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## NEUROMANCER

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### 3

Home.

Home was BAMA, the Sprawl, the Boston-Atlanta Metropolitan Axis.

Program a map to display frequency of data exchange, every thousand megabytes a single pixel on a very large screen. Manhattan and Atlanta burn solid white. Then they start to pulse, the rate of traffic threatening to overload your simulation. Your map is about to go nova. Cool it down. Up your scale. Each pixel a million megabytes. At a hundred million megabytes per second, you begin to make out certain blocks in midtown Manhattan, outlines of hundred-year-old industrial parks ringing the old core of Atlanta...

Case woke from a dream of airports, of Molly's dark leathers moving ahead of him through the concourses of Narita, Schipol, Orly... He watched himself buy a flat plastic flask of Danish vodka at some kiosk, an hour before dawn.

Somewhere down in the Sprawl's ferro-concrete roots, a

train drove a column of stale air through a tunnel. The train itself was silent, gliding over its induction cushion, but displaced air made the tunnel sing, bass down into subsonics. Vibration reached the room where he lay and caused dust to rise from the cracks in the dessicated parquet floor.

Opening his eyes, he saw Molly, naked and just out of reach across an expanse of very new pink temperfoam. Overhead, sunlight filtered through the soot-stained grid of a skylight. One half-meter square of glass had been replaced with chipboard, a fat gray cable emerging there to dangle within a few centimeters of the floor. He lay on his side and watched her breathe, her breasts, the sweep of a flank defined with the functional elegance of a war plane's fuselage. Her body was spare, neat, the muscles like a dancer's.

The room was large. He sat up. The room was empty, aside from the wide pink bedslab and two nylon bags, new and identical, that lay beside it. Blank walls, no windows, a single white-painted steel firedoor. The walls were coated with countless layers of white latex paint. Factory space. He knew this kind of room, this kind of building; the tenants would operate in the interzone where art wasn't quite crime, crime not quite art.

He was home.

He swung his feet to the floor. It was made of little blocks of wood, some missing, others loose. His head ached. He remembered Amsterdam, another room, in the Old City section of the Centrum, buildings centuries old. Molly back from the canal's edge with orange juice and eggs. Armitage off on some cryptic foray, the two of them walking alone past Dam Square to a bar she knew on a Damrak thoroughfare. Paris was a blurred dream. Shopping. She'd taken him shopping.

He stood, pulling on a wrinkled pair of new black jeans that lay at his feet, and knelt beside the bags. The first one he opened was Molly's: neatly folded clothing and small expensive-looking gadgets. The second was stuffed with things he didn't remember buying: books, tapes, a simstim deck, clothing with French and Italian labels. Beneath a green t-shirt, he discovered a flat, origami-wrapped package, recycled Japanese paper.

The paper tore when he picked it up; a bright nine-pointed

star fell—to stick upright in a crack in the parquet.

"Souvenir," Molly said. "I noticed you were always looking at 'em." He turned and saw her sitting crosslegged on the bed, sleepily scratching her stomach with burgundy nails.

"Someone's coming later to secure the place," Armitage said. He stood in the open doorway with an old-fashioned magnetic key in his hand. Molly was making coffee on a tiny German stove she took from her bag.

"I can do it," she said. "I got enough gear already. Infrascan perimeter, screamers..."

"No," he said, closing the door. "I want it tight."

"Suit yourself." She wore a dark mesh t-shirt tucked into baggy black cotton pants.

"You ever the heat, Mr. Armitage?" Case asked, from where he sat, his back against a wall.

Armitage was no taller than Case, but with his broad shoulders and military posture he seemed to fill the doorway. He wore a somber Italian suit; in his right hand he held a briefcase of soft black calf. The Special Forces earring was gone. The handsome, inexpressive features offered the routine beauty of the cosmetic boutiques, a conservative amalgam of the past decade's leading media faces. The pale glitter of his eyes heightened the effect of a mask. Case began to regret the question.

"Lots of Forces types wound up cops, I mean. Or corporate security," Case added uncomfortably. Molly handed him a steaming mug of coffee. "That number you had them do on my pancreas, that's like a cop routine."

Armitage closed the door and crossed the room, to stand in front of Case. "You're a lucky boy, Case. You should thank me."

"Should I?" Case blew noisily on his coffee.

"You needed a new pancreas. The one we bought for you frees you from a dangerous dependency."

"Thanks, but I was enjoying that dependency."

"Good, because you have a new one."

"How's that?" Case looked up from his coffee. Armitage was smiling.

"You have fifteen toxin sacs bonded to the lining of various

main arteries, Case. They're dissolving. Very slowly, but they definitely are dissolving. Each one contains a mycotoxin. You're already familiar with the effect of that mycotoxin. It was the one your former employers gave you in Memphis."

Case blinked up at the smiling mask.

"You have time to do what I'm hiring you for, Case, but that's all. Do the job and I can inject you with an enzyme that will dissolve the bond without opening the sacs. Then you'll need a blood change. Otherwise, the sacs melt and you're back where I found you. So you see, Case, you need us. You need us as badly as you did when we scraped you up from the gutter."

Case looked at Molly. She shrugged.

"Now go down to the freight elevator and bring up the cases you find there." Armitage handed him the magnetic key. "Go on. You'll enjoy this, Case. Like Christmas morning."

Summer in the Sprawl, the mall crowds swaying like wind-blown grass, a field of flesh shot through with sudden eddies of need and gratification.

He sat beside Molly in filtered sunlight on the rim of a dry concrete fountain, letting the endless stream of faces recapitulate the stages of his life. First a child with hooded eyes, a street boy, hands relaxed and ready at his sides; then a teenager, face smooth and cryptic beneath red glasses. Case remembered fighting on a rooftop at seventeen, silent combat in the rose glow of the dawn geodesics.

He shifted on the concrete, feeling it rough and cool through the thin black denim. Nothing here like the electric dance of Ninsei. This was different commerce, a different rhythm, in the smell of fast food and perfume and fresh summer sweat.

With his deck waiting, back in the loft, an Ono-Sendai Cyberspace 7. They'd left the place littered with the abstract white forms of the foam packing units, with crumpled plastic film and hundreds of tiny foam beads. The Ono-Sendai; next year's most expensive Hosaka computer; a Sony monitor; a dozen disks of corporate-grade ice; a Braun coffeemaker. Armitage had only waited for Case's approval of each piece.

"Where'd he go?" Case had asked Molly.

"He likes hotels. Big ones. Near airports, if he can manage it. Let's go down to the street." She'd zipped herself into an

old surplus vest with a dozen oddly shaped pockets and put on a huge pair of black plastic sunglasses that completely covered her mirrored insets.

"You know about that toxin shit, before?" he asked her, by the fountain. She shook her head. "You think it's true?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Works either way."

"You know any way I can find out?"

"No," she said, her right hand coming up to form the jive for silence. "That kind of kink's too subtle to show up on a scan." Then her fingers moved again: wait. "And you don't care that much anyway. I saw you stroking that Sendai; man, it was pornographic." She laughed.

"So what's he got on you? How's he got the working girl kinked?"

"Professional pride, baby, that's all." And again the sign for silence. "We're gonna get some breakfast, okay? Eggs, real bacon. Probably kill you, you been eating that rebuilt Chiba krill for so long. Yeah, come on, we'll tube in to Manhattan and get us a real breakfast."

Lifeless neon spelled out METRO HOLOGRAFIX in dusty capitals of glass tubing. Case picked at a shred of bacon that had lodged between his front teeth. He'd given up asking her where they were going and why; jabs in the ribs and the sign for silence were all he'd gotten in reply. She talked about the season's fashions, about sports, about a political scandal in California he'd never heard of.

