

Branded

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

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Date: 15 September 2006

Abstract

Branded is set in an allegorical near future South Africa stratified by an economic apartheid. Cell phones are used for social control, both as passes that provide entry to designated places and electroshock punishment that can be administered by the SAPS. In the wake of a superdemic, crime and anti-corporate activism are harshly dealt with and the worst punishment is being “disconnected”, your cell phone deactivated, cut off from money, communication and entrance into public spaces. Genetic tampering has become pervasive with mutacute pets and modified police dogs called Aitos.

The story follows four characters: Kendra, a young artist who has just enrolled in a flagship corporate sponsorship programme, Toby, a waster who dabbles in journalism, Lerato, an ambitious Aidsbaby raised in a corporate skills institute and desperate to defect to another company and Tendeka, an anti-corporate activist who is becoming increasingly rabid.

Kendra, 22, is a young and painfully promising fine arts photographer who dropped out of art school following her father’s death. She is living in her much older boyfriend’s second apartment, overseeing the renovations. With a big exhibition coming up, she’s been picked as one of twelve hot up-and-coming talents to be sponsored by a softdrink company, Ghost, with nanotechnology, that streamlines her body’s normal functioning, brands her with a glow logo and gives her an ecstasy rush every time she consumes the product. It’s a voluntary addiction with benefits.

Toby, 27, is a trust fund slacker who takes too many drugs and spends his time tumbling girls, DJing, recording video footage on his Babystrange chamo coat, and writing the occasional music review, while ostensibly completing a literature degree. He’s never had to do much, relying on his parents for money, but now they’ve cut him off and he’s forced to find work playing video games for fun and profit that will lead him into unexpected dark places.

Lerato, 26, was raised in one of the many corporate ‘orphanages’ which have sprung up to pick up the slack from social welfare struggling to cope with the flood of Aids orphans. The orphanages are really skills institutes designed to train up proprietary workforces and Lerato is absolutely a product of them; an ambitious and ruthless careerist, unhindered by the anchors of culture or family. She’s been with the same corporation, Communique, for six years now and she’s getting bored and frustrated and looking for a way to jump ship. But if she’s going to persuade another corporation to pay the hefty penalty fees for headhunting, she’ll need an extra incentive to make her worth the price.

Tendeka, 34, is an anti-corporate activist, a zealous member of culture jamming society. He runs several community projects with his infinitely patient boyfriend, Ashraf, not exactly successfully, including a township youth soccer club and a graffiti project designed to give street kids a means of creative expression. After hours, they also stage criminal sabotage raids on corporate adboards, which is getting trickier with all the new security measures. But it’s when he meets *skyward** in a virtual world, Avalon, that his actions start to become increasingly hectic.

now now

Kendra

There's no hospital involve. It doesn't even hurt. One injectable. A prick. The autosyringe snaps against the crook of my arm like a staple gun. And three million designer microbes go singing through my veins. I am expecting the world to rearrange, but I don't feel anything at all. I'm almost disappoint.

'Is that it?'

'Come back for a check-up. Three weeks from now. Andile will send you a reminder.' Dr Precious Lasson says, clip, efficient. She ejects the split silver shell from the back of the autosyringe and slots it back into the foam cut-out of the sterile med-case, in among two neat rows, twelve gleaming ampoules, four still intact. Like disciples, I think, but don't verbal. They think I'm odd already.

Andile is distract, racking the paperwork, checking that I have indeed initialled on every page. Signed here and here and here, the fine microbarbs of the disposable bio-sig pen biting into the pad of my thumb, injecting the cell scrape into the ink. You'd think the verification of my SIM ID would be incontrovertible sufficient.

Outside, the wind is stirring the trees, casting wavering slats of light across the bright white of the desk and before I can even think about it, I have already hit off three shots. Precious (we're all first names here) frowns, but Andile is bemuse. 'Hey! Do I get a copy of those? They could be worth something with the way you're going. But seriously, babes? You know you're not technically supposed to take any photographs inside the building? They really should have checked your camera at reception.'

‘Sorry,’ I say, but I’m already thinking about how these will fit with the series of shadows I took in the bathrooms at Replica last weekend, the slices of light beneath the closed stall doors echoing the strobe from the dancefloor. Editing in my head.

‘Lots of proprietary technology,’ Andile says, sliding the contract into a slim file marked with my name all caps, ADAMS, K, together with my med records from the pre-screenings. ‘Gotta protect our intellectual property, right?’

Like the kind uploaded into my system. I rub the inside of my arm, where a blue vein stands out like a knot, the only indicator of unusual. Or maybe it’s always like that and I’ve never paid it attention thorough.

‘I didn’t feel anything.’

‘Nope. You will though. Don’t worry. And don’t worry if you feel fluey over the next couple of days. It’s just your body adjusting.’

Just my immune system gone into overdrive, fighting off the detected invasive. But it’s only temporary. People adapt. Evolve. It’s all in the manual, although confessional, I haven’t read the fineline. Who does?

‘Well, now that we’ve got the icky out of the way, we just need you to stick around for the documentary.’ Andile ushers me out, leaving Precious to prepare the next ampoule, assembly line. And here I thought I was special.

He leads me through the agency, that comes in somewhere between new mod and Bedouin, not clinic at all. The configuration of cubicles are partition by gauzy white curtains hung floor to ceiling with audio dampeners for privacy when required. There are interested looks, a couple of heads popping up meerkat.

‘Just ignore them,’ Andile says, ‘It’s not often they get to see REAL talent.’ There is a snort of disgust from a guy with a number one buzzcut, clicking away

intent on his screen. ‘Back to work, you graft-dodging slacker reprobates!’ Andile shouts, cheerful.

The lounge is overplush, sueded velvet couches and wraparound views of the city backdropped by the mountain. There is a boy, bored, good-looking, leaning on his knees, studying the floorboards, ostensible, which are polished to an antagonistic sheen. He looks up when we come in, dark hair punked spiky and swept over his forehead, like he’s hiding the factual that he’s balding. It’s endearingly. Brown pinstripe jacket and a white tie. I cog him from somewhere dead away, although Cape Town typical, it’s impossible to tell if it’s just from the scene or whether I know him actual. Andile seems surprised.

‘Damian, china! You haven’t gone in yet?’

‘No. She said ten more minutes.’ The boy crinkles his eyes at me, wary-friendly, without quite smiling.

‘Cool, cool. Can I offer you guys some coffee? Tea? Tequila? No, just kidding. You’ve gotta lay off the hard stuff for a couple of days. Nothing? Okay! Just hang tight, Trusha shouldn’t be too much longer. Be cool. You’re ambassadors now. First generation! You gotta represent!’ This is honest how Andile talks. ‘I’ll just go see how she’s coming along.’

He flits out and I take a seat opposite the boy, Damian, who is, I realise, from a new spectro band, Kitten Kill or Killer Kittens or some other configuration playing off violent acts towards baby animals. The point is that they’re bigtime. And this just reinforces how outleague I am here.

He goes back to examining the floor and won’t look at me. I check the texture of the fabric on the couch, the way it darkens when you run your hand up against the grain. I make patterns. The boy notices, leans over, and for a second I am certain he is

going to touch my leg, but he traces a heart instead and then apologises for it immediately, defensive.

‘It doesn’t mean anything. I’m just doodling. I could have just as easily drawn a bomb or a rabbit or something, you know?’

‘It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.’

‘Where’d you come from?’ he says, so puzzled I can’t help wondering if it’s intended as a philosophical, if we will segue onto ultimate purpose and moral obligation, but then I catch on, of course, that he’s asking about what makes me worthy. How I got with the program.

They approached me. I was oblivious there even was one. But I suspect that’s the operandi general. Auditioning would be too gauche. Screening for suitability is a different animal entirely. I could tell him about my exhibition upcoming at Propellor, but is that enough? Is that the truth? I can’t imagine how art school dropout could be level playing with the leading of Kill Kitten (which I’m almost sure is the accurate).

‘I’m a photographer.’

‘Oh yeah?’ he says, the tilt at the end suggesting interest, but he doesn’t ask me further. ‘The rest of the guys are pretty peeved,’ he says, just assuming I’ll know automatic who he’s talking about. And the worst is I do. ‘That they only wanted me, y’know? I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s serious sony, and I’m the obvious, but end of the day, I gotta get up on stage with those guys and perform.’

I nod and smile. He *is* the obvious. I’m more surprised they came to me. Andile says it’s all about the potential. He said it’s always the girls who are the most fierce insecure and why is that? He gave me his number and said to call anytime, especially if I have any concerns during this period of adjust. Just take it easy, Andile said. Get some downtime.

‘Did Andile give you his number?’ I ask, sudden suspicious.

‘Ja,’ he offhands, and then leans in excited. ‘So, you in for the artist exchange? Ah, man, I’m so stoked about getting to play Seoul.’

And that’s another part of the project which is amazing, the financial, the artist exchanges to Seoul or Turin or New York, but it’s the biological advantages that sold me, the heightened reactionary, the immune system boost, the cell repair, all happening invisible, like we are the next evolutionary.

‘I had to look it up on the map,’ Damian continues unphase by the one-sidedness of the conversation, ‘I mean yeah, okay, New Korea, but where is that actual?’

A crisp woman in stiletto boots over her jeans, riding style, scissors into the lounge on her long legs, wearing a statement of a necklace all clunky beads mixed up with tiny neon plastic toys and holding a microcam. Her hair is a bare restrain tangle of dark curls that gives her an air of impatient. ‘Damian? You’re up. I hope you’ve been thinking of devastatingly smart and interesting things to say. Oh don’t look so nervous. Just be yourself. Recite some lyrics or something.’ She winks at me. ‘Don’t think I’ll be too long with this one.’ She leads him away between the maze of curtained cubicles, already recording.

