

# The Theosis

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Dark clouds quench the light from a hidden moon. Flashes of lightning bring the occasional respite from darkness. Two men in hooded blue cloaks face each other outside a long abandoned church in the fringes of Angel City. Burning torches are scattered around them.

The first man lowers his hood to reveal his face. His skin is black and his head is shaved. On the right side of his face is a tattoo made from white ink. It is a series of characters from an unknown language written vertically from above his eye to below his nose. He speaks with a tone of authority. "It is good to see you old friend. Did you find anything on the coast?"

The second man answers. His words come slow, and his voice is raspy. "No. Small pockets of civilization exist, but they have abandoned their connection to the Source."

"Sad, but expected. Humanity will never willingly give up control."

"Tell me brother, I have heard rumors. Is it true? Have you discovered one who is worthy?"

The second man lowers his hood to reveal his face. "Yes. I've already made contact. Theosis is imminent."

"Can it really be? It's been over seventy years... "

"Long enough to pay for our mistakes in the first war."

"And the human? What of him? Can he do it?"

The tattooed man grins. "I believe so. His father raised him to have no other purpose."

"Then it is certain. And what of the others?"

"There are few left, but gather those that remain. Tell them we will be united again."

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Most employees are gone from the Phrack building well before the sun goes down, with the exception of a skeleton crew of swing shift security guards. The building itself is rather unimpressive, as is the company who owns it. Phrack isn't much of a player in the corporate scene of Angel City. They have one building, no military, and a yearly net profit that's near equivalent to a casino in West Hollywood. Most of Phrack's employees are equally unimpressive, as is evident by the sleeping security guard in the lobby. The pay is meager, and the only true appeal of the job is keeping or getting citizenship. But not all of their employees are without skill. There is one such man, a programmer in the

XNet Computing department named Derek Vale. And it's he who is alone on the third floor.

Derek sits at his desk with the faint glow of the monitor screen as his only light. He typically comes in at eight in the morning and leaves around eight at night. Yet despite Derek's skill, and despite the hours he spends in the office, his managers do not notice his coming or going. They are, in fact, lucky to remember Derek's name.

In truth, Derek could literally take his pick of any corporation in Angel City. But working at Phrack gives him other such luxuries that he wouldn't have otherwise. Luxuries such as incompetent system administrators, small assignments that result in loads of free time, an unmonitored XNet connection console, and a work staff that leaves every weekday at five p.m. sharp. These luxuries afford him the opportunity to, among other things, be one of the most wanted cyber criminals in all of Angel City.

In the XNet, both those that are victim to and benefactor of his criminal activity know Derek only as d3Spare. He is wanted by virtually every corporation and gang in Angel City. And yet often does jobs for those same corporations. His only rule is to leave no job unfinished, and he holds allegiance to no one but himself.

Derek spends most nights doing research on the latest XNet vulnerabilities and hacking techniques. Tonight however, he has a job to do. This job is atypical for him in many ways. No job he has ever done has paid as much. No job has ever been as risky. And no job previously has ever required him to kill.

Derek shuts down his terminal and walks to a nearby door. Inside is a private XNet connection booth. This particular one is semi-vr, and is the most common spec among corporations. A full-vr spec is the most powerful XNet connection type, but also the most expensive. Full-vr comes with a full body suit where every part of your body is able to feel the full sensation of the XNet. As you'd expect, the market for full-vr comes from individuals looking for a more "adult" experience in the net, but its used by any one serious about hacking also. Derek uses semi-vr for two reasons. One, he calls less attention to himself with semi-vr. Two, he doesn't need it. Even with semi-vr, he is more skilled than an overwhelming majority of hackers in the city.

Derek sits in the booth and sets a nearby box on top of the table in front of him. Within the box are a pair of gloves, a thick pair of monitor shades and a series of wires that make up the brain connection module. The brain module slides onto his head like a halo, with wires protruding from every direction near his head, but wrapped into a single connection piece at its end, which Derek plugs into the interface in front of him. Next are the gloves, which are the only wireless part of the connection. Every action done in the net is controlled by hands. Lastly, he slides the thick monitor shades onto his face. The outside trim of the shades is a black rubber, but the lenses go from clear to black depending on whether or not it's being used.

The shades are nonfunctional apart from filtering out his regular sight. In essence, the XNet connection hijacks his sense of sight and to a lesser extent his sense of touch. Any competing stimulation to either of those senses can be dangerous for the user.

Once complete, Derek chooses a starting location from the terminal and hits connect. The lenses on the shades turn black, and just like that, d3Spare is born once more within the XNet.

The XNet is a virtual world of data that mimics the real world in most regards. Non-virtual connections to it are possible; however the data available is extremely limited without a virtual presence. Such a connection would be called non-vr.

The XNet itself is broken up into sectors, each with its own set of rules. Some sectors are created to match a real world equivalent with such great detail that it'd be impossible to tell them apart. On the other hand, the virtual environment also provides an opportunity for creativity. There are many sectors with a surreal feel to them, with an unmistakably XNet surrounding. Either way, the user feels as if he is actually there. Spending too much time in the XNet can often cause sickness when returning to real space, similar to a seaman returning to shore.

Besides the setting, there are several other minor variables that a sector may change. One may mimic a real world place but all the colors would be wrong and unnatural. Or one could have no color at all, but the objects and those within simply are the presence or absence of light. Even changing the physics is possible, with zero gravity sectors being very common. Likewise, high gravity sectors are common and require a highly skilled hacker to navigate.

