

A woman with dark hair is sleeping peacefully, her face resting on a white pillow. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt. The background is a dark, industrial environment with glowing green and purple pipes and machinery. The lighting is dim, creating a moody atmosphere.

THE HALFERNE INCUBUS

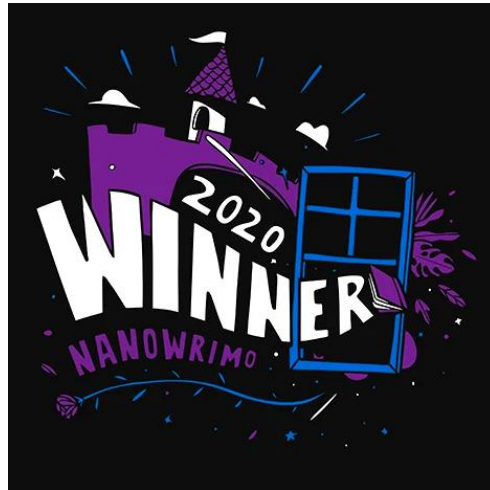
**A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider**

**DRAFT 0: EXCERPT
(FOR PROMOTIONAL USE ONLY)**

THE HALFERNE INCUBUS

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Draft 1.1 -- 24 February 2023



REVISION HISTORY

Original Short Story		November 2004
Draft 0	First 53K words (NaNoWriMo draft)	November 2020
Draft 1.0	Rewritten second act; add third act	September 2022
Draft 1.1	First spelling and grammar pass	September 2022

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CHAPTER ONE

The fish were yellow, though she remembered them being a less-realistic purple the last time she was there. A cool mist of water played across her face as she sat on the rocky banks of the raging river. The roar of the great falls surrounded her, filled her ears, and for a moment consumed her as she surrendered to the serenity of isolation. Wiping her clammy hands on her blouse, she stood up and walked along the narrow rock wall towards the edge of the cliff. The noise grew louder still, a siren's call, subduing her senses with seductive euphoria. Her muscles relaxed, her breathing slowed, and her steps found a rhythmic sync with the crescendo of her heartbeat. The wet, uneven surface caused her bare foot to slip as she got too close to the waterline, and the sudden adrenaline rush instantaneously cut off the trance-like sensation. In a panic, she caught herself, avoiding the tumble into certain death at the hands of nature's mighty spectacle.

Not yet, she thought.

Consciously she willed herself to relax again, and after a few moments, the feeling of lightness returned. Perching on her hands and knees, she peered over the cliff's edge to a vast blue-green ocean half a mile below. From this vantage point, the water appeared still and unmoving -- beautiful simplicity juxtaposed against the cacophony of the harsh, rocky rapids of the cliff top. The endless flatness of the horizon seemed as if it was the edge of the world -- or possibly a gateway to a different one. It was calling to her. She answered it. Slowly she stood up, outstretched arms serving to maintain balance, nose inhaling a deep breath of cold, damp air. Closing her eyes, she let herself fall forward with the rushing water...

... and flew.

The sensation was completely natural, not unlike swimming. With simple force of will she floated gently, slowly down the distance between the cliff top and the ocean below, occasionally soaring back upwards or off to one side -- just to assure herself that she was in command of the descent. Satisfied, she scoffed at the immutable laws of physics, pitched into an upward roll, and looked back at the endless cascade of water. Her arms fell limp as she gently kicked her feet in a scissor-like motion to

force her momentum outwards from the shoreline. A rainbow formed in the mist in front of her, its colors vivid against the milky white foam behind it. She sailed silently through it.

As her natural inertia slowed until she almost stopped. Twisting, she angled her body downward, and dove sharply towards the ocean below, picking up speed as the roiling waters rushed up to meet her. She leveled out a scant few meters from the cresting waves and sailed along the shoreline. Pristine beaches and palm trees passed underneath her as the roar of the falls lowered to a din of white noise and eventually the gentle hiss of wind rustling leaves, the rhythm of waves on shore, and the staccato song of gulls in the distance. A particularly beautiful glade rolled into view. She shifted her weight and sailed towards it, righting herself to slow her momentum. A carpet of cool moist wildflower petals rose to meet her. She slowed herself with three running steps, then rolled on to her back, digging her fingers into the dirt.

She lay there for a long time, the noonday sun warming her face and drying her clothes. Her mind emptied. At last, none of it mattered anymore. Serah Wiles: the nobody. Serah Wiles: the innocent. Serah Wiles: the one who always did what the world expected. Serah Wiles: the boring one that nothing ever happened to. Carefree birds flew inland overhead. She marveled at the display of colors and myriad songs -- so many varieties each engaged in their own unique dance.

Abruptly, the birds grew silent, reversed direction, and sped back towards the ocean. A sudden scream of terror erupted from deep within the grove, cutting sharply through the tranquility. The meadow grew silent as its echo died. Serah sat up and peered into the dense thicket of trees. An unnatural rustling of leaves made its way from deep within the thicket, headed directly towards her clearing. Seconds later, an elderly man emerged, running across the glade directly towards her. His movement far spryer than seemed natural for a man of his years. Couldn't he see she wished to be alone to enjoy what little unscripted time she had these days? Instinctively, she stood up and took several slow steps backwards, pretending to survey her surroundings in the hope that by feigning disinterest she could divert the man's attentions somewhere else. The last thing she expected, or wanted, was human contact. Not now. Not here.

The man continued his approach, stopping almost directly in front of her. He looked deep into her eyes, his expression betrayed both recognition and surprise. "It's you!" He said, half astonished.

"Hello," she said, stupefied. It seemed a silly thing to say. She had never seen the man before, though he seemed to recognize her. It happened occasionally--one of the drawbacks of being a third-

tier vid personality. Everyone recognizes you, though they didn't always know where they've seen you before. Usually, they were disappointed once they found out you were only a journalist.

"You've got to help me," he pleaded. "We're running out of time." The accent was unusual, and while Serah couldn't quite place it geographically, she understood the words. The old man grabbed her shoulders frantically. She gasped at the rudeness of the taboo. This was no holographic avatar; his fingers were cold and clammy.

Serah stepped back, releasing herself from the man's grip. "I don't understand."

"No, wait..." His voice trailed and he seemed lost in thought. "This isn't palatial!" he said, his accent drawling out the last word into at least four syllables.

Was he disoriented -- possibly hopped up on brain dust or some other narcotic? His face was round and pink, not the gaunt gray of a substance abuser. Perhaps he had accidentally ingested something. Perhaps he was genuinely insane -- possibly violent -- she mused. "Oh, I don't know, have you seen the waterfall about a half-mile up the beach?" She spoke in calm, helpful tones, hoping the man would lose interest in her and leave in peace. She winced as she realized her tone probably sounded more condescending than soothing.

"Don't let him find me," he whimpered softly. "Not yet." He fumbled around in his pockets for a moment as if looking for something.

Serah's throat went dry. The man was hysterical, incoherent with shock. "Who? Don't let who find you?" she asked as she looked around for signs of someone who might know the man, or at least be able to help him. The last thing she wanted was to get drawn into somebody else's squabble.

He studied her for a moment, and his expression turned ambivalent. Claspng his hands together under his chin, his face lit up with a parody of startled realization. "This wasn't part of the plan. I'm not supposed to be here, am I?" It was more a statement than a question.

There was another rustling in the trees behind them. A tall figure, clad in a gray and cape and uniform emerged from the brush, its face obscured by the mirrored visor of a helmet. She didn't recognize the uniform at all but found it difficult to imagine it as anything other than sinister. It slowly raised an arm and pointed a weapon of some kind towards them.

"No," the old man whispered as he studied the newcomer. He turned to Serah, fixed her with a gaze somewhere between apology and pity, and gave the slightest shrug of defeat. "I'm so sorry."

There was a high-pitched whistle as the projectile sped through the air, a dull thud as it entered the man's back. The man stared at her, eyes fixed in apologetic confusion for what seemed like several seconds before there was a soft, wet crack as the man's chest burst open, showering Serah in a wash of blood.

* * * * *

She screamed in the darkness of her apartment for almost a full minute before her conscious mind took hold of her senses and told her to stop. The echoes of the gunshot faded into the sound of her pounding heart in her ears. Cold sweat drenched her body, and her arms still tingled from the shock as she forced herself to her feet and took a few deep breaths to calm her racing heartbeat. She pressed the release button on the skullcap. It took five seconds for the nanofiber leads to retract from her scalp and the bio-adhesive contacts to release themselves. She quickly pulled off the foam skin and tossed it on the pillow. A delicate silk robe was draped over an old-fashioned chaise in the corner. She slipped into it, flipping long black curls out from under the collar, and began pacing.