‘So, what is that moves you, Dame? What the one thing about music that grabs you, that hits you right here in your gut?’

I take a photograph, surreptitious, of the impression Damian left on the couch – the slightest of indentations, already fading, like gripmarks of fingers on skin. Things are only real if they are documented. If there is visual evidence.

I mention this to Trusha when she comes clipping back in. ‘Oh yeah,’ she says, ‘Absolutely!’ and taking my hand, intimate, leads me outside onto the balcony,

the red bead indicatory of the camera winking steady, for the record, recording, recording. ‘So much more scenic,’ she explains, ‘So is that like why you became a photographer? To capture *life*? Do you feel like you don’t have a hold on it otherwise?’

‘I’m not a professional’, I say, deflecting.

‘Oh don’t be humble, honey. And can you do me a favour? Can you start you sentences with ‘I became a photographer because blah blah blah...’ Otherwise it’s a nightmare in the edit, trying to make sense out of it all. Fragmented sentences. You’ve no idea.’

The interview procedural is painless relative. More than the injectable, less than having your arm sawn off with a plastic picnic knife. That is to say, it is excruciate.

‘Would you say you’re compulsive?’ Trusha says. Caught in the act, I stop knitting my hands.

‘Not compulsive, exact... Sorry.’ I catch the disapproval, correct myself. ‘I’m not compulsive, exactly, more I dunno, is obsessive worse than compulsive? I think obsessive is better thought out, less spontaneous. Maybe?’

‘What do you like about photography? What about it moves you, that –?’

‘Grabs me in the gut?’

She’s unapologetic. ‘Yeah.’

‘The immediacy. Sorry, sorry. What... resonates with me about photography is the sense of immediacy. Catching the transitive. Arresting time, space, that whole continuum thingie.’

‘So why’d you get into it?’

‘Easier than real art?’

‘That’s great. That’s funny. Self-deprecating is good. Now, can you do it again in a whole sentence?’

‘I became a photographer because it seemed easier than real art. And I can’t draw.’ But really it’s that I’m terrified of losing anything.

She knows better than to ask me about Ghost, only how I feel to be involved in the project. ‘Honoured. It’s an incredible opportunity. It’s great.’

‘Do you mind?’ I say, raising my camera, after it’s all done.

‘Uh,’ She seems irritable, pushing her fingers into her tangle of hair. ‘Have you cleared it with Andile?’

‘Well, he hasn’t taken it off me, yet.’

‘Sure, kid. Whatever makes you happy.’

I lift the Zion to my face, frame her and fake the shutter click, so that she thinks it’s done and relaxes and I catch her off guard, looking down at her microcam. I will be this from now on. Off guard. On show.

But I’ll start the process personal. I’m going to do a time lapse on my wrist to capture the phosphorescence coming in, the cells shifting, mutating. My skin is already starting to itch.

Toby

We were at Stones, goofing around, maybe hoping to score a little sugar and planning Tendeka's next outrageous, which he's being sufficient generous to allow me to guest on. Ten was outlined on the table, using the balls as attack model placement, himself as the eightball, natural, me and Ashraf and Jasmine, a cutesome polit-economic student they picked up somewhere and Zuko, barely legal to be in here, playing rapt audience, when Kendra walks in, all moffied up and juiced to kill and spots me straight. Not that I know the girl intimate. It's more friendly-associate like, barely first name, but I guess we're obvious choicing. It's not as if Stones is exact jamming I Iam on a Sunday, despite it being one of the few places in Long Street that's general access. No corporati pass required.

And admissive, I'm hard to miss with my Babystrange chamo coat sifting random stills from the goresome folder today; a row of smileys, sheep's head grins bared in anticipate of the pot, a dead rat I found in the gutter, medical diagrams downloaded direct from Grey's Anatomicals. Tendeka wishes I wouldn't be so obtrusive, but I figure calling attention down is actual less so. Or maybe I'm just feeling extra hostile today in light of my motherbitch calling to schedule one of her 'we have to talks'.

So Kendra strolls up, cocky as a streetkid, only more fash. I appreciate this, especial when its designed to max factor how hot she is, but still edge slick, real statement, even for Long Street where dress sense is ultimate competitive. Denim shorts and a charcoal-colour ratcheted cotton shirt with sleeves overlong, tapering over her knuckles, this despite the soaring outside. Jap split toe leatherlite boots in gloss mahogany, cut with lace patternings that show off her slim brown bokkie legs.

And streaked hair, contrasting fat chunks of copper and chocolate, that brings out her eyes so striking vivid, that I don't quite hear her the first time she asks.

'Sorry, what?'

'Do you mind?' she says again, already reaching into her back pocket for her phone, hung skate-rat off a silver chain from her belt and logs twenty Rand to the table to get tata machance on the next game. Ten scowls, but what's he gonna say? Fuck off, we're busy with the insurrective? That's the problem with pool halls, they're not exact discrettable.

Besides, he can't resist a challenging. Not that anyone can offer. Truth is, Ten could wax us all six love, baby, one hand tied behind his back and blindfold. Boy even carries his own cue. Lycratanium. Separate pieces that click into each other, assembled slick 'n cold 'n casual, as if he was a soldier in a war movie snapping a sniper rifle together. So, far be it for me to be intervening. It's too entertain to pass up and surreptitious, I switch my coat from display to record.

'Your massacre,' I shrug and hand her the stick, Jazz and Ashraf falling back similar, all unspoken rank and cues. Ten scoops up the balls, click-clack in the white plastic triangle, and racks 'em up, so he doesn't get the glimpsing I do of the faint glow under her sleeve when K slips the phone back into her pocket. I knew something was up. Long sleeves in the height of the heat don't cut it.

It's the first time I've seen it life, although no surprising when it's so fresh on the scene. Stace gave me the heads-up last week, told me to keep a watchful. It's the standard sub-radar, dark market shit, no press releases, no interviews official, but off the record... Good for 250 words in some ad-related industry rag, first time it's being done global after all, but if I can scoop enough for a feature. Stacy said she'd run it definite in *Kwaai*, and hinted she might be able to get syndicating for *Radar*, their

sister push publicate in London. I've done nooit but snipsome previous, a band profile here, an art crit there. Who would have thought sweet little Special-K woulda ranked? That she'd be my breaksome potential?

So, anyway, I have an ink of what's coming and it doesn't surprise me none in the least when sweet K waxes the table. Ten is surprised though. Ten-Ten slips his groove. The boy's not used to losing. Not that you could tell unless you knew him well. It's the tight in his shoulders, the way he goes all precision. Anyone else might have been pissy, but he goes quiet, intense, like before the storm hits. So you can see.

He's just playing catch-up. It's close, but ultimate useless when she sinks her last remaining, knocking two balls off in quick successive, edging out his ball same time masterful as she clips the black into the corner pocket.

She moves to shake, extending her hand, but Ten is already loading another twenty to the table, racking 'em again, quick an' accurate. But Kendra smiles, says, 'Hey, thanks, I'm out,' and sets her cue down in the table next to us. Ash looks relief, like now we can get back to the businessing at hand, but Ten isn't going to let this hook slide.

'Best of three,' he says and smiles, loose and easy. Like it doesn't matter slightest. But Kendra shakes her head. 'Serious. Good game. I fluked it. I haven't played in a while, I just wanted to see...'

She leaves the sentence adangle, but I'm guessing I know the end clause. To see if it's true. If she can feel it. The hyped up reflexes, neurons firing faster, sweeter, more productive. And maybe Ten catches a snatch of this, something in her face that all is not exact halaal, cos he grabs her by the arm.

'You on drugs, girl? You tweaked?'

‘Piss off.’ She says throwaway, light, pulling free. ‘Game over, guy. Sorry you lost. Get over it.’

Ten follows after, irresist tenacious like an Aito on the scent of some bad doing or, more to the point, true believer evangelical with a potential convert. ‘You’re a tweaker. Fuckin’ little junkie. Coming here all blissed up to the eye balls. You think I don’t know the signs?’

‘Would you give it a break? Jeez. Kit kat, man. I’m not on drugs. And if I was, how would that be any to do with you?’

People are starting to pay attention to the heightening tense. Cams too, though in a place like Stones, they probably aren’t working none too well. Not like the venue draws the high profilings regular. But the bartender is getting edgewise, just itching to call in a defuse. ‘Hey, chill out!’ He yells from his safety ensconced behind the bar, no intentional of coming round to sort it out himself. Working Long Street will do that.

Ash steps in, ‘It’s not important, Tendeka, just los it.’ The role of peace keep will be played by the long-suffering boyf, defending some chic he barely knows, but that’s long-standing for them. Not that Kendra needs it. You gotta give Ten credit for sniffing out weirdness, but he’s got the flavour wrong. We all know the girl’s not a waster. Even Ten, if he’d get over his ego to admitting.

Now me, I’m a waster. I’m skeef. Tongue-piercing and everything. Bliss, supersmack, kitty – it all comes in handy capsule format, so you can load it into the piercing, to disseminate. Some prefer it old-style, pills ‘n needles, but for me, the works work best straight in. Mainline into the bloodstream and your glands sop up the remainder via the salivary. But, tell you true, it’s all cheap shit. Black-market. III

legit. Not like sweet Kendra's high. Girl had gone the straight 'n' arrow. All the way.