He looked around the deserted dead end street. A sheet of newsprint went cartwheeling past the intersection. Freak winds in the East side; something to do with convection, and an overlap in the domes. Case peered through the window at the dead sign. Her Sprawl wasn't his Sprawl, he decided. She'd led him through a dozen bars and clubs he'd never seen before, taking care of business, usually with no more than a nod. Maintaining connections.

Something was moving in the shadows behind METRO HOLOGRAFIX.

The door was a sheet of corrugated roofing. In front of it, Molly's hands flowed through an intricate sequence of jive that he couldn't follow. He caught the sign for *cash*, a thumb brush-

ing the tip of the forefinger. The door swung inward and she led him into the smell of dust. They stood in a clearing, dense tangles of junk rising on either side to walls lined with shelves of crumbling paperbacks. The junk looked like something that had grown there, a fungus of twisted metal and plastic. He could pick out individual objects, but then they seemed to blur back into the mass: the guts of a television so old it was studded with the glass stumps of vacuum tubes, a crumpled dish antenna, a brown fiber canister stuffed with corroded lengths of alloy tubing. An enormous pile of old magazines had cascaded into the open area, flesh of lost summers staring blindly up as he followed her back through a narrow canyon of impacted scrap. He heard the door close behind them. He didn't look back.

The tunnel ended with an ancient Army blanket tacked across a doorway. White light flooded out as Molly ducked past it.

Four square walls of blank white plastic, ceiling to match, floored with white hospital tile molded in a nonslip pattern of small raised disks. In the center stood a square, white-painted wooden table and four white folding chairs.

The man who stood blinking now in the doorway behind them, the blanket draping one shoulder like a cape, seemed to have been designed in a wind tunnel. His ears were very small, plastered flat against his narrow skull, and his large front teeth, revealed in something that wasn't quite a smile, were canted sharply backward. He wore an ancient tweed jacket and held a handgun of some kind in his left hand. He peered at them, blinked, and dropped the gun into a jacket pocket. He gestured to Case, pointed at a slab of white plastic that leaned near the doorway. Case crossed to it and saw that it was a solid sandwich of circuitry, nearly a centimeter thick. He helped the man lift it and position it in the doorway. Quick, nicotine-stained fingers secured it with a white velcro border. A hidden exhaust fan began to purr.

"Time," the man said, straightening up, "and counting. You know the rate, Moll."

"We need a scan, Finn. For implants."

"So get over there between the pylons. Stand on the tape. Straighten up, yeah. Now turn around, gimme a full three-

sixty." Case watched her rotate between two fragile-looking stands studded with sensors. The man took a small monitor from his pocket and squinted at it. "Something new in your head, yeah. Silicon, coat of pyrolitic carbons. A clock, right? Your glasses gimme the read they always have, low-temp isotropic carbons. Better biocompatibility with pyrolitics, but that's your business, right? Same with your claws."

"Get over here, Case." He saw a scuffed X in black on the white floor. "Turn around. Slow."

"Guy's a virgin." The man shrugged. "Some cheap dental work, is all."

"You read for biologicals?" Molly unzipped her green vest and took off the dark glasses.

"You think this is the Mayo? Climb on the table, kid, we'll run a little biopsy." He laughed, showing more of his yellow teeth. "Nah. Finn's word, sweetmeat, you got no little bugs, no cortex bombs. You want me to shut the screen down?"

"Just for as long as it takes you to leave, Finn. Then we'll want full screen for as long as we want it."

"Hey, that's fine by the Finn, Moll. You're only paying by the second."

They sealed the door behind him and Molly turned one of the white chairs around and sat on it, chin resting on crossed forearms. "We talk now. This is as private as I can afford."

"What about?"

"What we're doing."

"What are we doing?"

"Working for Armitage."

"And you're saying this isn't for his benefit?"

"Yeah. I saw your profile, Case. And I've seen the rest of our shopping list, once. You ever work with the dead?"

"No." He watched his reflection in her glasses. "I could, I guess. I'm good at what I do." The present tense made him nervous.

"You know that the Dixie Flatline's dead?"

He nodded. "Heart, I heard."

"You'll be working with his construct." She smiled. "Taught you the ropes, huh? Him and Quine. I know Quine, by the way. Real asshole."

"Somebody's got a recording of McCoy Pauley? Who?" Now Case sat, and rested his elbows on the table. "I can't see it. He'd never have sat still for it."

"Sense/Net. Paid him mega, you bet your ass."

"Quine dead too?"

"No such luck. He's in Europe. He doesn't come into this."

"Well, if we can get the Flatline, we're home free. He was the best. You know he died braindeath three times?"

She nodded.

"Flatlined on his EEG. Showed me tapes. 'Boy, I was *daid*.'"

"Look, Case, I been trying to suss out who it is is backing Armitage since I signed on. But it doesn't feel like a zaibatsu, a government, or some Yakuza subsidiary. Armitage gets orders. Like something tells him to go off to Chiba, pick up a pillhead who's making one last wobble through the burnout belt, and trade a program for the operation that'll fix him up. We coulda bought twenty world class cowboys for what the market was ready to pay for that surgical program. You were good, but not *that* good. . . ." She scratched the side of her nose.

"Obviously makes sense to somebody," he said. "Somebody big."

"Don't let me hurt your feelings." She grinned. "We're gonna be pulling one hardcore run, Case, just to get the Flatline's construct. Sense/Net has it locked in a library vault up-town. Tighter than an eel's ass, Case. Now, Sense/Net, they got all their new material for the fall season locked in there too. Steal that and we'd be richer than shit. But no, we gotta get us the Flatline and nothing else. Weird."

"Yeah, it's all weird. You're weird, this hole's weird, and who's the weird little gopher outside in the hall?"

"Finn's an old connection of mine. Fence, mostly. Software. This privacy biz is a sideline. But I got Armitage to let him be our tech here, so when he shows up later, you never saw him. Got it?"

"So what's Armitage got dissolving inside you?"

"I'm an easy make." She smiled. "Anybody any good at what they do, that's what they *are*, right? You gotta jack, I gotta tussle."

He stared at her. "So tell me what you know about Armitage."

"For starters, nobody named Armitage took part in any Screaming Fist. I checked. But that doesn't mean much. He doesn't look like any of the pics of the guys who got out." She shrugged. "Big deal. And starters is all I got." She drummed her nails on the back of the chair. "But you *are* a cowboy, aren't you? I mean, maybe you could have a little look around." She smiled.

"He'd kill me."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I think he needs you, Case, and real bad. Besides, you're a clever john, no? You can winkle him, sure."

"What else is on that list you mentioned?"

"Toys. Mostly for you. And one certified psychopath name of Peter Riviera. Real ugly customer."

"Where's he?"

"Dunno. But he's one sick fuck, no lie. I saw his profile." She made a face. "Godawful." She stood up and stretched, catlike. "So we got an axis going, boy? We're together in this? Partners?"

Case looked at her. "I gotta lotta choice, huh?"

She laughed. "You got it, cowboy."

"The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games," said the voice-over, "in early graphics programs and military experimentation with cranial jacks." On the Sony, a two-dimensional space war faded behind a forest of mathematically generated ferns, demonstrating the spacial possibilities of logarithmic spirals; cold blue military footage burned through, lab animals wired into test systems, helmets feeding into fire control circuits of tanks and war planes. "Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. . . ."

"What's that?" Molly asked, as he flipped the channel selector.

