

A Routine Tune-Up

Sweat beaded on Aron's face like a rusty kettle as he stared, flat on the ground, into the eye of the enemy that hung mockingly above his head. It was a foe he had faced before, but he had won then and he was not about to lose now. But the blood was draining out of his pale arm, and the ceiling seemed to darken and close down upon him...

Summoning every pulse of energy left in his nerves, he stabbed the blade back up into its center. A growl escaped his gritted teeth as he twisted the point. The thing replied with a pathetic keening, and finally, blessedly, retreated to the surface where it belonged.

He let out a pained sigh, and then almost laughed to himself. It was done. For now.

Letting the screwdriver fall slack in hand beside his stomach, Aron wiggled out from beneath the table into the fluorescent glow, and raised his stronger right hand. "All the screws are good on this side of the room," he declared, kneeling at eye level with a desk chair oozing fleshy stuffing out of its back.

Mr. Wales, wandering about the computer lab's octagonal kiosks, came into view. His hands fidgeted halfway in, halfway out of the pockets of faded mustard slacks. "Boy, I tell you," he said for the third time, "thanks so much again for coming in and taking care of this, especially on a Sunday."

"Not a problem," Aron replied flatly. "It's what we do."

"Yeah, it's just..." Wales made a flustered gesture before his flabby arm retreated to his side. "Cover loose on a terminal here, torn securing strip there, and soon the backs of machines are falling off, there's cords on the ground, people trippin' everywhere..." He sniffed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "So yep, good to do."

"Anytime you want to help the rest of us, Aron, just... don't be afraid," Cal called from across the room. From where Aron rose to his feet, all he saw was a dark arm waving between a pair of monitors.

"Not everybody can tighten the screws on fifteen computer stations in five minutes and twenty-seven point five seconds," stated Angela by the main door. She was hunched over, long black hair seeming to merge with the swathes of electrical cables she untangled atop a shelf writhing with dust bunnies.

Aron smiled. "Hey, I stay focused. On my *own* work." His eyes darted to where Fuller sat cross-legged by a detached router, inspecting its rear ports in one hand and fitfully twirling a USB cable in the other. "You know what? I'm going to help Fuller, since he's keeping to himself."

Aron rested on his haunches next to Fuller and adjusted his glasses. "How's it going, man?"

"Sucks," he muttered to the ground, eyes shrouded by his drooping blonde hair. "I wish I could help, but I'm just on my ass partying like it's 1999 with this thing. Can't Cardinal afford a decent hardware provider? I swear..."

Aron put a hand on his shoulder. "Well, what can I do?"

Fuller gestured limply to the nearest computer kiosk without looking up. "Keep going with those ones, I guess."

"On it." Aron positioned himself under the kiosk and rotated his wrist three times before brandishing the screwdriver.

"So, uh, how about that big story in the news now, huh?" Wales continued. "Those three little kids all went missing 'cross New York in middle of the night. Some kinda serial sicko, they're thinking."

Aron sighed. This guy was a terrible conversation-starter; no wonder he was the computer lab babysitter. He and Angela would probably get along really well. Not that Aron would ever say that.

"I know!" Rich said loudly. "Goddamn *tragic*." He was under the adjacent corner table flipping through something on his phone, which illuminated his unshaven square jaw. Probably donating to

another disaster relief fund without checking the overhead costs.

“Just twists my guts... They're workin' on keepin' tabs on people like that, right?”

“What can I say?” Cal audibly shrugged. “We're the NetFixerz club, not the WorldFixerz club.”

“Heh, true.” Wales scratched his receding hairline. “I guess you help with what you're built to. And our 'net' has plenty of problems as-is... Whole server crashed last spring from those Anonymous kids, remember that?”

“Oh, I remember...” Aron mumbled. Their daytime numbers had been ringing off the metaphorical hook after the undergraduate Dean of Engineering forwarded their contact info to the main university listserv, in a misguided attempt at comforting the student body.

“Course, that's nothing compared to what some of these Freshmen pull. Lookin' at porn in the middle of study sessions, messin' with the chair knobs until they break, music piracy—they don't think I'll notice, but I do...”

“The absolute gall,” Aron muttered, rolling his eyes and rubbing his burning shoulder.

“And don't even get me started on the research annex.” Wales waved towards a rectangular chamber walled off on the short side of the lab; beyond a door and wide window, rows of tables sporting several dozen additional computers led up to an enormous whiteboard. “Some dumb kids keep smearing rotten strawberry jam down the back of one of the towers. Tried cleanin' it off, but it always comes back.”

Aron's arm, en route to another dangling screw, seized in mid-air. “Interesting.”

“I think they're slippin' some kinda glitch on there while they're at it,” he continued. “Since Friday, every time I try and log onto the administrator's account in there, some crazy message pops up. Says 'The young flesh is ours,' in all caps.”

Aron's screwdriver slipped sharply off-target, nearly ripping through the fingers of his stabilizing hand. He hissed as a jagged strip reddened across the skin.