Ten grabs her arm again and this time she's peeved righteous. She spins, fury, and what strikes me particular is she's especial fine when she's angry. 'What is with you? What's your fucking problem? You wanna see? You want proof? Fine. Here's your proof, you psycho.' And she sticks out her tongue. Ash sighs reproach. 'There. Happy now?' But Tendeka isn't. Yeah, sure as sugar, Special-K's tongue is virgin. Never been pierced by a stud let alone an applijack. Never had that sweet rush as the micro-needles release slick-quick into the fleshy pink. Never had her tongue go numb with the thick rush of it so's you can't speak for minutes. As if talking were any of your worries. But then Ten doesn't care about her tongue, cos he's looking at her wrist. The one he's holding and the green fluorescent emanate through his fingers.

'What is that? What the fuck *is* that?'

Kendra tries to wrench away, but he won't let go. He's rouching up the sleeve to reveal her glow logo in its entire glorious - the double swirl of the Ghost logo in new-grass green and teal. No different from any usual light tat, especial when you consider the prolif of logos, kids sporting brands in lieu of personalities. Except this is no rinkadink glowshow, not LED implants beneath the skin, shining through the tattoo ink. Kendra-sweet's branding *is* her skin, the cells' biostructure modified and spliced, designer, by the nanotech she's signed up for, a dash of jellyfish, very specific targeted. And it's beauty deluxe.

'Get off!' She's panicky, swatting at him, but then something levels, interior. Took long enough, but maybe only to be expected when she's so fresh. Still adjust. You can see it kick in, so sleek, I get a surge of jealousy. One instant she's flailing

around and the next, she hits him in the solar plex with her elbow and uses the momentum to squirm out of his gripping. He whuffs, winded, puts his hand down on a table for support, knocking over a glass, which naturally, breaks, a shard sinking deep into his palm, pinky-side. And that is it. Tendeka loses the plot. Fat splats of blood mix with the spilt beer on the table, on the floor and Tendeka is screaming. 'You sell out! You fucking whore!' Of course, how could she know he takes this so serious? That of all the pool bars, she had to walk into this one. I'd intervene, but where's the fun in that?

K looks accusing at the bartender. 'Help me.' Tendeka lunges at her and doesn't mistake - the boy is big and intent on serious damage. So, he doesn't notice the bartender reaching under the counter to activate the panic, or hear the tromp of big SAPS boots and padded paws up the stairs. When sweet K puts a table between them, he vaults over it, still yelling accusatory, and pays no attention slightest to the cop, just the low-level citi variety in his black and white, reading rights and the Aito barking. His cell beeps first warning as the cop isolates his SIM from all the other in the room. And then second. But Ten doesn't register. Or maybe he just doesn't care. Like I said, about the plot? The plot was gone. Past its expiry date.

And from there, the morning descends into total predictable. The citicop messages an activate to Ten's defuser. Higher voltage than necessary, but when did the SAPS ever play nice? And Ten drops to the floor, jerking epileptic. Some wasters I know set off their own phone's defuser, on low settings for those dark and hectic beats. Even rhythm can be induced, boys and girls. But it's not maklik. Have to hack the hardware and then the shocks could come random. Crisp you KFC.

Me, I defused my defuser, pulled the plug, one time. Simunye. Or rather, Lerato did. I wouldn't mess with that ownsome. Cos, see, you don't know what

you're doing, you'll get crisped. Or worse. And the only thing worse than KFC is disconnect. Off the networks. Your all access pass revoked. Solitary confinement. Not worth the risk, boys and girls, unless you know the tec is razor. Lerato is. But Ten hasn't had the privilege yet of her servicings, so he's still on the floor, still jerking to imaginary beats, limbs akimbo, until the cop finally takes pity or more like, gets bored, and hits endcall.

Ten manages to raise himself to his knees, his phone still crackling, no-one going to help, cos hey, we don't want to be the next on the cop's shitlist, citi or not, and the Aito is still barking.

'Anybody else?' The cop asks, snapping his fingers at the modified dog, so it shuts up instant. It always throws me how they obey immediate. Those hyena good-looks belie their manners, although it's all chem-based, Lerato says, their own brand of defusers hard-wired into their brains. 'You want some more?'

Tendeka shakes his head, breathing heavy and a little too desperate. Ashraf hands him his pump, kneeling beside. He takes greedsome gulping hits. The cop bends down. 'Don't be causing any more shit, now, you hear. I've logged your SIM.' He turns to the bartend, as a horde of VIMbots scramble to clean up the blood an glass and spilled liquor. 'And here I was so hoping for a quiet day.' The bartender angles his chin jaded, in such a way as to convey, 'what are you gonna do?'

'Tell me about it.' The citicop tucks his scanner into his belt. 'You let me know if this guy gives you any more trouble. I'll be happy to sic /379 here on him.' He rattles his chem mace cheerfully. The bartend grunts and raises a hand. Playing it cool as if he weren't the guy who summonsed the citipricker in the first. The cop whistles, two notes and the Aito snaps to attention and pads out, down the stairs

after him. I've been practisin' the whistle lingo in my private. Figure it might come in hand if I ever get on the wrong side of those teeth. It's all the same audio signals universal. Can't fake the chem scents though.

Ashraf is helping Jazz leverage Tendeka to his feet, cursing soft and furious between sucks on his inhaler. Game over. Please upload more currency. The other patrons turn away pointed. Kendra stands watching a second more, as if she might step in to help and then apparent thinks better and walks up to the bar, where I am sitting, low profile like.

'Cause any more kak like that, girl, an I'll call in a crisp you too.' The bartender says as she slides onto bar stool next to me.

'That was not my fault. And how many panics you got left for the day, anyhow?' Kendra snaps, which only makes me rate her more, but the girl is looking almost as strung out as Ten.

'Yeah, well don't make me waste 'em all on you.'

'Just get me a Ghost, okay? Please?'

Behind her, Jazz and Ash are holdin' Tendeka up. Boy doesn't give up, he makes as if to move for the bar, but Ash pulls him back. Not least cos of the evil look the bartender shoots them. Boy's too fried to stir serious anyway, but says, loud enough for all to hear, 'Sell out.'

'Would you get the fuck out.' The bartender's good-humoured in the dismissive, no grudging, so long as Tendeka leaves actual.

'Corporate whore!'

Zuko parrots him, idol. 'Corporate whore!'

'C'mon, Ten. Let's go.' Ash yanks him towards the door. Ways too good for him. And this little upset has likely already unraveled our plannings for the eve.

Fucking idiot. I was so looking forward to the jol too. I was going to go for a surf, but now I reckon I might stick around here for a while, long as sweet K is hanging.

Kendra acts as if she doesn't even hear. She has her Ghost now and she's intent focus. Downs it in one. Let's her head fold back on her neck, eyes closed and shudders fine as it kicks in, like a shot of tequila, her brain seething like she was on some fine-ass kitty. I know that feeling all too well. And then she asks for another and turns to me accusatory.

'Your friend is psycho,'

'I'm sorry, he can be a tad overboard. He's real passionate about his causes. Can I get this one for you? Make up for it, like?'

She checks me skeef, but I can see the Ghost is mellowing her. 'Only if you join me,' she says, like it's a challenge. And who am I to say no.

'Another round.' I nod at the bartender. 'Do you mind if I take mine with vodka? I don't think I'm ranking the same beneficial.'

'Do what you like.'

I lean on the bar, my chin in hand. 'Can I see?'

She just looks at me, scoping my motives and then slides up her sleeve, revealing the glow on her wrist. Like I said, a marvel thing.

'Nice. Did it hurt?'

'Funny you should ask.' The girl is flying now, or drowning, in all the body's nat opiate happinesses; endorphins, seratonin, dopamine, the Ghost binding with the aminos and the tiny biomachines hummin' at work in her veins. Voluntary addiction with benefits. All free if you qualify for the sponsor programme. Apply now, boys and girls, while stocks last. You'll never afford this high on your own change.

‘Why do you do that?’ she says, antagonist, nodding at my Babysteering, which is back in display, with the new addition of blood splats on green felt in the gallery. ‘Project that dark on your clothes?’

‘Would you rather I displayed logos?’ I tap the cufflink with my thumb, zoom in on the can of Ghost, snap it and wallpaper it solid over the smartfabric of the trench.

She laughs appreciative and the conversational flows easier after that. She’s a photographer, uploads a flyer for a group show to my phone. I trade her for an invite to Replica on Saturday night, for the party I’m writing up for Kwaai’s nightlife section. Provide I don’t get too fucked, I might even DJ. But I hold back on the plus one. I’d prefer her to rock up solo mission. She tells me about the photographs she took in the bogs there, which just sounds lunatic, photographing streaks of light and shoe tips under the doors, cos, like if you were to documentary club life, surely you could capture more sensational?

‘That’s what I was specific trying to avoid,’ she says, irritate, her body language closing up on me, so I have to tease her back out, which is not over difficult when she’s in this state. Down the other side of the bar, someone else orders a Ghost. Just to see. Cos maybe, just maybe, it’s in the secret ingredients, right?

‘I feel like everyone’s watching me,’ she says, confessional. ‘Like this is a bigtime show.’

‘Course they are. You’re splinter new, novelty deluxe. And the burning on everyone’s lips is what does it feel like?’

‘You take drugs, right?’

‘Occasion.’

‘It’s something like that.’ She’s so sweet in her naïve, cos I could press her on the relative merits of the sweet and easy headtrip of sugar versus the speedy pre-orgasm hook of bliss or the dense super-saturate of kitty that floods your limb with numb, but maybe she *does* mean all of the above. Or maybe she’s just evasing.

‘Come on, now. That’s probably the most generic I’ve ever heard. I’m not buying that.’

