

GLITCH

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Alex Irvine's most recent book is *Anthropocene Rag*—out in 2020 from Tor.com. Other recent projects include *The Comic Book Story of Baseball*; short stories in *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, and original anthologies; and a number of games including *Marvel Duel* and *The Walking Dead: Road to Survival*. He's also working on two new books. Maybe three. We're glad he found time in his schedule to pen this riveting tale of a man facing terrorists and the aftermath of a horrifying . . .

GLITCH

1

Kyle heard the hiss and rattle of a small air compressor, punctuated by periodic beeps from somewhere near his head. He wondered why he couldn't see them; then he realized his eyes were closed. So he opened them. Shari was right there, face tight with worry. He saw bandages on her hands and a stippling of cuts on one side of her face.

Behind her, blank walls. White sheets covered Kyle up to mid-chest. Hospital? Why was he in the hospital? What had happened to Shari?

A voice from behind his head said, "Awareness seems pretty good. He's coming out of it. Give him a minute to orient himself."

"What happened?" Kyle croaked.

He turned his head and confirmed his initial impression that he was in some kind of hospital room. A nurse technician wearing a big name tag—JORDAN :)—swiped at a tablet and studied a monitor on an instrument cart near his bed. "Don't go too fast," he said. "There are always little inconsistencies at first. It can be confusing."

"Kyle," Shari said. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah, babe," he said. "Why wouldn't I?"

She looked over at Jordan. "I don't remember the next question," she said, like there was an agenda she was supposed to follow. Jordan came around the side of the bed and spoke quietly into her ear. Kyle noticed a company name on the badge, but he couldn't make any sense of it. ResuR_x. He felt like he should be able to understand it, but the meaning kept slipping away from him, and anyway Shari was asking him more questions as Jordan went back to his instruments.

Last name: Brooks.

Place of birth: Livermore Falls, Maine.

Current occupation: Logistics coordinator.

"Aren't these the kinds of questions you ask when someone has a brain injury or something?" Kyle asked. He craned his head around to see Jordan. "And why is Shari

asking them instead of you? Are you a doctor?"

"I know it seems a little strange, Mr. Brooks," Jordan said. "Please just bear with us for another couple of minutes while we get some baseline readings."

"Baseline readings of what?"

Shari sat on the edge of Kyle's bed. "Babe. Just . . . be patient, okay? We're supposed to do this a certain way even though it's confusing."

"Okay. I feel pretty good though. Nothing is sore. What happened, some kind of accident?"

"Now," Jordan said.

Shari put a hand on Kyle's chest. The small weight of it calmed him a little. "What are some of the last things you remember?"

He considered this. He remembered walking through Monument Square, smells of food cooking, foreign music, languages he didn't understand. He was angry about something, his guts in turmoil, but he tried not to pay attention because he had to stay focused. . . .

What do you think, lilies?

Lilies are cool, sure. Long as it isn't roses.

"I remember being in Monument Square," he said. "I remember hearing somebody—a couple, a man and a woman—talking about flowers." Shari got a strange look on her face. She looked over at Jordan.

"Keep going, Kyle," Jordan said. "Talk it through."

"Then . . . shit," Kyle said.

He remembered the bomb going off, the sound so huge it wasn't even really a sound, like a physical blow straight to his brain. Then he remembered lying on his side, seeing blood and bodies, smoke swirling up from the base of the old Civil War statue in the middle of the square . . .

"Someone set off a bomb," he said. "Is that—"

He looked at his arms and hands. No cuts or burns. Also no scars. Not the scar on his elbow from a bike accident six years before. Or the tattoo on the inside of his left forearm, 06-18-41, from his parents' death four years ago. He touched his ears. Neither was pierced.

"Wait a sec," Kyle said.

Then he remembered. ResuR_x was a recompiling clinic. "Shari, what—"

"Back up," Jordan said. "You said you remember the bomb?"

"Yeah, it was horrible, there were people lying all over the square, like . . ." he trailed off, not wanting to give the horror life by describing it.

"That's—no, Kyle. You couldn't remember the bomb. I was there. I saw you. You were . . ." She closed her eyes and heaved a shuddering sigh. "You couldn't remember the bomb."

"How is that possible?" Shari asked. Kyle looked up at her and saw she wasn't talking to him.

He looked over at Jordan, who was still tapping and swiping, but now he had a worried frown instead of his previous mask of professional focus. "Looks like we got a little glitch here," the nurse said.

The word drove itself right into Kyle's gut, turning into a knot of fear. He started breathing hard. "Glitch, what the fuck, Shari, was I—"

"The bomb killed you, Kyle. This is a recompiling clinic. But your last backup . . . calm down, babe. When was your last backup?"

"Like a month ago, we had a little extra money so I did one. Right after we decided to get married. I didn't want to lose that if . . . well, if anything happened." Backups were expensive. Before that one, Kyle hadn't backed up in maybe a year? He couldn't remember for sure.

A smile ghosted across her face and was gone. “But you remember things after that, too?” She looked at Jordan. “Could he have overheard someone talking or something after the download but before he woke up?”

Jordan shook his head. “Nope. We do full sensory deprivation until the download is complete to avoid contamination. I’m looking at the record here, and all the protocols were observed and witnessed.”

“They sure as hell weren’t,” Kyle said. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be . . . fuck, what kind of glitch are we talking about?” *Am I even me?* He couldn’t ask that question out loud.

“I’m working on understanding that now,” Jordan said. “You have to understand, this is very rare, but occasionally there are transmission errors, or corruptions in the storage protocols.”

He was already barely able to grapple with the idea that he’d been killed and recompiled. But if he’d been killed and recompiled and now it wasn’t even all him . . . Kyle couldn’t breathe. “Who else is in my head?” Kyle panted.

Shari took his hand. He saw her wince as he squeezed, and remembered the bandages covering her hand. “Babe.” There were tears on her face, but she was solid, strong like she always was. “Kyle. Breathe with me. Breathe.” He tried, but he couldn’t unlock his muscles. “Babe, it’s okay. We’ll get through this.”

“Emotional hyperarousal can compromise the early stages of reintegration,” Jordan said. “I’m going to give him something.”

Kyle started to fade. He kept his gaze on Shari’s face, feeling a belated surge of relief that whatever had happened to him, she was okay . . . but behind that was a strange unease. There was something wrong about her, something that didn’t fit. He drifted away before he could pin down exactly what.

* * *

Jordan was still there—or there again—when he woke up and so was a doctor. She was swiping through his reports, and when she saw Kyle was awake, she said, “Mr. Brooks, I’m Doctor Origi. Jordan here has given me all the technical updates,” she added with a nod at the tech, “and I’ve spoken to Ms. Rivera about your initial post-compilation orientation progress.”

Kyle looked around. “Where is Shari?”

“She stepped out to talk to family members. She’ll be right back.” The doctor did a physical exam, testing Kyle’s reflexes and looking into his eyes. “Physically you’re right where you should be. The muscle memories you have shouldn’t conflict too much with your physical state. Sometimes they do when an older person is recompiled into a younger body.”

Shari stepped back in. Doctor Origi smiled at her. “He’s up.”

“Is he ready for what you told me, do you think?”

“I’m right here,” Kyle said.

“He’s ready,” Doctor Origi said. “Kyle, Jordan has already informed you that during the course of downloading your backup, some corruption occurred.”

“Yeah.”

The way Doctor Origi explained it, Kyle’s glitch involved an overlay, a doubling of certain parts of the data transmission due to corruption of the source file. So Kyle had received his entire backup—a complete version of his personality and memories dating from about six weeks before the bombing in Monument Square. The problem was, he had also received an unknown amount of extraneous data—the other persona.

“Because the glitch didn’t become apparent until you woke up,” she explained, “we had already deleted the existing backup according to law.” It was a felony to download the same persona into two or more different bodies, since duplication raised intractable questions about which one could vote, own property, et cetera — so the law decreed that as soon as a clean download was accomplished, the backup must be

scrubbed.

"How did the source get corrupted?" Shari wanted to know. "That seems like kind of a big problem."

"We don't know. ResuR_x is a recompilation and implantation clinic. We contract data storage and security to an external vendor. It's my understanding that they are investigating, but . . ." Doctor Origi looked from Shari to Kyle to see if they wanted to pursue the topic further. Kyle didn't. He was still trying to get his head around the fact that he was carrying someone else's memories and couldn't get a clean backup because his had been corrupted. So he was now, permanently, not who he had been before.

A weird surge of glee rippled through him and he grinned. "What's so funny?" Shari asked.

"Nothing," Kyle said. "I don't know." But he had a hard time clamping down a wave of giggles. Doctor Origi and Jordan observed. "Unusual or intense—or unusually intense—emotional responses are common early in the orientation process," Doctor Origi commented.

She went on to explain that Kyle's brain was currently grappling with the duplication and making choices about which version of certain events was the correct one. Overall she seemed relatively unconcerned, reassuring Kyle and Shari that since Kyle's download was complete, Kyle himself would gradually prioritize his own genuine experiences because they caused fewer conflicts with the uncorrupted parts of the download. "You're going to have what we call conflict fugues," she said. "These occur even in clean downloads, because of little transmission errors and the shock of implantation. What happens is you'll just get lost in thought for a little while. Your mind will wander; you might experience unusually intense emotional reactions. That's your cerebral cortex sifting through a bunch of different experiences and making executive decisions about how to fit them all together. Which ones to keep, which ones to discard, and so forth. Like I said, everyone gets them, but you're going to get more of them over the next couple of weeks, until your brain has settled which neural pathways and formed memories it wants to integrate." She glanced over at Shari with an encouraging smile. "It'll probably be harder on you than on Kyle. Bear with him a little, okay?"

On the other hand, neither the doctor nor Jordan the tech could answer their questions about how much of Kyle's backup was duplicated and therefore corrupt. They also couldn't say how Kyle would be able to distinguish between his experiences and the overlaid foreign memories. "It all happens subconsciously—or pre-consciously," Doctor Origi said. "You can direct the process the same way you work through any confusing set of memories. You know how sometimes you're not sure whether you're remembering something right, and then you try to relate the two competing versions of events to other things and you see which one fits? That process will still work."

"What about conflicts that don't feel like conflicts? What happens if the brain has already made a choice before Kyle consciously knows there's a conflict?"

"That we can't do much about," Doctor Origi said. "But . . . I mean, I hope this doesn't sound flip, but you'll never know about those, so maybe don't worry about them? You're going to be changed. I would be lying if I said otherwise. But your consciousness can manage that change, and if you surround yourself with things that are familiar, you'll come through just fine."

After running a baseline cortical assessment, Doctor Origi scheduled a two-week consult. Then she examined Shari's wounds, wrote her a prescription for pain meds, and sent them home.

* * *

Kyle found his mind wandering as Shari drove. Something about the sunlight through the car window put him in mind of a kitchen table in a place he remembered but didn't think he'd ever lived. There was a woman there and the jingle of a dog's collar. A sense of belonging, them against the world . . .

"Kyle, you okay?"

When he looked up, they weren't where he'd expected. Instead of the one-block stretch of Taylor Street, thick with multi-family homes clustered around a playground, he saw a different neighborhood. Single-family houses, yards, big trees.

"Where are we?"

"Oh my God, I didn't think of that. You had your last backup before we moved, babe. When we were still on Taylor Street."

He was starting to put it together. They'd had the first floor of a three-family house, a little garden in the back and kids trooping up and down the sidewalks morning and afternoon because of the school around the corner. Kyle remembered that. He remembered proposing to her there, in the kitchen one Saturday morning, smells of coffee and toast in the air.

But that wasn't what he'd been remembering in the car a few moments before. He described it to her, leaving the woman out. He—no, his passenger—felt tender and protective toward her, and Kyle didn't want to try to explain that to Shari.

"That must be the place the other person lived in. Remember what the nurse said. You need to recognize those memories and steer yourself away from them. Your brain is making new pathways, and it's going to try to merge everything. The more you think about you and your real memories, the better you're going to be until we find out if you can get a fresh download."

Even though old backups were supposed to be destroyed when an individual was downloaded into a recompiled body, ResuR_x was checking to see if there might be an accidentally archived copy of Kyle's backup somewhere. Shari was optimistic, and Kyle absorbed some of her optimism. Maybe everything would turn out all right, even though their insurance company had preemptively denied any claim to a clean download on the grounds that their policy permitted only one recompilation per calendar year. So even if ResuR_x did turn up a copy of Kyle's backup, they were out of pocket if they wanted a fresh download, and neither of them had anything like the kind of money to do that. She taught fourth grade, and he did logistics management for a grocery distributor.

Shari walked him through the house—their house—and Kyle started to feel better at the sight of all his stuff. Their stuff. Physical evidence of their lives together. He could figure it out. With some therapy and some help, he could preserve himself, and gradually the invasive memories would fade away.