“Hey, you okay down there?”

Aron clasped his fist, and the opposing hand came back dry. “Fine,” he replied. He looked to Cal across the room, who looked back with the same wide eyes. Angela was still sorting the cords, but he could see her arms trembling. Fuller had put down the router altogether, and cracked his knuckles.

Aron looked to Rich. “*Should we?*” Rich mouthed. He put his hand on the thick black duffel bag to his side, marked with the initials “NF” in thin purple tape.

Aron nodded.

Wales chuckled. “What, is that some new dirty saying? What's everyone so quiet about?”

“Like I said, Mr. Wales, everything's just fine.” Aron maneuvered from beneath the kiosk and rose to his feet. He pointed the screwdriver firmly at the annex. “While we're here, though, I think we'll take a look at what's wrong in there.”

“Would you?” Wales wrung his hands. “That would be great, if it's not too much trouble.”

“Hopefully,” said Aron, “it won't be.” He beckoned, Rich snatched up the bag in a tight fist, and the team filed inside.

Fuller slammed the door behind them. “Blinds down, lights up,” Aron commanded. Fuller pulled a cord that sent yellowish drapes down the window, while Cal flipped the switch that bathed the room in dim fluorescence. As Angela confirmed the room lacked any other openings, Rich carefully set the bag down on the berber carpet, unzipped it, and tossed the topmost items to Aron: a pair of black gloves, with neon green wires running through their surface like veins.

“What do you think we're dealing with here, Angela?” Aron said, adjusting the gloves, flexing his fingers to snugness.

“Class One Virus, maybe Class Two. Or an Author.” She caught her gloves without a glance as Rich tossed the rest around the room.

“Shit,” Fuller muttered. “I better not have to do the reading this time.”

“*Did she say 'an Author'?*” asked Rip—a hurried, scratchy voice from his micro earpiece.

“Nobody's panicking until we actually *see* something,” Aron established. “Cal, start checking the backs of all the towers.”

As Cal crouched to examine the rows, Aron picked a computer to log in on. “Hey, what's wrong with the ones over here?” Rich asked, as Aron took a seat in the middle of the second row.

“This looked comfier,” Aron said, bouncing on the rounded cushion as an exclamation mark.

“Comfy,” Angela said thoughtfully.

“I never get your sense of humor,” Fuller frowned.

“Hey,” Aron shrugged. “I just need good ergonomic support when I'm working.”

“*I can give you a back rub when you get back,*” Rip said tentatively in his ear.

Aron tented his fingers, feeling the gentle spark that confirmed his gloves were active. Then he reached down and pressed the power button in the middle of the tower. As a plastic and static crackle coursed through the monitor's blackness, Aron contemplated where he preferred Rip in in rotation: at HQ or in the field? Would she be pacing the room, wiping dust off the tabletops and counting sagging ceiling tiles, or have programmed their way out of the whole thing by now? If it was up to him alone, though, she'd be their lifeline every time—Ripley Zeese could manage a three-monitor data range as easily as a pen and paper, and hack into a darknet database better than any man he knew.

The computer's fanfare and boot-up screens passed, and an image of the Cardinal University campus faded in: a New England mountain range in the distance, indistinct students strolling past an ornate fountain. A window appeared, prompting for User ID and Password.

Aron input his student credentials and the standard desktop appeared: a handful of shortcut icons flush to the left, the university crest in the middle against a backdrop of ethereal blue and green waves. “So far, so good.” In his concentration, he hadn't consciously noticed Fuller, Rich, and Angela standing close by and watching him until now (Cal was closing in on the adjacent row). After so long, he supposed it was like brushing teeth or locking one's apartment door—an automatic ritual, only to be called into uncertainty if someone questioned it.

He took the mouse, feeling its halves about the scroll wheel give slightly under cushioned fingers, and moved the cursor to the Start button on the bottom toolbar. *Click*. Aron navigated to the Computer folder, and a separate window opened to reveal the available campus intranets. “Alright, so we're on 'RESERANX07' here in my personal account, and all clear so far... Let's see what happens when we try to get in as 'administrator'...”

Aron scrolled through the list until he came to “COMPLAB_MAIN”. *Click*. A window similar to before appeared, requesting an ID and password. He entered the appropriate credentials for both (unlike some students Wales groused about, Aron had come by them legitimately) and hit “Enter.”

The pointer spun into its loading animation. Aron could almost feel the air in the room grow thinner as everyone held their breath. Then, another window popped up—not the intended menu, but a warning box. In plain font, next to a yellow triangle bearing an exclamation point, it read:

THE YOUNG FLESH IS OURS.

“That's all of 'em,” Cal said as he stood back up. “Everything looked clean to me, but—” He noticed the screen. “That's... pretty damn creepy, alright.” Aron could tell he was being sarcastic, but not how much.

“Creepy, creepy,” Angela whispered.