"Kid's show." A discontinuous flood of images as the selector cycled. "Off," he said to the Hosaka.

"You want to try now, Case?"

Wednesday. Eight days from waking in Cheap Hotel with Molly beside him. "You want me to go out, Case? Maybe easier for you, alone. . . ." He shook his head.

"No. Stay, doesn't matter." He settled the black terry sweatband across his forehead, careful not to disturb the flat Sendai dermatrodes. He stared at the deck on his lap, not really seeing it, seeing instead the shop window on Ninsei, the chromed shuriken burning with reflected neon. He glanced up; on the wall, just above the Sony, he'd hung her gift, tacking it there with a yellow-headed drawing pin through the hole at its center.

He closed his eyes.

Found the ridged face of the power stud.

And in the bloodlit dark behind his eyes, silver phosphenes boiling in from the edge of space, hypnagogic images jerking past like film compiled from random frames. Symbols, figures, faces, a blurred, fragmented mandala of visual information.

Please, he prayed, *now*—

A gray disk, the color of Chiba sky.

*Now*—

Disk beginning to rotate, faster, becoming a sphere of paler gray. Expanding—

And flowed, flowered for him, fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity. Inner eye opening to the stepped scarlet pyramid of the Eastern Seaboard Fission Authority burning beyond the green cubes of Mitsubishi Bank of America, and high and very far away he saw the spiral arms of military systems, forever beyond his reach.

And somewhere he was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face.

Molly was gone when he took the trodes off, and the loft was dark. He checked the time. He'd been in cyberspace for five hours. He carried the Ono-Sendai to one of the new work-

tables and collapsed across the bedslab, pulling Molly's black silk sleeping bag over his head.

The security package taped to the steel fire door beeped twice. "Entry requested," it said. "Subject is cleared per my program."

"So open it." Case pulled the silk from his face and sat up as the door opened, expecting to see Molly or Armitage.

"Christ," said a hoarse voice, "I know that bitch can see in the dark. . . ." A squat figure stepped in and closed the door. "Turn the lights on, okay?" Case scrambled off the slab and found the old-fashioned switch.

"I'm the Finn," said the Finn, and made a warning face at Case.

"Case."

"Pleased to meecha, I'm sure. I'm doing some hardware for your boss, it looks like." The Finn fished a pack of Partagas from a pocket and lit one. The smell of Cuban tobacco filled the room. He crossed to the worktable and glanced at the Ono-Sendai. "Looks stock. Soon fix that. But here's your problem, kid." He took a filthy manila envelope from inside his jacket, flicked ash on the floor, and extracted a featureless black rectangle from the envelope. "Goddamn factory prototypes," he said, tossing the thing down on the table. "Cast 'em into a block of polycarbon, can't get in with a laser without frying the works. Booby-trapped for x-ray, ultrascan, God knows what else. We'll get in, but there's no rest for the wicked, right?" He folded the envelope with great care and tucked it away in an inside pocket.

"What is it?"

"It's a flipflop switch, basically. Wire it into your Sendai here, you can access live or recorded simstim without having to jack out of the matrix."

"What for?"

"I haven't got a clue. Know I'm fitting Moll for a broadcast rig, though, so it's probably her sensorium you'll access." The Finn scratched his chin. "So now you get to find out just how tight those jeans really are, huh?"

## 4

Case sat in the loft with the dermatrodes strapped across his forehead, watching motes dance in the diluted sunlight that filtered through the grid overhead. A countdown was in progress in one corner of the monitor screen.

Cowboys didn't get into simstim, he thought, because it was basically a meat toy. He knew that the trodes he used and the little plastic tiara dangling from a simstim deck were basically the same, and that the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but simstim itself struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input. The commercial stuff was edited, of course, so that if Tally Isham got a headache in the course of a segment, you didn't feel it.

The screen bleeped a two-second warning.

The new switch was patched into his Sendai with a thin ribbon of fiberoptics.

And one and two and—

Cyberspace slid into existence from the cardinal points.



Smooth, he thought, but not smooth enough. Have to work on it. . . .

Then he keyed the new switch.

The abrupt jolt into other flesh. Matrix gone, a wave of sound and color. . . . She was moving through a crowded street, past stalls vending discount software, prices felt-penned on sheets of plastic, fragments of music from countless speakers. Smells of urine, free monomers, perfume, patties of frying krill. For a few frightened seconds he fought helplessly to control her body. Then he willed himself into passivity, became the passenger behind her eyes.

The glasses didn't seem to cut down the sunlight at all. He wondered if the built-in amps compensated automatically. Blue alphanumeric winked the time, low in her left peripheral field. Showing off, he thought.

Her body language was disorienting, her style foreign. She seemed continually on the verge of colliding with someone, but people melted out of her way, stepped sideways, made room.

"How you doing, Case?" He heard the words and felt her form them. She slid a hand into her jacket, a fingertip circling a nipple under warm silk. The sensation made him catch his breath. She laughed. But the link was one-way. He had no way to reply.

Two blocks later, she was threading the outskirts of Memory Lane. Case kept trying to jerk her eyes toward landmarks he would have used to find his way. He began to find the passivity of the situation irritating.

The transition to cyberspace, when he hit the switch, was instantaneous. He punched himself down a wall of primitive ice belonging to the New York Public Library, automatically counting potential windows. Keying back into her sensorium, into the sinuous flow of muscle, senses sharp and bright.

He found himself wondering about the mind he shared these sensations with. What did he know about her? That she was another professional; that she said her being, like his, was the thing she did to make a living. He knew the way she'd moved against him, earlier, when she woke, their mutual grunt of unity when he'd entered her, and that she liked her coffee black, afterward. . . .

Her destination was one of the dubious software rental com-

plexes that lined Memory Lane. There was a stillness, a hush. Booths lined a central hall. The clientele were young, few of them out of their teens. They all seemed to have carbon sockets planted behind the left ear, but she didn't focus on them. The counters that fronted the booths displayed hundreds of slivers of microsoft, angular fragments of colored silicon mounted under oblong transparent bubbles on squares of white cardboard. Molly went to the seventh booth along the south wall. Behind the counter a boy with a shaven head stared vacantly into space, a dozen spikes of microsoft protruding from the socket behind his ear.

"Larry, you in, man?" She positioned herself in front of him. The boy's eyes focused. He sat up in his chair and pried a bright magenta splinter from his socket with a dirty thumbnail.

"Hey, Larry."

"Molly." He nodded.

"I have some work for some of your friends, Larry."

Larry took a flat plastic case from the pocket of his red sportshirt and flicked it open, slotting the microsoft beside a dozen others. His hand hovered, selected a glossy black chip that was slightly longer than the rest, and inserted it smoothly into his head. His eyes narrowed.

"Molly's got a rider," he said, "and Larry doesn't like that."

"Hey," she said, "I didn't know you were so . . . sensitive. I'm impressed. Costs a lot, to get that sensitive."

"I know you, lady?" The blank look returned. "You looking to buy some softs?"

"I'm looking for the Moderns."

"You got a rider, Molly. This says." He tapped the black splinter. "Somebody else using your eyes."

"My partner."

"Tell your partner to go."

"Got something for the Panther Moderns, Larry."

"What are you talking about, lady?"

"Case, you take off," she said, and he hit the switch, instantly back in the matrix. Ghost impressions of the software complex hung for a few seconds in the buzzing calm of cyberspace.

"Panther Moderns," he said to the Hosaka, removing the trodes. "Five minute precis."

"Ready," the computer said.