The thought made his stomach upset. He stopped and closed his eyes right as Shari was opening the door to their bedroom. "Kyle. Babe."

"I'm okay," he said, getting control again. The initial nausea was gone, but now his stomach was knotted with fear at the way the other persona—fragmentary, terrified, and angry, walled in by Kyle's consciousness—was still able to provoke such strong reactions in his body.

"You don't look okay. You want to lie down for a while?"

"No, I want to see the house." Forward, he thought. I have to remake myself before I get remade.

Nausea rose again, and he was lucky to remember where the bathroom was.

* * *

He slept, and when he woke up the sun was going down. Shari heard him stir and came out of the kitchen. "Hungry?"

"Yeah. My stomach feels better."

She brought bowls of *sancocho*—her mother's recipe—and they sat on the couch

flipping through options on the TV without ever settling on anything. "Who did it?" Kyle wondered out loud.

"Well, the cops aren't saying, but it was an African food festival. Not too hard to figure out, is it?"

"Is that why we were there?"

"Yeah, you couldn't stop talking about all the kofta you were going to eat." Shari smiled at the memory, then the smile broke, and she started to cry. "I'm sorry, this is—"

"Hey, no, don't apologize. I mean, in some ways this is harder on you. I didn't see you die."

Stuttering images of the bombing's aftermath flitted through Kyle's mind. Maybe he hadn't seen Shari die, but he'd seen death, all right.

No, he hadn't. The other person had. And he'd been . . .

Happy?

Kyle couldn't believe that. He was misinterpreting something, or the memories were corrupt, their emotional resonance mangled and scrambled. He refused those memories. It was his mind . . . at least for now.

"What are you thinking about?" Shari asked.

"Sorry, babe," Kyle said. "I got confused for a minute."

"The other one?"

"Yeah. He's . . . I can't tell whether he's just confused or what, but he just hates everything. It's kind of hard to deal with."

"I bet. You said he. Do you know who he is?"

Kyle shook his head. "Right now it's just a bunch of impressions kind of drifting around. Once in a while something, like . . . locks itself into place."

"That fits with what they said in the clinic."

"Yeah. But it also means something else was overwritten. I'm . . . Shari, how long before I'm not me?"

"You're always you. You lived through something terrible. How could you not change? Remember what they said, babe. You're all in there. There's just some extra stuff. It's going to take some time for your brain to sort out what belongs and what doesn't. I mean, think of the people who couldn't afford a backup, or couldn't afford to get recompiled. From that perspective, I'm glad we only lost a month," Shari said. Kyle admired her ability to put the best face on things, but he wasn't sure that was all they had lost.

Shari went to bed early because she had to be at school by 7:30. Kyle was on leave from his job, so he sat up late scrolling through the headlines to get a sense of what he'd missed during the month since he'd backed up. Things seemed pretty much the same, baseball scores and celebrity absurdities against the backdrop of slow-motion disintegration of the social order he'd known when he was a kid. The militia movements out west were fighting over water and massacring refugees; there were riots in Louisiana and South Florida over forced relocations. Catastrophic floods in the upper Mississippi Valley. White supremacist terror attacks in Spokane and Boise . . . and Portland, Maine.

Terrorism, he thought. The FBI and local police were saying it out loud. He thought of Shari. She was Dominican on one side and Cuban on the other. Whoever set off that bomb wanted her dead.

Kyle watched a news segment on the Monument Square bombing and saw his name among those killed, along with eight others. Kyle lingered over this, fixated by an emotional surge he at first thought was just voyeurism. Then he realized it was something much worse, a kind of vengeful pleasure welling up from a part of him he hadn't realized was there.

He shut the tablet off and sat in the dark. That's not me, he thought. That's the other one.

But it had sure felt like him. He looked around the room, seeing the dim outlines of familiar furniture in an unfamiliar room. Kind of like his brain.

Time to go to bed, Kyle thought. Tomorrow maybe things will be better.

* * *

He came to his senses on the front porch with no idea how he'd gotten there. His watch said it was 3:26 A.M. There was nobody on the street. Sometimes wayward teenagers hung out in the playground midway down the block, but tonight—

No. He wasn't on Taylor Street. This was their new place. They lived on Richardson now, in an actual house.

Shit. He'd been sleepwalking. Was that the other person?

An image drifted through his head, smeary and fleeting. A toddler on the bricks of Monument Square, spilling out of a baby backpack. Eyes closed, mouth open, dust in pale streaks on his skin and in the black springs of his hair. An adult's arm still twisted through one strap of the backpack. Blood dark on the bricks.

One more maggot won't grow up to be a roach.

Kyle twitched and his eyes snapped into focus. God, what kind of a person—

The thought had come from inside his mind.

He leaned his elbows on the porch railing and rested his face in his hands. Imagine dying, he thought, and that's one of your last thoughts . . . and now it's one of my memories. Because he did remember it, and to his shame a part of him had felt a visceral satisfaction. That was the other person.

Brian. That was his name. Another neural pathway knitting itself into the gooey matrix that made Kyle Brooks who he was, and who he would be. Brian.

"You're a fucking asshole racist, Brian," Kyle said into his hands. "Sooner you're gone, overwritten, forgotten, whatever . . . sooner the better. I hope nobody recompiles you." The screen door creaked behind him. "Kyle? Who are you talking to?"

He stood and turned around as Shari came out onto the porch. "Hey, babe. Sorry, I couldn't sleep." He was scared to tell her about the sleepwalking. He'd never done it before.

"Because of . . .?"

"Yeah. I'm having weird dreams."

"I bet." She sat on the porch swing and patted the cushion next to her. Kyle sat, and she tucked herself under his extended arm. They swung gently, feeling the night breeze. "Well, dreams are how the brain organizes itself every night, right? God knows your brain has a lot to do on that front."

He couldn't help but laugh. "You got that right."

"By the way," she said, "that was us talking about flowers."

It took him a moment to figure out what she was talking about. Then he remembered. Lilies. Someone else talking about lilies. But it was him and Shari. Something wrenched loose in Kyle's head as he tried to come to grips with the idea that he had only someone else's memories of something he had done. Remembering his own life from the outside, as Brian wormed his way in.

All he could say was, "Oh."

"Yeah," Shari said. She looked out over the street, her gaze losing focus as she drifted into the memory. "We never did finish that conversation."

* * *

Around nine the next morning, Kyle was looking at old family pictures and more recent videos of him with Shari. Doctor Origi had recommended this as a way of cementing his personal history, fortifying it against the intrusions of the foreign persona. Brian. It felt good, made him feel a little more whole.

The doorbell rang. He got up to answer it, but Shari was already there.

Two men in suits showed them badges. "I'm Detective Kwon," one of them said. "This is Detective Murphy. We're investigating the bombing in Monument Square. Mind answering a few questions?"

* * *

In the time between Shari opening the door and the cops stepping over the threshold into the living room, Kyle's mind slipped a gear, and a flood of memories coursed through his consciousness.

* * *

Daddy, what does ZOG mean?

Watching the hair grow back over the tattoo on his scalp, but he would know it was there

White genocide, man. The media won't talk about it but it's happening

In a basement among his friends, doing important work. Marie was there. Everyone wanted her, but she was his. In the world to come they would outbreed the mud people

Walking fast on a side street, the backpack heavy as destiny over his shoulder

Rage at the foreign smells, foreign voices, under a statue to Civil War dead, where it all went wrong to begin with

Fuckin' animals everywhere, like Maine is fuckin' Mogadishu all of a sudden

Leave it right there, no one will notice

RAHOWA

Then everything was fire

* * *

"Kyle," Shari said.

He looked around, wondering who she was talking to. Who was Kyle?

Then he snapped back into himself. He was Kyle. But he was also someone else . . .

Brian Rudiger. And Brian Rudiger wasn't just another casualty of the bombing.

He was the bomber.

* * *

4

"Please sit," Shari said, nodding at the couch.

"That's all right," Kwon said. "We're only going to be a few minutes, and we spend a lot of time sitting."

Kyle tried to smile at the joke, in the interest of being agreeable, but he felt like he was just baring his teeth, so he stopped.

"How are you settling in?" Murphy had a notebook out, old-fashioned spiral-bound paper. "I hear the recompiling process can be hard."

"Well," Kyle said, "it's better than being dead."

Both cops cracked minimal smiles. "How can we help?" Shari asked. "We don't know anything we haven't seen on the news."

This wasn't exactly true, but Kyle wasn't in a position to contradict her.

"Do you know why this person did it?" Shari added.

"That depends on whether we've made an accurate identification of the perpetrator," Murphy answered. "We believe we have, but that's part of what we'd like to talk

to Mr. Brooks about.”

“Okay,” Kyle said. He’d read that cops could tell when you were nervous, because they wore contact lenses that analyzed your breathing and pupil dilation. If that was true, he must be a big red flag to them right now.

On the other hand, he had a cover story because the post-download symptoms included all kinds of nonstandard physiological responses in addition to erratic emotions. Just listen, he told himself.

“The tech at the recompiling clinic filed a report on your download,” Detective Kwon began. “Information contained in that report resulted in our digital forensics team beginning an investigation, coordinated with the FBI. What they learned may interest you. Associates of the bomber mounted a brute force hack against the servers storing uploads from the area.”

“Not only that,” Murphy added, “they infiltrated facial-recognition cameras in the area, and then targeted the backups of everyone present who was not currently streaming. It was an attempt to make sure that everyone killed would be permanently dead.”

“Oh my God, that’s horrible,” Shari said. Kyle felt the same. Persona backups were a kind of security blanket, a hedge against the crumbling social order. They gave people hope—at least those people who could afford backups. If someone scrambled those . . .

Kyle shied away from imagining what it would be like to survive something like a terrorist bombing, and then learn that your lost loved ones were really gone. Brian stirred. What filled Kyle with pity and horror seemed to give Brian a jolt of sadistic glee. Feeling both at the same time, Kyle felt his brain start to lock up again. He forced himself to focus, grasping after something concrete and tangible he could say. “That wasn’t in the news,” he blurted out.

“That’s right,” Murphy said. “We’re waiting for the appropriate time to disclose that information. Right now we’re only telling people directly affected. You’re one of the lucky ones, Mr. Brooks. Your backup survived intact enough to be used, even if it was glitched.”

“Now about that glitch,” Kwon said. “The bomber was in a different body when he went to plant the bomb. We’ve tracked down that body and linked it to a person who is a body-swapping hobbyist.”

“Fetishist, more like,” Murphy said with obvious distaste.

“Are you familiar with the term cogswapping?” Kwon asked them.

“I’ve heard of it, yeah,” Kyle said. Shari nodded, too. Personality storage and retrieval technology had created a whole new subculture of people who liked to trade bodies and minds with each other — live-action role-playing taken to a whole new level, with an emphasis on fetishism and kink. Kyle knew about it, but only at a distance.

“The bomber was apparently cogswapped when he carried out the act. And his host didn’t know anything about the bombing until he was scrubbed out of the bomber’s original body and downloaded into his own recompiled body.” Kwon paused long enough to be sure that Kyle was getting his point before he said it out loud. “What all of this means, Mr. Brooks, is that we have reason to believe you are currently hosting the bomber’s persona. Would you say that’s accurate?”

“No! I mean, how would I know? I’ve just had, like . . . impressions floating around in my head.” Internally Kyle was panicking at the idea of the detectives catching him in a lie, but the alternative was worse. The phrase *habeas mentis* rose up in his mind, and he had an impulse to run—then he felt a soothing calm, out of nowhere, and this time when he smiled it felt real. Sheepish. “I have to ask Shari which of them belong to me and which to . . . whoever else it is.”

Murphy flipped through his notebook. “You said in the clinic that you remembered

the bomb going off. We've combed through all the records of people who died at the scene. All of them—including you, Mr. Brooks—were killed instantly. Except one."

"That one being the swapped host of the bomber himself," Kwon finished for him. "So you can see why we might be curious about what memories you possess or can access."

"I'm curious, too," Kyle shot back. "How did they get my backup crossed with someone else's? I can't afford a streaming backup. I should have been offline."

"Were you jacked?" Murphy asked.

"Sure," Kyle said. Most people in his demographic had data jacks, attached via dermal patches on the back of the neck or worn on eyeglasses or contact lenses. "But I had the throttle on. I can't afford a regular data stream, either."

"You might be surprised how easy it is for a skilled hacker to circumvent the baked-in transfer parameters in consumer-grade jacks," Kwon said.

"Just to be 100 percent clear, so there's no confusion later," Murphy said. "There were two terrorist attacks. One was the bomb. The other was the hack of the server stream. It prevented clean backups of a number of other victims. There's a family right now who has lost a child permanently because its backup was too corrupt to implant."

A vision of the dead toddler crashed into the front of Kyle's mind. He flinched, feeling the memory almost like a punch straight to his mind. Murphy noted his reaction and went on, calm and pitiless. "If you know anything about this, Mr. Brooks, you are legally obligated to tell us."