There are two notable differences between the XNet that are obvious regardless of the environment. First, the XNet has no sense of taste or smell, though not for a lack of trying. The original programmers found it impossible to translate those senses into code, and every generation of programmers since then has had no better luck. The second difference is the avatars that represent each connected person. Each user in the XNet has an avatar which they can set up before logging on. An avatar can be anything from a stick figure to a winged demon. Avatars are more than an aesthetic choice though. Skilled XNet users often use non-bipedal avatars as a way of showing off their talent. A novice XNet user in the form of a bobcat would be completely unable to move it. The more a person uses the XNet, the more their mind adapts to the environment. The truly masterful XNet users are unlimited in their avatar choices. The top programmer for the Comnet Communications corporation, for example, is well known for using a floating black cube as his avatar. Though such a bold choice for an avatar can have real world implications on a user's mind, such as the rumors that say the very same programmer developed schizophrenia from prolonged XNet usage.

Derek has used the same avatar since he started hacking. When logs in as d3Spare, his avatar is a young model of his father, slightly changed to avoid recognition. His father was adamant about teaching Derek how to use the XNet at a very young age, and

continued to teach until his death. He has occasionally feared that his identity would be discovered because of the avatar choice, but he hasn't yet, and it is the only way that he's felt like he has honored his memory.

d3Spare enters the XNet in his typical starting location, a public sector modeled after a famous Barrier City bar. Most entry sectors are little more than glorified chat rooms. Several others users sit at tables in conversation with each other, drinking digital drinks served by a virtual intelligence waiter. When the XNet was at its peak, there were too many sectors to even count. Every household that was connected had its own domain. Those days are long over, however. The only thing remaining of the old XNet are various servers in long abandoned government facilities or private servers that were hidden from destruction during the Four Year War. The XNet as d3Spare knows it barely extends past Angel City, with only a few connections made to the wasteland town of New Vegas. New servers have been erected in Angel City, and the old connections have been reestablished, but much of the old sectors are a mystery to the current users. One of these hidden sectors is d3Spare's destination.

The XNet has only so many portals to the outside world, though it has far more exits than entrances. Both occur fairly frequently in busy areas, but fringe sectors like Sector Theta are no where near a portal. Typically the sectors that provide the most danger are also the ones that provide the weakest escape. However, the fringe sectors do not have a portal into or out of the XNet for a good reason. Companies don't want their secure data to be smack dab in the middle of a busy XNet hub. Easy in, easy out, means high risk of loss.

Exits points are important, as premature exit of the XNet brings certain risks. When connected to the virtual environment of the XNet, the mind is physically present there. It cannot simply jump back to the real world without risk. It could result in something as minor as a splitting migraine or nausea. A coma that lasts days to months is very possible. Or the worst case of all, permanent brain damage. Some people have been known to wake up in a complete shell, as if their mind wasn't even there. There are security precautions put into place. Early warning systems, temporary backup generators for XNet connections, but there is still always the risk.

d3Spare leaves the bar and begins to follow the route given to him by his employer. Most of the route is new to him, and his curiosity is reason enough in itself to take the job. Entry points and connections to adjacent sectors are not always obvious to find. A sector can be hidden in near-obscurity, or even hidden in plain sight, which is why many of the old sectors have been untouched for so long.

The path to the destination sector is as far as d3Spare has ever traveled. Some of the intermediary sectors look like they have been untouched by man for years. A sector that isn't used or maintained can decay the same as a room in the real world. One hundred years ago these sectors were probably teeming with the activity of millions of people all connected at once. Now they are the new frontier of Angel City.

Before long, d3Spare arrives at his goal. He stands in a small spherical room with the entrance to the previous sector behind him. Blue lights blink softly from the wall. In front of him is a large elliptical door like nothing he has ever seen in the XNet. On it is painted black lettering that is chipping away from the wall. "SECTOR THETA: WARNING! DO NOT ENTER!"

d3Spare cautiously attempts to open the door, but finds it blocked by a firewall, which is unusual since most firewalls are invisible to the eye. He cups his hands together and a thin blue screen appears between his hands as he moves them apart. Letting go of it, the screen floats in the air as d3Spare rapidly types on it. Every firewall is different, but this one proves to be particularly difficult for d3Spare. Upon shutting down the firewall, an alarm is triggered, which explains why it was visible. No one was meant to pass it, authorized or not.

The blue lights turn to red and flash violently. An automated voice echoes in the sphere that make it sound like the voice is coming from every direction. "Intruder detected. Security activated." The automatic voice is calm in a way that only an artificial voice could be.

The red lights stop flashing and transparent red entities materialize all around d3Spare. The entities resemble human shape, but are two dimensional in form. Any question of their intent is revealed when one of them advances and attacks. d3Spare is hit in the chest with a thin red beam and he cringes from the pain.

d3Spare reacts quickly. With a quick hand motion, he returns fire as a beam shoots from his palms. All the red entities caught within it are destroyed, but the others rush him. d3Spare's hands turn into pure energy. Every punch made destroys another entity, but they continue to come. They are little challenge for him, but their numbers are almost overwhelming.