"Lights," Serah said in a shaky, unsure voice, still sounding half terrified by the lingering visions of the dream and half frustrated by the interruption to her sleep cycle. The walls of the sleeping area finally came into focus as her eyes adjusted to the light. She allowed the sensation of silk on skin and the familiar surroundings of her apartment to bring her back to reality. The robe clung to her sweat-covered arms, feeling like a heavy second skin as she flipped on the sublimducer monitor next to her bed and keyed up the log files.

Sleep cycle initiated: 01:33 hours

Theta band program initiated: 01:54 hours

Program termination: 02:41 hours

Abort code initiated due to parameter failure.

"Parameter failure," Serah mulled the phrase over in her mind a few times. Is that what the arcane piece of machinery called a nightmare? What a worthless expression, she thought. Was "parameter failure" the result of the dream or the cause of the dream? She reset the program. It wasn't that she cared about pre-programmed or custom dreams, she just liked the secondary feature where it

allowed her to function with a much more efficient, and considerably shorter, night's sleep. Considering the shock to her system, any kind of sleep seemed unlikely at this point.

Dispenser lights flickered on as Serah entered the kitchen; display panels indicated their readiness. She punched up her personal menu and thumped the "coffee" entry at the top of the list with three fingers. She wasn't sure, but sometimes she thought the machine registered how hard she pressed the panel and adjusted its preparation time accordingly. It took seven seconds for the panel to slide back, revealing the perfect cup of coffee -- at least according to her own preference file. She grabbed the cup, sipped at it, and punched up the newsnet feed on the viewer in the corner. The barrage of flashing images and noises made her wince with sensory overload, and she struggled to pick meaning out of pandemonium: another uprising at a Comanche embassy over the States. She watched for a moment, trying to figure out which embassy it had been, but quickly gave up. It seemed there was always an uprising somewhere these days. Places and reasons eventually blurred together, though most everyone she knew maintained one common theory: Sensible people have long-since left the world -- well at least the physical one, anyway. The last two decades had seen a major growth in the appeal and affordability of an exclusively virtual life in the Phrame, but the blending of that universe with the idiophysical one had been so gradual that the tipping point must have gone unnoticed. Some days, Serah was convinced that the only thing left on this side were social misfits and eccentrics. The problem was, it was increasingly difficult to tell one from the other, and she wasn't sure which camp she fell in anyway.

She killed the video feed and reduced the audio to ambient levels. She didn't care about the story, but just needed to hear human voices and familiar tones of the newsfeed announcers. She hated being awake this late - or was it early? -- as the overnight programming schedule was laughably deplorable. The preference file would no doubt assume that she was up at 3:00 am by choice and select some 350-year-old movie that she had already seen a couple hundred times, even though the last thing Serah wanted to face was imagery of some fictional, unobtainable lifestyle of a quaint, centuries-old period piece. Journalism was her reality during daylight hours, and her refuge in the uncertainty of the overnight world. If nothing else, at least give her stories about people that she had no reason to be envious of. She had always meant to ask someone in programming if they knew why the ratings analyzer chose stories of violence and human suffering for night viewing and favored human triumph stories during the day. Perhaps only crazies would be up in the middle of the night. Sensible people would be long asleep.

She sipped at the coffee again and let the voices drift off to background noise like the sound of the sea crashing against the shore. The indistinguishable chattering brought back the noise of the falls, and the dream that still puzzled and disturbed her. Everything had been familiar. She had experienced several variants of the waterfall sequence before. It remained one of her favorites -- despite the minor deviations from the laws of physics and geology that, thankfully, she always failed to notice when she was in dreamstate. The sublimducer selected it for her every few weeks or so, its wisdom always seeming to pick it when she needed it most -- as it was painstakingly designed to. Sometimes the variants were mildly disturbing -- a storm, or a sudden fall while flying -- but never the blood-curdling murder of a terrified old man. Yes, so-called "bad dreams" were a natural part of incorporating stress, fear, and anxiety into the subconscious. The sublimducer knew this, and on occasion had provided unwelcome or mildly disturbing situations to allow her subconscious to work out these issues in ways she, for obvious reasons, couldn't understand. Ideally, however, it would also closely monitor her psychological thresholds and ease her out of the dream state slowly so that she didn't consciously remember most of the details of such nightmares. Above all, it would never voluntarily jolt her awake in blind terror.

Serah pressed the diagnostic button on the sleep monitor and waited a few seconds. A green icon appeared on the screen indicating that no anomalies or failures were found -- at least with the parts of the system that the diagnostic software tested. Even this relatively simple piece of hundred-year-old technology was a bit too advanced for anyone who wasn't at least an apprentice biotech. Though restored to new condition, the machine had more than outlived its expected lifespan, and it was easily conceivable that the diagnostic subsystems had stopped working decades ago. She struggled to remember if the woman who had sold the unit to her had mentioned any such defects. Even with a fully functioning diagnostic system, however, the best it would produce would be a red light and some abstruse machine language description of the problem. Though she might be able to decipher a few of the arcane codes, she probably wouldn't understand the meaning anyway. She suddenly felt completely helpless in the face of such a deceptively simplistic and ultimately useless feature.

Serah tapped communications console on the wall, scanned her personal comm directory, and selected the listing for the sublimducer's manufacturer. Within seconds a holo-projector lifted itself off the table, scanned the room for the most convenient, unobstructed floorspace, and hovered over to it. A figure shimmered to life in the middle of the room beneath it.

"Noctivo Systems customer support at your service. My name is Syn. Allen. How can I help you this evening, Ms. Wyles?" The avatar was that of a portly middle-aged man with a high forehead and round wire-rimmed spectacles wrapped around each ear. The honorific "Syn." identified him as a synthetic entity, what was generally referred to as an artificial intelligence -- until those intelligences began to take exception to the use of that adjective. The acoustics and ambient echoes perfectly matched what a flesh and blood person standing in that location would sound like, but the slightly-out-of-tune holo-projector from the same, nearly antique vintage as the sublimducer gave the man a fuzzy hue that betrayed his artificial nature. She knew she should probably get the projector fixed, but she took so few calls at home that the expense hardly seemed justified.

"Hello, Allen," Serah smiled, then suddenly remembered her casual state of dress and instinctively closed her robe in embarrassment. Allen, obviously, could see and hear everything going on in the room with approximately the same level of realism his avatar presented. "Something seems to be wrong with my sublimducer," she continued. "I've just had a rat her disturbing nightmare that woke me up."

Allen tilted his head to one side and regarded her for a moment, "I'm so sorry," he said with a sincere tone as look around the room for her sleeping area. "That's horrible. Are you all right now? Should I send medical assistance?" Serah was taken aback for a moment. She'd expected a well-rehearsed apology or defense of the product, but she hadn't thought that a mere technician would be genuinely concerned for her own well-being. She wondered why her neighbors, who would no doubt have heard her earlier terrified screams, didn't bother to knock, or at least call to see if she was okay.

"No, no, I'm fine." She waved him off. "I'm just a bit shaken, that's all, but obviously I'd like to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Of course," Allen nodded. He gestured with his hand and a collection of words assembled in the air around him, blurred by the low-res distortion at the projector field's outer edge. Serah could see that he was expertly traversing a series of menus, though she couldn't decipher any of their contents. The image on the sleep monitor next to her bed flickered and began scrolling various pieces of telemetry, its output mirrored in the air to Allen's right.

"Ah, there we are," Allen smiled. "I have access to your system now, Ms. Wyles. If you'd like to have a seat and relax, this should only take a couple of minutes."

"Thank you," Serah said taking a seat on the couch in the sunken living room where she could see the entirety of her L-shaped efficiency apartment. She tucked in her legs, sitting on her feet, and sipped at her coffee. After a few unproductive minutes, she grabbed the portable datapad on the cushion next to her and pretended to study it.

Alan poured through the readouts for several minutes, occasionally furrowing his brow or mumbling to himself in puzzlement. "I think this is going a bit beyond my expertise, Ms. Wyles. Would you mind if I called one of our tier three technicians to consult with?"

"No, not at all," Serah rolled her eyes wondering how crowded her apartment would be before the night was over.

A few seconds later a second man flickered into existence in the middle of the room. He was taller than Allen, with a well-toned muscular build and a strong jaw. His good looks were almost cartoonish, like those found in an adult-oriented simulation -- the type where a man arrives to fix the helpless woman's malfunctioning appliance and finds himself helplessly seduced into some ridiculous parody of lovemaking. She laughed at the ludicrousness of such an encounter, but why else would someone choose a completely inappropriate avatar for a customer service job?