Aron's focus didn't falter. “Of course it is.” With a few additional taps, he pulled up the C++ window, feeling what little discomfort burdened him ease at the sight of simple white code against pure black. Cracking his thumbs' joints in the clutch of each fist, he typed:

```
//skeletonkey Bypass [complab_main]login//
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Enter. The code dropped down in the window to join the opening prompt. Then the whole screen turned black for a fraction of a second, and when it returned there was another warning. The accompanying icon looked like a stop sign now:

ERROR: A fatal action has been performed.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Fuller grumbled.

“It *is* the university network,” Rich suggested. “Whatever... *problem* we're having here, maybe they just tightened the system anyway.”

“Yeah, but we'd be the first to know,” Cal offered.

“*You need me to whip out another proxy for you?*” Rip asked.

“Oh, I don't think that'll be necessary... Angela? Fuller?” Aron pointed at opposite ends of the succeeding row. “You take two more comps over there and get ready to run the same command on my signal, see if we can overload it.”

“Okay,” they replied, checking their gloves on the way.

“In the meantime...” Aron said quietly, under the pop and whir of additional computers booting up, “I'm going to get a little more *specific*.”

//skeletonkey Disable [Errorcode]all//

“Alright, that should at least shut up the messages. So...” His voice dropped to a whisper as the administrator login window reflected in his rimless glasses. “*What are you hiding in there?*”

Clacking of keys, like a handful of dice. “Got it,” Angela and Fuller said simultaneously.

“Alright, *one more time...*”

//skeletonkey Bypass [complab_main]login//

“...On three. One, two, thr—”

Their fingers hit the respective “Enter,” and every light in the room went out with *crack* like a popped joint.

The team immediately extracted their pen lights, casting thin sticks of blue LED across the room. “So much for team effort,” Fuller assessed, swiveling the light in his fingers like a cigarette.

“This a power outage?” Cal wondered.

“Always the optimist,” Fuller said. “That's what I like about you.” Angela had her beam pointed directly at the ceiling, and was tapping a single boot erratically.

Aron poked the space bar, clicked the mouse, jammed the power button. All dead. “Rip, you picking up on this?”

“*Wha' happun?*” Her voice was muffled, and Aron's pulse stuttered until he realized she just had a mouthful of food. Must've skipped her lunch break again.

“Localized blackout.” Aron eyed the slits of light from the main lab creeping around the blinds. “Keep this line scrubbed, just in case.”

“Gotcha.” A click and whir from the other end. “You make it out of there before 7/11 closes, though, you gotta bring back some ice—these terabytes are getting toasty.”

“Noted.” With anybody else, he'd think they weren't taking it seriously, but Rip never let humor hinder her work.

Aron switched from regarding the dark desktop before him to the team. “Alright, let's start looking for some auxiliary power. There should be a line to the backup generator in the corner of—”

“*Aron.*”

The voice was quick, soft—like a sound hallucinated through sheets at the verge of sleep. He looked around, but his team was all pursed lips.

“Aron.” It was coming from the center of the rows. “*Aaaaron Lovelace.*” A monotonous burble, quick then slow then quick again, like synthetic audio having trouble loading. Calm, but not collected.

Aron turned to face the darkness, but saw only his light, like a blue will-o-the-wisp, stuttering on another blank monitor. Then that monitor turned on, showing a square of pure dark red.

“*We would like to speak with you. You alone.*”

It was coming from the computer's old pod-shaped speakers, but as clear as if a mouth were right behind the mesh. “Anything you can say to me, you can say to them.” Aron kept the light steady, a raw purple now in the middle of the bloody glow. “That is, I assume you can see us?”

“*Ooooh...*” The voice faded out with a blend of ecstasy and agony, rising again in the speakers at the row's end. “*We see.*”

The computer closest to Cal burst on, and he stumbled back. There was no start-up screen, no password prompt—instead, it showed a World Health Organization webpage: “Bulimia.”

“*Calvin Gutenberg?*” The speakers crackled—a whisper too close to a microphone. “*Fitting name for a man who would eat his own words if he could. How does it feel knowing that no matter how much refuse you stuff down your throat, you'll never find your mother's love among the bile and reeking chunks in the toilet tonight?*”

Cal gulped audibly, tensed teeth gleaming yellow in the screen's light.

The screen neighboring Angela, second into Aron's row, flickered on—the homepage for an autism awareness foundation. “*Angela Redwall,*” it warbled. “*Your parents wanted a boy, but a working brain would have sufficed. Impressive you can get out of bed in the morning, an abortion with a college degree.*”

Angela's expression remained neutral, but Aron could see her cheek twitch.

“So you can talk shit,” Rich smirked. “Do Mommy and Daddy know you're hacking into a private network, or did you get on the internet all by yourself?”

“*Ohhhhhh...*” the voice moaned. “*Such temerity.*” Two snaps in quick succession, like breaking branches, and the computers next to Rich and Fuller were on. “*Richard Longenbach. Fuller Narson...*”