‘Okay, okay.’ She laughs easy and that’s kifsome. ‘I’m just... improve. It’s like, everything’s running better, like I’ve had a tune-up, you know? The world seems sharper. Or fiercer. As if someone’s pulled the focus. Like, in photography, hyper-realism?’ She catches my blank. ‘Where everything is intense crisp and real and super define.’

‘Sounds hectic.’

‘Yeah. Although, you know, I’m not entire convince I’m not imagining it.

‘What?’

‘Everything. All of it. That it’s some dumb psychology trip they’ve got us on, to get me to drink the stuff. And all the rest of you.’

‘I was wondering if that was in the contractual, getting me to drink one? But hey, don’t knock the product. It’s not bad. Maybe a tad too lime. You should speak to them about tweaking the recipe. If you’re gonna be drinking it your remaining life.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you seemed to handle Tendeka well sufficient.’ I wave away her concernings, cut her off before she can launch into the apologies inevit. ‘No. don’t worry about it, he had it coming. He can be a right sanctimonius. And besides that

game was fucking tight.’ And besides, additional, it’s apparent to sundry all that she’s rushing off her face. It’s definite physical.

‘But that’s the thing. I’m pretty sharp at pool. Maybe not *that* sharp and it’s been a while, but I reckon I could have taken him on a good day. And maybe this just happened to be... Oh, don’t look so sceptic. I used to play league in Durban.’

‘Chill, baby girl. I believe you.’ And to prove it, I lean forward and pull into her.

She kisses me back, initial, but then flinches away from my mouth, panic stations. ‘I’m sorry...’

‘Don’t be sorry.’

‘No, I have a boyfriend. I, uh, I can’t. Okay? I’m flattered real and...’

‘It’s okay. I was trying my lucksome. Look, I’m backed off. We’ll just reset to zero. Sorry if I freaked you.’

‘It’s fine. Thanks for the chat. It was cool getting to hang with you actual. Seeing you around, you know so many people from the scene, like its one degree of separational, so it’s been nice getting to talk, to connect, you know?’ She’s talking to speed, already up, slinging her bag over her shoulder.

‘Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I know.’ I’m grinning wide at her flustering, which only makes her more so.

‘And tell your friend, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...’

‘I’ll do that. But don’t stress it. Like I said, he had it coming.’

‘And forget what I said about the psychological. I talk overboard sometimes. It’s not...I mean, of course it’s genuine makoya.’

‘Sure. No worries. And come to Replica. Saturday. That’s a free entrance on your phone.’

‘Thanks. And Toby?’ She pauses in the doorway, but the camera catches me unawares. It’s a spif model, paper-thin, but I’m too preoccup caught in the flash to catch the make. ‘If you wanted me to model, you only had to asking,’ I snipe, but she’s total recomposure now, as if it’s the camera rather than the tech inside that smoothes out her rof edges.

‘Thanks. I’ll see you around.’ She winks, which is so cute its physiscal hurtsome. And then she’s vanishing down the staircase.

Tendeka

****Incident report****

South African Police Services FILE SAPS-CITI 430/77

LOG - CTC Public Disruption

Occurrence No: 94-1678

ACCUSED

(surname, first name) (alias)

Ncube, Tendeka N/A

(sex) (D.O.B) (Age) (Place of Birth) (ID number)

M 05.06.89 28 HARARE 8906050112291

(cell SIM ID) (prior record?) (criminal registration)

062-899-1359 Y #2291-1359-470

(residential address)

**last known: 43 subC, ImYethu Place, Hout Bay, Cape Town,
7948**

(height)(weight) (hair) (eyes) (complexion)

1.94m 94kg dreadlocks brown dark

(id status)

Civilian. LSM 6

(marital status)

married – Emmie Chinyaka. Malawi national. 3/8/2017

(identifying marks)

tattooed on left shoulder of a thick black concentric rings or 'bulls-eye' pattern. Black band tattooed on right bicep and wrist.

(occupation)

(employer)

NGOs, charitable fund-raising/events

self-employed.

(biological verification)

(date)

(time)

N

N/A

N/A

(priors)

- **23/8/2017 - CC 279 (a) Public disruption. Participating in unlawful, unlicensed protest march outside parliament. Defuse. R5000 fine. 24H disconnect**
- **29/12/2016 - CA 415 Defacement of corporate property. V&A Mall Christmas display. Defuse. 24H disconnect. 16 days corporate service.**
- **18/7/2016 – CC 279 (a) Public disruption. Defuse.**
- **22/11/2012 CTTD 80 unpaid underway fare fines. Amount settled in full.**

- 4/2/2007 CSP 121 (Juvenile) Possession of narcotics.
Intent to distribute. 150 grams Nitra-amaldrine (street name Bliss). Sentenced to eight months in Boy's Town juvenile facility. Six months probabationary surveillance.
- 17/10/2006 CVC 3A (Juvenile) Breaking and entering.
Suspended sentence.

OFFENSE _____**CC 279(a) public disruption**

(offense time) (offense date) (location)

11h23 17/9/2017 'Stones' pool hall, 181 Long
Street, CBD

(conjoined with)

CC 592 (b) aggravating behaviour**OFFICER'S NOTES** _____

Subject was shouting threats and acting in aggressive manner. A scan of the subject's SIM ID register revealed that the subject has recent priors including previous public disruptions and a juvenile record.

Subject failed to respond to officer's verbal warning or warnings uploaded to his phone.

Logged a defuse to subject's phone.

Subject was neutralised. Defuse lasted approx 2.5 minutes. Subject subdued.

Left premises without further incident.

Subject's SIM logged on SAPS watch-list for period of 24 hours. Temporary disconnect.

'Sorry, Ten,' Jasmine says, flicking her screen back to show me the site.

The log is already live on SAPS.com and this is what's so truly fucked up, that the government thinks this level of transparency auto rules-out repression. If it's all out in the open, it has to be above board.

'What did you expect?' Ash says, like this is the time to be grieving me.

'Fuck!' they both flinch as I slam my foot into a colddrink can, not Ghost, thankful, because that would have been the last, sending it clattering into the street. Not like it's a surprise, but skyward* is going to be serious pissed.

The worst is confirmed when we get to the entrance to the underway and my phone won't scan. Or, rather, it does scan and based on the police log on my SIM denies me entry flat. Bastards. Bastards. Bastards. I suck at my palm, which has stopped bleeding, it was only a flesh, but it still stings. At least the fucker didn't mace me, else every biogen dog in the city would be trailing me like a bitch in heat.

So, we walk to Adderley towards the station, past the Grand Parade, which only fouls my mood more, because it's a remind of the failing. Among the logos and adboards blaring neon, there are three panels in the historic of the old library that were supposed to be ours, for Streets Back.

The building is current the headquarters of a property developer - the kind of place that churns out the anonymous ultralux facades with wraparound wall2walls

exterior, like that godawful coat of Toby's, that you can project anything you want onto. Sixty million, I think is the going price. It's the most appropriate we could have wished for - knowledge pushed out by greed, a symbol of the economic landclaims that we were claiming back, legit, with govt funding. 20 kids rounded up street, including Zuko, who gave me the idea firstplace, painting up graffiti murals. Art to compete with the ads, a way for these dispossess kids to make an impression on a city that usually filters them like spam.

Leonie at Nest was pissed major, after she'd gone out way to recruit kids from the shelter. Like it's my fault we ran out of money three months in. Like I didn't make the exact same argue to Carol, our assign social development grant liaise from govt, that these kids have been let down so often the one thing they need, the one thing that will have real positive impact on their lives is establish routine - and adults who stick by their reliable.

The chatter flyers, with audio chips cos most of the kids are illiterate, cost more expectant and the freebies from the paint company were all reject stock, barely functional with broken nozzles or ancient clogged content, six years out of expiration. By the time we'd bought our own paint and masks and overalls and food for all the kids who came instead of just the ones who worked, our budget was wasted. Carol was terrible sympathy, said she was very sorry to hear about our troubles, but there are so many other just as worthy projects all clamour for cash. The realworld result being that kids like Zuko are left loose ends.

Ash wants to go the corp finance route, get some big dick to sponsor the whole thing. Like that isn't a total violate of everything we do. It's part of the reason we're so bickersome lately.

We head up to station deck, cos Ash is goodterms with some of the drivers after the work he did on that Italian documentary on taxis, and he figures he can sweet them into letting me ride withou a SIM. He goes off to talk to one of the gamchees on the side, leaving me and Jazz to hang among the stalls. She pretends to look through some of the cheap useless, bags and belts and cell phone covers, no intent to buy, while Zuko flips a soccer ball around. He's our best striker, although he's been racking up more the red cards of late. Ash says we shouldn't involve him in the extra mural, but I know what it's like being that age. It's better that we're channeling his aggro into useful than he ends up running for the gangs. I was doing far worse at 15. Actual criminal as opposed to civil disobedient with purpose.

I watch Ash do his thing. Friendly boy. Charm you right out of your pants. Which is how he was playing fixer for the Italians. Not that we ever got to see the damn doccie. The amigos came in with their expensive cameras, we hooked them up, showed them round, carried their shit, translated, and then they vanished incommunicando. Ash showed me the trailer online. It was all about the gamchees, painted like this charming old world tradition that still endures, cos theoretical, the drivers could be using audio hooks to announce the routes, pull in the fares, they don't actual need a person riding shotgun. But now it's like a tourist thing, like the rickshaws in Durban or those boats in Venice.

