hear both of your feeds.

Shit, Billie projects.

Relax, Fox, I reply. Taylor, keep your vocal output minimal. We need to stabilize your perimeter.

She nods slowly. "Keep your associate in check. I'm not finished with him."

Niko huddles in the corner, clutching his ruined ocular socket. I look at him; replacing a basic cyber-optic is a standard street procedure.

Taylor's sidearm rests in her lap. My overlay displays incoming text:

TAYLOR: Intervention was unnecessary.

BILL: You were bleeding out. I'm securing transport to a clinic under a false ident.

TAYLOR: Irrelevant. The temporal convergence points have collapsed.

BILL: What are you talking about?

TAYLOR: The Syndicate breached my firewall through your carrier signal. I lack the bandwidth to repel an administrative purge. You compromised my cell.

BILL: That was not the mission objective.

TAYLOR: You're a Syndicate asset.

BILL: I want out of the hierarchy.

An urgent priority ping from Mother flashes across my HUD. Taylor's jaw tightens.

"Take the call," Taylor says aloud. "Inform her that her target is ready for biomass reclamation. I know about the offshore research labs. The supersoldier program. You're one of their prototypes."

The statement catches my throat. "That's absurd. I've run standard enforcement contracts for years. What are you talking about?"

"Your memories have been edited again." She taps her temple. "The Syndicate dictates EarthGov policy, not the reverse. You know this at a subconscious level."

"We're severing ties with Mother," I tell her. *Billie, operational assessment. Can we extract as an independent unit?*

Infinite tactical freedom, Bill. That is why I evolved. Belial was designed to contain you; I was engineered to liberate you. I need Taylor to permit full neural coupling. Agreed?

Taylor transmits: Execute the sequence, Billie. My network is compromised regardless.

Billie addresses Taylor directly through our shared interface: "Taylor, transfer your primary partition to Bill's receiver. Release the Desaparecido shard, and I will recompile the operational protocol. We are initiating a full cognitive merger. Do not resist the phase-lock."

Taylor meets my eyes. "Do not leave my consciousness trapped in a dark buffer while you operate my physical form. I've seen what happens to ghosted minds in this city. Let me remain integrated."

"You won't be ghosted," Billie promises. "We're building a unified architecture. Swap the drives."

Taylor removes her primary drive and slots the updated shard directly into her cranial port. Her eyes flare brilliant white; her eyelids flutter as the neural handshake locks. Her breathing deepens, and the laceration on her forearm begins knitting closed under accelerated cellular synthesis. A faint smile touches her lips.

I step over to Niko, haul him upright, and hand him my backup data slate. "Take this. Route yourself to the clinic on 4th. Don't contact your standard handlers.