Rich sneered and bit his lip, while Fuller closed his eyes and moved his own lips silently, praying under his breath like he always did before a job. Aron didn't look to see what the screens showed this time, though. He already knew, more or less—the “uniqueness” they all bore, the scars and triggers each of them carried along with books and energy drinks to school every day and “work” every other night... he couldn't *not*, after all these years. They weren't all equal, but it was their unspoken pact of existence, their crosses to bear and share, and after a while it fell into silence like a broken clock counting time for an empty house.

But now... all that was left was his own screen, a taunting technicolor strobe. “*And. Aron. Lovelace. Yours is the most pathetic affliction of all. Do the others even understand the shadows you bat at like a dumb animal when no-one is looking?*”

“Why are you here,” he stated.

The flicker of his screen solidified in red. “*They fulfill their role.*”

“Who does? What role?”

“*Erasure. Apotheosis... Armageddon—oh, no, no. Your wet utterances are too flimsy to convey the meaning. It is like trying to carve an idol from wet clay.*”

Aron was unfazed. The voice never mentioned Rip, so whatever the source of its knowledge, it was surely bound by these walls. “Then go back where you came from, right now, and nobody gets hurt.”

The screens began to pulse, fading out and in like broken televisions. “*We think not.*” The voice was spreading across speakers, different syllables echoing from different pockets of the room in schizophrenic surround sound. “*Their link to your world withers as we speak... it is almost rapturous.*”

We can feel it... flowing.”

Every single screen flipped to the same wavering red, pitching the halo of a photographer's dark-room, and a moist splatter sounded at the end of the furthest row. Cal wound to face Aron, and Aron nodded in the noise's direction. Cal reached into his coat as he stepped, heavy-shoed, over to the back row and knelt at one chair in. “Think we found that strawberry jam,” he said.

The voice had paused, but in its place grew a steady drone like microphone feedback. As Angela plugged her ears and Fuller and Rich looked at each-other with desperation, Aron moved over to Cal's side. A viscous maroon fluid was gurgling from the computer's open rear exterior ports, and seeping around connected cables like a stab wound.

Cal took the neo-vial out of his inner jacket pocket, that peculiar device which looked like a smartphone with a test tube through the middle. He carefully held it under the flow from the topmost port. He tapped the screen a few times, let out what sounded like half of a much longer breath, and stood up and well away.

Aron put a finger to his ear. “Rip, we got some sample data incoming—I need a telebotoc scan ASAP.”

“Affirmative!”

The walls pulsed like angular organs under the red lights and warbling drone, turning every blink aimed at the mercifully unchanging floor into a trial. Rip couldn't have taken any more than fifteen seconds, but it wouldn't have surprised Aron if he was told she took a whole night.

“I got traces of human DNA—blood and epidermal fragments, mainly. And some kind of stone particles. Want me to run it against local medical records?”

“Please.”

Angela flicked the light switch again, in vain. Cal thumbed the neo-vial's cap, openly confirming it was sealed. Rich balled his hands into fists hovering at his waist. Fuller eyed the door, and Aron knew what he was thinking—but if Mr. Wales could see or hear what was happening in here, things were even worse than anticipated. This kind of “glitch” could hide in more ways than one.

Rip's connection sparked in his ear again. *“I... I got it, Aron.”*

“And?” He strode back to the central row.

“Well, I cross-referenced with the missing persons database on a hunch, and... I don't know how this is possible, but I'm getting three distinct results: Keith Simpson, Drew Cheng, and Malissa Levitts—those three kids who disappeared in New York earlier this week.”

“I should've known.”

“What is it?” Angela asked.

Aron filled them in.

“Damn, that's sick,” Cal said. *“Even for our line of work.”*

“Why,” Rich begged, *“is children's blood coming out the back of a computer?”*

“Because...”

The voice had returned, but not from a speaker—disembodied. Nowhere and yet everywhere. Suddenly, every screen flushed to white. Aron's eyes singed, and he could hear groans and winces erupt from the team as he staggered into the chair for “his” screen.

“...There is no sanctity without sacrifice. No birth without afterbirth...”

The drone cut out. He grimaced, rubbing his eyes.

“And no hope without death.”

Silence. The screens hummed and glowed like Tesla coils.

“Aron, you okay?”

“Damn, when's this thing gonna stop screwing with us?”

“I should've stayed back at base; Rip would know what to do.”

Aron's eyes were still burning in the afterglow. It was hard to tell their voices apart anymore, with the drone still echoing in his smothered ears.

He squinted over his shoulder; the team had formed a crowd by him again. It was so good to have them by his side, a patch of jeans and cargo pants standing at attention: Rich and Fuller, Cal and Angela, and...

And. There were five pairs of legs.

Dark shoes. Dark pants. Dark shirt. Aron looked up.

“Aron... what is it?” Fuller asked.

Between Fuller and Cal, he saw it: A triangle of holes in a pale gray face, ice cream scoops out of a cold bowl of flesh. Then the thing lunged at him, and the room was plunged into darkness.