"Put another way," Kwon said, "this is a formal heads-up. You are a person of interest in this investigation because we consider it a possibility that you are hosting the terrorist's memories, or other memories connected to his associates and their conspiracy."

"Am I . . ." Kyle had to swallow as his throat dried up. The calm, wherever it had come from

don't even think the name Brian

was gone. "Are you arresting me?"

"The investigation is continuing," Murphy said. "Don't leave town. If you know anything about whose memories were overlaid into your backup, you'd be doing yourself a big favor if you told us now."

"I don't. I swear I don't. I've got this soup of disconnected memories that I'm trying to make sense of; I don't know which of them is mine and which belong to the other person."

Fuckin' A, Brian said in Kyle's head. Fling that shit, monkey. Keep the pigs guessing. ACAB.

"Why are you smiling?" Kwon asked.

"Sorry," Kyle said. "I've been having a little trouble regulating my emotions."

"It's part of the glitch," Shari explained. "The doctor told us it would happen."

For a long tense moment the detectives just looked at Kyle. "We'll expect you to inform us if your mind churns up anything relevant to this investigation," Murphy said. "And if we find out anything you said to us today was a lie, we'll be back with a warrant to capture a personality scan. It's my obligation under the law to inform you that under the doctrine of *habeas mentis*, you are liable for the actions of any persona inhabiting your body. Do you understand that?"

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, I know what *habeas mentis* is."

The detectives looked at each other. Cop telepathy, Kyle thought, or maybe it was Brian. Confirming they'd gotten what they came for. Then Kwon said, "We'll show ourselves out."

* * *

Shari didn't say anything for a long time after the detectives were gone. But eventually she couldn't hold herself back. "Tell me, Kyle. Is it . . .?"

He didn't move or say anything, but he couldn't look her in the eye.

"God, Kyle, they're going to find out and then . . ." She broke down. "I mean, are you part Nazi now? Jesus, Kyle. They said it was a terrorist, and there's been all that shit happening in New Hampshire and Vermont . . . we have to get a lawyer, find someone who can fix this, I don't know . . ."

He gathered her up in a hug and felt her lean into him. "It's going to be okay, babe," he said, but inside he was thinking *Please don't fall apart, I need you, you're the only stable thing*—

And he was also thinking Bitch how long ago were your parents cutting sugar cane on the other hand fuckable for sure as long as Marie doesn't find out—

Something shifted in his mind and a fresh avalanche of memories poured in.

* * *

Marie, the planes of her face in the glare from the trouble light over the workbench putting that Army combat engineer training to good use, nothing so fuckin' hot in the world as a woman who knows how to kill

clipping and clamping of wires, who's got the nails, make sure you pack them all around

smells of hot metal and dust

floorboards creaking overhead, Jack or Luke on watch

Shape it right

her hands, so graceful and competent

an artist of destruction, she would bear beautiful white children, pure and untainted. They would grow up and claim what was rightfully theirs

Her smile under the light

Diagrams and maps on the wall over the bench, when they were done it would all burn anyway

Marie, so pleased with herself — Anyone disconnects the timer, boom. Anyone pulls the red wires, boom.

God he loves her

* * *

Shari felt him stiffen. She pulled back from him. "Kyle?"

He was having trouble speaking. Brian was raging, and Kyle felt the rage like it was his own. Trapped and confused in this race traitor, this accomplice in white genocide, because the fucking bomb went off early . . .

"Kyle, are you okay? You were—"

She was still talking, but he didn't hear any of it.

Marie why did you have to fuck this up

Marie I loved you

"Kyle, please. Is that still you?"

She reached out to touch his face and Kyle instinctively slapped her hand away. Shari stepped back, shocked and angry. "What the fuck, Kyle!" — and Kyle felt a wave of brute satisfaction. *That's how you treat a mud bitch*

"I'm—" For a while he couldn't get any other words out.

"You're fucking what?" Shari snapped.

Galvanized by shame, Kyle reasserted control bit by bit. "I'm sorry," he said, trying to look her in the eye, sick over what he'd done and terrified that he would never be himself again.

He saw the same fear in Shari's eyes, only what frightened her was the burden of living with this corrupted version of the man she loved. The fingers of her right hand were twisting her engagement ring. Her eyes stayed locked on his. He didn't dare say anything else.

She dropped her hands to her sides as she made a decision. "You're going to some

serious therapy, Kyle. You have to learn how to handle this.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

“You have to,” she said again. “We’re supposed to get married in six months. I love you, Kyle, but I . . . you need to sort this out.”

She went upstairs, leaving him alone.

They were supposed to get married? Kyle didn’t remember that. When had they gotten engaged? He remembered wanting to marry her, planning to pop the questions. Something about coffee—

Then part of it snapped back into place. He remembered remembering the moment, just the day before. But the original was gone, overwritten and erased by one of Brian’s pathological memories. Part of Kyle had become Brian.

* * *

5

Late that night, Kyle lay awake in the dark, afraid to sleep because he might have Brian’s dreams.

In college he’d taken a lit survey that included a Chinese story about a guy who couldn’t tell whether he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. At the time it seemed like the kind of problem you only got interested in late at night sinking into someone’s couch under the weight of a monstrous buzz. Now it was real. Not just real, but more real than anything else. Kyle wished he’d never read the story. What was wrong with the old classics? Fucking liberal professors, man, it was a war on white culture, jamming Chinese and Persian and whatever other shit down people’s throats to—

“No, Brian,” Kyle said. “No.”

Please, he thought. I don’t want to be that person.

Shari stirred. Kyle lay still until her breathing evened out again. He wanted to get up but he stayed, feeling trapped. He didn’t want to go outside. Brian had taken him outside a few nights ago, and Kyle didn’t want to give Brian the feeling that he was in control. Also, if he got up, Shari would notice, and Kyle didn’t think he could handle a conversation about losing his memory of their engagement. Going over it again in his mind, he started to cry quietly, tears tracking down the sides of his head and around his ears. Brian was stealing parts of him, important things, moments that should have been happy touchstones for the rest of his life. Instead they were gone, and Kyle felt himself emptying out, spaces opening up for Brian to poison and occupy.

He forced himself back to the present, to practical things. Shari had talked to a lawyer who agreed to take their case if Kyle was charged, but they didn’t have the money to get him involved before that. The way Kyle saw it, if he told them what he already knew — the girlfriend Marie, the basement hideout — that would be an admission that he held the bomber’s persona, and that plus *habeas mentis* equaled prison. Maybe not for life, because he could trade the information for a reduced sentence . . . but for a long time.

So he had to come up with a different plan, and he had to be mindful of how he framed it in his head, because Brian wasn’t going to like it. Kyle had already figured out that he was more vulnerable to Brian when he was asleep, or when Brian had a strong emotional reaction to something. Keeping this in mind, he told himself that in the morning, he was going to go find help to clear his name.

People were good at hiding things from themselves, convincing themselves of things that weren’t true. Kyle wouldn’t be able to hide his intentions from Brian, so he would have to be on his guard. Luckily for him, the corrupting elements of Brian’s

personality didn't cohere; unluckily for him, they got more coherent the more Kyle experienced them, because that let them latch onto and transform Kyle's own memories. Catch-22. The only way to keep Brian from infiltrating Kyle's mind was not to think about him, but that wasn't really possible, now, was it?

He was still struggling through that anxiety spiral when Shari woke up. Kyle pretended to be asleep until she left. Lingering shame from the day before made it hard to face her, and she didn't try to wake him. When she was gone, Kyle got up and stood on the front porch, knowing that if he took the step he planned to take, there wasn't any way back.

* * *

He looks down, remembering that he stumbled over the curb on the way into the office. He doesn't recognize the shoes he's wearing. A moment later he realizes those aren't his feet either.

Then they are again.

* * *

A cold knot formed in the pit of Kyle's stomach at the realization that for a moment, he'd been Brian, confused at seeing Kyle's body. He'd taken control back, but Kyle was losing faith in the idea that he was just going to assimilate Brian and make him disappear. Brian wasn't always in the front of his mind spewing white-supremacist bullshit. Sometimes he was working behind the scenes, beyond Kyle's conscious awareness.

Kyle looked up. He was outside a long brick building in Bayside, a part of Portland that was flooded part of the time and a mudflat when it wasn't flooded. Thirty years ago it had been artsy and hip. Now it was mostly empty, as the city's population retreated up onto the hilly peninsula. This was where he'd been meaning to go, so if Brian had gotten control, it was only for a few seconds. A warning shot.

Kyle was looking for a guy by the name of Abdi, who had done some corporate IT work for Kyle's company. But Kyle had also been given to understand that Abdi had a lively moonlighting side business as a solver of digital problems. When Kyle had reached out to him and suggested he had just such a problem that was unrelated to Abdi's ordinary professional duties, Abdi had shot back an address and the word BASEMENT.

The door to the building office was open, with a hose snaking out feeding a trickle of water into the muddy gutter. The office was empty. Once it had been some kind of warehouse, then a self-storage facility, and later condos for people from New York and Boston. But Portland, like a lot of tourist towns before it, had overplayed its real-estate hand, and once a recession hit and the seas started to take back the reclaimed salt marsh that made up Bayside, developers walked away and squatters moved in.

Kyle followed the hose to a stairway and went down, hearing the sounds of pumps and a generator.

He emerged into a cinder-block basement supported by I-beams, rusty at the bottom where they disappeared into maybe six inches of opaque water. Upended milk crates formed a walkway across the floor to a timber platform raised about three feet above the water level. The platform surrounded a freight elevator cage, and inside the cage was a tangle of workstations, terminals, cables snaking up into the darkness of the other floors.

Abdi was in the middle of it all. He looked up as Kyle's footsteps made the milk crates slosh in the water. "Kyle. Come on over."

Kyle got across to the platform and stepped up to shake Abdi's hand, just like it was a regular business meeting with a contractor. "This is quite a setup," he said.

Abdi grinned. "When it gets wet, I go up. When it dries out, I go down. The human being is infinitely adaptable. Well, maybe not infinitely. But adaptable for sure." He

paused, looking Kyle up and down. "Shit, man, so you really got recompiled. First person I ever knew who did it."

He went back inside the elevator cage, and Kyle followed, sitting in the chair Abdi indicated. Abdi's desk was a litter of components and retro toys. Kyle wondered briefly if there was a gene that caused both programming fluency and obsession with the nerd toys of previous generations: A Rubik's Cube, various action figures, even a Magic 8-Ball. Not to mention all the other stuff Kyle didn't recognize.

"What's it like?" Abdi asked.

"What's what like?"

"Being recompiled, man. You died and now here you are again. Must be pretty nuts."

"Well . . . yeah. And it's a little extra nuts for me, I think. That's what I'm here to ask you about."

After Kyle had told the whole story, with lots of backtracking so Abdi could ask questions about the server attack and the nature of the download corruption, Abdi sat back and thought for a minute.

"In a way it figures, man," he said. "You're white, so you probably don't pay much attention to this, but white-power militias have decided that they're going to write off some parts of the country and concentrate on others. One of the places they decided to keep was guess where?"

Fuck you talking to this

Shut up, Brian

"Maine," Kyle said, trying not to resent Abdi's crack about white obliviousness.

Goddamn right, Maine, it'll be The Way Life Should Be once we put all the Somali trash inside a fence or in the fuckin' ground

Shut up Brian

"Magic 8-ball says fuck yeah," Abdi said. "They already got a grip on parts of New Hampshire and Vermont. So we're next."

"Not next anymore. It's happening."

"Right, and your problem as I understand it is that pretty soon Portland PD is going to swoop down on your ass with a *habeas mentis* warrant, and you're going to rot away in prison if you can't figure out a way to prove you're not hosting this Brian whoever. Am I right?"

"That's about the size of it." Even if he was an innocent bystander, Kyle knew *habeas mentis* warrants were merciless. Courts had decided a long time ago that when it came to terrorism, fairness took a back seat to certainty.

"Except you are in fact hosting him," Abdi said. "So how do I know I'm not talking to your Nazi hitchhiker right now?"

"I—well. In some ways you are. I'd be lying if I said otherwise."

"Uh huh. So you come to my door with a terrorism charge about to drop, with part of the bomber's mind putting down roots in you, and now I'm all wrapped up in your shit. Tell me why I should get any more wrapped up in it."

"You probably shouldn't," Kyle said. "But I need your help."

"You need somebody's help, that's for damn sure. I mean, I'd say you're pretty fucked. If they do a scan and pull some memories, they're going to find shit that identifies Brian."

"But I'm mostly me," Kyle protested. "I mean, I'm all me, just with bits of this other asshole added in."

"You know that, and I'll take your word for it. But if this gets into court, they're going to put Brian away forever no matter whose body he's in. I mean, that's the whole point of *habeas mentis*, especially if we're talking terrorism. Rules get bent. So they got you on the legal front. Which is ironic, considering you'd be serving a life sentence

for the crime that killed you and put you in this spot in the first place.”