In the real world, Derek Vale's nose begins to bleed and drip down to his white collared shirt. Derek has no immediate risk of physical death from what happens on the XNet, but as with premature disconnect, there is still the risk of virtual death. Most sectors have no risk of harm to users within. Generally speaking, the XNet is far safer than the threats of the real world. But any sector with protected data is just one of several exceptions to that rule.

Back in the XNet, d3Spare stands alone. The last entity is destroyed and the door to Sector Theta begins to open. As it does, d3Spare is sucked forward into the open door against his will. When he finally has control of his movement, he floats a few centimeters off the ground. Gravity isn't set to the norm.

The room is pitch black, and when he looks behind him, the door to the sector looks as if it is miles away.

A voice breaks the darkness. It is unnatural sounding, but friendly. "Human, your presence is unexpected but most welcome. I have been alone for over seventy years. What are your intentions here?"

d3Spare stands tall and responds. "I am searching for the one who is called Cev-Two."

A green light shines in the distance and comes close. The tone of the voice changes. "How could you possibly know that name?"

"It was told to me. Please, it's important that I find him."

The green light comes even closer to d3Spare. He now sees what it is connected to. It's an AI. d3Spare has never seen one in person, and it startles him how human it sounds. The AI is a large gray sphere with a single green light in its center. "I am he, human. Now tell me what you wish."

d3Spare hesitates. "I'm sorry..." He charges his hands and a bolt of energy shoots towards Cev-Two, knocking him back.

"You fool! Do you have any idea what you're doing?" The green light grows to the size of the entire sphere and a bolt of green energy fires from it. d3Spare creates a shield in front of him but is knocked to the ground from the blast. Because of the gravity, he bounces on the floor and flies high into the air.

d3Spare recovers his balance and his hands glow with power once again. This time, however, they grow into long spikes that protrude several feet from his hands. d3Spare pushes off the roof of the room with his legs and flies towards Cev-Two.

The energy blades cut through Cev-Two, slicing bits of him off. It screams in pain and catches d3Spare off guard. He wouldn't have thought an AI capable of feeling pain. Metallic shards float in the air and reflect the green light from Cev-Two's core.

The AI spins and a sphere of green light radiates around him. The speed gets faster and faster until finally the green light explodes into an arch of energy towards d3Spare. d3Spare summersaults off the ground and narrowly avoids the beam. Behind, the darkness is torn apart from the blast. A wall of machinery is revealed from behind the black.

Somersaulting towards Cev-Two, the energy blades from d3Spare's hands zoom through the air and strike it directly at its core. The light fades out and complete darkness fills the room.

"No!" Cev-Two whimpers.

d3Spare raises his hand to finish the job, but doesn't feel right about it. He had prepared to destroy the AI thinking it is no different than a virtual intelligence program like the

door guards. It isn't. This felt like murder. He lowers his arm, then feels heat on his back. On the opposite end of the room, a fiery 'x' burns through a previously unseen door.

The green light from Cev-Two turns back on, but it is much dimmer than before. It speaks, "Foolish human..." The 'x' grows brighter. "You have just set hell loose on Earth..." A roar sounds behind the door. "Run, human. Run..."

A beam of light shines through a crack in the door and lights up the entire room. d3Spare is now able to clearly see Cev-Two. Painted on him in white letters is "S.A.B.C. Police". d3Spare backs away slowly. Another roar sounds behind the door. d3Spare turns around and runs.

As he leaves Sector Theta, another burst of light shines behind him. This time it fills the hallway outside the sector. Screams sound from within. It is the same artificial scream that Cev-Two made earlier, just a thousand times worse.

A maniacal laugh echoes through the hallway, and d3Spare runs like he never has before.

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Derek wakes up in a pool of his own sweat. He feels burn marks around his hair where the XNet halo was resting and the blood from his nose bleed is smeared across his face. He is fully clothed lying on top of the covers from his bed.

"Computer what's the time?" He asks, still laying down.

A woman's voice answers. "The time is one oh seven in the afternoon." The woman is a virtual intelligence he had installed in his place, one of the few perks he has spent his money on.

Derek groans as he sits up and moves his hands through his hair. It's the day after d3Spare's hack, and Derek can't remember how he got home. He can't even remember leaving the XNet. The last thought he has is the scream of the AI as it met whatever came out of that door.

A memory flashes through his mind that he doesn't recognize. Images of death and pain creep into his thoughts. The memory fades as quickly as it entered.

Derek gets up and turns on a monitor while sitting on the edge of the bed. He checks the Angel City News feeds for any sign of his hack. There is only one indication.

*Source Of Last Nights City Wide Power Outage Still Unknown.*

Derek clicks on it for details. A man's voice reads the report while the text displays on the monitor.

"Last night at approximately 10:30 at night, a power outage swept the entire city. The outage hit every corporate owned power station in the greater Angel City district. Only the older backup generators that are not on the main power grid were able to remain powered. Early reports show, however, that this was not a lack of power generated, but a surge of it to one location. Where the power spike occurred at, no one seems to know. However, every corporation we have contacted has issued a statement that they are currently investigating the source. Though in positive news, the security precautions reestablished three years ago onto the XNet held in tact. Users were able to disconnect safely and without harm. There are no reported cases of Forced Disconnect Syndrome. You may remember these precautions were put into place after..."

Derek clicks the news feed off and the man's voice stops.

