

The apartment complex was a labyrinth of lime green doors. The once cream-painted skirting boards had collected a veneer of grey, oily muck and scuff marks. The fumes that thickened the air of the city had started to seep in through the cracks, through doors left ajar, while broken chairs and lamps were piled haphazardly just outside the lobby; cross-contamination of the outside and the in. When the buildings got bad enough the homeless would encroach into the living spaces themselves, lining the walkways with sleeping bags and bottles of piss and booze, worming their way deeper and deeper inside.

The lift's magnetic rails shot us up above the smog line as we stepped out on the 36th floor. Fly zappers ballooned from the ceiling of the Penrose-esque corridors at regular intervals. Blue and threatening, they let out the occasional zap as a newly dead thing tumbled into the grime of the carpet below.

"Did you sleep on the way over?" asked Arno.

I hadn't. The fatigue was cruel. I was spread out thinly, missing bites of time, finding myself in mid-walk, commute, conversation, place. I found myself losing track of the why. I'd have to fill in the gaps of where we were from context, signs, landmarks, or snatches of mumbled beat officers and detectives.

Can you remember what it's like to wake up? It happens all the time and yet I forget it so quickly... It slips away so easily. So much so I wonder if we're meant to forget.

There is a point between sleep and wakefulness. It might happen before you've even opened your eyes, or even spotted that you're awake at all. It's that lurch between worlds, where the thing that is you has not yet been made. When who you are has been scrubbed clean in the night like a crime scene.

It's the silence before the play begins, before the curtains come up and reveal the scene; the audience are waiting in the dark, eyes front and centre, hunting for the twitch in the curtain folds.

And then it begins: stories fill the cup. A worry at work, a stressful meeting later in the day, an old pain in the joints, a familiar voice through the walls that reminds you of the presence of a lover, or a family... or a nightmare. You find hopes and dreams to clothe yourself in. You remind yourself of who you are, who you were and who you could be.

But this is a lie. In truth you exist only in the void, only in the lurch between worlds: between wakefulness and the detritus of a life picked up anew upon waking. Every morning you are remade and you tell yourself the same lie because without it we would be adrift. The lie is that we are the same person we were before we slept. That, when we go to sleep, whatever we were has not perished.

It had been too long since I could tell myself the lie.

We'd been chasing our lead going-on 60 hours now. Arno looked how I felt. He'd been trying to grab snatches of rest mid-transit as we flew through the city. I'd been unable to sleep even these. I'd been restless, tapping, never quite at ease, fidgeting. I felt a ravenous tired that made every flat plain look like a viable sleeping spot. I kept finding mugs of coffee in my hand, drinking it for some reason, denying myself even the meagre crumbs of sleep I was offered. I was wired-up electric, adrenaline loaded, caffeine laced.

I still hadn't answered. "No. No sleep"

I heard the scream of a child further in the complex and tensed. Normal scream, everything ok scream. God I was jumpy. My nerves were shot to shit.

"Do you think we'll get them before they go to ground?" asked my young partner.

Was this small talk or did he think I actually knew? I didn't. Once a cyber-crime like this came in, somewhere a clock started counting down, whether we could hear the ticks or not. We'd set-about tracing the blacklist online activity but anyone with a brain cell to spare would commit the crime across as many districts as possible. Money from Brazil, hosting in China, the crime itself in Azerbaijan, and then bounced around a dozen networks.

We relied heavily on the cooperation of our counterparts elsewhere to help us stitch things together before the crime and its sponsors disappeared entirely into the ether. Whether we were successful tended to be a question of motivation.

If the case was financially troublesome, and on a grand enough scale to bother some government somewhere, then police work got sucked up into diplomacy. It initiated a sort of tit-for-tat where key information might get quietly withheld to be lumped in with on-going trade disputes or agreements. In these cases a logjam would often ensue and the clock would easily run out before we even got any real play time.

Similarly, if the crime wasn't significant enough then other things started taking priority. So what if someone is stealing our medical data from somewhere in Portugal? Great. Why should Portugal care? Unless it could be linked to a domestic case as well - and if they were smart then it almost certainly couldn't - then things got a lot of "yes of course we'll get those to you"s which failed to materialise. Our export cyber team wasn't any better.

But there was a sweet spot. A crime macabre enough to attract attention but with little interest on the international stage. Fortunately - depending on your outlook - the present case was of no interest to governments, and was truly gruesome.

"Ellie? Do you think we have a chance?"

I'd zoned out again. "You know how it is, Arno..."

It was a nothing answer. I knew it as well as him.

"Haven't we done everything we can for now? You've still not told me what we're doing here. How does this link to the case?" He placed a hand on my shoulder. I slowed but kept walking. "What is this place?"

"A friend of mine lives here. He's not expecting us."