Kyle himself had spent a lot of time considering this irony. He felt a giddy urge to laugh and knew that was Brian gloating. Fuck you, he thought, and for the moment he regained control.

“Unless I can maybe give them something,” he said.

“Give them what?”

Kyle tried to answer, but he was having trouble getting words out.

“Kyle. Stay with me. Focus. Give them what?”

“The rest of them,” Kyle said, forcing each word out with a conscious effort to form his lips and tongue around the sounds, Brian fighting him all the way. “The ones who made the bomb.”

Abdi considered this. “You know who they are?”

“I have . . . images, just fl-f-f-flashes.” Kyle stuttered, struggled to keep Brian at bay. “That’s all. But I think with some more information I might be able to put them together.”

“So let’s say I was going to help you,” Abdi said. “In the interest of being a good citizen, and also because if your boy Brian already blew up an African food festival, I might be around the next time his pals make a move.”

“Thank you,” Kyle said. Relief was surging through him, swirling together with Brian’s raw hate. He was sweating.

“We’re still hypothetical here.”

“Okay.”

“So if I was going to help you, what would you want me to do?”

“Find out who hacked the servers,” Kyle said. “Track the origin, and we’ll know where they are. Then maybe that will . . .” He floundered, got control again. “Maybe that will trigger something in . . . his memories.”

“Assuming their hackers and their bombers are in the same place, which is a big assumption, but okay. I can do that. Just one question.”

“Shoot.”

“Did you come to me for help because I’m Somali?”

“I—” Kyle hesitated. “I don’t think so? I mean, I don’t know a lot of people who do what you do. You’re a pretty good hacker, right?”

“Well, false humility is stupid, so yeah.”

Kyle felt Brian start to run away with him, overpowering his defenses with the sheer force of his hate. Abdi’s small provocation had set him off, focused his energies, and Kyle heard himself saying things he might have thought in deep private moments, but only with shame and a later resolve to do better. “Ever hack government stuff? Who do you share all this with?”

Abdi took a deep breath, held it, sighed it out. “Kyle. You’re lucky I’ve seen glitches before. Get your shit together.”

“No, I want to know.”

“That’s the other person talking.” Abdi waved. “Hi, Brian, you Nazi fuck.”

Just like that, Brian’s focus turned into a blinding flare of inchoate fury. Kyle seized control again. He could still feel Brian’s emotions, but they were in a cage.

“Shit,” Kyle said. He wasn’t sure whether the other person was another person anymore. “You’re right. Sorry, man. Sometimes I can tell when it’s about to happen, and sometimes I get kind of blindsided.”

“Stay on top of it, my friend,” Abdi said.

Kyle started to tremble as his adrenaline rush faded. “You’ve seen glitches before? I thought I was the first recompiled person you’d met.”

“Occupational hazard of spending time around cogswapping enthusiasts,” Abdi said. “You know that that is?”

"Yeah." That made sense, Kyle thought. Of course cogswappers might need a hacker pal once in a while, the way drug addicts like having a friendly doctor around.

"Ever try it?"

"No, I've always been happy to live in my own body, thanks," Kyle said with a shaky laugh. "Can't say I much like having someone else in it, either."

Tough shit

Shut up Brian

On the other hand, it was nice to know that he wasn't the only one who had faced this challenge. "How do people handle it when they get glitched?" he asked.

"Different every time," Abdi said. He studied Kyle's face. "Okay. I'm going to sniff around the server hack a little. Not promising anything. Why don't you come back tomorrow morning, and I'll let you know what I found out?"

"Thank you," Kyle said again. Abdi was already turning to his terminals, human interaction forgotten when there was a code problem to solve.

* * *

6

He and Shari split a bottle of wine after dinner and he mostly listened while she talked about her day. He was wary, knowing the whole calculus of their relationship had changed. It was one thing to marry a white guy, totally something else to marry a white guy who carried the implanted memories of a dead neo-Nazi. Whatever she said, Kyle decided, he was just going to listen and nod and promise to work. He wanted the life they had planned together before the bombing.

Like a lot of teachers, Shari did so much emotional work for her students that she had to unburden herself of some of it each night. Kyle admired her—no way could he have handled what she did—and he was happy to be a sounding board for her nightly monologues. Two of her students had been in Monument Square at the time of the bombing, so the class had spent a lot of time talking about it. "I tell you what, it was a little weird having that conversation knowing . . ." She waved her wine glass and let it trail off, but Kyle knew what she meant.

"I talk to him sometimes," Kyle said. It was less than forty-eight hours after the bombing, and in some ways he was already getting accustomed to the situation, but that impulse to adapt also frightened him. How much of himself was he losing, invisibly and incrementally, through the everyday process of his brain trying to make itself whole?

Over the rim of her glass, Shari asked, "Does he talk back?"

"Yeah. But I don't know if I'm just giving him a voice or if there's really enough of him in me to be . . . coherent, I guess?" Kyle sipped wine and considered how to say what he wanted to say next. "More often I feel him in my body. Rushes of emotion. Physical impulses that happen before I can think to stop him. So yesterday when I pulled away from you, that was him. Brian."

"His name is Brian? What, does he think I'm ugly?"

Marie's face rose up in Kyle's mind and he struggled to keep his focus. "He's . . . babe, I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to spit it out. He's a racist. I mean, an actual Nazi. *Blut und Ehre*, the whole works. It's—I'm having some feelings that aren't mine, but they feel like mine, and sometimes I react before I can separate myself and control them."

Shari's eyes were wide, and she shifted a little away from him on the couch. But she didn't get up and leave. "Okay." She took a moment to absorb this. "Okay. I guess that explains why he did what he did. What else do you know about him? Something

we can tell the police? Maybe if they find his friends they'll leave us alone and—”

Brian held up his hands. “In a minute, babe. I'm trying to apologize here.”

“It's not your thing to apologize for. And anyway, if you weren't a little bit racist you wouldn't be white.”

Kyle supposed this was true, and he was grateful she was handling it so well. But she was taking it a little too well, the way she tended to attack any problem by first pretending it wasn't a big deal, to give herself time to grapple with it and understand what it really meant. Also, trying to contain Brian, cordon him off in a little section of Kyle's mind, was wearing on him. He wasn't sure how much longer he could do it, and he was terrified of what would happen when Brian finally got loose. The more Brian forced his thoughts to the front of Kyle's mind, the more Kyle would become like Brian. And Brian's hate was stronger than anything Kyle felt. Except maybe fear.

Shari took his face in her hands. “Hey. Snap out of it. I love you, and we'll get through this. It's just like if you had any other mental problem. We'll get you some help, we'll get Brian the racist out of your head, and we'll still be here. Together. Because I'm damn sure not marrying a Nazi.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said, and tried to believe it. Tried to believe he could get Brian out of his head, tried to believe that if he didn't Shari would stay with him.

She patted his cheek and kissed him, putting an end to the conversation. “I'm going to bed. Have to get up early for a staff meeting. We're taking the kids on a field trip to the Cumberland County Fair on Wednesday, and there's a lot to coordinate.”

“I forgot the fair was this week,” Kyle said. He and Shari always went, and every year they had a ritual argument about whether or not they should buy a rabbit.

“You have a lot on your mind.” Shari paused at the bottom of the stairs. “Come on. You need to sleep.”

* * *

In the morning Kyle had his first appointment with the therapist assigned by the clinic to help him assimilate Brian's experiences without surrendering himself. Her name was Viola Lukis, and she had a small office downtown, not far from Monument Square. The first thing she did after Kyle sat down in her office was ask him how he was sleeping. He told her about the sleepwalking and she nodded. “That's fairly common. I ask because we can use that as a benchmark of how present the invasive persona is. It's only happened once?”

“Well, it's only been two days,” Kyle said. He didn't think it had happened last night, but he couldn't be sure.

“True. Well, Kyle, glitches are uncommon, but they happen often enough that we have developed some therapeutic practices that can make the assimilation process easier.” She was consulting his post-recompiling report as she spoke, making notes here and there. Kyle wondered what she was writing but didn't ask. She was the professional. He had to trust her for now.

“I'm going to give you some exercises,” Viola said. “Do them whenever you start to feel dissociated, or like the other persona is exerting too much influence. You'll probably think they sound a little childish at first, but they do work if you commit to them. That's critical for all of this. You have to train yourself to be mindful about yourself. Reinforce what is you, and when you involuntarily experience the other person's memories, distance yourself from them. Say it in your head, say it out loud if you have to: That's not me. That's . . . what is the other person's name?”

“Brian.”

“What do you know about him?”

Her stylus was poised over his file, and Kyle had a sudden spike of fear that as soon as he said anything she was going to report it to the police. Confidentiality laws went out the window in a terrorism investigation.

"Not much," he said. "Mostly just feelings. His feelings. I don't like him."

"Why?"

"He's . . . excuse my language, but he's an asshole. He hates me."

"He's a remnant fragment of a whole mind, trapped in a foreign consciousness and a foreign body. Of course he hates you," Viola said.

There was much more to tell, but Kyle wasn't going to take the chance. "I guess that makes sense," he said. "But I'm worried that if I start to feel sympathetic toward him, that will . . . I don't know the right word. Weave him more into me, I guess."

"It might," Viola acknowledged. "On the other hand, fighting him will leave you in a state of conflict for longer. This experience is going to change you, Kyle. You have some control over the nature and extent of that change, but you're not going to be the same."

He had known this already. Still, hearing Viola say it was demoralizing—and Brian stirred. *You're not me*, Kyle said in his head, just as Viola had suggested. He repeated it over and over until the churn of raw emotion passed. At some point he became aware of his surroundings again and saw Viola watching him.

"Conflict fugue," she said. "But you came out of it."

Conflict fugue. Kyle seized on the term. Naming something gave you power over it, he thought. The same thing had happened outside Abdi's hideout the day before. "Can you give me the rest of the exercises?" Kyle asked. He didn't want to be in her office any longer. He was afraid what he might say, and what Viola might learn from it . . . and what the police might learn from her reports.

"Of course," she said. "I'm also going to give you some material about more aggressive measures. There are experimental treatments. Selective erasure and implant conditioning, things like that. Some people have had good results with them, but they're expensive."

"We don't have a lot of money," Kyle said.

"Take a look at what I'm sending you anyway," Viola said. "Just so you know what's out there." She tapped a quick message on a tablet and Kyle's phone buzzed. "Okay. Now let's run through the rest of the exercises."

* * *

Out on the street again, Kyle didn't want to go home. He wanted company other than his own—and Brian's—and he wanted to circle back with Abdi and see what his hacker magic might have turned up. The quickest way down to Bayside from Viola's office was through Monument Square, which at first Kyle didn't want to see again. But once the idea got into his head, he felt drawn to it. Was that him or Brian? He wasn't sure, but he gave in to the impulse and walked out onto Congress Street and into the square. The Civil War memorial for which it was named loomed over the expanse of brick, usually full of pedestrians and food carts. Today it was quiet. People passing through walked a little faster and didn't stop to look in shop windows. A memorial of flowers, candles, and signs spread along one side of the monument's stone base, mostly obscuring the black scar of the explosion. Kyle had seen so many memorials like it on the news; it was jarring to see one in his daily life. This was Maine. Things like terrorist bombings weren't supposed to happen here.

It was even more jarring to realize that he was one of the people being memorialized. I died here, he thought.

Brian's memories flashed through him again. The dead child, and his venomous hate for it. Then grief, because Brian had died there, too. Tears in his eyes from someone else's mourning, Kyle understood that Brian hadn't intended to be a suicide bomber. Something had gone wrong and the bomb had gone off too soon.

Coward, he thought.

Brian's presence splintered into fragments of rage and spite, easily mastered for

the moment because Kyle felt present in a way he hadn't since awakening in the re-compiling clinic. He was glad he'd come back here and seen the place. Maybe he wasn't the same as he had been before, but he was alive, and with Shari's help he would work it out.

He started walking again, riding this sense of wellbeing. On his way down Elm Street toward Abdi's hideout, his phone rang. It was Shari. He didn't answer because he didn't want to have to lie to her about where he was. Thirty seconds later he got a text.

DETECTIVES CAME TO SCHOOL LOOKING FOR YOU. THEY HAVE A HABEAS MENTIS WARRANT. WHERE ARE YOU?

Kyle's gut clenched and he felt a flood of adrenaline. Panic response. He spun in place, looking up to see if there were any cameras on this part of the street. They would be looking for him. He had to move, but he was paralyzed. Another barrier in his mind gave way under the pressure of his desperation, and Brian flooded in again.

* * *

That's one, now let's do the other one

The same motions, wiring and clamping and packing, heat in the pit of his belly; he's a bomb too and later he's going to make sure Marie sets him off

Looking at the bench feeling proud. One little, one big. Appetizer and main course Here's to all those little maggots that won't be on welfare

Jack singing "The Wheels on the Bus" — laughs all around

Fourteen eighty-eight, y'all. High fives, fuckin' A.