Aron dove out of his chair, feeling something bump his arm before he hit the ground—hard. His cheek sent shockwaves of pain through his skull, and it felt like his brain would liquefy and run out of his ear. All he could hear was a rush of scuttling, like a cat running low to a tiled floor.

As soon as he could summon a breath, he used it. “Rip... *Code Omega.*”

“Holy shit... already? What happened?”

“Humanoid manny, then a total blackout,” he growled. Even the light from the main lab was no longer visible. “Get me signatures on Two through Four, I’m *blind.*”

Clattering of keys. A harsh silence—but it might as well have been a scream. “Biotrackers are still reading in the research annex, Aron... everyone’s but yours.”

Aron replied with silence of his own. Scuttling again—from the east now. “Keep looking,” he ordered, not even knowing where to begin himself.

He fumbled in his pocket for his penlight, feeling around as he rose and stumbled forward. A hand to the right, and there was air. To the left—the cool plastic of a table, mouse, monitor. Another row, then another. Another. He extracted the light, to his side like a sword, and was just about to click it on when his hand brushed a row on the right.

There were no pairs of rows in the annex.

The screen next to Aron flashed on, then the one across from that and the one a row ahead, and then out again, faster and faster, like zig-zags of glowing dominoes. More computers, more rows than the room could hold. As the dots of light flickered in further and further in the blackness, like dying stars, it was more than *any* room could hold. Plastic screen after metal computer tower after chair and table full of looping, curling wires like distended intestines. A cathedral, a stadium. A void.

“Rip,” he said, realizing she may never hear him.

“Aron! Oh, thank God... What is it?”

Still there. For now. “I’m in creepspace.”

Rip gasped. “*Oh, Jesus... I mean, I thought, I was afraid that could be it, but—*”

“It touched my arm. We both know I’m going to lose this signal any second now, so—”

“Well, you gotta get out of there! Lemme just trace the room’s dimensional frequency and—”

“No. It’s in here somewhere. This is where it wants to play.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to be the one to turn out the lights at your away game, okay?” A scuff ran down the line—either the connection or her voice choking up.

“I’ll talk to you later, Rip.” He dug out the earpiece and placed it in his lapel pocket.

The scuttle again. He aimed his light, trying to trace its source. Ten rows down, a gray blur flicked in and out of sight.

He meant to keep a level head—just watch his footing and get a broader survey of the darkness—but next thing he knew, he was running down the aisle, then a row, and back down another aisle, cutting across and through like a mouse in a maze. As he did, the computers kept popping and flashing, black square to white square and back—just pure static, staccato digital noise.

He kept running, swerving enough to dodge his own breaths. “Get it together,” he whispered to himself, commanding his legs to slow down. It was a momentary lapse. It would pass.

Deep breath. Another.

It passed.

The scuttle again, closer now—like a poster falling off a bedroom wall in the middle of the night. His light snared a slick gray appendage disappearing into his column, six rows up.

Aron reached into his inner jacket pocket—the hidden one on the left. He pulled out his gun, looking more than ever like a blocky .44 in the darkness. He clicked off the safety, feeling its energy synchronize with his glove like a metronome, and its contours began to glow purple.

“This is your last chance to give it up,” he announced, letting the gun linger at his side. It was a standard line he'd granted a dozen times before—an invitation to lie down on the couch to monsters who'd rather swallow it whole. He always wanted to believe it would work someday, at least. “Let the kids go, return to wherever you came from, and stay there.”

“*You want the children?*” The voice had become a quivering warble—insane, but too excited to betray intimidation. “*You may have them, if you wish. Their role is finished; we require only one more. Yet why should a new age not collect a sampling of relics?*”

“Try stealing a vase.”

On the horizon, something quickly crept through the western aisle.

Aron raised his weapon, strafing slowly into the aisle. “What were you before you entered our world? A worker? An idea? A germ?”

A soft snicker. “*Oh, but what are you, Lovelace? An assassin? A shaman? An exterminator? Or just a boy trapped in dying man's body, banding together with all the other walking miscarriages that stumble into your life?*”

“I'm *necessary*. And you're not.” Aron squinted into the rows, trying to catch a glimpse of movement, but there was nothing for his eyesight to adjust *to*, beyond a gauntlet of ghostly screens.

A table to the northwest rocked, and Aron fired a round straight at the center. The clatter of the row mixed with echoless gunfire, as the violet bullet shot a phosphorescent trail between two monitors. He cursed himself for wasting ammunition, but as his misfire continued he saw its glow catch something tall and angular in the distance, surrounded by blank space. Anything different in here was either a good sign or a worse one.

As he stepped forward, Aron heard a fizzle like a fireworks sparkler behind him, and caught a purple glint in the corner of his glasses. He turned his head just in time to see the bullet rocket past his side, diving to an umbrous lump like a tiny campfire beneath a computer chair.