"El." He looked uncomfortable. "I saw your check in earlier. You didn't say where we were going... He's not part of the force is he?" Arno had just learnt the rule book and deviated from it with great reluctance.

"No he's not on the force - more of a contractor. Sometimes the force needs his help... right now I do."

"But we have teams of people working on this." He was trying to stay cool but he was tired and he wanted to go home. He wasn't used to me keeping him in the dark. "There are teams and teams of people working on this in Krakow, Bangkok, London and here. Why do we need AI?" He stopped in his tracks. I stopped too. His voice hushed in the way familiar to those who'd battled with our silent foe. "Is this to do with the leaks?"

"-Arno. Stop. I need you to follow me on this one. I'll explain everything later. If you trust me then you should trust AI. He's a good man. And he's my friend." He relented.

I'd been tracing the descending numbers all the way to AI's, counting my way in rather than remembering. His door had several faded rectangular outlines on its surface: the ghosts of old door locks that had sat there over the years. The latest incarnation was a large hulking metal

fist, that easily looked twice the size of its predecessors. It was a titanic thing of metal squatting on the crease. The door itself would be an easier thing to break.

A couple was arguing in a neighbouring apartment in a language I didn't recognise; though the argument sounded vaguely familiar. I knocked loudly on Al's door, the sound reverberating throughout the tower block, eventually muffled by its sheer scale. The door didn't budge. I knocked again, louder. The couple paused for a second as the knock sounded across their battle ground, before resuming with equal vigour. Al didn't answer.

"Right," I said, "I've got key access."

"Shouldn't we come back later?"

"Oh he'll be in alright," then I added, quietly, "unfortunately."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I leaned down to scan my eye on the panel near the door without answering. Steel shifted like a thunder clap as the door unlocked. "You go in first."

"Why?" Arno reached for his sidearm nervously. I raised an arm to stop him.

"It's safe. Don't worry. You're going in first because you're a guy and I still remember the last time I stopped by unannounced. Took me a while to get over it. But we need to speak to him as soon as possible."

Arno left the gun in his holster but his shoulders were still loaded. He hesitated before he stepped into Al's apartment. The only light in the corridor was coming from the living room at the end of the hall, its door ajar. Even without natural light coming through, the neon cityscape still screamed in through the window. Night time. Again?

All the other doors in the apartment were closed. Arno looked back at me, unsure what to do next, shrugging at me until I nodded to the door he needed. He knocked twice with no response. He tried again. Nothing. I encouraged him to head in anyway. He eked open the door, shielding his eyes like he was opening a blast furnace.

"Hello!" he yelled into the room.

"He'll be plugged in," I said, "you need to get him." There was a loud groan.

"He's butt naked!"

"Yeah that's what I thought. You're not gonna like this but... you're gonna have to hurt him."

"What the hell EI?!"

"Just pinch him or something. He's hooked into omnisense. He can't see or hear anything. The only thing he'll be able to feel is pain. And for the love of Sumiya throw a blanket over him."

Al had the look of a man who had been lost at sea for some time and had returned to shore without his glasses. He came around slowly, massaging his enormous head with a big hairy paw, gradually thawing back into the real world. Meanwhile, I worked on avoiding direct confrontation with the conspicuous lump beneath Al's blanket.

The room was a decadent tech hovel. Circuit boards and tangled wires littered the ground in various stretched and ripped boxes, or arranged on shelves around the room. Metal cuboids of unknown design and function were piled up in tottering pillars, along with magazines and biscuit wrappers, which encircled Al's large leather armchair in the centre of the dark room. Arno switched on the lamp by the side table as we waited for the groggy Al to resurface. Arno had become fascinated by a patch of wall in the far corner of the room.

"Mind telling me what the hell you're doing here?" drawled Al. He didn't have the energy for anger but he did his best.

"Sorry Al. Couldn't be helped."

He doubled over in the armchair, resting his groggy head in one hand while the other blindly spun a finger in the general direction of Arno, as if lassoing him. "Who the hell is this guy?"

"I'm Corporal Arno Clement."

He grunted. "Is that so Corporal? Pleased to meet you. Given what you just witnessed though, I think we're good to skip straight to first names. Don't you?" He sighed. "El, why don't you and the young Corporal go wait in the kitchen while I get myself a bit more... presentable? And make us all some coffee would ya? Strong enough to raise the dead."

Given the state of the other room, Al's kitchen was decidedly orderly. There was a tree shaped cup stand, an elaborate coffee machine and pristine marble work surfaces; not a single crumb in sight. He had one of those fridges that automatically ordered replacement food and an enormous touch-screen on one of the walls that would cost almost a gig of credit. Al was a compartmentalised hoarder come obsessive compulsive. Given the abysmal apartment building, a surprisingly wealthy one.