The trailer looked all right, typical shit, all flashy cuts and gritty kwaito trip to make it seem more street. Ash said he recked it seemed pretty cool, but it was hard to figure just from the promo. He was cut up by the dismissive. I could tell. So, I sent the hombres a real nasty email telling them exactly what neocolonial cocks they were, coming in here, raping our resources and fucking off again. I thought Ash

would appreciate it, me stepping up for him, but he got in a real mood, full on screaming match, said I shouldn't be interfering in his life and especial his work, and besides, 'amigos' is the incorrect. Like I care. And if he could have handled it own, then he should have fucking done so. Those pricks. I hate it when people are faking on the level, all global villaging when they're the ones raking the fat royalty checks and people like Zuko or Emmie are bare scraping the breadline.

Ash wraps up with the gamchee and gives me the thumbs up. Zuko and I head over and get hustled in, crammed next to a mama with a week's worth groceries and a two year old spilling out of her lap and a guy who is too beat down to be gangster probably just some poor asshole riding the jobhunt bus to nowhere. Not likely he's going to get anything with what's clearly a knife scar striped through his hair above his ear which pegs him as loxion. Could be worse though, he could be disconnect. He could be living rural or in Zim, that other suburb of China.

My wallet is locked out with all the other functioning on my phone, but lucky Jazz covers it. The girl has her useful. I can tell she's not going to last, despite the radical economics she's studying at UCT, she's too bourgeois comfy middle class. But while she's happy playing anarchist tourist, I'm happy to use her parent's cash.

'Yey! Diskonneksie. Geen moelikheid, ne?' The gamchee grins and waggles a patronising finger. At three times the going, he's got excuse to smile.

I feel like kak. The muscle in my eye is spasm and I'm still not breathing 100%. It's driving me crazy, although Ash says he can't see it. 'That's one of the things I'm talking about. The shit we can't see. Tech's only been legitimated 18 months ago. How do they know the long-term on defusings? Shock therapy gets used on mental patients to dampen the brain function that's too excitable. Of course,

maybe that's exact what they're doing. Dampening us all down, frying our brains, flattening out the excitable, so we're all unresisting, unquestioning, happy citizens.'

The mama rearranges the child on her lap, and Ash cringes, beckoning softer with his hands. He always gets embarrassed when I talk too loud in public, can't stand a scening. 'Ten honestly.'

It's not like anyone outside our row can hear me above bhangra rock blaring over-decibel from the speakers upfront or our greedsome gamchee friend screeching out the window in case there's any uncertain about our routing, 'Constaaaantia! Hout Bay!' But I lower my voice, slight, to placate him, to avert another fight.

'Couldn't they just drug the water supply?' Zuko says, first time he's said anything all day. It's good to get the kid out of his head.

'Ja, it'd be more convenient, more mass-scale than brainwashing people one troublemaker at a time,' Jasmine, adds, inspire by the economics.

'I'm not talking brainwashing. I'm saying it's electroshock lobotomy. Govt endorsed. And the whole water supply thing? Please. Too easy to test for. The int enviro agencies would pick that up in a second. Unless they paid them off.'

'Do you think that's possible?'

'Anything's possible, Jasmine. They're all corrupt, industry pocket whores, all of them. Don't let anyone tell you alternate.'

Ash shifts in his seat, impatient.

'But, no, okay, I don't think it's *likely*,' I concede. 'We've got to be realistic, right? Too much conspiracy conjecting hurts the cause.' I glance over at Ash, but he is looking fixed out the window.

I take a drag from the pump, which dispenses into my lungs with a pneumatic hiss. 'Che Guevara had asthma, you know.'

‘You’ve told them,’ Ash says, still staring out. The minibus rockets up Constantia Neck, past all the mansions clustered in their own private acres of forest behind acres of electro barbwire fencing. They keep talking about shutting down this taxi route particular, opening up another waterway to connect with the harbour, so the poor beleaguered rich don’t have to deal with the sight of us Imizamo Yethu commutables.

When the taxi pulls over to let us out at the circle, right by the massive SAPS station so inconspic right at the entrance to the sprawl, which has resisted all attempts at gentrify, Jazz gives me a swift kiss on the cheek as we get out. ‘I’m really stoked about tonight,’ she says and waves as the taxi takes off, pushing out into the traffic circle, no regard.

Outside, walking up in silence, Zuko trailing behind, kicking around the ball, I’m still irritate with Ash being irritable with me when I catch him smiling to himself, which *really* haks me.

‘Oh, what?! That’s how she says goodbye.’

‘She didn’t say goodbye like that to *me*.’ But he is playful.

‘You jealous?’

‘It’s only that it’s so obvious. It’s cute. I don’t know how you do it. She’s going to be so disappoint.’ He gives my hand an affectionate squeeze, which ruins the vibe utter, because of the wounding. I yank my hand back auto, so fast I nearly hit him. It’s not on purpose. The pain makes it total reflexive. ‘Fuck man, Ash. Be gentle.’

There’s clearly still a frag of glass in there. I turn my palm in the light, trying to see the damn thing, catch a hint of glitter just off my lifeline. ‘See that? Still in there. Dammit.’

‘I’ll get it out when we get home,’ Ash says.

‘Forget it. I’ll do it.’

The club smells decided funky, like too many sweaty kids have simply dumped their gear post-game in a pile which turns out to be exactly the case. Ash starts plucking up the shirts and pants and bundles them in the laundry vat. It’s looking more rundown than usual, the Kaiser Chiefs poster, curling at the edges from the damp seeping through from the DIY rigged shower next door. It’s been like that for 14 months already. We’ve applied for additional funding to get a real one, after the uniforms, after we get Streets Back back on schedule.

Zuko makes for the beanbag, but I head him off. ‘Uh-uh, bra. On the field. You can round up some chomma and practice for a couple of hours.’

Technical it’s not even a field. It’s an scrap of dirt, so uneven the ball catches on clods and grass and goes wide or random. I’ve told the kids it’s superior practice, but it doesn’t help that we’re adjoining the perfect manicured of the stables where the rich kids ride their ponies. They’ve tried to shut us down before. All the shouting of youthful exuberant spooks the horses apparent. Ash negotiated a settle, where they paid to put up a weave screen fence with built-in audio dampner, with the added benefit that it screens out the sight of us. I was ready to burn the fucking stables to the ground.

‘What about the thing?’ Zukes says, playing down his overeager.

‘Plenty time. We’re only leaving here at nine thirty.’

‘What?’ Ashraf says, freezing mid scoop. ‘We’re not still going?’

‘Chill, baby. Toby’s tec friend is going to sort it one time. I’m not going to let a disconnect stop me. It’ll be smooth sail. Promise.’

'I'm gonna do the laundry. We can talk later,' he says, slicing his eyes at Zuko, meaningfully. But it's good for the kid to know what's on the level and in the open. You can't hide shit behind close doors.

But Ashraf takes it as personal affront when he wants to talk later, after Zuko has gone off to find some other players, that I have to meet skyward* online. Like I planned it, like it's not critical for the missioning. But maybe he's right. About the riskable.

We hook up in Monomotopa, which is what I call my Pluslife dwell in Avalon. With 59.3 million registered users, it's one of the virtual escapes of choice, which makes it easier to blend unnoticed.

skyward*'s avatar pops up in the middle of my dwell, a short obese woman with a lumpy bald head and features on the wrong side of a mix of asian and black. He says it's so people underestimate him, cos even in game space, everyone wants to be skinny and beautiful. I couldn't be bothersome with the customising, I just uploaded a photograph and skinned it to my avatar direct. It's more truth.

Despite the Euro-traditional name, Avalon Asia-centric, so the game world is nine hours ahead and more than half the population don't speak English which suits me perfect. What's the point of escaping Plus if the world is too close identical to the one you just left? And besides, you can make an okay living, earning Avalon guinees (guineveres, current exchange G7.26 to the USD) teaching other residents English.

I spent more time on doing up my place. It's real modest, designed bio-friendly, all recyclable materials solar panels on the ceiling, a wind farm in the garden, not you need to generate energy in-world, but it's the principle. It's a shining example to the kind of excesses the neighbourhood attracts, which is why I chose

this location purposeful. A recreate of the LA hills, which pulls in celeb wannabes by the dumpload, all avatared to resemble their favourites current or deceased, the Cary Grants and Tupacs and Gwyneths and Angelica K. The fankids meticulously research and recreate the real, using the indepth you can get on the tab sites, right down to the brand of soy milk their famous obsessing of choice keeps in their fridge and the mosaic in their bathrooms and the guest listing for their parties. Sometimes there's more than one celeb clone in the neighbourhood and then they get into fiercesome competing about who's keeping it more real. It's a pathetic indicative of everything that's wrong with our superfice society and the idiots need a reminding.

I click the conversation window, and immediate, skyward* locks it into private chat.

>>skyward*: hey.

>>10: 'sup in the 'Dam, my man? Listen, I'm thinking of calling it off, I got watchlisted today.

>>skyward*: you're gonna have to be more careful. come on, we should take a walk.

>>10: Yeah. Okay.

It's dead quiet this time anyway, 3am in Japan, so it's only the most devout of players online and I don't know why skyward* is antsy about eavesdrops, especially in my home. But I'm not gonna take issue if he wants to play it noir. Avalon LA lends itself to that. We step outside my domicile and walk down the driveway into the night, which is far brighter than realworld, every star visible, every orbit hotel and satellite.

We set off into the wilder around the apartments, modelled on an idealised movie versioning of Mulholland Drive, ie. no gated communities, no Mexican labour

riots and there are even virtual coyotes, although I have yet to see one. Apparently, some of them are people too, playing out an entire different kind of alterna life, which I can relate to far more than the celeb clones.