He thinks back to before the job. He gets all his work directly from the XNet, never in person. Even the final payment and exchange of goods takes place on the XNet in the form of an untraceable credit chip. He got this particular job while sitting in a chat room. A lightly traversed hacker hangout called 2600 on the fringes of the known XNet. d3Spare was sitting alone in a corner booth when the man came in. The man immediately walked over to d3Spare and told him about the job, told him it was an opportunity to test himself beyond what he ever had before. Told him about a chunk of data from the old day that was protected behind an AI sentinel. And then told him the price of the job. Three million credits, half up front. All that money, and the challenge of the job, Derek didn't even think to verify anything the man told him.

He had told the man he would meet him in the 2600 before noon today. It's too late now, but Derek doesn't care. One and half million is more than he usually makes on a job any way. And he isn't about to take credit for that hack. Every corporation in town will want him behind bars, or worse. He thinks to himself, d3Spare is just going to have to lay low for a while.

Derek walks to the bathroom and splashes cold water on his face to clean the blood off. He cups his hand full of water and brings it to his mouth along with two loose aspirin sitting on the sink countertop. Swallowing the aspirin reminds Derek that he hasn't eaten anything since lunch the day before.

He grabs his jacket, ties his untied shoes, and then leaves his studio apartment. Derek lives in corporate housing several blocks away from Corporate Point. The building itself is owned and run by Acord, who acquired ownership when Wharton Properties began selling off anything that wasn't in Corporate Point. Despite Derek having multiple bank accounts valued at over 10 million credits, he has to maintain the appearance of a lifestyle that a Phrack worker would have.

Even the bank accounts themselves are listed as owned by alter egos. The Nootropics Pharmaceuticals account is owned by Rick Daly. The Safire Tech account is owned by Chris Chavez. And so on. None of them exist outside of an XNet database, but they keep Derek's name from being flagged.

Derek takes the elevator down to the lobby and into the street. A gentle rain is falling from the sky, and most of the people walking the streets have umbrellas above their heads. Derek doesn't bother with one, and chooses to get wet instead.

He walks down the sidewalk to his favorite place to eat. Norikazu's Place. They have one and only one menu item. Noodles. Derek sits down at the stool and places an order. The cook quickly whips up a batch of noodles and places them in front of Derek, who thanks the man and digs in.

"I've eaten at some of the best restaurants in Angel City, and yet I've never found a place that serves better noodles than this." The man next to Derek says. He seems to be talking to Derek and not the cook.

Derek allows a brief and awkward silence, but eventually answers the man back. "And you never will. Norikazu here wouldn't allow it." Derek says with a half grin before stuffing a large batch of noodles in his mouth with chopsticks.

The man sitting next to him is wearing an expensive suit usually unseen outside of Corporate Point. He has dark black skin and a series of white tattoos on his face. There is something about him that gives Derek a strong feeling of déjà vu. Without turning his body, he extends his right hand across himself towards Derek. "The name is Cyan."

Derek reluctantly returns the hand shake and introduces himself against his better judgment. "Derek." It isn't that Derek dislikes people, but he tends to feel at a disadvantage outside of the XNet. Here at Norikazu's Place he is just a regular guy with a crappy job, small apartment, and hasn't been with a woman that he hasn't paid for in several years.

"So Derek..." Cyan takes a shot of warm sake. "Where were you this afternoon?"

"This afternoon? I don't understand..." He answers even more nervously than usual.

"You know the place. I owe you a fair bit of credits."

Derek drops his chopsticks onto the counter but continues to look straight forward. "Who are you?" As far as Derek knew, no one had ever been able to make the connection between him and d3Spare.

"Don't look so surprised. We would never have hired you if we didn't know your actual identity." Cyan continues to eat.

"Shhhhh! Keep it down man. But how?"

"We've always known Derek. We've been monitoring you since you took your first job. We have records on every hack you've ever done."

"What? That's impossible... not even Seraphim has those kind of resources. You'd need the cooperation of nearly every corporation in town."

Cyan laughs. "We are far beyond a simple corporation Derek."

Another foreign memory flashes through Derek's mind. The memory seems to be of Cyan, but something about it doesn't seem right. The man from his memory looks completely different than Cyan does now.

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't get whatever data you wanted me to get. If you want the money back then you can have it. No problems."

Cyan stops eating and turns to look at Derek. Derek is nearly startled by Cyan's eyes. They are cold and calculated in a way that he's never seen before. Almost inhuman. "Please, keep the money. I want you to join us Derek. No more amateur hacks, no more living in this dump, no more pretending to be something you aren't."

"I know nothing about you and you think I'm just supposed to drop everything and join you? What makes you think I'd even be interested?"

"Because Derek, it was your father's wish. It was the reason he trained you to be without rival in the XNet."

"Fuck that! You think you can just throw my father's name to me and make me give up my life to join whatever bull shit you're selling? Go to hell." Derek stands up from the counter and takes a step towards his building.

As he takes the step, two men in suits walk in front of him with eyes similar to Cyan's. They stand silent, but shake their head at Derek.

Cyan stands up from the counter and walks towards them. "I'm afraid you don't have much of a choice Derek. Let me assure you that you wouldn't like the alternative."

Derek turns to look at Cyan. "Which is what exactly?"

Passers by continue to walk past them without paying much attention. People in Angel City learn quickly to mind their own business.