I busied myself with the coffee machine, and saw a satisfyingly rich, oily creme drip into Al's carved stone mugs. Elsewhere in the kitchen, Arno shuffled awkwardly, unwilling to commit to a seat. He was reading over some of the fridge magnets: a mixture of equations and what might have passed for sophisticated software puns to someone other than me. We heard Al padding down the corridor before we saw the door swing open, revealing the large man now wrapped in a thick dressing gown. His eyes honed in on one of the three gently steaming mugs of coffee. I gave him a peace offering.

He closed his eyes and took a draught from the mug in silence. It looked tiny with both his enormous hands clasped around it. His already expansive chest swelled with a deep breath, his back straightening a little, before he let out a contented sigh. Only then did he open his eyes.

"Hey El. Good to see you. Been a while. Next time, call first. And Arno, pleased to meet you. I'm all for starting fresh if you are."

"Sorry about earlier" spluttered Arno. "Didn't know you'd be... unavailable."

"It's the middle of the goddamn night young man. What did you expect?" He took another sip from the mug. "It's partly my fault anyway. I've been meaning to hook up my door lock to some sort of signal even when I'm plugged in. That might help if the mail man drops by... but it still won't help if someone walks into the actual apartment without warning." His eyes rolled over the rim of his mug, from Arno to me, his thick brow sharpening.

"What if there was a fire or something?" asked Arno. "Isn't it dangerous, having all your senses elsewhere?"

"That's why I told you to pinch him." I said. "All other senses are taken over with sensory information from whoever is piloting. Except for pain. It's a security measure. In case something happens to the body."

"Right you are. But yes it is a little risky. Best to be somewhere safe and secure."

"Omnisense is why we're here," said Arno. "We've got a new case. A pilot killer."

"Is that what I think it is? A waster?"

"It's the official term for a waster," I said, "anyone who broadcasts the live feed of their murders to their followers online via piloting."

Al grimaced. "Yeah I've heard about it. Twisted. I take it you need help tracing one of them?" He took another sip. "I thought you'd have whole departments to deal with this type of thing. I'm good EI but even big-AI isn't as good as 20 of your guys... 17 maybe."

Arno looked across at me pointedly and I cut in. "A new one has cropped up over the past couple of months. There was a new pilot-kill about 50 hours ago in Krakow. This one's different though. The waster's following has surged."

"How much?"

"18,000 paid subscribers in 2 months."

Al let out a whistle.

I'd piloted in with my equivalent in Krakow's cybercrime division what felt like an aeon ago. Just traditional piloting: no touch, taste or smell. Thank god. I couldn't remember the actual name for the division in Polish, just that there were a lot of accented letters. I'd taken a tour of the kill-room courtesy of a man I'd likely never meet. It looked like a slaughterhouse. Across the walls and ceiling usernames had been written like the graffiti you might find on an urban underpass, laying claim to a city. Each trying to outdo the other, jostling for attention and prominence. Except here they'd used the victim's blood instead of paint cans.

Near the corner of the kitchen table, where we'd found skull fragments and grey matter embedded in the grain, there were clusters of names like, 'Cry4M3' and 'SouL\_Blender' etched into the wood. Tiny spidery scrawls clamoured to get closer to the exact place where the man's life had ceased.

The fun hadn't stopped there. The scene was the conglomerate of a thousand twisted minds all around the globe. True mass, psychotic, schizophrenia. It was a spectacle and they were all paying for their share in the fun. There were body parts in jars, bits removed, other bits sewed where they shouldn't be. Some of it was pure sadism while other acts, possibly more disturbingly, seemed to originate from a morbid, deranged sense of humour.

The butter dish in the centre of the victim's kitchen had his severed digits arranged so that they neatly protruded from the block in order. The sculpture was pointed at the door so that, open entering, we were greeted by the dismembered fingers waving at us. Written in the pink grease was the username "buttur\_fingers". It reminded me too much of teenage boys playing video games.

"You think the growth is due to omni?" asked Al.

"Yes. Not only seeing and hearing the kill but actually feeling it? Taste, smell." I shuddered. "Too enticing. We really need your help to get these guys, Al. The subscribers too, or at least some of the big ones. You know more about this tech than almost anyone else."

"Maybe but that doesn't mean I can catch someone better. It's still the same principles as with any other waster."

"Al. I need you on this. Please."

He stopped. Him and Arno shared a look I wasn't party to. Half of a biscuit Arno was eating had halted on the way to his mouth. It seemed pleading didn't sound comfortable from me. I'll admit that I even surprised myself. Al nodded.

"Alright. No more questions. How can I help?"

We set up in Al's living room. It was a mis-match of adult and geek-chic, much like the man himself. Long designer couches were covered with out-of-place spiral pattern throws that reminded me of dream catchers. There was a large bookcase, with several intimidating volumes of German philosophy, and some others concerning entropy and information theory, juxtaposed with an entire bottom shelf devoted to board games whose edges were frayed with love.