We head up towards a hill, furthest from the civilise, which means sometimes the pixels drop off the page, because the gamespace maintenance doesn't pay that much attention to the uninhabited, not in a freeworld anyhow. If we were on premium subscription base, we might have justify to complain.

skyward* only picks up the conversational when we reach the top, looking down on the lights glittering in the dark. There are several parties happening in the valley tonight, no doubt careful recreational of the real deal, thumping bass drifting up. I pull up my private settings, toggle the ambient audio to lock out the human generated, so the incessant *doefdoef* vanishes immediate, leaving us with the sound of crickets and wind in the grass. Not that the grass is stirring actual – too much render time for my old dino machine to handle.

There's a flickering on the horizon and initial. I think it's some bug in the software, but as it spreads, multi-coloured, I twig that someone has hacked the sky, so it's doing a northern lights thing and that's the beauty of Plus life. That here you can influence the world actual.

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>>skyward*: i'll be straight with you. calling it  
off is not an optional.
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>>10: It's not a cancel. It's a raincheck.
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>>skyward*: it's critical we go ahead.
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>>10: Hey, man. I got crisped and marked once already today. I'm down for 24 hours as it is. And I can't do fucking anything. I'm total impotent here.

>>skyward*: think of it as a test. prove to me that you're NOT impotent. that you can get around. how am I going to trust you with bigger if you can't handle a minor setback? you do still want in on the impactful, don't you, 10? Stop splashing around in the kiddie pool?

>>10: Don't hardball me. This is serious shit. If I get picked up in criminal activity during a watch period, that's a fucking disconnect offense!!!!!! It's easy for you to kick back in fucking Amsterdam and be telling me I have to riskable in Cape Town.

>>skyward*: you're right. it is serious shit. either you can handle. or you're just playing. i don't have time for dabbler wannabes.

>>10: ...

>>skywards*: well?

I watch the northern lights flickering above our avatars, the digital represent of me and a dumpy woman who might or might not look anything like skyward*. The sky loops in fractals of colour, pale blue fire washing into acid green and purple like tie-dye. Just lines of code, really. Some bored programmer, a kid with surplus time to waste. No different from the wannabes recreating some muso's mansion immaculate. It's pretty. But empty. Just a distract.

>>10: Okay.

Lerato

Gabarone has all the soul and personality of a strip mall or maybe the teenage blank-heads who hang out in strip malls all desperately trying to conform. It feels like a shabby wannabe cousin of Jo'burg, trying too hard, too much hair gel.

This must be what Americans go through, that sour disappointment, expecting to encounter the exotic, when it's all the same homogeneous crap the world over. Only it's Mugg 'n Beans rather than MacDonalds. This is what we are striving for. Give me Lagos any day, screw the crush and the traffic. It's better than that blandly innocuous dust pit.

Did I mention the dust? I arrived with a minor chest infection, but it's like breathing silt, the air is thick with it. And it's stinking sticky humid. Two days in, negotiations are fraught, Mpho is on the verge of a breakdown from the tension, which makes me wonder why I even need a design architect along if he can't take the pace, and I start getting uncontrollable coughing fits for ten minutes straight. I had to excuse myself from the Bula Metalo meeting. Mataboge sent his PA to come see if I was okay.

The whole thing was hideous. The city. The coughing. Mpho getting all clingy. The problem. It took us four working days to resolve it and it all came down to the technicalities. My department. Pure fluke that the channel code our push ads were coming in on just happened to be identical to within a digit of the Botswanan police authority's defuse signals. Sorting out the code was a simple, it was the PR that was a total nightmare, not helped in that Mpho has the EQ of a gecko. Cute, but not exactly socially adept. He hasn't caught on, for example, that our little sexual sojourn is a

one-time limited offer, valid for this particular business trip only and only because there is fuck all else to do in Gabarone except fuck.

Mpho's about as good in bed as he is a systems designer. Same technique even. He's insistent and mechanical as a piston shaft, and completely lacking in imagination. He won't waver from the same dogmatic approach, which has always worked previously. And it'll work this time too, only because he's so tenacious that he'll eventually wear you down.

It meant I had to do a shit load of managing in both scenarios, especially with Bula Metalo. Let's face it, I can get myself off, but soothing the feathers that weren't so much ruffled as plucked (because Mercedes is a major Bula Metalo client and they were *not* pleased that their customers have been getting electrocuted by their advertising) took a lot more time and effort.

So, eventually, it was all sorted, and we're on our way home, flying economy, which is one more reason I have to get a new job, but I'm still coughing like I'm about to hack up a lung and this fat chick across the aisle keeps giving me these dirty looks and I know exactly what the paranoid wench is thinking. Don't think I didn't notice the fervent whispering when she called over the flight attendant.

It's no surprise then when customs pulls me aside at Oliver Thambo International, ready to slam me into quarantine. Which is not great considering I have a sort-of illegal, in the sense of sort-of dead or sort-of pregnant, chipped cell phone and other assorted tech nestled in the lining of my suitcase. Needless to say, Mpho is completely oblivious to this, and manages to make the situation worse, by working himself into a state of outrage on my behalf.

I'm not overly concerned. A dry cough isn't exactly a typical symptom, but I not in the mood to play coy with customs, even if they should be commended for

being so vigilant in their jobs. I have my trump card. Why take the path of least resistance, when you can simply eliminate it entirely?

When the uniform at the counter asks me for my immune status, I snap, 'I think you'll find *my company* does regular, health-department approved screenings,' and slap down my Communique exec ID, which has exactly the effect intended. Which is that they back the fuck off and fast-track me into the priority queue, the customs guy apologising all the way. 'We're so sorry, Ms Mazwai, if we'd known, it's just the risk and there's been an outbreak in Tanzania, they've closed down Dar Es Saalam...' Like I care.

'It's so incredibly tiresome,' I tell Mpho, who agrees absolutely with whatever I say. 'You'd think they could just formalise the process and issue us with corporate passports. Or segregate the flights, like they do on the underway. How much is that to ask, really?'

Two hours and seventeen minutes later, spun by in a very mellow flash thanks to the combo of Dormor and vodka on the connecting flight and the corporate underway door-to-door, we arrive home. Mpho tries to grope me in the lift as a clumsy invitation to spend the night in his apartment, but I put him off. I'm too exhausted to deal with breaking it off or even avoid breaking it off with a mercy fuck. Besides, my apartment has a better view. It gives me such satisfaction that I'm one floor above him in the Communique residence, even if his is a solo pad.

The door opens to my SIM ID and total cacophony. Jane twitches guiltily. *home™* is in rebellion, the system flopping between settings like a dying fish, desperately trying to accommodate all our personal pre-programmed at once. The

stereo is genre-blending, overlaying the banal pop she's into on the frantica dub I got compliments of Toby, bass lines colliding with the alarm.

I can't say it's not interesting, but it's wrecking my chill, especially with the lights gone into strobe, caught between the sheerday blue I prefer and the warm orange plush Jane's convinced she likes after she read some colour-therapy article in the pushmags, and plunging sporadically into darkness as some kind of compromise.

I don't like Jane.

Unfortunately the absence of technical ability is not her only cringeworthy failing. She is the kind of desperately depressing unattractive that would be borderline pretty, if only her nose didn't resemble a ski-jump or her jaw weren't so pointy or her hair wasn't such a stringy orange, just for example. Nor, sadly, is she the kind of girl where her personality makes up for her physical limitations. As much as I've paid attention, Jane's tastes seem to be a pastiche assimilated from pushmag articles, makeover TV shows and recommendations provided by Pandora based on her existing favourites that keeps her comfily secure within her own genre.

Oh and did I mention she's in accounts? And let's face it, at 34, way too old to be stuck in middle-management. Catch me still hanging around as executive programmer eight years from now.

Infuriatingly, Jane hits the off switch on the remote.

'Oh nice. Jane. Give me that. How am I supposed to restore the settings if it's off?' I turn it back on and click onto the menu. 'Christ on ice. What *have* you done? Pass me the keyboard. This isn't a click fix.'

'I'm sorry. I was only trying to record *Ángeles de la calle*,' which is the soap Jane is happily addicted to, a remake of a 1951 Mexican telenovela, only sexified, modernised, stripped of context and colour, like Gabarone. A real bleach job. And

particularly perverse, considering you can download the original on the Retro channel. Okay, so it's unwatchable, unless you're a total fanboy or an academic, or alternately, stoned with the subtitles turned off.

'I already set that up for you'

'But with the rugby...'

'It's a clever system, Jane. It would have registered the reschedule automatically. Oh never mind.' I reboot home™ manually, so it defaults back to the original settings. God only knows how she managed to do so much damage with the remote. 'There. It's all set up for you.' But I do it in such a way that it's going to cut off the last two minutes, overriding the download manager that normally insures against such eventualities. And you know what these things are like. Can you say cliffhanger? She's going to die. This is retribution for ruining my chilled vibe.

'Can you do me a favour and *not* touch anything in future?' I snap. Jane looks so miserable, I almost recant, until I open the fridge and see that she hasn't bothered to place a grocery order. There's only ice-cream. Thank god Communique has 24-hour chefs, which is the one major benefit apart from the sea view that made defecting from New Mutua all worth it.

I don't ask if there's anything Jane wants, although when I place the order with the kitchen, I throw in a side of avo maki. Keep your friends close and your enemies and all that. I'm just going to ignore the contradiction in how this philosophy pertains to my ruining her soap. The rules of contempt decree that you have to play nice occasionally.

When the doorbell goes ten minutes later, I naturally assume it's my sushi. But home™ logs the SIM as Toby. I waver about whether I really want to let him in,

whether I can handle him right now, decide what the hell and instantly regret it as he lopes in, still wearing his surf peel and dripping. His backpack is squirming.