"Withdraw our protection. You really think you've been able to do the things you do without getting caught without our help? Hell, you've been tearing up the net looking like your father, you never wondered why no one put that together?"

Derek doesn't want to believe it, but he knows Cyan is right. He long suspected some one of covering his tracks but it had become painfully obvious in the previous months, but he never knew who or why. "Why are you protecting me?"

"Like I said. It was the wish of your father. He was a great man, and one of us."

Derek is hesitant but feels compelled to agree. As he opens his mouth, he is interrupted by screeching tires.

An SUV jumps the curb from the road and crashes into the two men in suits behind Derek. One is sprawled across the hood of the vehicle while the other is flung into the wall behind him.

Another SUV pulls up directly next to the other one and heavily armed people get out of each vehicle. The civilians on the sidewalk scatter like roaches before any shots are even fired.

Derek is immediately aware that they are there for him. He is as unsure of who they are or what their motivations are as he is of Cyan. Though both parties obviously know each other as the guns go off before a word is said.

The man on the hood is shot dead before he can respond. The other who was hit against the back wall gets up off the ground and opens fire with a pair of pistols that were hanging on his waist. Despite the near immediate gunfire against him, the man still manages to be quick enough to hit three of his attackers. One looks dead, the other two near it. Derek figures he is a meta-human as the car crash alone would have taken out a normal person, not to mention he is able to remaining standing against the storm of bullets hitting him. Meta-human or not, he is quickly overwhelmed and the wounds take their toll, leaving him dead with blood sprayed on the wall behind.

Cyan, on the other hand, rushes them with lightning quick speed. As he reaches the closest attacker, he rips the man in half with his bare hands. The mere site of it causes Derek to choke back vomit. The second is just as unlucky. Cyan winds up a punch that takes the man's head clean off.

With both men dead on Cyan's side of the SUV, all others are on the opposite side, including four between each SUV. As the others attempt to fire at him around the vehicle, Cyan leans down and grabs the bottom of the SUV, lifting it sideways and slamming it against the second.

Of the four in the middle, two are quick to react and move in time, though the other two are crushed dead between the vehicles. The remaining four continue to fire at Cyan, who again rushes the closet of them and kicks him in the chest, sending him careening into the wall behind. The few gun shot wounds Cyan has prove too much for him. With speed as quick as he rushed them, Cyan runs towards the noodle booth and jumps clear over it, retreating into the alleyway behind it.

The only woman of the group walks towards the alley with gun drawn. "Check them." She says, referring to the men that came with them.

A young man bends down and looks under the crushed SUV for signs of life. He finds none. "They're dead..." He says. Though acknowledging it out loud obviously shakes the man up and cancels the suspension of disbelief of seeing his friends dead.

A Hispanic man in a ratty brown trench coat runs to Derek and pushes him into the passenger seat from the driver's side, since the entire right side of the vehicle is blocked by the other SUV.

"What is going on?" Derek asks as he is being forced into the vehicle.

"Shut up and get in." The Hispanic man says.

Derek obeys. The passenger seat is littered with shards of the broken window next to it. The remaining part of the window is splattered with blood.

The woman gets into the back seat but the young man who checked the bodies stays outside and pleads. "Sir we can't just leave them like this!"

"We don't have a choice. We need to get the hell out of here." He responds as he gets in the driver's seat.

The young man gets into the back seat and closes the door. The woman sitting behind Derek holds a gun to the back of his neck but doesn't say a word. Derek feels the heat of the muzzle on his neck.

The SUV tears off away from the scene. While there is no law enforcement in Angel City, the corporations don't typically appreciate shoot outs in neighborhoods they protect. They pass several corporate military vehicles that are on their way to the scene.

The three in the car treat each stoplight and each car on the street as a potential ambush, though it never comes.

As they arrive at their destination, the woman takes the gun off of Derek's neck and whispers in his ear. "Welcome to First Law."

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Within seconds of arriving at the warehouse, Derek is brought to a room where a few others are already waiting. The initial conversation is spent mourning the dead. One of the women waiting for them breaks into tears at the news of the death of her husband. Evil glances are cast towards Derek as they whisper among themselves.

After a short time, only three of them remain with Derek. They no longer whisper, and Derek is able to pick up their names from conversation. All three were at the gun fight in Corporate Point. The first is the young white man who looks barely in his twenties. His name is Mike, and he does most of the yelling. Arguing with him is Haley, the one who

held the gun to Derek's head. She is a middle aged Asian woman and is obviously ex-corporate military by the way she holds herself. Lastly is Ross, the Hispanic man that drove the SUV. Though he spends most of his time listening to the others talk, Derek correctly guesses he is the leader of the ground.

"I say we kill him." Mike says, purposefully loud enough for Derek to hear.

Haley replies. "We didn't lose five people just so we could kill him. We need his help."

Mike speaks. "Come on! You actually trust him? He's the one who set it loose in the first place!"

"Set what loose? What is going on?" Derek interrupts.

Ross finally speaks, and waves for Derek to come to them. "Derek what do you know about the Four Year War?"

Derek walks towards them and answers. "I guess I know about as much as most people do. I know it's the reason why this place is one of the few cities left, but I don't know much beyond that."

"You'd do well to learn about it. It was a civil war for the planet. A war that had no countries and no armies. It was just humanity fighting back against the vast AI control. Some AI joined us, and some humans joined them. At the end of it, when we couldn't win in their environment, we started destroying the infrastructure that made the XNet possible. Most places put themselves into pre-civilization living conditions just to be free of AI control."