Like a mother hen, Al fussed over our respective make-shift work stations, insistent on providing us with an endless supply of convex screens, as our laptops alone were considered insufficient. He tried to hide his disappointment when Arno insisted that just the one would do. We discussed the avenues left unexplored, sharing a couple of files with Al that explained some of the details of the case and then got to work. We rarely needed to speak.

Through the living room window, a lurid red neon sign beamed a message in, despite us being 38 floors from the street below. It was advertising 2 for 1 chicken wings at what appeared to be a local strip club. Whether it was on a predetermined path, passing slowly in rows along every window in the building, or searching for open curtains or gatherings of people late in the night, distracted me. It was unsettling. The feeling of being watched and counted. I untensed a little when it passed on.

Time moves and is woven strangely. Ever present is the pull of sleep. The thirst for it. The caffeine seemed to do no more now. All I felt was the warmth of the drink. I can hear the typing and clicking of Al and Arno as they work on into the night, progressing even though I am removed, asking nothing of me at this moment. The gentle tapping becomes rhythmic and soothing. The couch padding is deep and safe and I feel myself sinking into it more and more. Deeper and deeper...

I'm still typing. I've somehow kept working even though my mind has drifted. It felt similar to sleep. I don't know how long I was out for. And I don't know how I'm clinging on at this point.

"How's it going Al?" How do I manage to sound so chirpy? Arno still looks how I feel. He's gone a sickly grey. It looks like torture.

"I think we've got something." As Arno was rapidly melting into a minor breakdown, and I was part-way catatonic, it was clear that 'we' meant 'Al'. "But I'd be surprised if it hasn't already been picked up by the team."

"That's ok." I said. "I appreciate it. Want to make sure we haven't missed anything." My fists clench. "I think I may need to go and take a nap. Arno, I think you could use one too. There's not much we can do right now, everything is being followed up on. Al, do you mind if I go watch something in the other room? Easy to fall asleep in front of a film."

"Of course. You must be knackered."

I feel a strange mixture of relief at the promise of sleep, juxtaposed with anxious nerves. It's jarring. It might be the coffee. The sleep deprivation is doing weird things to me. I'm edgy, like I'm about to do something I shouldn't.

"Can I grab a piece of paper and a pen? Just in case I think of anything else."

"Uh yeah. Sure thing. Let's get you set up."

Arno wordlessly staggered towards the sofa I'd just left and fell onto the cushions face first. His feet hung off the edge of the sofa, everything but his shoes still on. He looked like he was already out by the time we'd left the room.

Al set me up in the chair that we'd found him in a few hours ago. Thankfully he'd tidied up the place a little and pulled out some fresh blankets. He set up yet another screen, placing it

in front of the chair. I selected a slow film. Something easy, mindless and gentle. It required nothing of me.

"The pen and paper please Al."

"Of course." He set them next to me on the side table and turned off all the lights except the tv, which mumbled gently into the darkness. I could just about make out Al's big eyes as he smiled, a little sadly. "It's good to see you El. It's been a long time but... It's good to see you."

"I'm sorry I haven't been around. Work has been... hell. We've all been under it a lot. There's been a huge investigation. People worrying about information getting out of the precinct. It's been stressful." I took one of his big hairy arms in my hands, surprising him. "I've missed you, you big lug. And I'm sorry we're seeing each other like this."

"Yeah of course, El. Don't mention it."

"Al, I need to ask another favour. Will you come and check on me in a bit? I'm not feeling myself right now."

He paused. His brow knotted as he tried to read my expression. "What's going..."

"Please Al. Just... come in quietly. I'm not feeling well."

"Sure. Of course. I'll do a little more digging on the messaging site's encryptions and come check on you... in a half hour or so?"

"Perfect." He turned to go but I held his arm, stroking it. He had thick, wiry hair. He made me feel safe, secure, tired. I was already falling asleep but the words bubbled out anyway. "Yes, do that."

"El. I'm worried about you. Are you sure..."

"I'll get some sleep and things will make more sense after. Just make sure you come check on me like you promised. It's important. I'll see you soon." I was desperate for him to leave. I needed to shut my eyes. I was crashing through the surface of a deep lake of unconsciousness. He looked reluctant to leave. He thought about staying with me, I could see, but then he turned away. I heard the door close.

The credits were rolling on the film. There was a large shape next to me in the dark. It was Al.

"Thanks for getting me." He said nothing. He pulled off the blanket, the pen clattering to the floor, and helped me up. "Have you had any luck?"

"Yeah we're getting there." He mumbled. He refused to look at me. He was stiff, awkward. I went to stroke his arm again but he twitched, as though he'd meant to pull away. The images I'd seen in Krakow were truly horrific. The aesthetic, excited indulgence in another's pain and suffering was a uniquely scarring experience, even to someone hardened to it like me and Al. Nevertheless I was surprised by his... unease. Was the case getting to him?