It wasn't a name he knew. Something new, something that had come in since he'd been in Chiba. Fads swept the youth of the Sprawl at the speed of light; entire subcultures could rise overnight, thrive for a dozen weeks, and then vanish utterly. "Go," he said. The Hosaka had accessed its array of libraries, journals, and news services.

The precis began with a long hold on a color still that Case at first assumed was a collage of some kind, a boy's face snipped from another image and glued to a photograph of a paint-scrawled wall. Dark eyes, epicanthic folds obviously the result of surgery, an angry dusting of acne across pale narrow cheeks. The Hosaka released the freeze; the boy moved, flowing with the sinister grace of a mime pretending to be a jungle predator. His body was nearly invisible, an abstract pattern approximating the scribbled brickwork sliding smoothly across his tight onepiece. Mimetic polycarbon.

Cut to Dr. Virginia Rambali, Sociology, NYU, her name, faculty, and school pulsing across the screen in pink alphanumeric.

"Given their penchant for these random acts of surreal violence," someone said, "it may be difficult for our viewers to understand why you continue to insist that this phenomenon isn't a form of terrorism."

Dr. Rambali smiled. "There is always a point at which the terrorist ceases to manipulate the media gestalt. A point at which the violence may well escalate, but beyond which the terrorist has become symptomatic of the media gestalt itself. Terrorism as we ordinarily understand it is inately media-related. The Panther Moderns differ from other terrorists precisely in their degree of self-consciousness, in their awareness of the extent to which media divorce the act of terrorism from the original sociopolitical intent. . . ."

"Skip it," Case said.

Case met his first Modern two days after he'd screened the Hosaka's precis. The Moderns, he'd decided, were a contemporary version of the Big Scientists of his own late teens. There was a kind of ghostly teenage DNA at work in the Sprawl, something that carried the coded precepts of various short-lived subcults and replicated them at odd intervals. The Panther Mod-

erns were a softhead variant on the Scientists. If the technology had been available, the Big Scientists would all have had sockets stuffed with microsofts. It was the style that mattered and the style was the same. The Moderns were mercenaries, practical jokers, nihilistic technofetishists.

The one who showed up at the loft door with a box of diskettes from the Finn was a soft-voiced boy called Angelo. His face was a simple graft grown on collagen and shark-cartilage polysaccharides, smooth and hideous. It was one of the nastiest pieces of elective surgery Case had ever seen. When Angelo smiled, revealing the razor-sharp canines of some large animal, Case was actually relieved. Toothbud transplants. He'd seen that before.

"You can't let the little pricks generation-gap you," Molly said. Case nodded, absorbed in the patterns of the Sense/Net ice.

This was it. This was what he was, who he was, his being. He forgot to eat. Molly left cartons of rice and foam trays of sushi on the corner of the long table. Sometimes he resented having to leave the deck to use the chemical toilet they'd set up in a corner of the loft. Ice patterns formed and reformed on the screen as he probed for gaps, skirted the most obvious traps, and mapped the route he'd take through Sense/Net's ice. It was good ice. Wonderful ice. Its patterns burned there while he lay with his arm under Molly's shoulders, watching the red dawn through the steel grid of the skylight. Its rainbow pixel maze was the first thing he saw when he woke. He'd go straight to the deck, not bothering to dress, and jack in. He was cutting it. He was working. He lost track of days.

And sometimes, falling asleep, particularly when Molly was off on one of her reconnaissance trips with her rented cadre of Moderns, images of Chiba came flooding back. Faces and Ninsei neon. Once he woke from a confused dream of Linda Lee, unable to recall who she was or what she'd ever meant to him. When he did remember, he jacked in and worked for nine straight hours.

The cutting of Sense/Net's ice took a total of nine days.

"I said a week," Armitage said, unable to conceal his satisfaction when Case showed him his plan for the run. "You took your own good time."

"Balls," Case said, smiling at the screen. "That's good work, Armitage."

"Yes," Armitage admitted, "but don't let it go to your head. Compared to what you'll eventually be up against, this is an arcade toy."

"Love you, Cat Mother," whispered the Panther Modern's link man. His voice was modulated static in Case's headset. "Atlanta, Brood. Looks go. Go, got it?" Molly's voice was slightly clearer.

"To hear is to obey." The Moderns were using some kind of chickenwire dish in New Jersey to bounce the link man's scrambled signal off a Sons of Christ the King satellite in geosynchronous orbit above Manhattan. They chose to regard the entire operation as an elaborate private joke, and their choice of comsats seemed to have been deliberate. Molly's signals were being beamed up from a one-meter umbrella dish epoxy-ed to the roof of a black glass bank tower nearly as tall as the Sense/Net building.

Atlanta. The recognition code was simple. Atlanta to Boston to Chicago to Denver, five minutes for each city. If anyone managed to intercept Molly's signal, unscramble it, synch her voice, the code would tip the Moderns. If she remained in the building for more than twenty minutes, it was highly unlikely she'd be coming out at all.

Case gulped the last of his coffee, settled the trodes in place, and scratched his chest beneath his black t-shirt. He had only a vague idea of what the Panther Moderns planned as a diversion for the Sense/Net security people. His job was to make sure the intrusion program he'd written would link with the Sense/Net systems when Molly needed it to. He watched the countdown in the corner of the screen. Two. One.

He jacked in and triggered his program. "Mainline," breathed the link man, his voice the only sound as Case plunged through the glowing strata of Sense/Net ice. Good. Check Molly. He hit the simstim and flipped into her sensorium.

The scrambler blurred the visual input slightly. She stood before a wall of gold-flecked mirror in the building's vast white lobby, chewing gum, apparently fascinated by her own reflection. Aside from the huge pair of sunglasses concealing her

mirrored insets, she managed to look remarkably like she belonged there, another tourist girl hoping for a glimpse of Tally Isham. She wore a pink plastic raincoat, a white mesh top, loose white pants cut in a style that had been fashionable in Tokyo the previous year. She grinned vacantly and popped her gum. Case felt like laughing. He could feel the micropore tape across her ribcage, feel the flat little units under it: the radio, the simstim unit, and the scrambler. The throat mike, glued to her neck, looked as much as possible like an analgesic dermadisk. Her hands, in the pockets of the pink coat, were flexing systematically through a series of tension-release exercises. It took him a few seconds to realize that the peculiar sensation at the tips of her fingers was caused by the blades as they were partially extruded, then retracted.

He flipped back. His program had reached the fifth gate. He watched as his icebreaker strobed and shifted in front of him, only faintly aware of his hands playing across the deck, making minor adjustments. Translucent planes of color shuffled like a trick deck. Take a card, he thought, any card.

The gate blurred past. He laughed. The Sense/Net ice had accepted his entry as a routine transfer from the consortium's Los Angeles complex. He was inside. Behind him, viral sub-programs peeled off, meshing with the gate's code fabric, ready to deflect the real Los Angeles data when it arrived.

He flipped again. Molly was strolling past the enormous circular reception desk at the rear of the lobby.

12:01:20 as the readout flared in her optic nerve.

At midnight, synched with the chip behind Molly's eye, the link man in Jersey had given his command. "Mainline." Nine Moderns, scattered along two hundred miles of the Sprawl, had simultaneously dialed MAX EMERG from pay phones. Each Modern delivered a short set speech, hung up, and drifted out into the night, peeling off surgical gloves. Nine different police departments and public security agencies were absorbing the information that an obscure subset of militant Christian fundamentalists had just taken credit for having introduced clinical levels of an outlawed psychoactive agent known as Blue Nine into the ventilation system of the Sense/Net Pyramid. Blue Nine, known in California as Grievous Angel, had been

shown to produce acute paranoia and homicidal psychosis in eighty-five percent of experimental subjects.