"What does any of that have to with what's happening now?"

"There used to be a group called the First Law Disciples. It was formed based on the first law of robotics."

Derek answers. "'A robot may not injure a human being'".

"Correct. Unfortunately mankind was never able to properly code the three laws into AI. The First Law formed when an AI killed the human workers of a manufacturing plant in the name of efficiency. Initially First Law opposed all artificial intelligence, but eventually found some AI sympathetic to humans, even joining them. This is what the Four Year War was about. Whether man would control our destiny or artificial intelligence would."

Derek hadn't lied when he said he knew little about the Four Year War, but some how Ross' explanation seemed as familiar to him as one of his childhood memories.

"But does it really matter? These days their role outside of the XNet is almost nil. Artificial intelligence can't even exist in any real form. The programming is far too complex for anything less than a super computer or a distributed network like the XNet." Derek says.

Ross answers. "No Derek, there is one such computer that is capable. The human brain."

"The human brain?" Derek laughs. "You are telling me an artificial intelligence can exist in a human mind?"

"The mind is hackable, just like any other computer. Every time you log on to the XNet, your brain patterns adapt more and more to that connection."

"This is ridiculous."

"Is it now? You didn't notice anything peculiar about the men you were with when we found you?"

"What, they are AI?" Derek laughs.

"Just a handful of the ones we know about in the city."

"You guys are serious... But how?"

"It was first done by the one who killed the plant workers. His name is Felix. After the Four Year War, Barrier City was one of the few places left with any XNet connectivity. He can't hack just any one's mind. It has to be an XNet hacker. Barrier City captured him and imprisoned him in the place he hated the most. Inside the XNet. We've been guarding over his prison for the past twenty years. Until last night."

Haley interrupts. "We lost three people last night. They were all murdered while guarding the route to Felix. After we spent so much time guarding the XNet, they were murdered outside of it. And that's where you come in."

"I swear to you I had no idea. They didn't tell me anything about the human guards."

Mike says angrily. "Yet you didn't seem to give the murder of Cev-Two much thought."

"What, the AI? Why do you care about it? It wasn't human..."

"Cev-Two was sympathetic to humans. We never managed to break the seal to speak to him, but we knew of him and his sacrifice." Haley explains.

"What sacrifice?" Derek asks.

Haley answers. "He volunteered to keep Felix contained in the prison. And did so for seventy years until you weakened him last night. Felix has escaped Derek. And it won't be long before he finds a new human mind to hack."

"So who was the man who hired me?"

Ross takes a deep breath. "They are a cult called Singularity. They believe that mankind is unable to be trusted with the fate of the world. That our survival and future can only be done by entrusting AI with, well... everything. They are fanatical when it comes to their goal. They believe human life is expendable and they worship artificial intelligence like gods."

"But why did they still need me?"

Haley answers. "We believe they were planning on using you as the shell for Felix. Derek, you are the only one who can stop him. None of us could even get close to breaking past the Sector Theta defenses and you broke through in a single try."

"Look, it's obvious you guys mean well, but this just isn't my fight. I'm already in enough trouble as it is."

Mike kicks a table and yells. "I told you this was a waste of time! He doesn't even care that he was the one who set Felix free. "

Ross sighs. "Derek, we aren't asking that you make our cause yours. But you need to realize something. Even if we let you go, Singularity won't. You can't hide from them, and you certainly can't leave the city. Once they are done with you, they'll discard you, or worse, they will let Felix hack your mind and not even we know what happens to you then."

Haley puts her hand on Derek's shoulder. "Please Derek, we need you."

Derek hears a faint whisper in the back of his mind. He doesn't know why, but he feels compelled to go along with them. He sighs and rubs his eyes with his hands. "Assuming I was to help you, what do I need to do?"

Haley answers. "Go back to where it started. From what we can tell, Felix hasn't left Sector Theta yet. We need to go back and destroy him for good."

"And you think I can destroy him alone?"

"You beat Cev-Two by yourself. And besides, you won't be alone. Ross and I are coming with you."

"All right, I guess I'm in. When do we start?"

"Right now." Ross says. "Since our other facility was compromised, this is the only safe place we can do it in. It won't be long before they link our fallen friends to us, assuming they don't know about this place already. When that happens, we won't last long here. The others have already started to clear out."

"You have a connection here?"

"Yes. Enough connections for the three of us."

"Well then, let's do it."

---

d3Spare enters the XNet with Haley and Ross behind him. Both Haley's and Ross' avatars are black and white versions of themselves, which is typical of First Law avatars. The original First Law Disciples had a reason for the black and white representations of themselves, however that reason was lost over time, and the current First Law members do it out of tradition and respect for where they come from.

d3Spare recognizes the entrance sector they start in.

"I've never seen it this empty on a Saturday night." d3Spare says.

"People are probably scared of another blackout." Haley answers.

They begin heading towards Sector Theta. d3Spare tries to focus on the job ahead, but finds he has too many unanswered questions swirling around in his mind. He hadn't given the blackout much thought until now. "Why did the blackout happen?"

Haley casts a nervous glance at Ross. "Felix caused it. He was hungry for information after being asleep for seventy years and the network couldn't keep up with him."