So the place was a loop.

Gun and light crossed like a police officer, Aron started racing towards the distant shape, now apparent beyond his beam. After three aisles and ten rows, he reached the circular clearing: in the middle was a ten-foot-tall stone pillar. It looked like the world's oldest tombstone, a cracked chunk of blackening oval rock rising out of nothingness.

Crumpled against its base were three ragged kids—a blonde boy, a Chinese boy, and a weeping chubby girl. They couldn't have been any older than eight, but their heads sunk to their chests in either defeat or catatonia.

Aron crossed the threshold, and the kids raised their heads. He holstered his gun, hands open to signal that he meant no harm. “W-who're *you?*” The girl croaked.

“I'm here to help you,” he said. He could tell them his name, but it would be so pointless.

“Are you part of the game?” The blonde boy said.

“Game?” Aron looked around at the computers again. “What kind of game?”

“*Graytongue's Maze*,” the boy sniffled. “He said it'd be fun... and it was free.”

“Like Pac-Man,” the girl added. “With puzzles 'n stuff.”

“It said we just had to turn off the lights,” the other boy said. “More better graphics that way. Then *everything* was dark, 'n something grabbed me, and...” A choking sniffle broke off his words. “I just found it on Google, I dunno—”

“It's okay,” Aron said, kneeling softly. “I'm going to get you out of here, alright?” He already knew their names, but he asked for them anyway. They sounded more real this time.

The kids' wrists were bound to the stone with rough Ethernet cables, rubbing their skin raw. Red trickled down green and out of sight beneath the rock. Looked like he'd found the source of the blood.

Aron extracted his butterfly knife and gently tapped a thick knot beside the girl's wrist. He acknowledged that he could comfort them further, but what was there to say? He had no clear idea of how to get them out yet—some of the computers probably corresponded to ones in the real world, but there was no telling which.

The kids' faces were dewy with tears, and they looked at Aron with cloudy eyes as he sawed through their bonds. He tried to look away, and read the words on the stone instead. The minute he tried, though, the carvings in its surface seared his eyes like he had stared straight into the sun. As he tore his gaze away, his hand slipped, and the knife skidded through the last of the cables into his opposing glove.

His own eyes watered instantly. *Careless, so careless.* The cables collapsed and the kids exhaled away from the stone as if rising from deep water, but the blood—dark as cherry juice—came fast. Before he could twist the fabric over his hand, several drops had spilled into the stone's base.

The girl whimpered, but then one of the boys said "Wow!" Aron stowed the knife and turned around to see four large, shimmering rectangles bordering the clearing. They looked like windows hovering at chest height, windows to some place indoors...

"My room!" The other boy exclaimed at a rectangle that showed a beanbag and oak desktop, in front of a wrinkled picture of the Milky Way. Similar scenes played behind the other rectangles, except the one in the middle: there, Aron saw a familiar row of computers and a comfortable chair.

These weren't windows—they were their monitors, the inside looking out. And wherever they had appeared, if they could get *into* here through a screen...

"C'mon." Aron extended his least bloody hand to the kids one by one, helping them to feet that probably hadn't held weight for days. "Which one's your room?" He asked the girl.

She gestured limply to the screen showing a mini-couch surrounded by plush owl dolls. A faint smile tugged at the corner of Aron's dry mouth.

"Alright, I'm going to pick you up, okay?" The girl nodded, and he scooped her into a fireman's carry. When the hem of her jeans passed safely into the screen, he hoisted her all the way through, and she landed softly on the couch.

She gazed around the room, at wonders out of sight to Aron. He didn't know what she saw of him now, but their eyes locked. "Thank you," she said, and her eyes closed.

The girl's screen remained as Aron lifted the two boys through their own portals. Each tumbled onto the nearest surface and regarded him with gratefulness, before falling into the amnesiac sleep he'd grown used to in creepspace victims. It made him wonder how much he and his team could *really* remember, even though they never forgot like everybody else.

Only his own screen remained, but when Aron tried to enter it there were no edges to grasp. He stumbled, through what felt like a warm, two-dimensional cloud.

"So... 'Graytongue'?" Aron declared to the rows beyond the clearing. "You make some fake browser game to lure little kids here? And that school is your 'nest'?"

No response.

"You've lost. You're not going to get your final sacrifice."

"*Won't I? Then why does your blood run beneath the stone?*"

Aron was immobilized. He looked down at the dark stain forming under his glove, then back at the base of the stone, cables coiled about it like dead snakes. "*The rift between worlds has become unstable. Now there is only us.*"

"Don't get your hopes up." Aron eyed the aisles like a hawk. "If it's children you're after, I've been shaving a little too long to scratch that itch."

"*That is of no consequence. There is something within you that clings to youth, Lovelace.*" The voice seemed to come from above and trickle down every side, like water on a glass dome. "*And as for*