‘You’re dripping on my carpet.’

He hugs me tightly against the damp neoprene and kisses me, too intimately for a friendly smack. I shove him off, but, unlike Mpho, he’s not bothered by the rejection. ‘Gotta towel?’

Jane steps into the lounge to see who it is and her face clouds. She and Toby share a prickly antipathy, although she flat out denies it’s because he’s not a corporate. She’s internalised enough feelgood talkshows to know you should never confess to being a bigot.

I’ve been co-habiting with her for eight months now, assigned as live-ins on synchronous personality matching by Seed. The overlap of our schedules is usually only an hour or so a day, not including weekends. I don’t know how she manages to be so bad at number crunching that she has to work overtime so frequently. Maybe she’s trying to impress someone, get that promotion which is always and forever going to pass her by in favour of some smarter, better, more attractive candidate.

Not that I’m complaining. It means we stay out of each other’s way and she’s oblivious to how I really spend my down time. (I *could* even confess to having maybe given Seed a little nudge in this direction, but hacking Communique’s central database would be a violation of company protocol and subject to a downgrade at the very least.)

Toby is still bitching. ‘Your security sucks. Scratch that your visitors should have free reign. Who knows what streetside degens might wander in.’

‘Like you, you mean?’

‘Exact!’

This is old routine. Even though I've hooked Toby up with a Communique Preferred Visitor's card, he usually forgets it. This irritates me immensely, but I don't let on, because then he'd only do it on purpose, the same way he always ramps up the slang to get under my skin. But maybe he always talks like this. I pretend at sympathy, laced with a syrupy dose of sarcasm.

'Poor baby. Lumped in with the civilian dregs again.'

'Separate entrance 'an all. Back of the train. Can you tell?' He sniffs himself suspiciously and then flumpfs into the couch, still wearing his peel. Jane bites off a little squeal of dismay.

'But never mind my travails. How was Gabs?'

'Shit. Thanks. It's this big push on Push,' (Toby snickers gratifyingly) 'But their cellular network is shambles. It doesn't have the bandwidth to cope with the content and there have been horrendous glitches with Bula Metalo's ads conflicting with the defusers. So it's ads or social control. Your choice.'

'Sounds like a good time to be criminal intent in Botswana.'

'Uh, yeah, apart from that whole death penalty thing.'

'Hectic. Forget the workables. I only asked to be polite. Did you get it?' Toby grins lopsided in that way girls find attractive, although honestly, he's more interesting than beautiful, especially since he's started cultivating his beard.

Jane is still hovering inside the alcove anomaly squeezed in between the kitchen and the lounge, which is but one of the many factors that reveals our apartment was converted, and it was originally only intended for one, which only makes me more bitterly resentful to be lumped with tediously conventional finances girl.

‘C’mon, let’s get you that towel,’ I say, downplaying his comment and because I’m dying to see what’s in the bag. And yeah, okay, because otherwise Jane is going to have a coronary about the couch. I’m not completely heartless.

‘Should I call you when the food is here?’ Jane chirps.

‘You got edibles coming?’ Toby perks up. I might have suspected he would have the munchies.

‘Straight from Communique’s premier chefs.’

We traipse into my room and I close the door. Toby unpeels, weaselling out of the skintight suit that protects him from all the pollutants in the water, until he is standing naked before me and posing shamelessly. I laugh out loud and he pretends to sulk.

Jane assumes we fuck, but Toby and I worked that out of our systems years back. And besides he’s too promiscuous. I know that sounds hypocritical coming from me, but I’m careful. I throw the towel at him.

‘You’re still not eating enough.’

‘Girls like a boy on the skinny. And besides, it’s not insufficient food. It’s oversurplus drugs.’

‘Speaking of which.’

Toby grins and like a cheap magician summons a joint of sugar between his fingers. But when I reach for it, he holds it above his head.

‘Uh-uh. Did you get it?’

‘Maybe. You gonna tell me what’s in the bag?’

‘Maybe,’ he shoots back. I pass him a lighter and all play is put aside as he sucks the joint to life. ‘Do you ever worry about her?’ He jerks his head at the door.

‘Uh. No.’

‘Surely, *surely* sugar and, hmmm, let me see.’ He sniffs delicately at the length of the joint as if savouring a cigar, takes a long drag and smacks his lips together, ‘With just a hint of vanilla and a touch of bliss isn’t exactly on the employee preapprove list?’

‘Stop fooling and hand it over.’

‘Only if you tell me you got it.’

‘Only if *you* tell me what’s in the bag.’

‘Ah. Seems we’re stalemated.’ He waggles the joint. I ignore it, nudge the neoprene with my foot, enjoying the game, then look up at him, coyly through my lashes.

‘What do you think?’

He tackles me, knocking me back onto the bed and pins my arms above my head. ‘You incredible woman.’ He moves as if to kiss me and I twist my head away and take a drag from the joint still pincerd between his fingers instead. He sighs and lets up. ‘You used to be so much funsome.’

‘And you used to be not such a drugged out freak. Put that away. And put some clothes on. I assume you brought clothes?’

He gets sulky and crouches down beside his pack, turning his back on me. As he starts unzipping the bag, it jolts and struggles. A scrummage ensues.

‘Shit!’ Toby falls backwards onto his ass as a VIMbot shoots across the room and under my bed. I yelp and pull my feet up, laughing. ‘Toby! What was that?’

‘My new friendling. I liberated him.’

‘How do you know it’s a him?’

‘I would never have gone for a female. Too much troublesome.’

I hang my head over the edge of the bed. The VIMbot is already at work, rustling the dust bunnies.

‘Tobe. I can’t help but notice that this particular VIMbot appears to have the Communique logo on it.’

‘Yeah, like I said, I liberated him. Just similar to how I’m gonna liberate you one day, storm into the cursed citadel, slay the vile monsters or, you know, alternately Jane, and carry you off.’

‘To your shitty swivel with the rest of civilian humanity.’

‘Hey, don’t knock the swivel. I get a view at least a fifth of the time.’

‘And motion sick the rest.’ His rotating apartment, designed to maximise space makes me dizzy.

‘I like the revolve. It’s like being on a ride. All the time.’

‘Thanks for the offer, the noble knighthood thing. But I’ll pass.’

‘Okay, you wanted to know my motivate? It’s revenge.’

‘Oh. Right. I see. You kidnapped a VIMbot because you resent Communique’s security policies?’

‘Not just Communique, Lerato. Every corporation! Let every multinational conglom quake in fear, for the people have spoken! We streetside degens, us dredge humanity, we’re bandin’ together like. We’re taking a stand for freedom, truth, equality and the right to buy Fong Kong brands.’

‘A noble cause indeed. But I’m not buying the whole Fong Kong cheap rip-off pledge considering you’re wearing a twelve grand BabyStrange chamo coat. Please.’

‘Okay, all right. I needed some help in my apt. It’s a mess. And this little guy... I just know he wants to help out.’

‘All right, all right. I concede. You can have the damn thing. But let me neuter the little bugger first. Pass it here.’

Toby scrabbles under the bed and yanks out the bot, buzzing hysterically, desperate to get back to vacuuming. They’re pretty dense. You can’t interrupt them mid-task. He hands it to me and I snap out my toolkit from my phone, designed specific for this purpose and unscrew the faceplate on the underside of bot. It takes less than ten seconds to override the GPS tracking programme and the homing instinct. It’s not like a cleaning bot is exactly a priority.

‘What about the vocalising?’

‘You want ‘em?’

‘What does it say?’

I click through the verbal responses. Even less than you’d expect. It’s such a simple piece of tech and they’re not expected to last long, so they’re pretty limited. ‘Error, please try again’, it chirps mechanical. ‘Property of Communiqué Inc.’ and, lastly, a really cute, ‘All clean.’

‘Mal,’ Toby says, so I leave the vocals operative and hand over the bug, which is now sitting quietly on best behaviour.

‘Oh, crap, speaking of my BabyStrange, I’ve got something to show you.’

He plays back a weird mash of some almost bar fight, which is not overly interesting, until he points out the big guy with the dredds, his would-be revolutionary friend.

‘Is that where you’re getting all the political doggerel?’

‘Yeah and we’re having a protest party. It’s the new theme night at Replica. Insurrection Saturdays. Awesome band playing. You should come. It’s going to be toyota. I can comp your phone, plus one, natural.’

‘Toby. You know I can’t attend those sorts of things.’

‘Not even to show solidarity with your gen? Okay, okay, chill. It’s just a bash. No-one actually gives a shit about the protest. ‘Cept maybe Tendeka and ilk. But I did want to ask if you wanted to make a contribution.’

‘What kind of contribution?’

‘My beauty, your genius? The perfect pairing.’

‘I can’t do this guy’s phone if that’s what you’re asking. It’s too high risk. Maybe when he’s not on a watch.’

‘So, what about switching off the security on an adboard. I can get you the exact GPS. Just temporary like.’

‘Oh. I don’t know. What’s temporary?’

‘Long enough.’

‘For?’

‘A little outlaw smear campaign.’

‘What would you do if you didn’t know me, Toby?’

‘I’m sure the world would be a much improve place.’

‘Whose board is it?’

Toby sucks intently on the joint, all the better to avoid meeting my eye.

‘Fuck knows. I don’t keep track of the proprietary.’

‘Well where is it?’

‘N2, near Roodebloem Road. Smack in the middle of the highway.’

‘You know that’s a Communique board.’

‘Oh. Your employers would disapprove terrible.’

‘It’s a serious offence, Toby.’

‘Worse than the tamper you just did on this little guy?’