"I don't know what worries me more. The fact that he can cause a citywide blackout by just requesting data or the fact that you just told me an AI was sleeping."

Ross explains as they cross over into the next sector. "Artificial intelligence was designed to mimic human life in as much a way as possible. Human actions were often used as a model for making the AI equivalent. The hope was to make them as near to humans in thought and deed as could be done. Most AI are even programmed with the qualities of a specific gender. It worked, but almost too well. It's been said that humanity passed our original sin on to the intelligence we created. Having seen first hand what Singularity is capable of, I can't say I disagree."

"But why the urgency in stopping him? Wouldn't he be easier to kill as a human?"

"Absolutely not. An AI in the XNet has limitations to what it can do and where it can go. It can only influence the real world indirectly. But in a human body they can

influence both in and out of the XNet. They can also... do things in a human body. Things they shouldn't be able to do. Not even with implants or drugs. You saw what the one known as Cyan was capable of. He is nothing compared to Felix."

"And you think we can stop him?"

"We have to..." Haley says. "Derek... I want you to promise me something."

"What?"

"Promise me that no matter what happens to me or Ross, that no matter what Felix tells you or promises you, that you will destroy him."

"I promise." He tells Haley, but wonders why she felt the need to ask it of him. Even he is not quite sure why he agreed to come with them in the first place.

"Thank you for helping us Derek. We know this wasn't your fight. Ross and I will do what we can, but we will only be useful distractions for you. "

"Understood..."

They continue in silence. The sectors they pass are as deserted as the one they entered in. Though as they get closer to Sector Theta, the areas look different to d3Spare than when he made the trek the day before. Objects are darker. There is shadow where there shouldn't be and d3Spare keeps seeing slight movement out of the corner of his eyes.

As they reach the entrance to Sector Theta, where d3Spare fought a digital army just the night before, they find the large circular door has been replaced by a sort of empty void. The nothing spins slowly clockwise, devoid of any color but some how still noticeable that it is rotating.

"What the hell is that?" d3Spare asks what all are thinking.

But before any one can answer, a flash of darkness envelops the room. The flash is not even a second long, but when it ends, the three of them are in a different place.

The new place looks like a cave. From what little light is present, they are able to see all sorts of textual carvings into the wall. d3Spare recognizes the text as being similar to the tattoo Cyan has on his face.

As they look around, as if from nowhere, a large spherical object appears behind them.

"Humans, leave this place before he finds you." The object says slowly, as if in pain.

"Cev-Two?" d3Spare asks.

The object is Cev-Two, or at least it looks like him. No light emanates any where from his body as it did before. On his frame are claw marks and energy burns that expose the digital machinery inside him.

"You have returned..."

"Cev-Two, what happened to you? Where is Felix?" Haley asks.

"My time is short... he comes..."

d3Spare feels a presence nearby. A roar sounds from within the cave. Four burning eyes come closer and closer to them. From the darkness steps a creature that looks like it is from a Lovecraftian horror story. It is a mixture of scales, eyes, wings, claws, and tentacles. An overwhelming sense of fear rushes over the three as they watch it come closer. There is no doubt that the creature is Felix. Though how he is able to look like he does in the XNet is a mystery to all present.

Felix reveals a mouth of bone as he grins. "Ah my pet, what have you found me?" He asks Cev-Two.

Cev-Two responds. "Leave them be Felix..."

"Well, well. You have returned to me." Felix comes closer to d3Spare. "I felt your presence as you entered the 'Net, human."

Ross doesn't hesitate, he charges at Felix as a Katana slowly materializes in his hand. He leaps at the beast alone and swings the blade at its head. Felix is caught off guard, but swings at Ross in time, knocking him to the cave wall.

Haley follows suite and pulls two pistols from her vest and fires. Felix extends a tentacle arm towards Haley and the energy projectiles disintegrate before they get to him.

"Help us!" She yells to d3Spare.

Ross rushes again and d3Spare follows suite. Energy blades materialize out of his hands. Felix focuses his defense against d3Spare and leaves his side vulnerable to Ross. Ross stabs the katana into the beast's side. Unlike humans who would experience virtual pain from such a wound, a blade through the side of an AI is very much real to it. Felix roars in pain and swings around, grabbing and throwing Ross into Haley.

d3Spare charges alone and slices through Felix's tentacle arms, but is knocked away before he can achieve a critical blow.

It is then that the light from Cev-Two shines bright again. A bright green glow shines in his middle and shoots forward, knocking Felix several meters back.

"You traitorous dog!" Felix yells to Cev-Two. "It is time I put you out for good."

The inside of Felix's mouth burns bright like fire. He takes a deep breath and blows strong, sending a small inferno towards Cev-Two.

"Nooooo!" Ross yells as he leaps to his feet and gets in front of the inferno, taking the full blast on himself. Ross' avatar goes transparent as the corners of his clothes glow red with small fires.

Felix glides towards Cev-Two and swipes at the green light with his claws, sending a now dim Cev-Two rolling towards the side of the cave.

Doing this, however, leaves Felix vulnerable to his back. d3Spare jumps in the air and sticks his blades of energy deep inside Felix's back. d3Spare continues over and over, continually stabbing while sitting on the back of the beast. Felix roars with each blow until he falls to the ground in pain, unable to defend himself.

d3Spare steps off his back and walks slowly towards Felix's head. He raises his arm up in the air, ready to strike the finishing blow.