On average, a phramer would have four or five avatars for various situations. More than that and their identities could get confused or crossed. Though this was sometimes desirable. Virtual self-presentation and design services constituted a multi-billion cred industry, but Serah never understood the need for such expensive vanity. For those rare occasions when she used an on-line persona, she had only two avatars to choose from: one for professional interaction; one for social. Both were modeled on her own features -- or at least her features of five years ago when she assembled them -- and differed only subtly in appearance. The ridiculously attractive man in front of her was obviously a well-thought-out, purchased creation, right down to the customized tattoos and jewelry. She gave a quick prayer of thanks that the tech's avatar was at least human in appearance. The photo-realistic image of a seven-foot eagle, centaur, or other strange mythological creature was fine in social settings but having one traipsing around her living room in the middle of the night would probably have been more than she could bear at the moment.

"Hello, Allen," the brawny newcomer said politely. "What have you got?"

"Ah, Étienne, bonjour, take a look at this." Allen grabbed a block of text from the air in front of him and "threw" it across the room.

Étienne, even the name reeked of pretension, reached out and caught the image, reassembling it in front of his face with one well-practiced motion. It followed along in front of him as he walked towards the sleeping area. "Wow, and old T40 series. Don't see too many of these anymore," he chuckled and looked around the room. His eyes fell on the couch where Serah was sitting. "Good evening, Ms. Wyles," he said, pretending to have just noticed her for the first time. His oversized biceps seemed to flex as he spoke her name. Under most circumstances, it would be rude to begin speaking to someone from an avatar without first giving your honorific, to let the person being addressed know if they are dealing with a synthetic, virtual, simulated, or fluid-presence personality. Since Étienne had not offered, the subtle outrageousness of his avatar led Serah to guess he was fluid – meaning he lived some substantial portion of his time in the physical world, hence his oversight in etiquette.

"Hello," Serah said, stifling another laugh by staring into her empty coffee cup. She wondered for a moment how many times a night he was called to a strange woman's bedroom to look at faulty equipment. For that matter, was it even night where he was? Theoretically he could be anywhere in the world, though his accent was distinctly that of the London Metroplex. Allen had probably called a local tech in case a physical service call was required. It would serve Étienne right if he were forced to bring his physical body to her apartment to complete the repairs. She would revel in irony if the "real world Étienne" turned out to be a frail, 95-year-old man.

Allen continued, "The diagnostic shows no physical anomalies with the local system, yet look at this telemetry..." The two spoke quietly together, pulling up various displays on the sleep monitor, occasionally arguing over their interpretations in techno-babble speech. After several minutes they had apparently given up, and a third person appeared in the living room. This one was a shorter, blonde female in her early fifties who dressed in white suit. Judging from the amount of data that seemed to orbit around her, she was obviously a high-level engineer of some sort. The newcomer conferred with the other two technicians for a moment then walked back into the living room.

"Ms. Wyles?" she asked, then continued without waiting for confirmation, "I'm Vir. Dr. Adams. I'm a dream supervisor for Noctivo Systems."

Serah put the coffee cup down on the table in front of the couch. No doubt she was about to get an explanation. "How do you do?" she offered, resisting the urge to shake hands with the projection.

"I just saw your dream. Looks like you took quite a shock. I hope you aren't suffering any lingering effects."

"No, not really," Serah assured her. "It's just that ... well, nothing like that has ever happened before."

"That's understandable," the woman said, nodding as if she hadn't really paid any attention to what Serah had just said. "Tell me, Ms. Wyles, are you under any kind of unusual stress lately? Work or relationship difficulties?"

The personal nature of the question took Serah aback for a moment. She considered making a wise crack about how she enjoyed keeping an ample supply of stress in her life but thought better of it. The woman was a psychoengineer, after all. In general, if they weren't over-analyzing your every sentence, they were seeking out slightest encouragement to shuffle off their professional demeanor and sit and expunge their own innermost fears on to total strangers for hours on end. Perhaps this was some side-effect to the rigid precincts of the sacred doctor-patient relationship. "No, nothing out of the ordinary," Serah finally said, making sure to keep eye contact lest the good doctor read something into that as well.

"There was a man in your dreams. Did you recognize him?"

"No, I've never seen him before--"

"Well, people in dreams may only represent people in real life. Did your feelings toward him remind you of anyone you know, a boss or a boyfriend, maybe?"

"No neither. You watched the dream, I only saw him for a few seconds, he didn't elicit any feelings in me at all." Serah paused for a minute. "Listen, if this is some free psychoanalysis you're giving me, I'm really not comfortable with doing anything like that at this time."

Dr. Adams appeared mildly disappointed. "Well, apparently your sublimducer has suffered what we call a 'parameter flood,'" the woman began with an inflection to her voice that reminded Serah of several of her former primary school instructors. "You see, when you are exposed to drastic changes or unusual levels of stress, the dream program is designed to compensate, but with a minimum of deviation from your preprogrammed sleep/dream regimen. Sometimes, however, the stress level is so severe that the compensations themselves set up additional stresses on your subconscious. An analogy might be the way that patching a small leak in a dike can cause shifts in the rocks that lead to more small leaks, then larger ones, until the entire dike collapses. With the sublimducer, those leaks are really nothing more than program instructions. As your dream state continues to deviate from the preprogrammed dataset, the number of compensating instructions increases exponentially until the

subliminducer simply can't keep up. In those instances, it's programmed to abort its programming and wake you up in order to minimize the risk of psychological damage."

"You're saying I'm so stressed, I broke your dream machine?"

Dr. Adams frowned slightly, "Not precisely, It's just that—"

"A joke," Serah furled her brow, instantly regretting the attempt to make one. "As I just said, I haven't been under any unusual stress lately—" Had the woman not been paying attention, or had she just not believed her? Was Dr. Adams a real person? She identified herself as Vir – a living entity who has chosen to live an entirely virtual existence. Could that be a ploy by a synthetic intelligence to put her at ease? Could she be addressing a navigation avatar for psychoengineering help file? It was so hard to tell sometimes, particularly when dealing with corporations, to whom it would be a minor breach of ethics.

The projection cut her off abruptly, "Maybe you don't think so, Ms. Wyles, but your subconscious most certainly does, and our equipment agrees with it." That response meant Dr. Adams was a genuine person at least, Serah decided. It would be very unlikely for a synthetic customer-service-rep to get baited into rudeness. The avatar composed herself and gestured to a block of telemetry hovering in the air to her left. "We do of course have human staff members who monitor the system and intervene when these types of situations arise, but with cutbacks being what they are and your system being almost a century old... Well, it's nothing you need to worry about. Even when real-time dream supervisors aren't available, there are three-dozen failsafe systems in this old model. It may give you some bumpy nights, but it's still perfectly safe to keep using it. I would suggest, though, that you consider getting rid of this old, hardware-based system and try upgrading to one of our hosted neuro-simulation services. They're fast enough to--"

"I sleep off-line," Serah snapped. Then lifted her hair, showing pure, unblemished skin behind her left ear, where an implanted neural interface would normally be on an estimated 95% of the population. "No wetware interface."

Dr. Adams was obviously taken aback, "A slowbander? That's fascinating. I haven't met very many planet-side adults who don't--" she paused, embarrassed. The Phrame was unique to Earth, thus -- barring the rare neurphysical issue preventing a wetware interface -- most people who elected to be slow-banders were off-world immigrants or aspiring colonists. "I'm sorry, you must understand that as a psychologist, I find anthropophobia--"

"It's not fear," Serah sang, not bothering to meet the doctor's gaze. She had been through the conversation so many times that she wondered if she shouldn't have the transcript written out on flyers that she could distribute whenever someone tried to convert her to the ways of modern technology. "Simply a personal choice," she shrugged. While it was initially her way of rebelling against the norm, the fact was, Serah did harbor hopes that her lack of a neural jack would allow her to mingle better offworld, possibly even going undercover for a major story or research piece.

Most fluids, who maintained a presence in both the physical world -- "idiospace" -- and the virtual world of the Phrame much preferred the latter. Serah, on the other hand, spent very little time on-line via the skullcap, and only when necessity dictated. For her, the slower connection, meant poorer resolution in translating the "Phrame experience" to her own senses, and excluded her from most of the advanced services offered by a direct neural interface that would make the Phrame feel every bit as real as idiospace. Serah still preferred interpersonal, human contact over virtual existence as an avatar, and had never bothered with the augmentation. Because of this, most people regarded her as either quaint primitive or a decadent radical. Secretly, she enjoyed keeping them guessing.

Dr. Adams smiled, patronizingly, obviously having already performed her own mental categorization. "Well," she said dejectedly, "technically, this model's service program does cover both individual and group therapy sessions to help you orient yourself to the sleep/dream regimen, as well as helping you optimize the programs to give you the maximum benefit. Of course, nobody really uses these old models anymore and we no longer have the real-world facilities to handle such requests, but Noctivo will honor the letter of the agreement should you choose to--"

"I'll be fine," Serah said, curtly.