"Would you like some coffee?" he mumbled.

No. "Please."

Arno was still in the living room, gently drooling onto one of Al's jackets, which he'd clumped up beneath his head. Al's work spot had accumulated the files, notes and mugs of industry since I'd last seen him. He closed one of the notebooks by his computer as he grabbed a cluster of empty mugs.

He still wasn't looking at me. "It's being sorted." He said. He wasn't looking at me. I felt almost like he wasn't addressing me.

"Thank you."

I gave Arno's hair a tussle as I went past and left him sleeping.

"You can tell the newbies, hey?" I said.

Al grunted to fill the space where words should go.

"One of the last things you get used to. Took me years. He's not done too bad - all considered. He's a good kid."

In the kitchen, the coffee machine hummed to life. Al had his back to me, busying himself with the steamer, creating a sound like ripping paper as he used the task to avoid facing me.

"How have you been Al?"

"Fine."

He looked anything but fine. He clearly felt unsafe.

"Al, if this is going to... work, we need to be able to speak to each other. Like normal. It's the only way we get through this. We don't have to talk about the work. But we do need to... just need to talk."

Steam rose from the jug as he burnt the milk. He turned off the steamer and set it down. He still had his back to me. He bounced his palm against the work surface a few times, each one slower and more forceful than the last.

"It's not much longer Al. I know this is a lot to ask of you. I'm so grateful. But I need you to talk to me. For my sake if not for yours."

I'd never heard myself talk like this. It was unsettling.

"You're right." He turned around, leaning against the marble work surface. "What do I talk about?"

"I haven't seen you in so long. With everything going on at work-"

"With the leak-?"

"Yes. And other things. But I don't want to talk about that. I want to know what's going on with you. Catch me up on how you've been. I feel like I've missed so much."

His lips were pursed before he pushed out words. "It's been a hard few weeks to be honest. Stressful."

"How so?"

"Well work's been tricky but...it's mainly Marcus."

"Your nephew, Marcus? What about him?"

He paused. He wasn't looking at me. He rubbed a big bear paw through his hair. He was reluctant to go on.

"Al. It's just us. Just us. Let's talk it out like we would any other day."

He nodded at me but the motion kept going on and on, continuing, as though rocking himself into action.

"He's been on the omni. Gotten obsessive. It's all too predictable in hindsight - when he was a kid we had a hard enough time getting him to put down his games."

"I don't know many kids that didn't struggle. Why would you get up and go to school when you could pretend to be a fly?"

"Exactly. And it's only gonna get harder as the technology improves. Eventually they'll be able to create the sensation of the fantasy world so it doesn't just look and sound like you're there, but it feels like it too. Just like with omni."



"Tells you how much I know. I woulda thought it was easier to do it in a game than stream the sensations of another living person."

He shook his head.

"Generating the textures of an entire world is hard. Every material requires its own parameters and coding for temperature, resistance, texture etc. There's also wind and ambient temperature to take into account to make it feel real. If you let a person have freedom to choose, which is what a game is, then you have to be able to serve a whole lot of information because there are so many possibilities for what they might do next. It's a lot to generate and hold at any one time. I've seen some attempts. A cloud world and some driving simulators have had a go because the sensations are fairly limited. Either you're in an unreal world so the expectations are different, or a naturally restrained environment like a driver's chair, so you just have the different textures of the surface you're driving on to think about. But even then they feel gimmicky. Not always easy to tell what's wrong about them either."

"Omni isn't like that. The world exists and you're experiencing what someone else is doing. There's no need to generate the feel of a floor because the real world, a body, and a brain is doing all that work for you. All you have to do is mirror how a person's brain is processing it. A lot of the hard work is done for you. And it's gotten really good now. Really good. You feel like you're... wearing the body."

These words slithered up my spine.

"Easy to see why someone would use it for porn."

"Exactly. It's potentially highly addictive. I'm finding it hard enough to resist and I'm not incapable of talking to a woman. Big hairy nerd I may be, but big AI's got game with the gamer girls." I snort and roll my eyes. "But for someone like Marcus, who hasn't seen an unpixelated tit in all his 22 years... heroin. Poor lad."

That's why I sent that email out a bit back. About omnisense and what it can do. People haven't understood the danger yet.

It's not just the sex bit of it. It's the feeling of owning a good body, the feeling of physical confidence that comes from being a passenger to someone comfortable in themselves. There's the romantic side of it. There's a massive market for people just streaming their relationships. Date night at dinner. Watching a film with a bottle of wine. Cuddling. People get to feel what it's like to have their own body in love. It's often far more addictive than the porn."