Case hit the switch as his program surged through the gates of the subsystem that controlled security for the Sense/Net research library. He found himself stepping into an elevator.

"Excuse me, but are you an employee?" The guard raised his eyebrows. Molly popped her gum. "No," she said, driving the first two knuckles of her right hand into the man's solar plexus. As he doubled over, clawing for the beeper on his belt, she slammed his head sideways, against the wall of the elevator.

Chewing a little more rapidly now, she touched CLOSE DOOR and STOP on the illuminated panel. She took a blackbox from her coat pocket and inserted a lead in the keyhole of the lock that secured the panel's circuitry.

The Panther Moderns allowed four minutes for their first move to take effect, then injected a second carefully prepared dose of misinformation. This time, they shot it directly into the Sense/Net building's internal video system.

At 12:04:03, every screen in the building strobed for eighteen seconds in a frequency that produced seizures in a susceptible segment of Sense/Net employees. Then something only vaguely like a human face filled the screens, its features stretched across asymmetrical expanses of bone like some obscene Mercator projection. Blue lips parted wetly as the twisted, elongated jaw moved. Something, perhaps a hand, a thing like a reddish clump of gnarled roots, fumbled toward the camera, blurred, and vanished. Subliminally rapid images of contamination: graphics of the building's water supply system, gloved hands manipulating laboratory glassware, something tumbling down into darkness, a pale splash. . . . The audio track, its pitch adjusted to run at just less than twice the standard playback speed, was part of a month-old newscast detailing potential military uses of a substance known as HsG, a biochemical governing the human skeletal growth factor. Overdoses of HsG threw certain bone cells into overdrive, accelerating growth by factors as high as one thousand percent.

At 12:05:00, the mirror-sheathed nexus of the Sense/Net consortium held just over three thousand employees. At five

minutes after midnight, as the Moderns' message ended in a flare of white screen, the Sense/Net Pyramid screamed.

Half a dozen NYPD Tactical hovercraft, responding to the possibility of Blue Nine in the building's ventilation system, were converging on the Sense/Net Pyramid. They were running full riot lights. A BAMA Rapid Deployment helicopter was lifting off from its pad on Riker's.

Case triggered his second program. A carefully engineered virus attacked the code fabric screening primary custodial commands for the sub-basement that housed the Sense/Net research materials. "Boston," Molly's voice came across the link, "I'm downstairs." Case switched and saw the blank wall of the elevator. She was unzipping the white pants. A bulky packet, exactly the shade of her pale ankle, was secured there with micropore. She knelt and peeled the tape away. Streaks of burgundy flickered across the mimetic polycarbon as she unfolded the Modern suit. She removed the pink raincoat, threw it down beside the white pants, and began to pull the suit on over the white mesh top.

12:06:26.

Case's virus had bored a window through the library's command ice. He punched himself through and found an infinite blue space ranged with color-coded spheres strung on a tight grid of pale blue neon. In the nonspace of the matrix, the interior of a given data construct possessed unlimited subjective dimension; a child's toy calculator, accessed through Case's Sendai, would have presented limitless gulfs of nothingness hung with a few basic commands. Case began to key the sequence the Finn had purchased from a mid-eschelon sarariman with severe drug problems. He began to glide through the spheres as if he were on invisible tracks.

Here. This one.

Punching his way into the sphere, chill blue neon vault above him starless and smooth as frosted glass, he triggered a sub-program that effected certain alterations in the core custodial commands.

Out now. Reversing smoothly, the virus reknitting the fabric of the window.

Done.

This edition contains the complete text  
of the original hardcover edition.  
NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

SNOW CRASH

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Hiro Protagonist and Vitaly Chernobyl, roommates, are chilling out in their home, a spacious 20-by-30 in a U-Stor-It in Inglewood, California. The room has a concrete slab floor, corrugated steel walls separating it from the neighboring units, and—this is a mark of distinction and luxury—a roll-up steel door that faces northwest, giving them a few red rays at times like this, when the sun is setting over LAX. From time to time, a 777 or a Sukhoi/Kawasaki Hypersonic Transport will taxi in front of the sun and block the sunset with its rudder, or just mangle the red light with its jet exhaust, braiding the parallel rays into a dappled pattern on the wall.

But there are worse places to live. There are much worse places right here in this U-Stor-It. Only the big units like this one have their own doors. Most of them are accessed via a communal loading dock that leads to a maze of wide corrugated-steel hallways and freight elevators. These are slum housing, 5-by-10s and 10-by-10s where Yanoama tribespersons cook beans and parboil fistfuls of coca leaves over heaps of burning lottery tickets.

It is whispered that in the old days, when the U-Stor-It was actually used for its intended purpose (namely, providing cheap extra storage space to Californians with too many material goods), certain entrepreneurs came to the front office, rented out 10-by-10s using fake IDs, filled them up with steel drums full of toxic chemical waste, and then abandoned them, leaving the problem for the U-Stor-It Corporation to handle. According to these rumors, U-Stor-It just padlocked those units and wrote them off. Now, the immigrants claim, certain units remain haunted by this chemical specter. It is a story they tell their children, to keep them from trying to break into padlocked units.

No one has ever tried to break into Hiro and Vitaly's unit because there's nothing in there to steal, and at this point in their lives, neither one of them is important enough to kill, kidnap, or interrogate. Hiro owns a couple

of nice Nipponese swords, but he always wears them, and the whole idea of stealing fantastically dangerous weapons presents the would-be perp with inherent dangers and contradictions: When you are wrestling for possession of a sword, the man with the handle always wins. Hiro also has a pretty nice computer that he usually takes with him when he goes anywhere. Vitaly owns half a carton of Lucky Strikes, an electric guitar, and a hangover.

At the moment, Vitaly Chernobyl is stretched out on a futon, quiescent, and Hiro Protagonist is sitting cross-legged at a low table, Nipponese style, consisting of a cargo pallet set on cinderblocks.

As the sun sets, its red light is supplanted by the light of many neon logos emanating from the franchise ghetto that constitutes this U-Stor-It's natural habitat. This light, known as loglo, fills in the shadowy corners of the unit with seedy, oversaturated colors.

Hiro has cappuccino skin and spiky, truncated dreadlocks. His hair does not cover as much of his head as it used to, but he is a young man, by no means bald or balding, and the slight retreat of his hairline only makes more of his high cheekbones. He is wearing shiny goggles that wrap halfway around his head; the bows of the goggles have little earphones that are plugged into his outer ears.

The earphones have some built-in noise cancellation features. This sort of thing works best on steady noise. When jumbo jets make their takeoff runs on the runway across the street, the sound is reduced to a low doodling hum. But when Vitaly Chernobyl thrashes out an experimental guitar solo, it still hurts Hiro's ears.

The goggles throw a light, smoky haze across his eyes and reflect a distorted wide-angle view of a brilliantly lit boulevard that stretches off into an infinite blackness. This boulevard does not really exist; it is a computer-rendered view of an imaginary place.

Beneath this image, it is possible to see Hiro's eyes, which look Asian. They are from his mother, who is Korean by way of Nippon. The rest of him looks more like his father, who was African by way of Texas by way of

the Army—back in the days before it got split up into a number of competing organizations such as General Jim's Defense System and Admiral Bob's National Security.

Four things are on the cargo pallet: a bottle of expensive beer from the Puget Sound area, which Hiro cannot really afford; a long sword known in Nippon as a *katana* and a short sword known as a *wakizashi*—Hiro's father looted these from Japan after World War II went atomic—and a computer.