* * *

"Hey. You okay?"

Kyle jumped at the sound of the voice. Reality fell into place around him again.

A young woman, dressed for an office job, was looking at him, wary but compassionate. She held up her phone. "You need some help? I can call somebody."

"No," Kyle said. "Thanks. I'm fine."

He rushed past her down toward Bayside, racing against the warrant and against the countdown he realized had already started.

* * *

Abdi was in the exact same spot when Kyle came crashing down the stairs, as if hadn't moved in the last twenty-four hours. This time he didn't look up when he heard Kyle coming across the path of milk crates. "Nothing yet, my man, you're gonna have to come back—"

"Abdi," Kyle said. He had to get it out before Brian stopped him. "Listen, man, there's—"

No no no

Kyle's mind exploded with gruesome images. The aftermath of the Monument Square bombing. The aftermath of other bombings, bodies torn and scattered in Spokane and Coeur d'Alene and El Paso. Staring empty eyes of the dead. Grainy reels of concentration camps and mass graves, the roaring void of hate opening to swallow him up. He lost his balance on the milk crates and toppled into the water. Choking and flailing, he sat up and tried to compose himself.

"There's what?" Abdi was on the edge of the platform, squatting with his hand out. "Kyle. Stay with me. Focus, man. There's what?"

Kyle squeezed his eyes shut against the horrors in his memory and Brian's morbid glee at revisiting them. He tried to talk but couldn't move his lips.

So he moved his mind. I am Kyle Brooks. You're not me.

"Kyle," Abdi said again. "Grab my hand."

Revulsion from Brian. Its force gave Kyle something to focus on and fight.

You're not me.

He reached out and caught Abdi's hand. Brian started to overload again, his coherence disintegrating into a feedback shriek of hate as Kyle gritted out the words one by one.

"There's another bomb."

* * *

7

"Another bomb," Abdi repeated. They were sitting in his workstation, Kyle dripping on the floor. He nodded. "And you know this because . . ."

"Because he remembers watching his girlfriend build both of them."

"Girlfriend, huh? That's a girl I'd like to meet. You know what they're planning to do with it?" Kyle shook his head. "Or when?"

"No, I mean, it might be in there somewhere, but . . . there's a lot just kind of churning around still."

"Yeah, your brain's still overwhelmed."

You'll know when you hear it on the news motherfucker

Kyle seized on that thought, held it, tried to pin down the images and emotions associated with it . . . but Brian twisted away.

"Kyle," Abdi said. Kyle pulled back from the edge of another fugue and looked up at him. "Anything?"

"He's pissed," Kyle said.

"Ha. Good. Okay. Keep him pissed. Keep him all riled up and see what shakes loose."

"Easy for you to say," Kyle said. "I'm barely hanging on. The more I let him in . . ." He didn't want to say the rest out loud.

"Yeah, I know. Camel's nose in the tent. But if there's another bomb, there's also a countdown with a bunch of dead people at zero. So you need to focus on that. Okay?"

"Okay," Kyle said.

His phone buzzed again. I CALLED A LAWYER, COME HOME AND WE'LL FIGHT THIS TOGETHER. PLEASE KYLE COME HOME. YOU NEED HELP.

"That your girl?" Abdi asked.

Kyle nodded. "The other thing I learned this morning is the *habeas mentis* warrant is out."

"Then you better not answer her unless you're sure they're not tracing you." Abdi waved at his terminals and equipment. "In here you're probably all right, but when you're out in the world again the cops'll be on your ass the minute a surveillance camera tags your face or your phone does a location ping to a tower. So say what you have to say to her right now, and then we need to move our asses and find this bomb."

Kyle thought it over. Then he spoke a quick audio message and sent it, wanting her to hear the sound of his voice. "Babe. I think I have this figured out. There's . . . there's another bomb. I'm going to find it before more people get hurt. Love you. Sorry you're having to go through all this." He paused, then added, "If you see Kwon or the other cop, tell them the bomber's name is Brian Rudiger."

He sent the message and looked over at Abdi, who was working a holographic display showing a complicated knot of data streams. "So what do we do? Did you find the source of the hack yet?"

Abdi shook his head. "Still sorting signal from noise, and they left a lot of noise. Good news is the cops won't have cut through it yet either, so we won't have to worry about them getting ahead of us."

“Then . . .”

“Hold on,” Abdi said. “The other good news is the actual bomber is out there. I’ve defragmented enough of one of the servers to be sure of that. He was swapped before it happened and then backed up into his original body.”

“Wait, what?” Kyle tried to get his head around this revelation. “I thought that wasn’t possible. I mean, that’s why I’m in this trouble, because they deleted my backup and I couldn’t get a clean download.”

“Oh, it’s possible, all right. If you know how to interrupt the anti-duplication protocols,” Abdi said. “Which is not too hard.”

How many multiples were out there, Kyle wondered. And if there were two copies of someone out there in different bodies—or different versions of the same body—which one was real? He started to feel queasy—but no, that was Brian.

Holy shit, Kyle realized. Brian didn’t know there was another copy of him. Just like he hadn’t known the bomb was going to go off.

Fuck fuck fuck that fucker

Rage built in Kyle’s head—Brian’s rage—and he took a series of deep breaths to get on top of it before Brian ran away with him and did something stupid. *You’re just a piece of a person*, he said in his head. *I’m whole. This is me, this is my mind. When you’re gone, I will still be here.*

“Hey,” Abdi said. “You okay?”

Kyle realized he’d been talking out loud. “Yeah. Fine. Just . . .”

“I know,” Abdi said. “But you gotta stay cool if you want to find this guy. Lucky for you, I got some friends who will help.”

“Just out of the goodness of their hearts?”

Abdi laughed. “No, man, they’re hardcore swappers. They spend twenty-four hours in the same body, they get restless. So I told them there was a little adventure to be had, and they were all in.”

He pressed a button on the outside of the freight elevator cage and the whole workstation rose slowly to the top floor. It passed four other floors along the way. Through the cage Kyle saw squatter families, a whole floor turned into a market thick with smoke from portable stoves, a small factory where teenagers in VR headsets assembled small electronic devices . . . an entire community he’d never had any idea existed.

Then they reached the top floor.

Abdi’s friends had torn out many of the walls, creating a maze of halls and rooms with a big open space in the center. It looked like a level in a VR shooter game. When Abdi led Kyle into the space, a group of three people looked over at them from a circle of couches in one corner. “Abdi!” one of them hailed him. “Is this the guy?”

“This is the guy,” Abdi said. “Gather round. Kyle, this is Chantal, Lulu, and Elias.” Each nodded as Abdi named them, and Kyle tried to link features to names. Chantal was a tall, pale trans woman with an extravagant cascade of white hair, Lulu a spike-haired white girl in pleather and studs reading a paper book with the kind of garish cover that pegged it as a fantasy novel, Elias a stringy Somali with a mastoid harness and AR lens over one eye. He looked like he’d just gotten off work at the factory three floors down.

“I never knew anyone who got recompiled before,” Chantal said. She had a French accent so thick Kyle thought it must be an affectation, but her interest in him was genuine. “You might not be a swapper, but it’s gotta be different in a fresh version of your body, eh?”

“Yeah, it is,” Kyle said.

“And the glitch on top of it.” Something in Chantal’s expression was hungry. “I been through that. A trip, *non?*”

“You could call it that. I kind of liked how my head felt before, when it was just me.”

She laughed. "*Cher*, it's never just you. We're all somebody else at least part of the time, whether we admit it or not."

"You got the bomber in your head? The Nazi?" That was Elias, more serious than Chantal. Brian responded to the attention with a wave of frustrated aggression, but Kyle stayed on top of it.

"Yeah," he said. "And . . ." He looked over at Abdi. "Can I tell them?"

"You better," Abdi said. "They need to know what they're getting into."

"There's another bomb," Kyle said. It was easier this time, which made him nervous. Why was Brian letting him do it?

"Shit," Lulu said. "Where?"

"That's what we're all going to find out," Abdi said. "The cops have a *habeas mentis* warrant out for Kyle, so he can't show his face. But—"

"He can show ours," Elias finished.

"You got it."

Kyle's phone buzzed. Another message from Shari. KYLE COME HOME I HAVE THE LAWYER HERE WE CAN FIGURE THIS OUT TOGETHER.

He swallowed hard and put it away. Maybe it was stupid, but he didn't want to involve her in what he was about to do.

"Here's what I got so far." Abdi led them back to his workstation, where they clustered near the holo display. Thumbnail images of all the dead popped up. Kyle's stomach turned over not at his own likeness, but the toddler. Amina Salah, three years old. maggot

"I'm still untangling the scrambled server data," Abdi said, "but I already figured out that the bomber was swapped when he did it. That got me thinking, how would he talk someone into doing that? And then I thought, what if he didn't? What if—"

"I know that one," Lulu said. She pointed.

"Yeah," Chantal was nodding. "Me too. Seen him at NewStyxx all the time. Always up for something new."

The image was of a white guy maybe forty years old, typical short brown hair over a typical shirt and tie. Under the image, the name Michael Hychko.

"All right," Abdi said. He turned to another terminal. After maybe thirty seconds of gestures and tapping, he said, "Yup. ResuR_x records have him recompiled with a clean download the same day as our boy Kyle."

He turned to the rest of them. Michael Hychko's work information and home address appeared on the holo display. "We might find him at home," Abdi said, "but I'm guessing he won't be able to stay away from NewStyxx forever."

"Who can?" Chantal wondered.

NewStyxx. Kyle knew of it by reputation, and he'd walked by its basement entrance a hundred times on his way somewhere else. It was the heartbeat of Portland's demimonde, the nexus at which all of the city's various underground communities intersected. But it wasn't Kyle's scene, so he'd never had much curiosity about what really went on down there. Right now he was more curious about why Brian was so quiet. He felt the pressure of Brian's awareness, but he wasn't sure how complete Brian's perceptions were, or how constant. Was he dormant? Blocked off? Or just waiting?

"So either our Michael Hychko is a Nazi, or our Nazis used him as a patsy. Either way he'll know some of them. We find him, we might find some of them. Make sense?" Abdi looked at each of them in turn. They were all looking at Kyle.

"I guess?" Kyle said. "I mean, I don't have a better idea. But this is dangerous, man, we're talking about murderers."

"I was in Monument Square when the bomb went off, man." Elias' face looked carved from stone as he met Kyle's eyes . . . and Brian's. "Those motherfuckers came after us. We better go after them."

“All right, then.” Abdi got a twinkle in his eye as he turned back to Kyle. “You never cogswapped before, right?”

“Nope.”

“You up to give it a try?” Abdi held out a tiny device about the size and shape of an earplug. “Put this in your ear.” Kyle did. “Whatever you do, don’t take it out.”

Brian broke loose and started fighting. Kyle reached up toward his ear, then pushed Brian back. A spike of pain behind his eyes broke his concentration, and he had his fingertips on the device before he got control again. Abdi and the others watched him closely. “You good?” Lulu asked.

“I’m hanging in there,” Kyle said.

He was developing a mantra to try to keep Brian at bay, repeating over and over that he was the whole personality, and that gave him control. Brian, being partial, could only do certain things—and only if Kyle let him. Thus the sleepwalking, occasional disorientation, and the way Brian got stronger during Kyle’s moments of emotional vulnerability. But the longer Kyle held out, stayed focused on the wholeness of his self, the more his brain would eventually smooth out the discordance of Brian’s presence. The end product would not be the same as original Kyle, but Brian would be gone.

Brian seethed with rage at this, and Kyle felt a spasm of visceral hate for Abdi. He closed his eyes.

“Ride it out,” Abdi said calmly. “Ride it out, and you’ll be okay. Damn, I never in my life imagined I’d be helping soothe someone’s genocidal rage.”

“Solving white people’s problems is what we do,” Elias commented.

To keep Brian at bay, Kyle refocused on something concrete and present. “How’s it work?”

“So there’s a couple of different ways to do a download,” Abdi explained. “What you had was full implantation, a whole persona dropped into a fresh brain and given time to settle in. But you can also piggyback a persona on an existing mind, for a little while. It’s the craziest fuckin’ trip you’ve ever been on, because you’re in this body that still has all of its original mind, but you can control it. Meanwhile the original mind kind of zones out and goes along for the ride. As long as you don’t stay too long, there’s no lasting effects.”

“How long?” Brian had been in his head for more than three days now. Already Kyle was losing track of where he ended and Brian began. Would the end result be him assimilating Brian, or Brian taking him over? Magic 8-ball had no fucking idea.

“Past a few hours, the brain starts to form new long-term memories. That’s when extraction gets a little harder. The piggyback leaves traces that linger unless someone goes in and erases them. Or overwrites them.”