nesting, it is only natural. We must always have a place to roost. A place to breed. And a place to eat.”

A screech like a dying wildcat burst from the aisle in front of Aron, and Graytongue leaped at him: skin the color of cremains, a hollow cut-up face, swathed in plain dark fabric like a doll’s imitation of clothing. Aron fired a round and the thing dodged it in midair, contorting like it was made of gelatin. He ducked, and it soared over his head, limbs flailing like eels. When he spun around, it had scampered around the stone into the dark.

Another screech, and it was coming at him from the right—on all fours now, then all sixes, as slick gray limbs squeezed from its sides like a sausage extruder, each one ending in eight bony fingers. Aron fired again, purple light revealing a thick proboscis that lashed out of its mouth-hole. The shot just barely missed its head, and Aron sidestepped as Graytongue stampeded past like a lion.

The air was dry and cool in this place, but Aron could feel his palm slickening around the rubberized grip of his gun. He needed a new strategy. And then he remembered his first missed shot.

Aron whipped his arm back and blindly fired down the row where Graytongue had just disappeared. No sooner had its illumination died in the fringes of his glasses than he heard the stampeding to his right again.

Graytongue charged with a screech, and though Aron sidestepped the brunt of its torso, it collided with his shoulder with the force of a linebacker. Aron went down, and the earth felt like concrete under his back. He gasped, but the wind had been knocked out of him too many times in the past to stop him just yet.

Then one of Graytongue’s arms clenched around his throat. “*Your species is a parasite!*” Its head pulsed and vibrated like a throbbing heart, the words emanating impossibly from an unmoving mouth. “*A disease, a wretched foulness propagated on the universe like a pox!*”

Through ears pounding with blood and eyes seeing stars, Aron could sense a sizzling purple glow growing behind Graytongue’s shoulders. *Well, what goes around...*

With a bolt of adrenaline, Aron delivered a one-two punch to Graytongue’s torso. It recoiled, and the looped shot blew square through its back and over Aron’s head. The spurt of blood was black yet colorful, like an oil slick, dripping down its chest as it howled madly.

Aron tried to slide out from beneath Graytongue’s body, but its dead weight still had him pinned. “*You wish to return to your world?*” It rasped. “*So be it!*”

With two pairs of arms, it wrenched Aron off the ground and leaped through the screen.

Aron felt the same flash of heat and static as before, and then Graytongue dropped him. He collided collarbone-first with cream-colored berber carpeting and tucked into a hasty somersault, bracing for impact with the nearest row of computers. Instead, he phased straight *through* it.

Aron kicked back to his feet, and he saw his surroundings: the research annex was empty, every surface blurring black and red as if his glasses were missing a lens. Then Graytongue was charging at him.

Aron phased through the row once again and strafed towards the eastern wall. He leveled his gun at Graytongue’s head, but one of its secondary arms slapped the pistol out of his grasp. Aron went for his butterfly knife instead, only for yet another set of arms to swat it away.

Two of Graytongue’s spare fists chokeslammed Aron, and two more kept his legs flat to the ground. “*You think your knowledge and weapons will save you, Lovelace? You are nothing more than a blind beast swatting at a thunderstorm.*”

Sixteen fingers were squeezing Aron’s throat like a vice, gulps of oxygen stolen away from his brain second by second. Through watering eyes, he saw his gun and knife splayed on the floor, too far away to reach. He was pinned down, hopelessly unarmed. And yet...

Against his pounding chest, he could feel the circular grip of the one tool he still had left.

Graytongue released its grip on Aron’s right hand to put a palm across his forehead, and a paralyzing image exploded in front of his eyes: hundreds of thousands of slick, gray, six-limbed creatures, creeping over the blackening husks of skyscrapers and burning streets, strangling people

starving in rags, proboscises flicking at piles of corpses.

“The transition is almost complete, and the ancient gates will open!” it hissed, head thrashing inches from Aron's own, oily blood flecking his aching red face. *“And when the last of your feeble, milky kind are washed from this world, we shall drink to the dawn of a new age atop your unmarked grave!”*

“Good,” Aron growled. “Then have a *screwdriver* on me.”

He plunged his free hand into his pocket, whipped Graytongue against the wall, and slammed the Phillips through its neck like it was the button for a late elevator.

The sensations passed Aron by like a video at high speed: the grinding of his Phillips against the wall through Graytongue's neck, its reptilian screeching and thrashing, a shudder like an earthquake, a popping in his ears like a change in air pressure, and then...

Aron.

“Aron!”

Brightness beyond his eyelids. Shoes and legs, moving sideways at eye level—rushing closer, one pair and then another. He felt his elbow brushing his knee, and realized he was in a fetal position. He straightened out.

Above, his team had crowded around him. Rich held out a hand, like Aron was dangling off a cliff. The screwdriver was clutched tight in his fist, but as spotless as his clothes and the wall behind him. His gun and knife were still on the ground.