"That's kind of sweet-"

"In a fucked up way maybe. But Marcus's body is wasting away. I saw him last week and he's locked in a room with dishes piled up and clouds of flies in the kitchen. And that's from when he was eating. Now he forgets he needs to. If the pilot he's being a passenger to is healthy then he doesn't feel anything until he's in actual pain. He's gone from overweight to borderline anorexic in just a few weeks. And there's just no talking to him. It's hard to speak with him long enough to face the issue that he's truly sick. There's skin danglin' off him. He looks like something out of a horror film, El. It's scary. Really scary. He's circling the drain."

"Professional help?"

"We'd get him it. Of course we would. But without his consent - which he won't give - we can't get him any treatment until his life is seriously in danger. It will be soon."

"Could you not just grab him before it gets to that point? Surely it's serious enough to pull him out physically. With his consent or not?"

"He won't let us in. The only way I saw the apartment last week was because I paid a delivery guy to use my piloting gear so I could check in on him. I haven't actually seen him with my own eyes in months." His face sagged and he looked far off into the distance. "I'm gonna have to trick him into opening that door. I know I will. We'll have to barge in and man handle him out and into some sort of facility. But we need to get in that flat. It's the only way. But afterwards he'll never trust me again. And even then I don't know any medical professional that's got the remotest idea what this tech really does to you. It's too new."

"Sorry." It was Arno, staggering into the kitchen, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep. "I wasn't meaning to hear. I just woke up."

"It's fine. We weren't worrying about people listening in." Arno had turned back to the machine again, playing host once more. "If El trusts you then that's enough for me." He handed him a fresh mug. "How much did you hear?"

"Basically everything." He winced apologetically.

"I meant what I said. It's no bother. He's just a poor kid. We'll get him some help. Have you had any experience with it?"

"Experience being a passenger?" said Arno. "I've tried it a few times. A mate has the kit. I just watched a few snowboarders off-piste. Scary stuff, really immersive even when it's just sounds and visuals. Never tried the full omnisense though. Imagine it would be terrifying to head down a mountain feeling all that. It's expensive - I wouldn't be able to afford it. I know a couple of guys that have splashed out for it though - friends of friends sort of thing."

"Would you ever get it?"

"No. No I wouldn't. I find it weird. Too... intimate. To feel everything that someone else was feeling? I wouldn't want that even with a partner, nevermind a stranger."

"Yeah I get that. It's a strange concept."

"Why do you...?" He trailed off, gesturing in the direction of the room we'd found Al in.

"Watch porn? Isn't it obvious? Bit of fun and I work hard. You don't see a girlfriend kicking around here do you? But even then it's still addictive if you're not careful. That's why I try not to stay too long on any one stream. That's when it gets dangerous."

Al's eyes found mine and then flicked back to the floor. Shame? I stayed silent.

"Why's that?" asked Arno.

"Because you get used to it. I mean, you get *really* used to it. You've got to understand that you're not just feeling what it's like to head down a mountainside at 60 mph, or feel the sand between your toes on an exotic beach. You're feeling the way that a body is reacting to situations too."

"How does that make it more addictive?"

"It's not just that it's addictive. It's not just another game; it has a deep psychological impact which has been totally overlooked. It's much more than a bit of fun. How do I explain it? Look, have you ever played poker?"

"A little."

"If you know what a tell is then that's enough. A tell is just a way that your body reacts when it's trying to conceal the truth. It's some irrepressible way that your body will act when it's lying. Some tells are harder to detect than others and professional poker players work hard to minimise their own tells... but ya' can't eliminate them all. They just change or become more subtle. That's because they have a function."

"We're social creatures and lying is damaging to the collective, so we've evolved mechanisms to give ourselves away... in favour of honest knowledge brokering. Our body fights lying, even if being found out will cost us dearly. Even when there's dozens of gigs of credit on the table our own body would rather tell the truth that we're bluffing..

"The point of this is that our own body movements, where we're looking, how our toes clench, how our heart speeds up, all indicate how we're feeling. We just can't see it with other people easily and we don't notice it in ourselves because it fits so closely with our mental state. But what people don't understand is that, when you're a passenger with omni, you get a sense of someones' mental state in a way you'd never expect - just from the physical sensations. Your mind picks up on all the subtleties, all the little movements. You start to understand them just from how they move their body, what they look at and for how long."

"Are you saying you can tell what someone else is thinking just from how they move their toes?"

"Yes and no. You don't really know the content of why someone is doing something. So, for instance, you can easily tell whether someone is truly in love or just pretending. That's why a lot of the early porn and relationship omni-pilots flunked: because people weren't actually enjoying themselves and they weren't actually in love. If you spend enough time as a passenger with them you can feel it, as if it was your own body.

"So certain emotions can't really be faked when someone is this up close and personal to you. But that doesn't mean you can read their mind.

"You can tell someone is hungry but you don't know what they're going to pick up and eat. Y' know their uncomfortable but not what's setting them off. But the longer you spend plugged in the harder it gets to separate yourself.