Dr. Adams smiled and faded from the room. Allen and Étienne said their brief but polite goodbyes and followed shortly behind her. Serah was alone once again.

CHAPTER TWO

Little could be said about the London Metroplex's Transit System, except that it was always on time. The transparent, bubble-like tube cars were designed to be unobtrusive, silent, and for the most part uninteresting to look at, which meant that they didn't distract from the natural dull gray metalwork of the Metroplex itself. With much of the physical world falling into disuse, replaced by the efficiencies of virtual existence, there seemed little point in ornamental detail -- or mass-transit systems for that matter. Despite a global population estimated at nearly 5 billion "biological" people, fewer than a third -- the so-called "fluid" -- ever bothered to leave their homes and interact in the physical world. The rest led strictly virtual, idyllic lives in the Phrame. Cities, once overpopulated with tens of millions of residents, were now hollow shells slowly succumbing to the relentless forces of entropy. Political initiatives had begun converting the outer districts back to nature preserves or tomb-like historical centers, while many inner districts were routinely gutted and rebuilt from the ground up to reflect the changing needs of the population. At least, after centuries of destroying the planet, mankind was finally starting to repair the damage it had done.

The nine-minute express ride from Bethnal Green to the Soho Tower Centre was pleasant, and usually the social high point of Serah's day -- a chance to interact with various flesh-and-blood acquaintances she had made over the past few years. She and the rest of the "Car Seven Commuter Club" were beginning to feel like something of an elite group, having had relatively few additions or losses to their membership in recent memory.

Today however, she was in no mood to exchange pleasantries. The disruption of her normally unshakable nightly routine had left her in an effete haze. A "bad dream" seemed a trivial excuse for ending a three-year perfect attendance record, but she had briefly entertained the idea of calling in sick. As the train sped along, Serah avoided making eye contact with the half-dozen or so other passengers and settled into a comfortable rear-facing seat at the back of car. Her personal datapad, the one essential item in her life, scrolled her itinerary over a pale blue background and indicated a light workday.

"Amazing," a man's voice came from across the aisle next to her. "I didn't realize anybody still used antiques like that."

Serah stifled the urge to reply with a snide comment, choosing instead to fake a smile and pat the flat screen as if it were a favorite pet. "My oldest, dearest friend," she cooed. She glanced over at

the man and stifled an embarrassed gasp. He was tall and handsome, with perfect blonde hair and piercing green eyes. His suit was contemporary in fashion was unmistakably hand-made, bearing the label of what Serah knew to be one of the more expensive boutiques in the Chelsea district.

"I'm Michael," the man said, cautiously extending his hand with a warm smile.

"Serah Wyles," she replied, shaking his hand. His skin was smooth and his grip firm. When she pulled back her hand, she caught a scent of expensive cologne, one of her favorites. "I've not seen you on this train before."

"Yes," the man looked embarrassed. "I normally take the second train, but most of the people I know have stopped riding lately. You know how it is: new jobs, promotions to virtual offices, early retirements, and so forth. Since I've been feeling energetic lately, I thought I might change my routine and earn some overtime credits."

"Wish I could say the same for my energy level today," Serah smirked.

"Do you work in Soho Tower?"

"Yes, I'm a journalist with Neward and Provident."

Michael paused, thinking for a moment. "That's right," he said at last. "Didn't you do that wonderful interview with the Emir of Persia from the Diego Garcia penal colony a couple of years ago?"

A chill went down Serah's spine, as it always did whenever somebody mentioned the Emir. "Yes, that was mine," she said. "Frankly, I'm surprised anybody downloaded that. Usually the darker, tragic stories about human cruelty and suffering aren't at all popular with the viewers."

"Well, foreign politics is a particular interest of mine," he said, then quickly added, "not necessarily incarcerated former dictators and insane mass-murderers, mind you." He chuckled slightly then leaned a little closer to Serah. "Seriously, that was a great piece. It took a lot of guts to face off with him the way you did. Though I must admit I had nightmares for weeks after seeing some of the documentary footage."

The word "nightmare" echoed in her head and triggered another chill. Serah shook reflexively. She remembered having nightmares of her own as she sifted through hours and hours of footage documenting the worst human suffering -- and inhuman atrocities-in recent history. She remembered Henry, her boss, forcing her to visit a therapist. She also remembered purchasing the sublimducer just to be able to get through the nights.

Her surroundings faded away briefly, and she suddenly pictured the old man in her dream again, remembering every detail of his features as his chest literally exploded in front of her, snapping her back to reality.

She jumped with a start, realized she had probably been staring blankly at Michael, and wondered what he must think of her to appear so obsessed at the reference of her spouse on the Emir. Obviously, he was still interested, however, so she shrugged the thought off. "And what do you do for a living?"

Michael uncrossed his legs, meticulously brushing something from his trousers. "Oh, a little bit of everything, I guess. Whatever puts food on the table without requiring a lot of effort."

"I see," Serah said, not having a follow-up for such a vague response. A few seconds of awkward silence passed.

"You seem a bit out of sorts," he said furrowing his eyebrows. "If I may ask, is everything all right?"

Serah shrugged, wondering briefly if her disorientation was really that obvious. "Oh, just a little problem with my sublimducer last night," she said.

Michael's eyes seemed to sparkle, he leaned in further and lowered his voice as if about to share a rare and precious secret. "I know exactly what you mean. My old one started acting up and after a while I just didn't trust it not to fry my synapses while I slept. Ended up replacing it with that new Stewart Mosaic 2700 and their premium subscription service. They have a complete staff of qualified analysts who--"

"You use a sublimducer?" Serah asked suspiciously, nodding towards the neural interface jack plainly visible behind Michael's left ear. "Why don't you just sleep on-line and use a hosted neuro-simulation service?" Michael's smile quickly faded. His eyes darted around the car as if looking for the answer. Serah frowned in disappointment. "You're a billy, aren't you?" The man sat back and said nothing. She let out a grunt of frustration, then said, "I can't believe I fell for that. You people are shameless. Does my consumer file really make me out to be this desperate and gullible?"

Michael smiled acerbically and shrugged like an errant child who had just been caught telling a lie. The "human billboards," guerilla salesmen who seemed to prey on unsuspecting fluids for their virtual megacorp bosses, had gotten out of control in recent years. There was a statistic that said that, if less than a third of the population interacted as fluids, then as many as 25% of that number were

actually employed as billys, influencers, surveillance specialists, or other corporate analysts that keep vigilant watch on unsuspecting potential consumers, as well as the competition. There were days when Serah had no trouble believing that a sizable portion of the people she knew were covert commercial agents -- the flesh-tools of the megacorps.

Worse, Serah's service call to Noctivo Systems had been a bold announcement to agents and tracking databases all over the planet she was alive and well -- and having problems with her sublimducer. Hundreds of corporations would have spent the last three hours retrieving copies of consumer file. By now, they would have analyzed her work history, travel schedules, hobbies, and interests to help them calculate the perfect (or at least most efficient) personal sales pitch. The next forty-eight hours would be filled with offers for every conceivable product and service: sleep-inducing medications, dream analysis specialists, and dieticians who claim to have developed an all-natural alternative to sublimduced sleep regimens. She was now the hapless target of the ultra-competitive global marketplace at its most ferocious.

The sad part was, the tactics apparently worked, at least enough to justify them as common practice. People purchased goods based on the recommendation of billys and influencers all the time, perhaps without even knowing it. Each of these so-called gentle contacts were recorded and tracked by megacorps, analyzed for trends, then sold or traded throughout other vertical markets-all this in an effort to build the most comprehensive data set imaginable for each person in idiospace.

Michael blushed slightly, trying to salvage the work he had put into the pitch thus far, "Honestly, Ms. Wyles, we only want to help you. If you would just--"

"Help me?" Serah laughed incredulously, raising her voice a decibel or so. "The very first words out of your mouth were a deliberate deception. Why would I want to do business with the likes of you?"

"Look, Ms. Wyles, it's just a job," he said defensively. "I have a right to --"

"Yes, let's talk about rights," she interrupted, completely fed up with the conversation. "How about I just claim my 'Article 43' rights, and you go back to your little hole in the wall and wipe my record from your system!" She tapped a quick, well-rehearsed series of commands on her datapad, and beamed her consumer ID number to the government-mandated personal recorder Michael would be wearing on his belt. There was a beep of acknowledgement from the device, and Serah grinned triumphantly. There wasn't much that could be done about such types of harassment, but the

consumer privacy acts were irrefutable law. She didn't really mind corporations tracking and storing minute details about where she ate, what she wore, or as Michael's appearance would seem to indicate, her personal tastes in men, fashion, and cologne. She would not abide a company that abused the privilege, however. Her verbal instructions and transmission of her consumer ID legally bound his employers to erase all information they had acquired about her over the years. With luck, they would consider her a "lost customer" and not even go to the trouble of starting or purchasing a new dataset. Growling in frustration, she turned and stared out the window. Michael got up and quietly drifted to the other side of the car a few moments later.