“Access the admin account,” Aron croaked without moving.

Rich looked slightly offended, but Fuller ran to the nearest computer and clicked a few times. “We... we got it,” he said, and turned the screen for Aron to see: it was just the white window and little document icons of an open folder, but Aron could just barely read its title: “COMPLAB_MAIN.”

Aron managed a sigh of relief. He tilted his head towards Angela. “Definitely more than a Class Two Virus,” he smirked. She bowed her head slightly. She understood, but she was happy.

He finally took Rich's hand. “How long was I gone?”

“All we saw was the lights comin' back on,” Cal offered. “Been waiting for you!”

“Sorry for the holdup, then,” Aron smirked, dusting himself off. He found the earpiece in his pocket and poked it back in. “Rip?”

“Aron!” She shouted. “*Are you out? Are you safe? Is it dead?*”

“All of the above,” he said. He looked to the rest of the group. “Watch the news over the next few days. You're gonna see a story about three missing kids who mysteriously came back home.”

When the team emerged from the annex, Mr. Wales—straining a computer kiosk with his lean—put down his phone in surprise. “Shoot, you guys were in there for a while! Did you manage to get that glitch figured out?”

“Oh!” *So no major temporal distortion.* Aron figured Rip had heard Wales, but he made a mental note to remind her when they formally logged the mission that evening. “Well, it was a struggle for a while...” he said, casually pocketing his uncovered, bloody hand. “But we got it taken care of.”

“Just a routine tune-up,” Rich beamed, nonchalantly hoisting the duffel bag onto his shoulder. “Some harmless malware, was all. Couldn't trace it, unfortunately, but if you keep your security settings and firewall updated regularly, you should be good.”

“Well, glad to hear it. So, yeah, if the screws are done...” Wales looked around the main computer lab and slapped his leg. “You're free to go, if you want!”

“Sounds good to me,” Aron said. Angela and Fuller were already heading for the door.

As Cal and Rich brought up the rear, Aron did a mental run-down of the to-do list for that night: *Log date, time, and location of encounter. Log formal name and nickname for DEMON encountered. Review tactical strategies. Plan cover story in the event of leaks. Update creepspace map. And all of*

this on top of the homework they already had. *Okay, so midterms are in two weeks and—*

“Nice work, buddy,” said the voice in ear. *“Couple of dehydrated and bloodstained kids with memory loss suddenly appear in their beds—that won't raise any red flags.”*

Aron froze. The voice, reedy and androgynous, had come from his left ear. Slowly, he reached up and removed Rip's transmitter from his right.

“But for realsies, I think I deserve some credit. Did I say a blood offering would work or what?”
Ignore him.

He could feel the presence next to him now. Stale breath over his shoulder. *“I mean, I know you think it was an accident, but—”*

“Not now,” Aron whispered.

Just the bare outline of a sallow face in his peripheral vision. *“Okay, okay... so, you finally finally gonna take a night off so I can screw Ripley?”*

“Rod, shut up,” he muttered through gritted teeth.

“Or Cal, I'm not picky. I could go for a chocolate wafer about now—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Aron snapped, jerking his left shoulder as if shaking off a grab from behind.

“Whoa!” Cal said, throwing up his hands. *“What'd I do?”*

Fuller shot him an injured glare. *“Sorry if my shoes squeak,”* he moped.

Aron shook his head. There was nothing to his side but room-temperature air and a freshly-tuned computer kiosk.

Wales cleared his throat. *“I don't mind if you guys swear, but just keep it down, 'kay?”*

Angela was holding the door. Rich hesitated by Aron's side. *“You okay, man? I can—”*

“It's nothing,” he snapped, continuing into the hallway. *“I just...”* He lowered his voice. *“That place screwed with me.”* Cool aquamarine tile, rushing with the eggwhite light of the sun pressed up against the bay window at the end of the second-floor cul-de-sac, seemed to gently carry his senses back into reality. He forced a chuckle. *“Creepspace, you know? Never the same twice.”*

“Ah... no doubt,” Rich affirmed. *“Well, if you want me to go in next time, just say the word.”*

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Rich gave him a satisfied pat on the shoulder and went on ahead. Aron reinserted his earpiece, and Rip responded almost immediately. *“What happened there, Aron? I lost the connection for a sec.”*

“Must've been some kind of interference,” he said quickly. *“Get the car running, we need a ride back to HQ.”*

Aron hoped she had only just heard him, but every once in a while Rip *understood* him, too.

“You know that if there's anything wrong you can always tell me... right, Aron?”

Aron looked over his shoulder. He tired of the gesture, but as long as there voices coming from either side, he had no cause to stop it. *“Of course.”*

“Because I know you always told us to be honest with each-other, and... even if the others don't know, I don't want one little secret to stand in the way of you getting a good night's sleep.”

He could feel the emotions in her voice of protocol, like seeds in a handful of dry grass. If only he could plant them.

“You know a good night's sleep is the last of our worries, Rip. We're the Nightmare Force.”