"What we're starting to understand is that your consciousness is not tied to any one physical form. It's polyamorous. You give it a new body and it learns to accept the one it's in."

"Surely it wouldn't have been released if that could happen?"

AI shrugged. His whole body was recruited for the movement, including his eyebrows. "I think some people probably did know. But it's worth a lot of money and so it was easy to cover up. I actually know some of the guys that helped build it. They tested it for hours at a time. A full workday at most. But that wasn't enough. It wasn't until it was released to people who used it excessively - as was of course going to happen - that the problems really started."

"Did people forget to turn it off? Is that what's been happening to your nephew?"

"In part, yes. It's addictive. But the really bad stuff happens when you don't sleep. When you stay in it for a truly long time, when you take barely any rest."

"What happens?"

We share another glance, me and AI. It's loaded and frightened and desperately trapped. I don't quite understand it.

"You forget that you're a passenger."

"That's... unsettling. How can someone not know-"

"The brain builds narratives. It's a big part of its job. Even when they're illogical the mind will make a story. The mind needs a story. It's not faithful to it."

Something riddles under my skin, I can feel my spine prickle.

I head back into the living room to find somewhere to slump down. I cannot concentrate on work. Al and Arno remain in the kitchen and I can hear their voices. No wonder we woke Arno up; I can hear the gentle rumble of Al's patter through the wall.

Outside, the inorganic clouds lingering below the towers are starting to glow, as though heated through by a great flame. They start to tinge phosphorescent yellow as the morning sun bathes the clotted, choked out sky. Identical tower blocks, tall and oppressive like this one, stand in vigil around the wasting city. It self cannibalises. Even the hours of night barely slow its progress.

Pain. Shit.

Shocking, splintering pain, like packed ice in the back of my skull. It's a singular stab that runs deep. I keep myself under control. My hand doesn't even tremble. I coach myself through the shock and focus on the calm rumble of Al's voice. I hear no words but the sounds still soothe me.

My hand hasn't even moved. My surface of the drink remains smooth and ripple free.

I need the bathroom. My stomach churns. It's hard to say exactly why. Is it anxiety? I know I need to use the loo but I remain sitting with my discomfort. Allowing it to build. I keep drinking coffee. Why do I keep on drinking it?

Pain.

Bright light. Searing light. It takes up all of my vision.

This many days without real sleep. This much stress, this much caffeine. It was going to happen eventually.

I can hear a phone buzzing on the table. I don't think it's mine. I don't answer it but let it twitch on the table. It feels more and more insistent. Whatever is on the other end of the line is important, but I let it ring out again. The boys clearly can't hear it.

I finally stand up and head to the toilet.

I don't want to look at myself. I avoid the mirror. Maybe it's the bags under my eyes or the pale, greasy complexion I'll feel will greet me, but I have the strong impulse to look away. At least until I've had some beauty sleep.

There are traces of wiry beard around the sink. There's bottles of colognes, beard oils and hair wax. Signs and scents of Al. Sandalwood.

I stare straight ahead as I go to sit. Straight ahead, like I'm boring a hole in the wall in front of me. I slide down my pants and my hands are trembling. I sob. I've surprised myself. I stare forwards, hearing the sounds of bodily relief and I try to hold back tears. I feel as though my skin is crawling over itself, my stomach has dropped away. I have a sense of being invaded by things beyond my control. It catches me off balance, as if a jigsaw has locked into place.

When I wash my hands I avoid the mirror.

Things are getting away from me. This investigation is killing me. Some part of me is dying.

When I get back to the living room there's been a reckoning. The feeling of a storm, a frisson has been building to a climax, and now the sky has cracked.

Arno does not look up, unnerving me. But far worse is Al. Al stares at me. A deep, angry, furious stare. He is no longer a loveable giant but a viking, broad and deadly and full of bitterness.

"You've found the mole haven't you?" I say. Something is wrong.

"You can say that again, El." His voice gets louder, like he's screaming down the end of a telephone. "Are you listening to me ya' piece of shit?!" he screams in my face. "Nowhere left to run. Nowhere to escape to."

I'm not reacting how I want to. Why is he speaking to me like this?

I slump down onto the sofa and my head is in my hands. I'm crying, the nails gliding over the edges of my eyes as though to scratch at them. I'm covering my face: I do not want them to see me. Their judgement is corrosive.

"El." said Arno. "All that info... coming out of your office. For months." His voice became frail. "What did I tell you? I'm trying to remember what I told you from my cases. What contacts did I speak to you about, or other officers..." He stares straight at me. "Did Rowan die because of me? Did I do that by telling you?"

"I tried to stop you from saying too much to me! There was only so much I could do. I didn't want your information. Anyone's. I didn't want anyone to tell me anything. There was no way to stop it."

Blinding flash. Another light shock across my vision. I see movements in the light this time. Shapes shifting. Even voices?