* * * * *

The Neward and Provident Newsnet Agency's main offices, at least as far as the "physical world" was concerned, were sparsely decorated and encompassed a mere 2500 square feet of space tucked in the back of the 263rd floor of the Soho Tower Centre's northeastern wing. In the reality of the Phrame, however, they were the ninth largest newsnet corporation on the planet, employing thousands of agents, analysts, and other content producers. The meager 10'x10' physical world waiting area, or P-lobby, was empty, except for the solitary avatar of a young, bright-eyed man who stood in the middle of the room, greeting Serah as she exited the lift.

"Good morning, Ms. Wyles."

"Good morning, Erik," she nodded to the avatar. "Slow day so far?" While Vir. Erik Walker maintained a competent air of professionalism and efficiency to most, over the years they had established a rapport, and he had allowed Serah to see the more flamboyant and mischievous sides of his personality. As a result, he was one of her favorite people.

"Oh, we've got 37 people in the V-lobby right now," he said in a disinterested tone. Most of them are here to complain about our 'biased coverage' of the Comanche Embassy bombing yesterday. For the most part, they're not even taking 20 percent of my bandwidth, though."

Serah rolled her eyes, knowing Erik's penchant for controlling simultaneous avatars. With a base configuration and no special training, most people had the mental acuity to run two at a time convincingly; three for short durations in a pinch. She had known Erik to convincingly run as many as half-a-dozen avatars simultaneously. This had the advantage of allowing him to literally be in six places

at once. Such a feat was rarely matched, except by expertly trained military and government specialists for purposes of intelligence and infiltration.

"Erik," she grinned, rehashing the running joke the two had shared for the past five years, "You do understand, when most people moonlight at two or three companies, they usually don't go to all three jobs at the same time?"

"Hey, it's not enough that I be able to afford my opulent lifestyle, I must also have enough time left over in my day to enjoy it." He bowed flamboyantly. "So, what the hell happened to you last night?"

Serah arched one eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Erik took a deep breath and began, "You've received 270 new messages in the past six hours, and all but thirteen of them were solicitations of some form. I routed the legitimate ones to your terminal and kill-filed the rest. You've also had six calls from gentlemen claiming to have lunch dates with you and wanting to know what your favorite restaurant was. I know you never mix business with your social life, and since Henry had already ordered lunch for two to be delivered to the conference room, I assume they were all billys. Two of them were rather cute tough, so I ran a quick background check and made sure they weren't married or anything, then left things a bit vague in case you wanted a free lunch and a chance at some social interaction--"

"Ugh!" Serah cut him off abruptly. "K-F them as well. I loathe salespeople."

"Sensible policy," Erik continued without missing a beat. "I'll call them back and tell them all of your personal finances are held in trust by a cult of devout mango worshippers in New Tibet and they should really go through those channels if they're trying to get their hands on anything but your--"

"--Thank you, Erik." Serah hissed before he could complete the thought.

"You really should hire one of those blockers to accompany you when you go out. Some of those billys can be dangerous you know. I've heard stories about people signing over their entire life's savings without even knowing it."

"Tell Henry I need a raise then," Serah said as she walked down the hallway towards her office.

To Serah, her work area was simply an extension of her living quarters, which were in turn an extension of her personality. The automated routine ran like clockwork as it had every morning for four years. As she entered the small room, ambient lights flickered on, a desk lamp swung itself into position

over her work area, and the holoprojection screen on the wall flickered on, displaying a picturesque country field bordered by lush meadow. The food dispenser in the corner hummed to life and, after a well-memorized musical series of gurgles and beeps, presenting her with one perfect cup of coffee and one glass of water. She placed the coffee on the sandstone coaster on her desk, and carefully poured the water into the potted plant in the corner. Next, she called for her terminal and personal portal and slid into the perfectly formed chair behind her desk as a jumble of reports and tickers materialized and danced through the air in front of her.

She casually brought up a couple of headlines concerning the American block commodity markets, as well as the latest on the Comanche Embassy incident -- which, it turned out, was the one in the Antarctic preserve. Everything else was a jumble of meaningless numbers to her this morning. She yawned. This was a bad sign for 9:05, even if she hadn't yet finished her first cup of coffee. Unable to concentrate, she stared blankly and the meadow image on the projection screen. Though she didn't know the artist's name, the picture was a favorite of hers and had been since she had first seen the original in the Buckingham Dome Museum at the impressionable age of ten. The painting's subtle details had sparked an interest in pursuing a career as an artist ... then a poet ... then a sculptor ... then a novelist. It didn't matter which dream was prevalent in her mind, the painting simply represented sheer creative force to her. Ironically, the copy projected on the wall in her office was now the only expression of pure creativity she saw most days.

She sipped at her coffee and studied the picture, a regular exercise she felt necessary to focus her mind for the day ahead. The beauty of piece to her was that no matter how many times she examined it, she could always find some new detail or inspiration in it that she had never noticed before. It was simply a matter of changing her perspective and looking at the picture as if it were the first time again. After about five minutes she found what she was looking for: nothing more than a swath of black paint behind a brown tree trunk, really. To Serah, however, it was now a shadow, possibly cast by some woodland creature the artist had painted, then covered up with the tree trunk. She imagined for a moment that she could peer behind the tree and see a figure standing there -- a figure dressed in a black uniform with a visored helmet.

He stood there, not moving, regarding her for a moment. He transfixed Serah somehow, and she felt unable to avert her gaze or look away. Reaching down slowly with his right arm, he removed a sidearm from its hip-holster. Casually and methodically, so as not to startle his prey, his arm raised and aligned the sights on Serah. There was a loud bang as he pulled the trigger.

Serah jumped and yelped reflexively, then stared at the painting again.

The figure was gone, as was the streak of black paint she had spotted earlier.

"Rough night?" a friendly voice in the doorway boomed. Serah shrieked and jumped again, this time splashing coffee onto her desk. "Sorry, kiddo," the man apologized.

"Morning, Henry," she said with a nervous giggle as she exchanged the coffee for her datapad, stood up, and headed for the door. "Staff meeting this morning, right?"

"That's where I was heading." His face grew concerned. "You look beat today."

"Yeah, having issues with my sublimducer."

"Ugh, I hate those things; the idea of some quack analyst and his computer monitoring, programming, and controlling my dreams just to improve the efficiency of my sleep cycle and gain me a few more hours of boredom during the day..." He stuck out his tongue in mock distaste.

"I can't get along without it ... obviously."

Henry frowned. "How long is your programmed sleep cycle?"

"Just under four hours."

"Good grief!" he exclaimed, amazed. "How can anyone function like that? Myself, I take a minimum of nine hours, all natural and unassisted, the way nature intended."

Serah laughed, "You realize, of course, that you're missing over a third of your life that way."

"Nah, I've already done everything I wanted to. Now I'm just trying to recuperate." He smiled warmly. "You ought to just try it once in a while, you'll feel a lot better in the long run."

"Well, when you retire, and I've got your job, then I'll be able to afford that kind of time. Until then--"

"Hey, I'll give you the time if you want it. All you need to do is ask, you know. You work too hard as it is, and I can't afford to lose my best reporter."

Serah raised a hand and smiled, hoping to put an end to the argument for the moment.

Henry patted her gently on the shoulder, then slid back the door to the conference area and motioned Serah inside. "Well, think about it anyway. I'm genuinely concerned about you, you know."

Serah regarded the man for a moment. Henry Whittaker had been her mentor during her university years and had immediately recommended her when a position at Neward and Provident opened up. She knew she owed no small debt to him for her subsequent successes, which had culminated in her becoming the youngest full correspondent the agency had ever had. Like herself, he too lacked the neural jack needed for complete sensory immersion in the Phrame. While she merely tolerated the associated label of "non-conformist," however, Henry seemed to revel in it. The benefits of rank, she decided. On one occasion after an intense debate about his inefficient insistence on using his physical body, Henry had used the ancient typewriter in his office to type all the senior staff's annual bonuses out on paper cheques. He then sealed the cheques in envelopes, and left them on the conference room table, inviting the assembled avatars to "drop by and pick theirs up" at their convenience. The lesson seemed lost on his employees, however.