The computer is a featureless black wedge. It does not have a power cord, but there is a narrow translucent plastic tube emerging from a hatch on the rear, spiraling across the cargo pallet and the floor, and plugged into a crudely installed fiber-optics socket above the head of the sleeping Vitaly Chernobyl. In the center of the plastic tube is a hair-thin fiber-optic cable. The cable is carrying a lot of information back and forth between Hiro's computer and the rest of the world. In order to transmit the same amount of information on paper, they would have to arrange for a 747 cargo freighter packed with telephone books and encyclopedias to power-dive into their unit every couple of minutes, forever.

Hiro can't really afford the computer either, but he has to have one. It is a tool of his trade. In the worldwide community of hackers, Hiro is a talented drifter. This is the kind of lifestyle that sounded romantic to him as recently as five years ago. But in the bleak light of full adulthood, which is to one's early twenties as Sunday morning is to Saturday night, he can clearly see what it really amounts to: He's broke and unemployed. And a few short weeks ago, his tenure as a pizza deliverer—the only pointless dead-end job he really enjoys—came to an end. Since then, he's been putting a lot more emphasis on his auxiliary emergency backup job: freelance stringer for the CIC, the Central Intelligence Corporation of Langley, Virginia.

The business is a simple one. Hiro gets information. It may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document. It can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster.

He uploads it to the CIC database—the Library, formerly the Library of Congress, but no one calls it that anymore. Most people are not entirely clear on what the word “congress” means. And even the word “library” is getting hazy. It used to be a place full of books, mostly old ones. Then they began to include videotapes, records, and magazines. Then all of the information got converted into machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes. And as the number of media grew, the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more and more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortuitously, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked out a big fat stock offering.

Millions of other CIC stringers are uploading millions of other fragments at the same time. CIC's clients, mostly large corporations and Sovereigns, rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something that Hiro put into it, Hiro gets paid.

A year ago, he uploaded an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent's wastebasket in Burbank. Half a dozen studios wanted to see it. He ate and vacationed off of that one for six months.

Since then, times have been leaner. He has been learning the hard way that 99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all.

Case in point: After a certain Kourier tipped him off to the existence of Vitaly Chernobyl, he put a few intensive weeks into researching a new musical phenomenon—the rise of Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge collectives in L.A. He has planted exhaustive notes on this trend in the Library, including video and audio. Not one single record label, agent, or rock critic has bothered to access it.

The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this

lens emerges and clicks into place, its base flush with the surface of the computer. The neighborhood loglo is curved and foreshortened on its surface.

Hiro finds it erotic. This is partly because he hasn't been properly laid in several weeks. But there's more to it. Hiro's father, who was stationed in Japan for many years, was obsessed with cameras. He kept bringing them back from his stints in the Far East, encased in many protective layers, so that when he took them out to show Hiro, it was like watching an exquisite striptease as they emerged from all that black leather and nylon, zippers and straps. And once the lens was finally exposed, pure geometric equation made real, so powerful and vulnerable at once, Hiro could only think it was like nuzzling through skirts and lingerie and outer labia and inner labia. . . . It made him feel naked and weak and brave.

The lens can see half of the universe—the half that is above the computer, which includes most of Hiro. In this way, it can generally keep track of where Hiro is and what direction he's looking in.

Down inside the computer are three lasers—a red one, a green one, and a blue one. They are powerful enough to make a bright light but not powerful enough to burn through the back of your eyeball and broil your brain, fry your frontals, lase your lobes. As everyone learned in elementary school, these three colors of light can be combined, with different intensities, to produce any color that Hiro's eye is capable of seeing.

In this way, a narrow beam of any color can be shot out of the innards of the computer, up through that fish-eye lens, in any direction. Through the use of electronic mirrors inside the computer, this beam is made to sweep back and forth across the lenses of Hiro's goggles, in much the same way as the electron beam in a television paints the inner surface of the eponymous Tube. The resulting image hangs in space in front of Hiro's view of Reality.

By drawing a slightly different image in front of each eye, the image can be made three-dimensional. By changing the image seventy-two times a second, it can be made



to move. By drawing the moving three-dimensional image at a resolution of 2K pixels on a side, it can be as sharp as the eye can perceive, and by pumping stereo digital sound through the little earphones, the moving 3-D pictures can have a perfectly realistic soundtrack.

So Hiro's not actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse. Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It.

Hiro is approaching the Street. It is the Broadway, the Champs Élysées of the Metaverse. It is the brilliantly lit boulevard that can be seen, miniaturized and backward, reflected in the lenses of his goggles. It does not really exist. But right now, millions of people are walking up and down it.

The dimensions of the Street are fixed by a protocol, hammered out by the computer-graphics ninja overlords of the Association for Computing Machinery's Global Multimedia Protocol Group. The Street seems to be a grand boulevard going all the way around the equator of a black sphere with a radius of a bit more than ten thousand kilometers. That makes it 65,536 kilometers around, which is considerably bigger than Earth.

The number 65,536 is an awkward figure to everyone except a hacker, who recognizes it more readily than his own mother's date of birth: It happens to be a power of 2— $2^{16}$  power to be exact—and even the exponent 16 is equal to  $2^4$ , and 4 is equal to  $2^2$ . Along with 256; 32,768; and 2,147,483,648; 65,536 is one of the foundation stones of the hacker universe, in which 2 is the only really important number because that's how many digits a computer can recognize. One of those digits is 0, and the other is 1. Any number that can be created by fetishistically multiplying 2s by each other, and subtracting the occasional 1, will be instantly recognizable to a hacker.

Like any place in Reality, the Street is subject to de-

velopment. Developers can build their own small streets feeding off of the main one. They can build buildings, parks, signs, as well as things that do not exist in Reality, such as vast hovering overhead light shows, special neighborhoods where the rules of three-dimensional spacetime are ignored, and free-combat zones where people can go to hunt and kill each other.

The only difference is that since the Street does not really exist—it's just a computer-graphics protocol written down on a piece of paper somewhere—none of these things is being physically built. They are, rather, pieces of software, made available to the public over the worldwide fiber-optics network. When Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the Street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness, disappearing over the curve of the globe, he is actually staring at the graphic representations—the user interfaces—of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations. In order to place these things on the Street, they have had to get approval from the Global Multimedia Protocol Group, have had to buy frontage on the Street, get zoning approval, obtain permits, bribe inspectors, the whole bit. The money these corporations pay to build things on the Street all goes into a trust fund owned and operated by the GMPG, which pays for developing and expanding the machinery that enables the Street to exist.

Hiro has a house in a neighborhood just off the busiest part of the Street. It is a very old neighborhood by Street standards. About ten years ago, when the Street protocol was first written, Hiro and some of his buddies pooled their money and bought one of the first development licenses, created a little neighborhood of hackers. At the time, it was just a little patchwork of light amid a vast blackness. Back then, the Street was just a necklace of streetlights around a black ball in space.

Since then, the neighborhood hasn't changed much, but the Street has. By getting in on it early, Hiro's buddies got a head start on the whole business. Some of them even got very rich off of it.

That's why Hiro has a nice big house in the Metaverse but has to share a 20-by-30 in Reality. Real estate acumen does not always extend across universes.

The sky and the ground are black, like a computer screen that hasn't had anything drawn into it yet; it is always nighttime in the Metaverse, and the Street is always garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from constraints of physics and finance. But people in Hiro's neighborhood are very good programmers, so it's tasteful. The houses look like real houses. There are a couple of Frank Lloyd Wright reproductions and some fancy Victoriana.