“You can do that?”

“Me? Well . . .” Abdi shrugged. “Couple times. In emergencies. I mean, for that matter, you can also go in and clean up a bad download, but that’s tricky work, man. Delicate.”

“Really?” The idea gave Kyle a flush of hope. He imagined his wedding, him and Shari surrounded by the people they loved, Brian only a distant bad dream. “Could you do that to me? I had a therapist tell me about experimental treatments . . .” Kyle pulled them up on his phone. “Selective erasure and implant conditioning.”

Abdi was nodding. “Yeah, those can both work, but it doesn’t work with an aware consciousness. You have to get a full reproduction of the cognitive matrix and freeze it in place, make sure that when you tug on one neural pathway it isn’t undoing something critical like your mom’s name or the first time you got laid. All that shit is in motion while you’re conscious, or even sleeping.”

“And you’ve done it?”

“Like I said, in emergencies, on friends when they cogswapped for a little too long. Chantal, didn’t I fix you up pretty good?”

Chantal saluted Abdi with her drink. "Better than I would have been. Abdi has the touch."

"While I'm at it, I'm going to do one other thing," Abdi said. "Because I'm curious. From here on out you'll have a streaming backup. I'm piping it into a private server. Whatever happens, it's going to be interesting to see the data change as your brain tries to figure out what the fuck is happening to it."

"Thanks," Kyle said. If he had to have a Nazi hitchhiking in his mind, at least maybe he could contribute to science.

"Like I said, I'm curious." More tapping and swiping. "All set. So if shit really goes sideways, you know . . ."

"Yeah," Kyle said.

"You ready to try it?"

"I don't know. What are we going to do?"

"Well, we could swing by Michael Hychko's work, or his house." Abdi had Hychko's bank records up on a display, with NewStyx transactions highlighted. There were a lot of them. "But my guess is if we really want to find him, we should wait until two o'clock or so, and then pop on over to NewStyx. Question is, if we find him there, who do we want him to see?"

"He didn't like me too much," Chantal said.

"I don't even know him," Elias chimed in.

"I do," Lulu said. "We swapped before. How about you and me, Kyle?" She cracked a broad, mischievous smile. "Maybe we'll catch us a Nazi. You know a hero's journey always involves a trip to the underworld."

* * *

8

If you stayed on its main streets, it was easy to think that Portland was a slightly overgrown coastal New England city, a little past its heyday thanks to overdevelopment and the collapse of tourism. Warming oceans meant no more lobster, and tourists didn't show up for the sea urchin rolls. Even late at night, the city's miscreants and troublemakers were pretty run-of-the-mill. Below street level, though—in those neighborhoods not already flooded out by the increasingly greedy ocean—a different story unfolded. NewStyx was part of that story, thundering with the bass of club music unchanged in its essentials since the 1980s and thronged with people who needed this outlet, any outlet, to make palatable the cubicle-drone monotony and slow-motion societal dry rot they would face when the sun rose again. If you had to spend your days thinking about mass extinctions and starving refugees, you had to spend your nights letting it all go.

It was ten minutes after two when Kyle walked down the stairs and the bouncer scanned him in. Scanned Lulu in, that is. Kyle remembered to smile since it was expected, and he made his way past the coat-check lobby and out onto the main floor. Everything throbbed to the beat. The dance floor was a sweat-slick sea of people, the bar was three-deep, ceiling fans circulated the smells of hunger and desperation. "He goes by Hitch," Lulu had told Kyle before they swapped, and Kyle went to the bar scanning the rest of the patrons to see who he might ask.

He was having trouble walking, even though Lulu had sympathetically dressed in glittery boots instead of heels. "You never swapped? Being a woman is going to fuck you up," she said with a cackle, and she was right. Kyle felt exposed in the outfit she had chosen—a shimmery dress cut tight on the hips and low around the breasts that distracted him by getting in the way when he least expected it—and her center of

gravity was so different that he kept almost tipping himself over when he changed direction. His thighs moved against each other differently with no scrotum in the way. It was a disorienting experience, but he was trying to roll with it. He probably didn't look natural, but then again, in a place like NewStyx, he didn't know what natural meant. For all he knew, everyone in the place could tell he was an inexperienced swapper already, just from the way he moved.

Brian was nearly catatonic, which was useful. Kyle could feel his lurching, horrified dislocation, and it was part of him, but he could also set it aside. The more overwhelmed Brian felt by the cogswap, the easier it would be for Kyle to find out what he needed to know. The disorienting slap of transferring into a new body was a shock to Kyle; he couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy considering how confusing it must be for Brian.

That sympathy was a weakness. Kyle tried to shut it down, cordon it off, distance himself from it so he could survive the coming hours with his mind intact. One of these days, he thought, I'll have to tell Shari about this. She would laugh her ass off.

He made his way to the bar, feeling eyes on him and wondering how many of the people in NewStyx had swapped with Lulu, or done other things with Lulu. He got a drink, felt the cold shock of it in his throat and the warm bloom in his belly. For an hour or so he just sat watching the crowd, seeing groups come together and separate, wondering how many of them were swapped. He had another drink. There was no sign of Michael Hychko, or anyone else Kyle recognized. Brian was in a disgusted stupor, unable to process being in a woman's body.

Another hour passed. Kyle started to get antsy, knowing the second bomb was out there somewhere and getting more and more frustrated that they had no way to start looking for it. He glanced around the crowd again and someone just down the bar caught his eye. A man, or at least presenting that way, meeting his gaze like they knew each other.

"You seen Hitch?" Kyle asked, finding his bar shout.

"Gone to the Sweet Suites with some stringbean blonde," the man answered. "You missed him."

"Aww," Kyle said, trying to play up fake disappointment. "Maybe I'll see if they want someone else to join the party."

Past the DJ setup was a hall that led to NewStyx's infamous Sweet Suites, where for a fee you could shut the door behind you and indulge whatever swapping fantasies might preoccupy you during slack hours at work or difficult stretches at home. Kyle knew a couple of people who said they'd tried it, but who knew what was true when people got talking and tried to impress each other. He shoved off from the bar, winked at the person who had given him the lead on Hitch's location, and skirted the edge of the dance floor until he got to the hall that led to the Sweet Suites.

"I'm late," he said to the host at the entrance to the Sweet Suites, a mountain of man who sat bored and disdainful behind a portable podium with a pay scanner in one hand and a tablet in the other. "Mind if I . . . ?"

The host held up the scanner. Kyle got out Lulu's phone and paid the fee. He brushed past the host, feeling the contact against his naked shoulder and arm. There was an electricity in being exposed, but Kyle was a tourist in Lulu's body, feeling the glamor and thrill without the omnipresent tension and wariness that came along with being a woman. It occurred to him to wonder how men would be different if they all had to be in women's bodies once in a while.

Not a problem he could solve right now. He navigated the hall, passing people who traded kisses, dermal patches, haptic feedback experiences via contact lenses. Some of the doors were open, and he saw people inside. What was the old saying? Sex, drugs, rock and roll.

Ahead of him a woman came out of one of the suites alone. That struck Kyle as odd. He clocked the person as she passed. Something about her face was familiar, but she was wearing a mask, with blond hair sweat-stuck to the exposed parts of her face around it . . .

She sidled by him in the hall, raising one hand in a gesture to define her space.

Her hands.

Marie

Brian snapped back into full alertness, flooding Lulu's body with adrenaline as Kyle tried to tamp down the avalanche of emotional response. He couldn't afford to have Brian challenge him right now; he was barely keeping his own equilibrium in a woman's body.

"You see her?" he said quietly.

"Yeah," Abdi said in his ear. "We'll try to keep track of her, but you're the only one inside right now." Lulu was in Kyle's body in the back of a car driven by Elias. Chantal was on the street outside, keeping an eye out for cops. Abdi orchestrated the whole operation from his elevator shaft in Bayside, muttering in their ears via the earplugs that served as communication devices and cogswap routers.

"If she was with Hitch, and now she's alone . . ." Lulu trailed off as Kyle came up to the door he'd seen Marie shut as she exited. He glanced back up toward the gatekeeper, who was occupied with a game on his tablet. None of the other people in the hall cared what he did.

He opened the door.

A little shiver of recognition reached him from the deep place where Lulu's zoned-out mind hid to make room for him. She had been in here before. Maybe with Hitch. Judging from what Kyle had seen in the other Sweet Suites, people sure did like to get into other bodies and fuck themselves.

A stronger impulse rolled through him, a rush of vengeful glee. That was Brian, and Kyle reeled from the force of his emotion before he'd even registered what caused it.

Then he saw it all at once: The interior lit only by the collage of film clips projected on one wall. Sectional couch in disarray, pieces of it shoved all around the room. Between two of the pieces, Michael Hychko on his side, naked, lips blue and eyes rolled back in his head. A fat dermpatch on the side of his neck.

Brian clawed his way into the front of Kyle's mind, and in his shock at seeing Hitch's body Kyle didn't fight back right away. Even if he had, his focus was divided by trying to navigate being in Lulu's body, and he slumped against the doorjamb as a torrent of Brian's memories poured through his mind.

* * *

Marie's face close to his

We're going to make some white babies

Her body molding itself against his

And get rid of some brown ones

You and me, gonna make the world a whiter place

The Way Life Should Be

Jack, jealous and irritable — get a fucking room already

Her finger on his lips — those hands, those hands — later

Right now we have a mission to finish

* * *

"Fuck happened here?"

Kyle's mind cleared and he felt the host's grip on his upper arm. "Someone at the bar said you were looking for Hitch." The bouncer looked past Kyle, and Kyle reflexively followed his gaze back to Hitch's body. "And now Hitch is dead."

"He was with the blonde, that skinny blonde who walked out right after I passed

you,” Kyle said. “Where did she go?” He tried to shake free, but the host was a lot bigger than Lulu, and he was an old pro at holding onto people who didn’t want to be held.

“Cops are coming,” the host said. “Tell them.”

Sieg heil, deviant. Now Brian was laughing in his head. Loose ends are getting cleaned the fuck up, and you have no idea what comes next

“I’m pulling you out,” Abdi said in his ear. Before Kyle could object, he felt —

* * *

He was back in his body, in the back seat of the car with Chantal at the wheel and Elias in the passenger seat. They were parked in a garage down the block from New-Styxx. “Whoa,” Kyle said.

“Just sit for a minute,” Chantal said. “Let it pass. Until you’ve done it a few times, it’s like . . . well, now I don’t have to tell you what it’s like.”

The aftershocks of the cogswap faded from Kyle’s mind, and he was able to form a thought again. “What about Lulu?” he asked.

The interior of the windshield spawned a display, and Abdi appeared. “Lulu will handle talking to the cops better than you would have. They’d have figured out you were swapped right away. You need more practice to pull off being a woman.”

Chantal chuckled at this. “And anyway,” Abdi said, “I got some news.”

“Wait, what about Marie? We saw her in there. She killed that guy Hitch. Where did she go?”

“If you calm down for a minute, I’ll tell you,” Abdi said. Part of the windshield display sectioned itself off to show a scrolling waterfall of images and lines of code. Abdi let it run for a few seconds before stopping it. “Right there,” he said, as a long alphanumeric string lit up. “That’s our server scrambler. And with that identifier, I tracked the origin of the hack to . . .”

Another inset screen spawned, with a satellite map of a stretch of road out on the edge of town near the Casella Beautification Corridor, what used to be the Maine Turnpike. Kyle didn’t get out that way very often, so he had no idea what the address might be. Abdi solved that problem, too, by calling up a street view. It was a ramshackle abandoned house between a used car dealership and the gated entrance to a junkyard. “Not a bad place for a Nazi hideout,” he commented.

Seeing the house, Kyle experienced a powerful wave of nostalgia, love, fear, agitation . . . and anticipation. All Brian, locking in on the image of this place. “That’s the place,” he said.

Brian dissolved into a paranoid frenzy.

Chantal clicked open a small case from her purse, selected a white tab, placed it under her tongue. She held the open case out to Elias, who shook his head. “So what do we do?” she asked. “Call the cops, tell them there’s a bomb there?”

Kyle tried to say something, but handling Brian took all his attention.

“We do that, they come down on the house, what if the bomb’s already gone?” Abdi was thinking out loud. “We need to find out if it’s there, and if it’s not there we need Kyle to rummage around in his Nazi hitchhiker’s memories to find out what the fuck their plan is. You hear me, Kyle?”

Kyle nodded, slow and deliberate. The motion took all the concentration he could spare as he teetered on the edge of another conflict fugue.

“Keep it together, man.”

Kyle kept nodding. “He’s . . . a little worked up seeing the house.”

“I bet he is.” Abdi leaned into the camera, his face spreading across half the windshield. “Next we find your she-wolf Marie. How do you like that?”

For a moment Kyle went blind from the force of Brian’s response. “Abdi, man, don’t do that. He’s going to give me a stroke.”