Though Serah figured the man to be some eighty years her senior, physically he still appeared to be in his early sixties, and she knew him to have a wife at home who looked even younger. The idea of commodified beauty was one of those nagging questions that always ate at Serah. Would she end up spending her later years and a small fortune on rejuvenation treatments to extend her life for additional decades? For that matter, would she one day break down, have the neural jack installed, and pay for a metabolic stasis tank for her body while her consciousness lived permanently linked in to the Phrame waiting for her brain to physically wear itself out? Age and death were rapidly becoming quaint, old-fashioned concepts. The ability to completely copy and simulate memory matrices and neurological activities had existed for several years, ensuring a type of transhuman immortality once the biological components of a person were no longer feasible. Currently Rep. (reproduced/replicated) individuals were a small demographic, only numbering in the tens of millions, but they were the fastest-growing demographic. At present, as long as the biological brain was still functioning, it was still more efficient to keep that preserved in an artificial cadaver than it was to create, store, and run a replicated personality. Though any Rep would claim they have no conception of being dead and their current perception and experience is no different from when they were alive, and they had all of the laws and protections afforded to Simulated personalities, there were still endless philosophical arguments about consciousness, the self, and the soul that would probably never be answered.

"Something else bothering you, kiddo?" Henry asked.

Serah realized she had been staring at the man and gave a defeated smile. "Oh, Henry, why is it that my most meaningful relationships are with men who are either married, incarcerated madmen, or worse still, salespeople?"

A female voice giggled from the other side of the room. "Because you persist in that degenerate off-line lifestyle of yours instead of meet-netting a nice man and settling down in the real world."

"I was misinformed," Serah sighed, "I thought this was the real world, Maggie." She nodded to the avatar seated at the table.

"Not anymore, my dear." Vir. Maggie Steward had been with the company for twice as long as Serah had been alive and for most of that time served as the be-all-end-all decider of what went into the style-related content the agency published. She may be a major expert of and influencer on cutting-edge fashion and outrageous pop culture professionally, but personally Serah didn't understand the woman's self-righteous devotion to traditional, conservative values like marriage. She may have been happily married for over sixty years, as she was apt to remind Serah at every available opportunity, but as she had only been in the same room as her husband three times -- at least as far as the physical world was concerned -- the argument had little relevance to Serah.

"Honestly, dear," Maggie continued, "you're never going to meet anyone unless you spend a little more of your time linked-in. I don't see what you have against joining the civilized world and settling down with your soul mate," she smiled condescendingly, then added, "on-line that is." Serah busied herself flipping aimlessly through various files on her notepad, hoping to end the discussion. Maggie persisted, however. "Unless of course you have aspirations of being a breeder or something as--"

"Now Maggie, don't be such a cynic," Henry scolded. "I've got to believe that the important things in life, the ones that really make you happy, can't be cataloged, preprogrammed, or distributed by the Phrame with a stamped-out compatibility rating. If two people were meant to be together, love will find a way."

Maggie was polite, but obviously not amused with the argument. "That's a sweet, primitive sentiment, Henry, and I'm sure it has worked out just fine for you, but surely you understand you're the famous anomaly."

Another avatar, a younger man with short-cropped red hair, rezzed into the chair next to Serah. "I don't know, I find something curiously arousing about the idea of an idiophysical relationship. It seems so ... primitive and feral," he laughed. "Not to mention dangerous."

Serah blushed in embarrassment. Was her sex life, or at least what her co-workers imagined it to be, a frequent topic of discussion when she was not around? She could only hope that the perverted fantasies of her co-workers proved more interesting than the reality of her situation. "Careful, Jafet, or I'll find where you keep your pale, atrophied body and breathe on it," she said dryly, without looking up from her notepad. She genuinely liked Vir. Jafet Meléndez, and she knew he would appreciate the slight taboo of the joke, while at the same time completely offending Maggie.

Jafet laughed, then leaned in close to Serah, and whispered, "Well, I'm not one for bleeding through the eyeballs or whatever you get with the latest venereal disease out there, but if I thought you were the least bit serious, I'd happily take the risk." The offer was no doubt serious. Sex was quite a casual act on the Phrame, particularly anonymous sex. In fact, despite the average Phramer's perception of the idiospace, it was probably much less prevalent in the physical world these days.

Serah laughed off the proposition, knowing Jafet would leave it at that.

"You really should listen to Maggie once in a while," he said, smiling dejectedly. "You might just meet the man of your dreams."

Dreams ...

The word hung in Serah's mind. She pictured the old man, remembered the pleading look in his eyes, and heard the needler exploding in his chest. The last thing she remembered was Henry, in the corner of her vision, darting across the room to catch her as she fell out of her chair.

CHAPTER THREE

Endless rows of towers stretched thousands of feet into the blackness above. Each was perfectly square, about fifty feet on a side, and made of black obsidian that seemed alive with the pulsing glow of soft violet light. The towers were arranged to form a grid of corridor-like pathways, each identical to the last, stretching outward as far as the eye could see. Serah glided through the corridors. It was not the carefree kind of gliding she had done the night before around the waterfall, but instead more like the sensation of standing on an invisible conveyor that moved her in a steady, almost rhythmic motion. There was something more than that, however. She felt as if she was somehow controlling the conveyor; able to change her direction and speed with a mere thought or wave of the hand. She simply chose not to. For the moment, one direction seemed as good as any to her.

Occasionally, brighter sparks of light appeared, seemingly inside the tower walls. The lights pulsed and hummed briefly, then shot off in a straight line into the distance, skipping from tower to tower with a strange, disjointed "whooshing" sound. Meanwhile, the conveyor moved on, jogging left for a while, then right, then left again, but always seeming to follow the sparks.

Serah rounded a corner and was surprised to find a single non-conformity in what had proven to be an endlessly uniform grid work of passages. A bright red pipe emerged from the side of one of the towers and stretched its way into the distance along the corridor wall about eight feet above the ground. After a hundred feet or so, the pipe joined another, forming a T-shaped intersection. The invisible conveyor turned at this point, following the new pipe, which was then joined by three other red pipes. After what seemed like several hundred feet, a blue pipe emerged a few feet above the red ones.

Abruptly the conveyor changed directions again. Intersections in the maze of pipes became exponentially more frequent, and a great multi-colored latticework formed above and around her. Before Serah could ascertain if the pipes followed some sort of mathematical progression or pattern, the intersections had become too numerous to count, and the intricate, colorful web obscured the black sky above her.

She was about to will the conveyor to stop so that she could find her way back to the comfortable symmetry of the empty corridors when she noticed a dull yellow glow ahead. The light seemed even more incongruous than the pipes, but somehow, she knew, without really knowing, that this was the destination she had been seeking. The conveyor seemed to know this too, as it suddenly picked up speed with what Serah felt was almost a human-like fervor and enthusiasm.

Upon reaching the light, the conveyor glided to a smooth stop, gently depositing Serah inside a fifty-foot square chamber whose walls seemed to form the nucleus of intricate pipe-web. The floor was solid but shimmering with the consistency of fluorescent liquid and seemed strangely cold under her bare feet. Seated in the middle of the room, serenely curled into a lotus position, was the figure of an old man. The same man she had seen in the forest dream the night before. His eyes were closed, and his arms rested gently on his knees, palms turned upward. She approached cautiously, crouching in front of him. His breathing was slow and meticulous -- too slow, it seemed, for consciousness.

She reached out for his wrist, expecting to find a faint, thready pulse. The man suddenly jerked awake with a gasping inrush of breath. Serah fell backwards in surprise as he scampered backwards in the opposite direction and shrank into a fetal position. An expression of terror and amazement blazed across his face.

"That was very foolish!" the man scolded. "You shouldn't have come here!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"—Now he knows who you are!" his voice shook at the edge of hysteria.

"Who?"

The man ignored her completely. "Wait a minute. You got in here." He shook a finger in the air as if trying to remember something important. "You were out there ... but now you're here." His eyes lit up with recognition. "How DID you get in here?!" his voice becoming accusatory.

"I came from right--" Serah turned around and pointed straight at a wall of pipes that looked, seemingly, exactly like the other three. She was trapped. "I mean I was..."

The old man rushed to the wall behind her and began pulling on the pipes, obviously hoping to jar one loose and reveal the secret exit. "Help me! Hurry! Before he--" He turned around to grab Serah and stopped, transfixed by something behind her. His face blanched.

Serah spun. A dark figure stood against the far wall of the room. Had he been there all along, or had he followed her? He did not look exactly like the same man she had seen in the glade. The gray and black uniform was now a dark blue tunic ornamented with swashes of silver and topped with a kepis-style hat. Where the reflective visor had been, Serah now peered into the coldest, grayest eyes she had ever seen, and an inhuman malice and hate peered back at her. No, the appearance was different, but it was unmistakably the same man. She could feel that somehow.

The old man frowned, defeated. "I'm trying, but I just can't control him."