So it's always a shock to step out onto the Street, where everything seems to be a mile high. This is Downtown, the most heavily developed area. If you go a couple of hundred kilometers in either direction, the development will taper down to almost nothing, just a thin chain of streetlights casting white pools on the black velvet ground. But Downtown is a dozen Manhattans, embroidered with neon and stacked on top of each other.

In the real world—planet Earth, Reality—there are somewhere between six and ten billion people. At any given time, most of them are making mud bricks or field-stripping their AK-47s. Perhaps a billion of them have enough money to own a computer; these people have more money than all of the others put together. Of these billion potential computer owners, maybe a quarter of them actually bother to own computers, and a quarter of these have machines that are powerful enough to handle the Street protocol. That makes for about sixty million people who can be on the Street at any given time. Add in another sixty million or so who can't really afford it but go there anyway; by using public machines, or machines owned by their school or their employer, and at any given time the Street is occupied by twice the population of New York City.

That's why the damn place is so overdeveloped. Put in a sign or a building on the Street and the hundred million richest, hippest, best-connected people on earth will see it every day of their lives.

It is a hundred meters wide, with a narrow monorail

track running down the middle. The monorail is a free piece of public utility software that enables users to change their location on the Street rapidly and smoothly. A lot of people just ride back and forth on it, looking at the sights. When Hiro first saw this place, ten years ago, the monorail hadn't been written yet; he and his buddies had to write car and motorcycle software in order to get around. They would take their software out and race it in the black desert of the electronic night.

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As Hiro approaches the Street, he sees two young couples, probably using their parents' computers for a double date in the Metaverse, climbing down out of Port Zero, which is the local port of entry and monorail stop.

He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars.

They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. Hiro's avatar is now on the Street, too, and if the couples coming off the monorail look over in his direction, they can see him, just as he's seeing them. They could strike up a conversation: Hiro in the U-Stor-It in L.A. and the four teenagers probably on a couch in a suburb of Chicago, each with their own laptop. But they probably won't talk to each other, any more than they would in Reality. These are nice kids, and they don't want to talk to a solitary crossbreed with a slick custom avatar who's packing a couple of swords.

Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down the Street and you will see all of these.

Hiro's avatar just looks like Hiro, with the difference that no matter what Hiro is wearing in Reality, his avatar always wears a black leather kimono. Most hacker types don't go in for garish avatars, because they know that it takes a lot more sophistication to render a realistic human face than a talking penis. Kind of the way people who really know clothing can appreciate the fine details that separate a cheap gray wool suit from an expensive hand-tailored gray wool suit.

You can't just materialize anywhere in the Metaverse, like Captain Kirk beaming down from on high. This would be confusing and irritating to the people around you. It would break the metaphor. Materializing out of nowhere (or vanishing back into Reality) is considered to be a private function best done in the confines of your own House. Most avatars nowadays are anatomically correct, and naked as a babe when they are first created, so in any case, you have to make yourself decent before you emerge onto the Street. Unless you're something intrinsically indecent and you don't care.

If you are some peon who does not own a House, for example, a person who is coming in from a public terminal, then you materialize in a Port. There are 256 Express Ports on the street, evenly spaced around its circumference at intervals of 256 kilometers. Each of these intervals is further subdivided 256 times with Local Ports, spaced exactly one kilometer apart (astute students of hacker semiotics will note the obsessive repetition of the number 256, which is  $2^8$  power—and even that 8 looks pretty juicy, dripping with  $2^2$  additional 2s). The Ports serve a function analogous to airports: This is where you drop into the Metaverse from somewhere else. Once you have materialized in a Port, you can walk down the Street or hop on the monorail or whatever.

The couples coming off the monorail can't afford to have custom avatars made and don't know how to write their own. They have to buy off-the-shelf avatars. One of the girls has a pretty nice one. It would be considered quite the fashion statement among the K-Tel set. Looks like she has bought the Avatar Construction Set™ and put together her own, customized model out of miscellaneous parts. It might even look something like its owner. Her date doesn't look half bad himself.

The other girl is a Brandy. Her date is a Clint. Brandy and Clint are both popular, off-the-shelf models. When white-trash high school girls are going on a date in the Metaverse, they invariably run down to the computer-games section of the local Wal-Mart and buy a copy of Brandy. The user can select three breast sizes: improbable, impossible, and ludicrous. Brandy has a limited repertoire of facial expressions: cute and pouty; cute and sultry; perky and interested; smiling and receptive; cute and spacy. Her eyelashes are half an inch long, and the software is so cheap that they are rendered as solid ebony chips. When a Brandy flutters her eyelashes, you can almost feel the breeze.

Clint is just the male counterpart of Brandy. He is craggy and handsome and has an extremely limited range of facial expressions.

Hiro wonders, idly, how these two couples got to-

gether. They are clearly from disparate social classes. Perhaps older and younger siblings. But then they come down the escalator and disappear into the crowd and become part of the Street, where there are enough Clints and Brandys to found a new ethnic group.

The Street is fairly busy. Most of the people here are Americans and Asians—it's early morning in Europe right now. Because of the preponderance of Americans, the crowd has a garish and surreal look about it. For the Asians, it's the middle of the day, and they are in their dark blue suits. For the Americans, it's party time, and they are looking like just about anything a computer can render.

The moment Hiro steps across the line separating his neighborhood from the Street, colored shapes begin to swoop down on him from all directions, like buzzards on fresh road kill. Animercials are not allowed in Hiro's neighborhood. But almost anything is allowed in the Street.

A passing fighter plane bursts into flames, falls out of its trajectory, and zooms directly toward him at twice the speed of sound. It plows into the Street fifty feet in front of him, disintegrates, and explodes, blooming into a tangled cloud of wreckage and flame that skids across the pavement toward him, growing to envelop him so that all he can see is turbulent flame, perfectly simulated and rendered.

Then the display freezes, and a man materializes in front of Hiro. He is a classic bearded, pale, skinny hacker, trying to beef himself up by wearing a bulky silk windbreaker blazoned with the logo of one of the big Metaverse amusement parks. Hiro knows the guy; they used to run into each other at trade conventions all the time. He's been trying to hire Hiro for the last two months.

"Hiro, I can't understand why you're holding out on me. We're making bucks here—Kongbucks and yen—and we can be flexible on pay and bennies. We're putting together a swords-and-sorcery thing, and we can use a

hacker with your skills. Come on down and talk to me, okay?"

Hiro walks straight through the display, and it vanishes. Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of interactive three-dimensional movies. But in the end, they're still nothing more than video games. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings.

When Hiro learned how to do this, way back fifteen years ago, a hacker could sit down and write an entire piece of software by himself. Now, that's no longer possible. Software comes out of factories, and hackers are, to a greater or lesser extent, assembly-line workers. Worse yet, they may become managers who never get to write any code themselves.

The prospect of becoming an assembly-line worker gives Hiro some incentive to go out and find some really good intel tonight. He tries to get himself psyched up, tries to break out of the lethargy of the long-term underemployed. This intel thing can be a great racket, once you get yourself jacked into the grid. And with his connections, it shouldn't be any problem. He just has to get serious about it. *Get serious. Get serious.* But it's so hard to get serious about anything.

He owes the Mafia the cost of a new car. That's a good reason to get serious.

He cuts straight across the Street and under the monorail line, headed for a large, low-slung black building. It is extraordinarily somber for the Street, like a parcel that someone forgot to develop. It's a squat black pyramid with the top cut off. It has one single door—since this is all imaginary, there are no regulations dictating the number of emergency exits. There are no guards, no signs, nothing to bar people from going in, yet thousands of avatars mill around, peering inside, looking for a glimpse

of something. These people can't pass through the door because they haven't been invited.