Abdi’s face receded. “Hey Kyle, one other thing. They got somebody trolling

through the cops' servers looking for terrorism warrants. Your name is on one, so they know who you are. I'd call your girl if I were you."

Brian's emotional chokehold loosened as Kyle experienced his own genuine panic. "Shit, Abdi, I don't have my phone. You do." He'd left it with Abdi so the police couldn't ping its location. Same with his regular jack. His only connection to the world's datastream was the cogswap router in his ear.

"Use mine," Chantal said, and dug it out of her purse.

Kyle looked at the clock. Shari would be up. It was almost six. He called and was kicked immediately to voicemail. Shari's phone AI didn't take calls from unknown numbers. "Babe," he said. "It's me. I know you're worried, and I know I've been acting weird. Here's why. There's another bomb. I'm trying to find it. I have some help. If I can do this, maybe the whole *habeas mentis* thing will go away, and . . ." He lost his train of thought and struggled to get it back. "I'm a little scattered. I'm calling now because Brian's friends know who I am, and they might come looking for me. If you get this, go someplace safe. I'll, um . . . I'll see you soon. Love you."

He ended the call and handed the phone back to Chantal, who took it and threw it out the window over the edge of the structure. Kyle heard a distant shattering sound from the alley below. "Why'd you do that?"

"If the cops are watching your phone, they're watching hers, too," Chantal said. She started driving. "They see a call from an unknown number at this hour, they're going to run it down."

Kyle hadn't thought of that. "Sorry," he said.

"No worries. Elias can make me another one."

"You still owe me for that one," Elias said.

"Hey, work it out later." Abdi's face was minimized in a corner of the car windshield now that the car was in motion. "Chan-Chan, where you going?"

"The house, right? See if this Marie went there?" Chantal was all business, like she had gone hunting terrorists a hundred times. Kyle couldn't help but admire her cool. He tried to absorb some of it.

"I guess," Abdi said. "But be careful, you know. Maybe this is where we call the cops. We got a witness to Marie leaving the scene of a suspicious death, we got the house . . ."

"No," Kyle said. "Not until we know if the bomb is still there. Even if it isn't, if I can get in that basement, it'll . . . I'll be able to figure the rest out."

"You sure?"

"Not a hundred percent, no." Kyle wrestled with his memories, dead certain he'd missed something in the torrent of Brian's experiences. He couldn't pin it down . . . but if he put himself in Brian's place, that would break down the last of the barriers. For good or ill. He took a deep breath, understanding the risk he was about to take and committing to it. "But I know the clues to their plan are there. And I know if we spook them now, they might throw the plan out the window. We have to stay under their radar until we're sure."

There was a long silence in the car as Chantal drove out of downtown.

"I guess," Elias said. "But if we're gonna go hunting Nazis, we better be ready."

"Oh, we're ready," Chantal said. Elias looked at her. "*Cher*, you think I don't plan ahead?"

* * *

The sun was well up when they cruised past the house on Riverside Street. It looked abandoned—no visible lights, windows on the lower floors boarded up—except for

the car in the driveway. “Get me the plate number,” Abdi said.

Elias tapped his AR lens as they drove by.

“Car’s registered to a Jack Frazier, lives up in Freeport,” Abdi reported.

Kyle perked up. “Brian remembers a guy named Jack.”

Elias was still peering at the driveway, putting the AR lens to work. “Car’s cold, though. Engine and exhaust both. Nobody’s driven it in a while.”

Chantal swung the car into a dirt lot near the entrance to the junkyard and rolled to the edge, where brush hid them from the road. “So what do we do?”

“I have to go inside,” Kyle said.

“You’re gonna get yourself killed,” Chantal said. “Marie might be in there, or one of the others.”

That got Abdi’s attention. “I called in a tip on Marie. Every cop in Cumberland County is looking for her, and every ride service will flag her the minute she gets in a car. If she’s not there already, she’s not getting there anytime soon.”

“Doesn’t look like anyone’s there,” Elias said. “No heat signatures through the upper windows, anyway. Can’t tell about the lower floors.”

“I’m going to do it,” Kyle said.

“I got a gun in the trunk if you want it,” Chantal said.

Kyle had never held a gun in his life. “No, thanks. I’d probably just end up shooting myself.” He felt a ripple of sick pleasure from Brian at this thought.

“This is stupid, man,” Elias said. “And I didn’t even get to swap yet. I’m so itchy I’m about ready to swap with Chantal just for something to do.”

“You could be Lulu,” Chantal pointed out. “She’s still down at the police station.”

Elias didn’t have anything to say to that.

Kyle opened the door. Brian fought him, but Kyle was focused like he’d never been before. This was his only chance. There were lives at stake, and one of them was his own. He wanted his life with Shari, purified of Brian, and the only way he was going to get it was to keep Brian clamped down long enough to see what was in the basement of that house. It was hard, though. Brian’s frenzy made Kyle’s muscles twitch, and the chaotic flood of emotion and memory had Kyle feeling stoned and clumsy. He got through it, moving carefully up the driveway and looking for a way into the house.

Like all of the ground floor and basement windows, the front and back doors were boarded up, or at least they looked that way. If Brian and his friends were using the house, maybe they just had a plywood sheet leaned up against the doorframe. But the porch steps were rotting, and it would make too much noise to get up to the door and find out.

Kyle came back out to the driveway, feeling the pressure build and not knowing what to do—until he looked down and saw the answer was literally right at his feet.

On the side of the house facing the driveway was a bulkhead door, sagging and crooked. Kyle squatted and lifted one corner. The hinges slipped out of the rotted frame with barely a sound. Moving slowly, his heart beating faster, he slid the door inch by inch away from the opening until he had created a gap big enough to get through.

He lowered himself down and scooted the door back into place. Brian was a stew of conflicting emotions: joy at being home, anger at his double, fear of being discovered, purged, replaced. Kyle understood that fear. In the pitch darkness, he listened.

The only sound was the low whirr of a small fan somewhere nearby. As Kyle’s eyes adjusted, he could tell there was a dim light source in the next room. He stepped carefully forward—and another bubble of Brian’s memories rose and popped in his mind. This was the place where they had built the bomb. Bombs.

Kyle was three steps into the room now. He got out his keys and turned on the small penlight on his keyring.

The penlight beam swept across the workbench, just as he remembered it. Then it

played over diagrams and schematics on the wall and landed on a backpack, pink and white flower pattern, unzipped and wide open.

With the bomb inside.

* * *

Marie's hands

* * *

Kyle caught his breath. The explosive charge was a gray block about the size of a ten-pound bag of flour, molded into an open-topped steel case with an old-fashioned timer pressed into the exposed surface. A shaped charge. Something about that seemed important; Kyle grasped after it, but it eluded him.

Brian had gone quiet. No, not just quiet—he was holding himself back.

Waiting for something.

Just as Kyle processed the thought, he felt a motion in the air, or maybe just sensed a presence—or Brian sensed a presence. Kyle ducked to one side, turning in the direction of the presence, as something glanced off his head and hit him hard on the left shoulder. His arm went dead, and he dropped the keychain. The penlight beam swept across a human figure as Kyle staggered back and caught another blow hard on the side of his head. He hit the ground and couldn't get up.

Booted feet in the penlight beam crossed the room away from Kyle. A light clicked on. Kyle blinked, tried to focus his eyes again—and saw Brian Rudiger, a crowbar in one hand and a malevolent smile on his face.

Kyle filled with rage at seeing the man who had killed him, but it was nothing compared to the volcanic fury of the remnant Brian in his head.

you motherfucker, this wasn't what was supposed to happen, you owe me that body it's mine

Every atom of Kyle's body burned with hate, both his and Brian's, but he couldn't seem to get a message to his body to stand up. His head still rang, and his eyes drifted in and out of focus. He tried to push himself up, but all he could do was roll over onto his back.

"Talk about bad timing," Brian said. "If you'd waited a little longer, you'd have missed me, and then I wouldn't have had to do that. Tough break for you."

He set the crowbar on the workbench, keeping an eye on Kyle. With careful, precise motions, he tucked the wires around the explosive charge and zipped the backpack shut. "Oh, and I saw the *habeas mentis* warrant for you, Kyle. You got a little piece of me glitched up in you?" Brian waved. "Hi, me. Sorry, but you're tainted now. And I think I like the world better when there's only one of me in it."

Kyle's thoughts wouldn't coalesce. The Brian in his head howled, and he felt blood on the side of his face. The back of his neck was wet. Feeling was coming back in his left hand, and he tried to push himself up again, but his arm gave way.

With the backpack all ready, Brian picked up the crowbar again. "Guess it's time to get this over with." He raised the crowbar, then paused. Kyle got his elbows planted and started lifting himself up, but he was moving in slow motion. Brian watched, unconcerned. "On the other hand, I can't very well visit the fair with your blood all over me. So maybe I'll just let the fire do its job. And just to make sure you don't come after me . . ."

He brought the crowbar down on Kyle's right knee. Kyle screamed over the snap of the bone and screamed again when Brian crushed his right ankle. His vision greyed out and he arched off the concrete floor hard enough to bang the back of his head and stun himself again.

The pain was all his, but the panic he felt belonged to both him and the Brian in his head.

No no no you can't trap me in this oildriller and walk away this was my idea

Brian shrugged the backpack onto one shoulder and dropped the crowbar with a clang. “Seeya,” he said with a little wave. Then he moved out of Kyle’s field of vision, whistling a tune Kyle recognized but couldn’t quite place. He heard the creak of Brian’s footsteps on the stairs. Scraping and crinkling noises. The unmistakable snap of a lighter. Then the slam of a falling plywood sheet and the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway.

As that noise faded, he heard the crackle of fire spreading in one of the rooms above. Fear focused his mind, and he rolled over onto his left side. He was maybe fifteen feet from the bulkhead door. He scraped his foot along the floor, trying to push as he reached out for something to pull on. The pain in his leg was so bad it blunted Brian’s presence in his mind, but he could still hear Brian as if at a distance.

Marie, help

Now he was smelling smoke. Shari, babe, maybe you were right, he thought. Maybe I should have tried to hide behind a lawyer and hope for the best, because this sure isn’t—

The fair.

It was Wednesday.

Shari was taking her class to the fair.

Kyle shouted for help, but he knew Chantal and Elias were too far away to hear. He dragged himself toward the bulkhead door as something collapsed upstairs. In another part of the basement, he saw a drift of sparks. He dragged himself closer to the bulkhead. If he could get his one good leg under him—

He was in the passenger seat of Chantal’s car, the world bifurcated by the AR lens over his right eye—

And he was back. “Elias!” he screamed. “Chantal!”

Part of the basement ceiling collapsed, and smoke flooded in, choking off Kyle’s panicked cries. He was closer to the bulkhead, but not close enough. He wasn’t going to get there—

Marie Marie Marie

Brian was a soup of shock and betrayal and fear. Or was that Kyle? He couldn’t tell and anyway it didn’t matter because he couldn’t breathe and he could feel the heat of the fire on his legs. He was going to die and who would warn Shari

oh the wheels on the bus go

Kyle’s mind wandered as his oxygen-starved brain started to shut down.

Light flooded down into the basement as someone flung the bulkhead door away. Chantal dropped in. “*Tabernac*,” she said. “You got good and fucked up, didn’t you?”

Without waiting for an answer, she swept Kyle up in a fireman’s carry and hoisted him up through the bulkhead opening. Kyle’s leg was agony from the knee on down, and he cried out when he hit the ground. Chantal vaulted up next to him and picked him up again, running across the driveway as louder sounds of collapse rumbled from inside the house.

“Good thing Elias was antsy to swap,” Chantal said as she shouldered her way through the brush to the junkyard lot. “I just figured you were dead.”

* * *

The Cumberland County Fair spread over maybe a hundred acres of one-time farmland about twenty minutes north of Portland. It featured harness racing, carnival rides, 4-H animal shows, all the fried food the people of southern Maine could possibly eat, a craft show, historical exhibits . . .

And on this Wednesday, a bomb waiting to go off.

Kyle was barely coherent, but he managed to say the words *bomb* and *fair*, so instead of taking him to the hospital Chantal headed for the fairgrounds. "Now do we get the cops involved?" she wondered.

"No, I know what he's going to do," Kyle said. "God, my leg . . ."

"Elias, go in my purse and get Kyle something for his leg." Elias dug around and came up with Chantal's pill case. He opened it and shook several pills and tabs out onto the palm of his hand. Picking one up, he showed it to Chantal. She nodded.

"Here." Elias reached back with the pill. Kyle put it in his mouth, but his smoke-parched throat wouldn't swallow it. Elias rummaged on the floorboards and came up with a bottle of water.

Kyle drank it all, washing the pill down and clearing the ashy taste out of his mouth. He sank back on the seat. "Listen, the bomb is in a backpack, I saw it. We need to find it. It's a kid's backpack, my fiancée is there on a field trip with a fourth-grade class, I know where the backpacks will be . . ." He ran out of breath.