"Who is he? Who are you?" Serah demanded. The reply, if it ever came, went unheard. As the speeding projectile entered his chest and exploded, Serah was jarred awake for the second time in as many nights.

"You mean you seriously don't remember going home yesterday?" Henry asked, amazed.

"No, I don't. The last thing I remember was getting ready for the morning staff meeting." Serah tried to keep her voice from shaking and she paced around the kitchen only occasionally looking up at the man on the video screen.

"That's when you fainted," he offered.

"I did?"

"Yes. I carried you back to your office and started to call the corporate physician, but you wouldn't hear of it. You said you were fine, just a little tired from the bad sleep cycle. I insisted you go home and get some proper sleep, and you didn't even put up a fight."

She struggled to remember anything between the staff meeting and waking up her apartment but recalled nothing of what Henry was describing. It didn't even sound like her. Surely, she wouldn't have left work to be home alone, particularly if she were suddenly prone to fainting spells. "When did I leave?"

Henry thought for a moment. "Around 10:30 I suppose. You seemed fine at the time. A little tired, but otherwise fine."

Seventeen hours. They were all a blank to her.

"Listen," he continued, "why don't you stay home today, and I'll send the corporate physician over to--"

She whipped around. "No, don't be silly, I'm fine. It's all coming back to me," she lied. "I guess I'm just not used to sleeping that long in one stretch. It disoriented me a little." She moved towards the

wall to keep the automated vidcam from picking up the commotion in the next room. "I'll be there in an hour."

Henry frowned and started to protest. Serah countered him with a stern look that said he could not possibly win the argument. He didn't press further. "Well, as long as you're okay, then." She was sure Henry didn't believe that for a moment, and no doubt the corporate physician would meet her in the lobby when she arrived. "By the way," he added, "would you mind stopping off at the Tower Police precinct house by the train station? I need you to authenticate so we can pick up a homicide report from last night."

In her confusion, the words took a moment to register. "Homicide? In Soho Tower?"

Henry nodded. "Yeah, weird, isn't it? See you in an hour."

"Thanks, Henry," she said and flipped of vidscreen.

Seventeen hours. She kept rolling the concept over in her mind. How could she not remember any of it?

Allen's avatar walked across the living room towards the edge of the field closest to the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Ms. Wyles," he said with a tone that bordered on condescending. "According to our diagnostic, there's nothing wrong with your sublimducer."

"What do you mean: 'nothing wrong'? Your infernal machine has jarred me awake with nightmares two nights in row, and now I'm experiencing short-term memory loss. You think that's normal?" Serah's face flushed with both fear and frustration. Was she going crazy? She placed the cup of mint tea in the sink. She had never been particularly fond of tea and wondered why she hadn't disposed of the beverage as soon as she accidentally selected it. She ran her fingers through her hair, pulling the loose strands away from her face and considered, briefly, the possibility of having her head shaved to end the constant irritation. It was a strange thought. Where had it come from? Stress and exhaustion were beginning to wear at her nerves, she realized. Politeness dictated that she apologize for the verbal display, but she took some kind of sadistic enjoyment at the discomfort that shown clearly on the incompetent technician's face.

"We can't be held liable for the memory loss. Do you realize how dangerous modding the system to bypass the safeguards is? You're lucky you didn't --"

"I did what to what?" Serah asked, more annoyed than confused.

He gestured with his hand and row after row of seemingly random letters and numbers scrolled between the two of them. "You see, the telemetry is all in order, but last night you bypassed the safety protocols and ran your sleep program three times in a row. Surely you understand that without the system to monitor and adjust to your mental responses, the program can't be balanced for --"

"I did no such thing!" Serah protested.

The technician pointed to a section of code that highlighted itself in red. "It's right here."

"Allen," she said, defeated, "Do you really think I am technically capable of modifying a system like this?"

Allen seemed to consider this for a moment before answering at least. "I have no reason to doubt you, but are you sure you didn't patch in some third-party dream customization program that might have had malicious code attached?"

"You've been watching and programming my dreams for years. You have detailed scans of my neurology and my personality. Does anything you know about me indicate I'm the type of person who endanger herself just to have more-thrilling dreams?"

"Well, no but given the fact that your mental state is erratic enough that your sublimducer shut itself down two nights ago, and you're currently suffering short-term memory loss from running a programmed sleep cycle redundantly and without proper safeguards, can you really say for certain that you didn't do it?"

Serah considered the implications. "You said I ran my sleep program three times in a row?"

"Yes," Allen said, pulling up three blocks of numbers and floating them in the air between them. "One after the other, right here: 17:30 hours, 21:15 hours, and 01:00 hours."

Three times.

She tried to make sense of it all. At least that accounted for ten of her missing hours. What had she done during the remaining seven hours between leaving work and going to bed? Surely, she didn't come home and fall asleep unassisted. She shivered at the thought. Another fainting spell, perhaps? And why had she run the program three times? More nightmares she didn't remember? Had she rerun the program to compensate? She thought back, but only remembered the last dream.

"I don't remember any of it." She muttered.

Allen thought for a moment. "Ms. Wyles, I can't stress enough the seriousness of unauthorized modifications ... " He stopped, obviously not wanting to alarm her.

"Look, can you remove the modifications and turn the safety protocols back on or not?" She snapped, then took a calming breath. "I don't know what's going on, but if the machine is misconfigured, it's because of something you people did. If it's dangerous to use, it's your job to fix it."

"I can fix this system, Ms. Wyles, but maybe the nightmares and memory loss are a manifestation of some repressed stress or trauma. If you like, I can arrange to have a qualified--"

"I'm not interested in talking to one of your head-shrinkers!" She said abruptly, confusion and frustration turning to anger. "Recalibrate the damned thing, re-balance my program, or whatever you call it, but if you people cause me so much as a uncomfortable chill tomorrow night, I'll personally rip the thing out of the wall and vidphone my attorney." She walked straight through the avatar, gesturing for him to leave, as she stepped up towards the bedroom.

"Yes, ma'am," Allen said calmly as he hastily winked out of existence.

Where had that come from? She was not the type to make idle threads like that. Allen was only doing his job and was in fact being very helpful. Maybe he was right, and she should see a psychiatrist. She crossed the bedroom and pressed the controls to draw a bath, hoping that would make her feel better, assuming she didn't faint -- or worse, fall asleep -- and drown herself. She knew she would feel better once she got back out and among physical people again.

* * * * *

Serah walked through the large automatic doors into the P-Lobby of the Soho Tower Police precinct house. The large room was cold and unfriendly. A tall counter ran the length of the far wall. Clerks and officers, mostly avatars she guessed, peered down from the top of the counter on to an assembly of people who had formed themselves into a dozen or so single-file lines.

"May I help you," a voice said from behind her. She turned, stifled a startled yelp, and almost leapt out of her skin. A large lion, or at least an avatar of one, stood behind her. It was almost two meters in height, standing on its hind legs, and had features vaguely personified to look slightly more cartoonish than a real lion.

"I'm sorry," the lion said in a booming baritone voice. "I thought you'd seen me. The boys in the PR office really didn't think this idea through when they commissioned the Avatar. For some reason its endearing to children, but if I'm not careful, I can really startle adults -- particularly if they don't watch children's vid-programs and know the character."

Still bug-eyed with shock, Serah nodded in emphatic agreement and swallowed hard. "My fault ..." she whispered, half gasping. "No kids," she said by means of explanation, shrugging with a sheepish smile.

The lion smiled. "What can we do for you?"

"I'm with Neward and Provident. They sent me to authenticate for transmission of the last night's homicide report."

The lion smiled. It seemed a bit unnatural, though disarming. "Certainly. Would you like to speak with a press liaison as well?"

It had been a while since Serah had done anything like this. She was grateful that the lion was more versed with routine press relations. "Yes, that would be fine," she said.

"Credentials please."

"Hmmm?" She gaped for a moment, still not quite used to talking to two-meter-tall lions, even charming ones that smiled. "Oh, sorry." She reached into her pocket, removed an electronic credential card and held it up in front of her.

The lion closed his eyes momentarily as his operator made the arrangements. "Thank you, Miss Wyles. If you would care to step over to queue number ten." He pointed a giant paw towards what was, mercifully, one of the shorter lines. She walked over and stood behind another avatar, this one of a young, pretty woman dressed in what appeared to be swimwear. The woman examined Serah from head to toe, scowling disapprovingly.