Above the door is a matte black hemisphere about a meter in diameter, set into the front wall of the building. It is the closest thing the place has to decoration. Underneath it, in letters carved into the wall's black substance, is the name of the place: THE BLACK SUN.

So it's not an architectural masterpiece. When Da5id and Hiro and the other hackers wrote The Black Sun, they didn't have enough money to hire architects or designers, so they just went in for simple geometric shapes. The avatars milling around the entrance don't seem to care.

If these avatars were real people in a real street, Hiro wouldn't be able to reach the entrance. It's way too crowded. But the computer system that operates the Street has better things to do than to monitor every single one of the millions of people there, trying to prevent them from running into each other. It doesn't bother trying to solve this incredibly difficult problem. On the Street, avatars just walk right through each other.

So when Hiro cuts through the crowd, headed for the entrance, he really is cutting through the crowd. When things get this jammed together, the computer simplifies things by drawing all of the avatars ghostly and translucent so you can see where you're going. Hiro appears solid to himself, but everyone else looks like a ghost. He walks through the crowd as if it's a fogbank, clearly seeing The Black Sun in front of him.

He steps over the property line, and he's in the doorway. And in that instant he becomes solid and visible to all the avatars milling outside. As one, they all begin screaming. Not that they have any idea who the hell he is—Hiro is just a starving CIC stringer who lives in a U-Stor-It by the airport. But in the entire world there are only a couple of thousand people who can step over the line into The Black Sun.

He turns and looks back at ten thousand shrieking groupies. Now that he's all by himself in the entryway, no longer immersed in a flood of avatars, he can see all

of the people in the front row of the crowd with perfect clarity. They are all done up in their wildest and fanciest avatars, hoping that Da5id—The Black Sun's owner and hacker-in-chief—will invite them inside. They flicker and merge together into a hysterical wall. Stunningly beautiful women, computer-airbrushed and retouched at seventy-two frames a second, like *Playboy* pinups turned three-dimensional—these are would-be actresses hoping to be discovered. Wild-looking abstracts, tornadoes of gyrating light—hackers who are hoping that Da5id will notice their talent, invite them inside, give them a job. A liberal sprinkling of black-and-white people—persons who are accessing the Metaverse through cheap public terminals, and who are rendered in jerky, grainy black and white. A lot of these are run-of-the-mill psycho fans, devoted to the fantasy of stabbing some particular actress to death; they can't even get close in Reality, so they goggle into the Metaverse to stalk their prey. There are would-be rock stars done up in laser light, as though they just stepped off the concert stage, and the avatars of Nipponese businessmen, exquisitely rendered by their fancy equipment, but utterly reserved and boring in their suits.

There's one black-and-white who stands out because he's taller than the rest. The Street protocol states that your avatar can't be any taller than you are. This is to prevent people from walking around a mile high. Besides, if this guy's using a pay terminal—which he must be, to judge from the image quality—it can't jazz up his avatar. It just shows him the way he is, except not as well. Talking to a black-and-white on the Street is like talking to a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine, repeatedly pounding the copy button, while you stand by the output tray pulling the sheets out one at a time and looking at them.

He has long hair, parted in the middle like a curtain to reveal a tattoo on his forehead. Given the shitty resolution, there's no way to see the tattoo clearly, but it appears to consist of words. He has a wispy Fu Manchu mustache.

Hiro realizes that the guy has noticed him and is

staring back, looking him up and down, paying particular attention to the swords.

A grin spreads across the black-and-white guy's face. It is a satisfied grin. A grin of recognition. The grin of a man who knows something Hiro doesn't. The black-and-white guy has been standing with his arms folded across his chest, like a man who is bored, who's been waiting for something, and now his arms drop to his sides, swing loosely at the shoulders, like an athlete limbering up. He steps as close as he can and leans forward; he's so tall that the only thing behind him is empty black sky, torn with the glowing vapor trails of passing animercials.

"Hey, Hiro," the black-and-white guy says, "you want to try some Snow Crash?"

A lot of people hang around in front of The Black Sun saying weird things. You ignore them. But this gets Hiro's attention.

Oddity the first: The guy knows Hiro's name. But people have ways of getting that information. It's probably nothing.

The second: This sounds like an offer from a drug pusher. Which would be normal in front of a Reality bar. But this is the Metaverse. And you can't sell drugs in the Metaverse, because you can't get high by looking at something.

The third: The name of the drug. Hiro's never heard of a drug called Snow Crash before. That's not unusual—a thousand new drugs get invented each year, and each of them sells under half a dozen brand names.

But "snow crash" is computer lingo. It means a system crash—a bug—at such a fundamental level that it frags the part of the computer that controls the electron beam in the monitor, making it spray wildly across the screen, turning the perfect gridwork of pixels into a gyrating blizzard. Hiro has seen it happen a million times. But it's a very peculiar name for a drug.

The thing that really gets Hiro's attention is his confidence. He has an utterly calm, stolid presence. It's like

talking to an asteroid. Which would be okay if he were doing something that made the tiniest little bit of sense. Hiro's trying to read some clues in the guy's face, but the closer he looks, the more his shitty black-and-white avatar seems to break up into jittering, hard-edged pixels. It's like putting his nose against the glass of a busted TV. It makes his teeth hurt.

"Excuse me," Hiro says. "What did you say?"

"You want to try some Snow Crash?"

He has a crisp accent that Hiro can't quite place. His audio is as bad as his video. Hiro can hear cars going past the guy in the background. He must be goggled in from a public terminal alongside some freeway.

"I don't get this," Hiro says. "What is Snow Crash?"

"It's a drug, asshole," the guy says. "What do you think?"

"Wait a minute. This is a new one on me," Hiro says. "You honestly think I'm going to give you some money here? And then what do I do, wait for you to mail me the stuff?"

"I said try, not buy," the guy says. "You don't have to give me any money. Free sample. And you don't have to wait for no mail. You can have it now."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hypercard.

It looks like a business card. The hypercard is an avatar of sorts. It is used in the Metaverse to represent a chunk of data. It might be text, audio, video, a still image, or any other information that can be represented digitally.

Think of a baseball card, which carries a picture, some text, and some numerical data. A baseball *hypercard* could contain a highlight film of the player in action, shown in perfect high-def television; a complete biography, read by the player himself, in stereo digital sound; and a complete statistical database along with specialized software to help you look up the numbers you want.

A hypercard can carry a virtually infinite amount of information. For all Hiro knows, this hypercard might contain all the books in the Library of Congress, or every episode of *Hawaii Five-O* that was ever filmed, or the complete recordings of Jimi Hendrix, or the 1950 Census.

Or—more likely—a wide variety of nasty computer viruses. If Hiro reaches out and takes the hypercard, then the data it represents will be transferred from this guy's system into Hiro's computer. Hiro, naturally, wouldn't touch it under any circumstances, any more than you would take a free syringe from a stranger in Times Square and jab it into your neck.

And it doesn't make sense anyway. "That's a hypercard. I thought you said Snow Crash was a drug," Hiro says, now totally nonplussed.

"It is," the guy says. "Try it."

"Does it fuck up your brain?" Hiro says. "Or your computer?"

"Both. Neither. What's the difference?"

Hiro finally realizes that he has just wasted sixty seconds of his life having a meaningless conversation with a paranoid schizophrenic. He turns around and goes into The Black Sun.