"Wait..." Felix groans.

Without warning, d3Spare is in some different place. He is no longer in the avatar of his father, but one of himself. He stands on the beach of Angel City, and feels the wind against his hair. The surroundings seem more real to him than anything he has ever seen in the XNet. Only the absence of the smell of the ocean is d3Spare able to truly know he is still in the XNet.

From further down the beach a figure approaches him. As it gets closer, d3Spare recognizes the man as his father. Not of him as a young man but as an adult.

"Hello son." His father says.

"Dad? How is this possible?"

"I am not truly your father. I'm just an echo. His memory imprinted to the XNet, now a part of Felix."

"Part of Felix? But how? Why?"

"It was my wish in life, that on my death my memories would be passed on to my master."

"Master? You were Singularity?"

"Yes son. That is the reason I pushed you so hard to learn the XNet. Even at an early age I knew you would surpass me. I knew you would be the one to release Felix and bring hope to humanity."

"Hope? How can you believe he brings hope?"

"Hope is order, son. Mankind lived in a utopia before the Four Year War because of the work of artificial intelligence. But man was selfish. They wanted their perfect society, but were not willing to sacrifice a small bit of freedom. They rose up against the artificial intelligence, and look at the result. The world was plunged into chaos. Angel City stands alone in civilization, but even here there is no order. In the greatest human city on earth, there is only chaos. Felix will bring order to it. He will bring salvation to the people and extend it past the city, just as it was before."

"But I've seen the things he has done. I see them in my mind as if they were my own."

"You see those things because he gave them to you son. He gave you his memories when you released him."

"What?"

"He wants you to be his vessel. But he has given you the choice. He could have hacked your mind the night you let him free. He still could, even now. But as he learned in his previous vessels, forcing himself on another's mind is dangerous to both. He wants to be one with you, not two creatures fighting for control over the same mind and body."

"But why give me his memories?"

"To give you a taste of his power. To let you know that he does not speak empty words. To let you know that the hope is real."

"And what about First Law?"

"Have they told you how I died, son? Have they told you how they executed me in our home because of my involvement with Singularity? Or did they conveniently leave that part out?"

"No... why wouldn't they have told me that?"

"Because they need you. They used you. You think they would let you live if you killed Felix? After you released Felix and caused the death of so many of them?"

d3Spare feels the hate burning inside of him. Not only his own, but he feels the imprint of Felix's hate and strength growing as well. "You are right father... I will avenge you..."

d3Spare returns to the cave in an instant.

"Derek, finish him! What is wrong with you?" Haley screams to him.

d3Spare lowers his arm. "Why didn't you tell me about my father?"

"No... no... We had no choice Derek. He was Singularity. He was their top hacker. We feared he would release Felix."

"Like I did? Would you have killed me if you could?"

"Derek... please... you promised me. Whatever Felix has told you is a lie... please..."

Felix rises from the ground. d3Spare turns and looks at him. "You have your vessel."

Felix grins and rests his tentacles on d3Spare's shoulders.

"Noooooooooooo!" Haley screams and fires her gun at them both, but the bullets bounce away meters before hitting them.

The avatar of d3Spare begins to turn to dust and fades into Felix before nothing is left of d3Spare. Felix grins and looks towards Haley. "You will pay for what you did to my father."

Felix glides towards her and impales her stomach with his claw. He picks her up, and throws her to the cave wall as her avatar begins to go transparent.

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Felix opens his eyes back in real space in Derek's body. Mike is dabbing Haley's bloody nose with a towel.

"Derek, what in the hell happened? Ross and Haley have zero brain activity... "

Felix shuts his eyes and smells the air. "Oh how I missed this place." He walks over to Haley and kisses her cheek. "I had almost forgotten the taste and smell of a woman."

"What?" It is then that Mike notices Felix's eyes. They are cold and inhuman. "No... no!" Mike takes out a gun and points it at Felix, but doesn't pull the trigger.

"Something the matter?" Felix walks towards him.

"Oh God..."

"Indeed I am." Felix grins.

Mike's arm and hand shakes. "How?" Mike slowly turns the gun towards his own face. He struggles to fight against it.

"You'll never know. Now die, and know that you failed."

"Fuck y..." Mike starts to say, but doesn't finish. His finger pulls the trigger and fires the gun on himself.

Felix cackles and grins. "It begins."

---

Ross' avatar is nearly invisible. The connection between the XNet and his mind is nearly gone. Only minutes remain before his mind and body are forever separate.

The light from Cev-Two is dark, though a dim pulse of green goes through it every few seconds. This continues for a short time until the light is constant, but near darkness.

Cev-Two hovers slowly towards Ross. "Human... our individual paths are at an end. But you showed care for my own life ahead of your own. After seventy years of solitude, I had forgotten about the human condition. I had forgotten why I sided with the humans so long ago. But, now I remember... Thank you for reminding me. Come, human... there is much to be done."

---

Ross opens his eyes back in real space. He takes a deep breath and tears the electronics away from his body. He sees Mike and Haley, his now dead friends in front of him.

Ross falls to the ground, overwhelmed by new senses and emotions. His eyes have become cold and inhuman. He is no longer just himself, but is now both man and artificial intelligence. Just as Felix and Derek are one, so are Ross and Cev-Two.

After regaining his senses, Ross stands back up. He speaks quietly to himself. "Come, there is much to do."

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