"We know El." said Al. "I've explained it to Arno. You would have been found out and killed long before you tried to remove it. That you found a way to get rid of it is a fuking miracle. Honestly. It's not your fault. You did the right thing. It's sick what they've done... Where is it El?"

"In my spine. They told me they would kill me... everyone I know if I tried to remove it. And that it would have been futile."

"They were telling the truth, El. Every movement, every handwritten note, every hesitation they would have felt. There was no chance of getting rid of this until you'd got the upper hand. Until they'd melded. You did everything you could. It's a miracle you were ever able to do it."

"Melded?" asked Arno.

"Well we haven't had the chance to go over everything but I think I know most of it from context.

El had to wait until there was a case she could disguise her actions with. Not just an excuse to see me but one that was stressful enough that it would hide her intentions better and, importantly, required almost no sleep. That's when the brain forgets where it belongs. When it starts to meld with the body it's grown accustomed to."

He addressed me. "How did you even know about that? Or see it without alarming the passenger?"

"I didn't know for certain I hadn't. Until now. I saw your email warning people, Al. Thank Sumiya it came in the middle of the night, when I was half asleep in front of the tv, otherwise this would have never worked. I deleted the email immediately."

Al ran a hand through his hair, massaging his temples. He was agitated, bouncing from one foot to the other. He looked on the verge of violence.

"I was worried about Marcus. I'd just seen him. I'd been looking into the effects of prolonged omni after I'd heard what was happening to him. I was angry. I sent that email before I could sleep." said Marcus.

I nodded at him. "It was 3am. I did my best to slow my heart rate and not get too excited when I saw it, in case they were still in there... still locked into my head and sleeping. But I

prayed they'd left. I figured they had to make their reports somehow and I guessed it must be when they were sure I was unconscious. It made sense, but I didn't know for sure. It was all a gamble and I wouldn't know if I failed until it was too-

"This piece of shit is stewing in his own filth... he hasn't moved in days."

Who said that? Al and Arno's lips didn't move. And they're weren't reacting. I want to look around the room and see who'd come in but I can't. My head won't turn.

"So there wasn't a reason to see Al?" asked Arno.

"Not related to the case, no. But he was a legitimate contact that people wouldn't raise too many eyebrows over. And someone I trusted. He would understand. They seemed to have total control over me but I reckoned I had one card to play: sleep. I've spent decades barely sleeping whilst running these sorts of cases and doing night time raids. I was confident I could last longer than anyone else they would put me against. They wouldn't be able to stay awake and function on as little sleep as me."

"How did you tell Al?"

"I wrote him a note whilst I was in the other room resting. It was risky. I needed to be comfortable enough to write coded information whilst still not shocking myself into waking up the passenger from my stress. I didn't know how strong the melding would be. Everything I knew about it was basically from Al's email. I've never used omni myself. I didn't know whether the passenger would wake up where they were once I went to sleep and then realise something was wrong. It was all a gamble." I was crying. Huge relieved sobs. But somewhere else, somewhere in a remote part of me, something started to go into shock.

I was a walking contradiction. I felt a deep sense of dread whilst simultaneously feeling freer than I had in months.

"...piece of scum. I will personally flay you alive you motherfucker. I will feed you your fucking balls for what you did to Rowan you sick piece of shit!" A woman's voice.

It wasn't coming from the living room. It was from somewhere else. Somewhere outside of me. Somewhere I'd misplaced.

The face of the new woman fills my vision. I'm not in the living room anymore. She is spitting a tirade of violent images my way. There is a smell like excrement in the air and my body, once tired but taught with potential, is now heavy and deflated. I see IV bags suspended from racks to my side and my skin itches where it meets a chair sodden with sweat.

It's like waking from a dream - and the lie is being told again.

No. I'm a good person. I help people. I defend people and work hard and I love my friends and they love me. I've been protecting Al. Reluctant to see him. Staying away from him but not because I don't care for him. I'm not being selfish. I've been busy with work. I stay away because I care. To protect him.

To protect him from my eyes. From me. From the thing lurking behind my eyes. From me. Me. I remember the lie and realise it's my truth.

I'm looking at El's face in the mirror. It's flushed and tired and fiercely beautiful in a way that frightens me. Familiar and strange all at once. I stare deep into my eyes. Deep into El's eyes. El's sincere, captivating eyes. And I realise that I love her. Not a romantic love but a familiar love, a shared spirit, that only comes from knowing someone as much as I know her. And I do know her.

We were a beautiful thing, she and I. I wish I did not have to slide back into that other place. I deserve to be here, just as much as she. My soul is clean but I am being pulled back into the filth of someone else's deeds. And just as El hates them and I can see it in her eyes, staring back at me in the mirror, I see that I too hate them. I can only hope she can see that I am not them. That I have learnt something. How much we have learnt together.

She stares into the mirror.

"Rot in hell."