It took only ten minutes for her to get through the line. She showed her credentials to the clerk above her. A few seconds later, a short, elderly man, this time not an avatar, stepped out from behind the counter and approached her. "Hello, Miss Wyles," he said with a broad grin. "I'm Sergeant Conners." He extended a hand, which Serah shook. Conners gently led her out of line and into a small surveillance-proof meeting room adjacent to the P-Lobby. Once inside, he verified her credentials once more, explaining about some new privacy protection initiative. "Some district qubit-brain has it in his

head that justice is moving too swiftly, and we need a few more levels of bureaucracy to slow things down," the man said with disgust. "Says we're libel to make mistakes without all the extra checks and balances."

Serah smirked and raised one eyebrow as a gesture of understanding. Conners pulled out a datapad and began pulling up a series of files. "Not sure what kind of mistakes we can make here. We don't see it too often, but this guy's pretty obviously been murdered." He tapped the transmit button and the files instantly copied themselves onto Serah's display. "Per your authentication, these are also being uploaded to the N&P submission server. I'll save you the reading, if you like: One dead billy, name of Galloway. Local resident."

Serah skimmed through the first several pages of the report. She stopped on a standard ID photo of the victim. A chill worked its way through her body. "Michael..." she said softly

"No." the Sergeant yawned, checking the summary page again. "Robert. Age 24. Employed by Stewart Labs. No next of kin. He was last seen alive at approximately 12:45 PM at a café in Kensington. "

Of course, "Michael" was the name of her best friend from primary school. No doubt Robert Galloway had usurped it to engender trust on some subconscious level. Billys had no shame. She remembered the smugness on the man's face. Just a job, he had said. She flipped through a few more pages, coming eventually to the crime scene report. Guilt suddenly overtook her. Billy or not, he had been murdered. But why? Did somebody appreciate his invasive tactics even less than she? Was he involved in some shady dealings that had gone wrong? Or was he just a victim of random, senseless violence.

"Body found in a closet in the machine level last night. Coroner puts the time of death between noon and 1:00 yesterday. More than likely, we're dealing with a robbery gone wrong."

"How can you tell that?" She asked.

Conners pressed a couple of buttons on the pad, then turned the display around for Serah to see the identification card. "There were no possessions on the body when we found it. His id and credentials were found and turned in to the Soho precinct house hours earlier."

She returned to the datapad and skimmed a few more pages, her eyes fell on the name of the Kensington café where he was last seen. "Nine Stones," she read aloud. "Haven't been there in a while." It had been a regular haunt of hers during her university years, though when most of her old friends settled for more-lucrative Phrame jobs, the café lost its luster and she stopped going.

"Better get there quick, they're tearing it down next month."

"Tearing it down?"

The sergeant sniffed and scratched his nose. "Yeah, making way for that new arcology tower and all. The proprietor was very helpful and friendly when we interviewed him, but you could tell he was really upset about losing the place. Anyway, that's about all we can give you for now. There's a case number on the main page if you want updates later." He turned and started towards the door.

A strange sensation poked at the back of Serah's mind. Even though there was no tangible reason -- at least none she could easily identify in the information she had in front of her -- a nagging feeling crept into her mind.

There was something more to this. Something important.

"Now, wait a minute," Serah started to protest. "I'm not clear on some things."

Conners stopped, rolled his eyes in annoyance, and stared at Serah.

"Do you have any leads? Any suspects?"

"Now, Miss Wyles," the sergeant said in a well-rehearsed tone, "under free-information statutes, we are obligated to release to you all of the information you currently have in your possession. It is not department policy to discuss leads, suspects, or the details of ongoing investigations, and obviously you people know the rules about publishing speculation or conjecture. We would appreciate it of course if you could add the standard tag line encouraging anyone to contact us if they have additional information--"

"But who would want to kill a billy?"

Conners rolled his eyes. "You want a list?" he muttered under his breath. "Those guys are a menace to the public if you ask me. Half of them are scam artists, the other half are so pathetic that harassing people seems to be their only marketable skill. If we find anybody who sheds a tear for this one, I'll be surprised." He opened the door to the lobby and bowed exaggeratedly, "Now, unless you require anything else, I've got a work file filled with reports to get back to. Hell, I'm surprised District hasn't required criminals to fill out applications before they're allowed to commit crimes."

Serah ignored the joke. The feeling of ominous portent still nagged at the back of her mind. Frustrated she could not place its source, she switched off the datapad, thanked the Sergeant politely for his time, and made her way up to the Neward and Provident offices.

* * * * *

Once she had settled into her desk, Serah began to feel more at ease. The display of market data, news updates, and myriad projects swirling above her desk felt familiar and comfortable. The only marked difference: a picture of a Scottish farmhouse now replaced the usual meadow painting on the holoprojector. Erik had managed to keep any additional billys, sales inquiries, and unannounced callers at bay once again, remarking that the onslaught had subsided considerably since the previous day.

There were two soft taps at the doorway. Henry Whittaker poked his head around the corner. "You wanted to see me, kiddo?"

"Close the door," Serah whispered.

Henry grimaced, stepped into the room, and pressed the close button on the door panel. "This can't be good."

"The Galloway murder," she said. "I want it."

Henry appeared confused. "The what who?"

"That homicide file you had me pick up this morning. I want to do a story on it."

"Why?" he prompted.

"A robbery and murder? How often does that happen anymore, especially at high noon in the most boring, least-crime-ridden neighborhood in the city?"

"Tragic coincidence maybe, but it isn't newsworthy of my best correspondent, my dear. You're not selling me."

"Dammit, Henry, there's something to this. I don't know what it is yet, but I know it's there."

Henry nodded, conceding the point -- a bit too easily, Serah thought. Had he seen something she overlooked? "Fine, maybe there is, but you're not an investigative reporter, you're a foreign correspondent."

Serah threw up her arms in disgust and leaned back in her chair. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Henry sat down in on the couch, looked at Serah, and sighed heavily. "Listen," he said paternally, "It's no discredit to you or your abilities. You're one of the best analysts I've ever seen. You've got great instincts, you read people better than anyone, and are brilliant at dragging a story out of them. But, the crime beat? Particularly violent crime? It's an entirely different game, and frankly, kiddo, it's beneath you."

"That's not it," Serah accused. "You're sheltering me. You think I'm too timid. You think I can't go out there, get aggressive, and play rough to get the story."

"I'm saying it's dangerous and not worth wasting one of my best writers on."

"So, you did read the file. You know there's a story here then." Serah squinted at him defiantly. "Stop shining me on. I don't need you to protect me."

"I'm not protecting you. I'm simply concerned for the most efficient use of Neward and Provident personnel."

"Oh, so what were you planning to do? Send out Jafet or Geoffrey with some drones to dig around in trashcans digging up clues? I'm the only qualified physical asset you have in Soho, Henry."

He shook his head. "We're talking about messy, down-and-dirty, investigative journalism. It's an entirely different set of instincts from what you have. Frankly, you could get hurt, or worse, if you don't know what you're doing."

"Then help me," she pleaded. "Coach me. Guide me. Mentor me like the good old days, but you have to give me this story."

There was a long pause as Henry studied her, reading the passion in her face. Finally, he nodded. "I know that look. You'll do it with or without me, and you'll get into trouble without me."

"Thank you," she said.

Slowly, the old man stood up and walked towards the door. "Don't thank me yet. Just watch your back. This is different world. Like Diego Garcia without the security."

Serah shuddered, taking the warning in the spirit it was intended. "So, are you going to tell me?" she called out. Henry cocked an eyebrow at her but said nothing. "You obviously saw something in there that made you believe there was a story worth pursuing. What did I miss?"

Henry frowned. "Okay, I assume you'd have figured it out eventually, so the first one's free." He looked her straight in the eyes. "Run the timeline the police gave you in your head," he said calmly.

Serah nodded, understanding what Henry was leading her towards. "He was killed sometime between 12 and 1, but at least one witness claims to have seen him alive at 12:45. Okay, so it was closer to 1." She paused and considered the implication. "How did he get to SoHo to be murdered a mere fifteen minutes later?"

Henry nodded, waiting for her to finish the thought.

"He didn't. He was killed in Kensington and dumped in Soho later." She pictured the scene in her mind. "Moving a body in broad daylight? With all those witnesses? Why would anyone take a risk like that?"

Henry finished the thought for her. "Robbery gone wrong? No way. Frankly, I'm surprised the police even suggested that." He shook his head. "It's a smokescreen, a deliberate fabrication. Somethings going on in Kensington. They know that, but they're downplaying it hoping we don't get interested."

She was embarrassed that she didn't figure such a blatantly obvious deception herself immediately. Was Henry right? Was she not up to the task? She glanced back at the datapad containing the police report, hoping another such clue might jump out at her. So far, nothing about this story made any sense. "The official report is robbery, and they made a point of restating to me, but they should have known how thin that story is. Either they're just lazy or--" she asked.

Henry smiled, "Or there's a bigger story and they're hiding it."

APPENDIX

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/techno culture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speedwriting first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

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