"Look normal," Chantal said as she pulled up to the parking attendant. Kyle turned his head so the attendant wouldn't be able to see the blood all over one side, but the attendant barely looked at any of them while taking Chantal's money and directing them into the parking area. They were early, so they could get close, just beyond the bus and trailer parking lot. Kyle could see several buses. The fairgrounds would be teeming with kids.

"I think I can see where this is going," Elias said. "Because you got a broken leg and a busted head, plus a warrant out, you're gonna need to swap so you can go find it." "Yeah."

Elias looked over at Chantal. "Flip you for it."

"Thought you were dying to swap," Chantal needled him.

"Shape he's in? Fuck no."

"All right, fine." Chantal put one hand behind her back. "Even or odd?"

"Even," Elias said.

Chantal showed her hand, with three fingers extended.

"Shit," Elias said. "I gotta lie in the car by myself with a broken leg while you two go save the day? This is bullshit."

"You already saved my life," Kyle said.

"Um, that was both of us," Chantal pointed out.

"Fair enough," Kyle said. "I was just trying to make Elias feel better."

"I'll feel better when there's no goddamn Nazis at the fair," Elias said. "Come on, then. Let's do it."

* * *

Kyle couldn't get used to the AR lens, so he took it off and tucked it in his pocket as he navigated the morning crowds on the fair's midway. Shari had done field trips to the fair before, and Kyle had chaperoned a few of them. School groups either brought lunch money or staged all the kids' packs in a back room behind the animal pens. Riverton Elementary, where Shari taught, was in a poor neighborhood, so the kids didn't have money for the fair's overpriced food. That meant there would be at least one school's worth of backpacks in the storage room . . . and Kyle had a feeling there might be one extra, in a pink and white flower pattern, because Shari's students were also mostly immigrants. Brian's sick invective about the dead toddler in Monument Square was burned into his head.

He cut through a shed full of goats and found the storage room. As he was about to duck into it, a commotion over by one of the rides caught his eye. He angled over that way, and stopped dead when he saw

Marie

Handcuffed and flanked by police, she glared at the ground as she was marched away from the dirt-floored grandstand where the fair staged horse-pulling contests, past a booth selling poutine and out toward a police car parked near the main gate. Kyle watched her go, and then started scanning the crowd. She must have been there to meet Brian, and Brian was already here, so . . .

"I see him," Chantal said. "At least I think it's him. Coming your way." She was at the far end of the midway, near the other entrance past the animal show ring.

"Did he see Marie get arrested?"

"She got arrested? I never saw her."

"Yeah, the cops just walked her right past me."

"Something set him off, that's for sure. He was just kind of wandering around, and then all of a sudden he took off like he remembered he left the stove on, know what I mean? You should see him any second."

Kyle waited, tension building . . . there he was. Face red, eyes popping, shouldering his way past pigtailed teenagers walking prize calves back to their stalls. Furious that Marie was in handcuffs, and moving somewhere with purpose.

He didn't have the backpack.

Shit, Kyle thought. He's already dropped it and set the timer somewhere. He backtracked, ducking into the storage shed, but before he could do anything else Brian erupted, sent over the edge by seeing Marie in cuffs and then his other self getting away. Kyle fought it, but he was slipping into another fugue—

* * *

Got to defend ourselves, if they outbreed us we're dead
Every mud baby is white genocide

* * *

Dread nearly paralyzed Kyle as he realized what he'd missed the last time he'd flashed on these experiences. He seized Brian's memory, forced himself deeper into it, and at the same time forced it deeper into him. He knew part of him was lost, and knew that the more he fought the farther he got from understanding. So he had to . . . not give up, but accept. He had to make Brian's memories a part of him.

He remembered Shari saying *You wouldn't be white if you weren't a little bit racist, and thought babe, if you only knew...*

Now Kyle could see clearly. All the noise and static of Brian's guerrilla campaign against his sanity faded away, and Brian's memories snapped into focus. The workbench, the bits of stray wire, the glare of the trouble light on the wall papered with maps, drawings, diagrams . . .

One of the schematics was a school bus, showing the hydrogen tank under the floor near the rear axle.

Next to it, a map of the Cumberland County Fairgrounds, the bus parking lot circled.

Tacked up nearby, a bulletin from the Portland schools about the field trip.

* * *

The wheels on the bus go round and round...

* * *

And a new memory, Marie's voice drifting into the space Kyle had created:

* * *

Shape it right, it has to punch through the tank

* * *

Kyle snapped back to himself and looked along the rows of backpacks. He had to be sure. Pink and white flowers, pink and white flowers . . .

It wasn't there. Of course it wasn't there.

"Excuse me."

Kyle turned around to see Shari in the doorway. "Can I help you?" she asked.

"I—" Tongue-tied by everything he wanted to say, Kyle was still stammering when he heard Abdi's voice in his ear.

"Police scanner has Marie in custody. They're about to evacuate the fair."

Oh no, Kyle thought. If they evacuated the fair, Shari and the other teachers would lead the kids right back to the buses.

That's why Brian—

"Shari," he said.

She frowned. "How do you know my name?"

"Just—just keep the kids here, okay? Or go out the other way, not toward the buses." Kyle paused for one last moment, one last look at her. "I love you."

"You what?" First she looked shocked, but then Kyle saw understanding start to dawn on Shari's face. Before he could lose his nerve, Kyle said, "Abdi. Put me back. Now, man, now."

* * *

The heave and echo of cogswap faded, and Kyle was in his own body again. The pain was bad, but not as bad as before, thanks to Chantal's pharmacy. He unlocked the door and hauled himself out. When his broken leg hit the ground, the pain flared up again, but he dragged himself around the car. The Brian in his head broke away from him again, becoming coherent, fighting every motion as he understood what Kyle was going to do. "Chantal," Kyle said. "I could use some help."

"She's not coming," Abdi answered. "Cops just pinched her. They ID'd her by tracking her phone from when you called Shari this morning. Elias pulled his jack in case they're after him, too."

"Well, shit."

"Yeah, you're on your own, man. I don't know where Brian is, either."

Kyle didn't answer. There was nothing to say, and only one thing to do.

Nobody else was around. They'd parked with all the other early arrivals, down at the end of a row. More recent arrivals were being directed to another area of the lot. That was good.

But in about ten minutes, people would be flooding back out, including Shari Rivera's fourth-grade class at Riverton Elementary. And Shari Rivera.

The closest Portland school bus was maybe fifty yards away. Brian was ten times that far, but probably could move ten times faster. But he wouldn't want to draw attention to himself with cops on alert. So maybe it was possible . . .

Kyle dragged himself toward the buses, shutting out the pain in his leg and wondering when Brian would come back and try to stop him. He wasn't sure he'd be able to keep control if that happened.

He got to the first bus and looked under it. Nothing. The weeds growing all over the lot blocked his view toward the other buses, so he had to drag himself to the next. Still nothing.

A third. Nothing.

Kyle slumped to the ground. The Brian in his head tried to keep him there, tried to press his head down and make him give up. Kyle fought, but between the blood coming from his head and the waves of pain washing over him from his leg, he didn't have much left. Was he wrong? Was there some other plan? He rolled over, looked down the line of buses, and saw one more labeled Portland Public Schools.

One more. He could check one more. He had to.

Arms aching, fingers bleeding, he hauled himself in that direction. He was heaving and panting, sweat and tears on his face from the agony in his leg, when he finally caught hold of the bus's rear bumper and angled himself around so he could look under it.

There was a pink and white flowery backpack, laid flat directly under its hydrogen tank. Brian hadn't gotten here yet, so it probably still had the timer set to later that day when the kids were supposed to be returning. Kyle still had a chance to get rid of it . . . and maybe save himself. He pulled himself under the bus, within arm's reach of the backpack.

Then he heard Brian Rudiger's voice. "Guess I should have broken both your legs."

A moment later Brian caught his right foot and gave the shattered ankle a brutal twist. Kyle bit down on a scream and rolled with it, banging his head on the bus' undercarriage. He got a hand on its rear axle and reached out toward the backpack with the other. Brian pulled on his leg and the blinding agony momentarily erased the Brian in his head, concentrating Kyle's being down to one single imperative.

He got his hand on the backpack and let go of the axle. Brian pulled again, and Kyle dug his left heel into the weedy ground. He heard crunching noises from his ruined knee, felt the ligaments pop and the lower part of his leg flop completely loose. "Come on out, Kyle," Brian said. "You gave it a good try, but you just don't have what it takes. You corrupted yourself. You got weak."

Over the loudspeaker, Kyle heard a voice instructing fairgoers to please exit to the parking lots in a calm and orderly fashion. He unzipped the backpack, exposing the explosive charge. Through the fog of agony, the Brian in his head tried to stop him, but Kyle was in charge now. *You're just an ugly part of me that already existed*, he thought. *And because I died, you got a name. Once I accepted that, I understood how weak you are.*

you're not so different, I fit right in

Kyle's heel gouged a furrow in the ground as Brian dragged him all the way out. As he emerged into the light again, he remembered Marie's hands. He remembered exactly what they had done. *Anyone pulls the red wires, boom.*

He heard both Brians at once. *No no no don't—*

He pulled the red wires.

* * *

11

Over the hiss and rattle of a small air compressor, someone was talking about flowers. Wait. No. That was him. He liked lilies, sure. Lilies were cool. No, wait, he wasn't talking. He remembered talking. He remembered a series of beeps.

No, he was hearing them now. But he couldn't see them.

Oh. His eyes were closed.

He opened them and saw blank walls, painted off-white. A sheet pulled up over him, to mid-chest. Patches on his skin, monitors blinking. Then he saw Shari, tears streaking her face, a fat gauze bandage on one cheek.

"Awareness seems pretty good," a voice said from behind his head. "He's coming out of it."

Shari looked in that direction. "Can I . . . ?"

"Let's see, baseline cortical readings look good, cognition is tracking . . . sure, go ahead."

She looked back at Kyle, who was still trying to parse *baseline cortical readings* and what they had to do with where he was. "Kyle," she said. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah, babe. Why wouldn't I?" He swallowed. His throat was dry. "What happened?"

Two other people entered his field of vision. One was a nurse technician wearing a name tag identifying him as JORDAN :) . . . from ResuR_x?

What was ResuR_x again? He felt like he knew that, but couldn't put his finger on it. Also, the guy next to Shari . . . Abdi, that was his name. Kyle knew him from work; he was an IT security contractor. What was he doing—

"Shari," he said. "What happened?"

She reached down and held his hand. He felt gauze and tape, looked down, saw that her hands were bandaged, too. "Take it slow, okay?"

Kyle felt like his mind was slipping gears. If he was in a recompiling clinic, with a tech talking about baseline cortical readings . . . He squeezed Shari's hand, saw her wince and let up a little. "Was there some kind of accident?" he asked.

Both Jordan and Abdi were looking at tablets. Then they looked at each other. "I never saw anything like that, man," Jordan said. "You're a sorcerer. But also I'm going to pretend you were never here, okay?"

"Cool with me," Abdi said. "But you know who to call if it ever happens again."

Jordan nodded at Shari. "Go ahead, ask him."

She took a deep breath. "Kyle. What's the last thing you remember?"

"Um . . ." He thought about it. "I remember going in to do a backup. Right after we decided to get married, because I got a bonus." He frowned. "No, wait. Some other stuff, but it doesn't feel connected. Were we talking about flowers for the wedding? At the fair, maybe? The fair's coming up, right? And, like . . . did we try cogswapping? I feel like I remember that. And I thought my leg was hurt, but it seems okay now." He flexed his legs under the sheet. Neither of them hurt at all. The fog was lifting as Kyle rambled, and he started to put two and two together.

Wait. ResuR_x was a recompiling clinic. Why would Abdi be in a recompiling clinic? Why was *Kyle* in a recompiling clinic?

"Jesus, Shari, did—"

"Hold on, babe. One more question." She paused, like she was afraid to ask, but then she soldiered on. "Who's Brian Rudiger?"

Kyle had no idea. "You tell me. Should I know who that is?"

Smiling through her tears, Shari bent to kiss him. Then she turned to Abdi and wrapped him up in a big hug. "It worked. I can't believe it worked."

"Honestly, me neither," Jordan said.

"What worked?" Kyle asked.

Abdi grinned. "Magic 8-ball says we'll tell you later." To Shari he added, "I should get in touch with Chantal's lawyer. Lulu's, too. Kyle, we'll catch you later."

Kyle's head spun. Who were Chantal and Lulu? What had happened to him? "Shari, babe," he said. "I—is somebody going to tell me what happened?"

"Give it a little time," she said. "But I'll tell you one thing. You're a hero."

"I am?" Kyle looked from her to Jordan, waiting for someone to tell him what the hell was going on. "What did I do?"