‘Oh please. That’s the equivalent of stealing stationery. Aiding and abetting a hack job on corporate property? That’s a whole other category. That’s goodbye plush apartment and cushy job. Firing offence, no written warning required.’

‘You could have just left it at ‘no’.’

‘I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. I just want you to appreciate the risk I’m taking on your behalf. And speaking of dangerous favours...’ I rummage in my suitcase for his reward and toss it to him. He stashes the phone just in time, as the door cracks open.

‘Uh-oh,’ Toby stage whispers, really fucking obviously, ‘Evil housemate alert.’

Jane pokes her head in, bearing gifts. ‘Oh, hey, your food is here. What are you guys doing?’

‘Fucking,’ Toby says brightly. ‘You wanna join?’

Kendra

The way your brain works it's always rewiring, creating new pathways for new experiences which shift your context of the old ones, the layers of associate overlaid mesh, good and bad all tangled up with different people and places. It's disturb how much signify can be weighted to a location. how you can map out a whole city according to memories, little thicketed tangles of connect that become denser the longer you stay in a place, the associations growing suffocate thick.

As soon I step out into Long Street and the sheet of rain that soaks through my clothes instant, I realise I can't face going back to the loft dead away, not because of the gaping in the walls or the dust that the absorbent tarps are supposed to sponge up right out of the air, but don't do any such, but because there's zero chancing Jonathan will be there. Because we're on a break again, although I'm still allowed to stay in his studio, ostensible to oversee the renovate, which has been going on six months now.

I feel like the dust tarps veiling the furniture sop up the fraught. There are dust motes of emotional residual drifting down to settle on the carpet, filming the walls; the shouting matches we degenerate into at two in the morning when he stops in for a 'chat' after a night out with his friends and leaves straight after. Initial, I liked the glamorous of being a kept woman, especial coming out of the impoverish of studentdom, but now it just seems stale and tired and terrible naïve.

I walk down the steps to the underway, below the new deco curls of the signage which says 'Long' and 'D' and stand on the platform waiting. The tunnels rumble and shush with far-off trains. It's 98 seconds til the next up to Tamboerskloof and Mr Muller's subterr. If it wasn't raining, I'd just walk it, even

though it's a steep uphill. I should feel cold, my skin is puckered in goosebumps, but I feel warm and light and razor.

The rumbling audio amps up and the train rides in, sending plumes of water skating up on either side of it. The plastech doors slide open and I push past the spilling throng to get on and slide into a seat while there's still one around. Adderley Station is next and it's always madding. The train rises slightly, hissing as the hover reinflates and it glides off. I get out my camera, ignoring the tadpole next to me who leans forward to see and click through the shots of buildings and architectural detail I've been snapping late, til I get to Toby. It's not a good shot, but I don't delete it. I don't delete anything. Out the window, the darts of neon on the tunnel walls slide into slender blurs of light as we pick up speed towards the St Michael's stop.

I need to drop off a new reel for development prior to the exhibition. It's old school, the process and it's been a total 'mare to find someone who can still handle it, although if I were a real artist, Jonathan rips me, I would do it entire myself as point of pride. I dug up Mr Muller between a photog newsgroup and the Milnerton market where I picked up my Hasselblad ridiculous cheap during the panic of the first outbreak, when everyone thought this was it.

That sense of urgency has eased up, finally. Andile didn't tell me it would be like this. Like an ultra-caffeine rush gone sour. And it only took four Ghosts to subdue. Or maybe it's just the residual humiliate of Toby trying to kiss me, the black ironic being that Jonathan would likely encourage it. I haven't even seen him this week. And I haven't told him. He'll flipmode.

I've documented my wrist precise. 4120 photographs over the 16 hours it took to develop, like film. Played back in timelapse, it's like a bruise bursting and resolving rorschach into the logo, the exact colour of the green phosphorescent algae

shimmering in the waves on the beach in Langkawi when Jonathan took me to Malaysia, after my father finally succumbed to the protracted.

I spent an hour looking at my skin this morning, not at my wrist, but at my face. The cosmetic is the most obvious. You can buy low-level versions of nano in just about any of the facials on the market now, but the tech is only operating dermis, surface or only just beneath, whereas mine is humming merry in my blood, eliminating toxins, sopping up free radicals, releasing anti-oxidants.

It's where you can see the effective first, in your skin. A marathon detox and a fine-tune all in one and I'll never have to go through what dad did, the cancer chewing its way through his stomach, inside outwards. No promises Andile said, explaining the nano's programmed to search and destroy any abnormal developing, before he made me sign the waiver direct contradictory. *'The applicant understands that any claims made by Inatec staff regarding medical or health benefits are based on preliminary findings based on testing in animals. The applicant understands that the Inatec nanotechnology is still in the prototype phase of development and based on this information and understanding, accepts full responsibility for all the risks inherent, etc, etc.'*

I don't mean to dismissive the etceteras or the risks inherent. I know exactly what I'm in for, despite what Toby might think or that freakshow friend of his, or my shrinkable who thinks I'm just doing this as a way of asserting myself in the whole bang shebang with Jonathan.

I'm a demo model for their demographic. An angel of aspiration. A guinea pig for an appropriate alliterative beginning with g. Ghost, I guess. Only once removed on the food chain from the kids who sell space on their chamo, adblips

playing out on the plastivinyl of tees and jackets like walking projectboards, only with more 'risks inherent.'

And my skin does look amazing, like it's been buffed and scrubbed and moisturised within an inching of its life, all velva glow and radiant, even though the only cosmetic in the apartment is Jonathan's aftershave. It's been almost six days now with no side effective, or only good apart from the first couple of miserable when the flu and achiness hit. But then maybe that was self-inducive. Maybe all of it is.

By the time I reach Mr Muller's apartment block in St Michael's, it's almost lunching and I feel a guilty twinge that I should have called first. The elevator recognises my SIM on the approved guest list dead away, slides open and drops me to -4, sending an announce to his home™ automatic, so that he is already brewing the ultra-caffeine when the door swings open.

He's got the wall2wall set on Karoo in here, pale light over scrub hills complete with a windpump, metal blades turning idle in a breeze you could almost convince yourself you felt. An idealised rural, peaceful, far remove from the actual. But unlike most, Mr. Muller keeps the display reductioned, so it only takes up half a wall, more painting than wraparound, although he keeps the TV on always. He doesn't like to forget that it's not legit. He says it's just another kind of sedation. A lulling he calls it. 'Watch out for the lulling,' he says sometimes, like it's something profound, if the mood strikes him philosophic or a commercial sets him off. Commercials really get to him. He says you used to be able to skip them entire, just prog them right out of your recording, but it's hard to imagine. Then he'll launch into a rant on newfangle tech and how the world has evolve for the worst, although

at least the crime is down, and the factual of it is he *likes* to yell at the television and I should just leave an old grouchsome in peace to his foibles.

He turns, two cups already in hand and says warm, 'Hello, hello. I wasn't expecting you today. You're looking well. Got something new for me?' and kisses me on both cheeks with lips that are always slightly too wet.

I swap him a cup of ultra for two spools of film, which he puts up on the counter, already looking frayed, even though the subterr's only a couple of years old. It makes me depressed, but Mr Muller likes to joke that he's just in touch with his body. It's dragging down with age, so he's moved belowground to keep up with it. 'This way, they won't even have to bury me,' he says, 'Just lock up the door and be done with it.' Of course, he's joking. The property in town's far too value, even the swivels and the subterr. There are a lot of oldsters living deepdown now, but with the wall2walls, you don't even have to know.

The real advantage of living subterr, he says, is that there is no natural light to interfere with his darkroom radical. It's really his bathroom, the entrance hung with a tunnel of black recycling bags, cos even if there's no natural incoming the fake light from the wall2wall vistas can still mess with the process. The major problem is getting the chemicals. He has to get them shipped in from a guy in Germany, which takes weeks additional with all the security checks.

I had about 30 rolls already by the time I hooked up with Mr. Muller. Didn't have the slightest what to do with them, cos there was only one lab I could find up in Jozi, and then it would have been imposs for me to be involve in the process. I couldn't afford to fly up everytime and I'd gone overboard complete. Partly it was the find, picking up the 30 cannisters for next to nought at the Milnerton station market and what else was I going to do with them but shoot? But it was also the

mystery, a grand experiment. When I told him this, when I found him, Mr. Muller knew exact what I was talking about. 'It's an alchemy,' he said, 'As much in your head as the camera.' Unfortunately, it's also fierce expensive and Mr. Muller doesn't cut me any slack.

His wife left him seven years ago, though he doesn't go into the details, I have the idea that there was an affair involve, maybe even on his side. That's when he picked up on the old habitual of photographics. Not much call for film development these times, but he's taught me mega I didn't know from digital.

If I catch him in the right mood, he'll haul out his portfolio, which he insists on keeping hardcopy, endearing, and flip through thousands of portraits of politicians and other public figurines, concerts, crime scenes, the quarantine riots cos he was a photojournal for the Cape Times back in the day.

My favourite is the mangle wreckage of a truck engine embedded in the sludge of a dried-up irrigation pond, framed by grape vines all shrivelled from the temperature upscale none of the farmers wanted to believe in. It's from a car bomb from a right wing coup attempted in Stellenbosch – a freak occurencing by a bunch of radicalised students who thought they could do a better job than the govt with the drought and the superdemic spreading, and managed to blow themselves up process. 'Do you hear what I'm saying, Kendra?' he will say pointed and wait for me to nod, before he goes on to explain how engines are built so solid, they're the only thing that survives the wreckage of that level of explosive, and how in Lebanon in the 1970s, there were so many car bombs, the photojournals, total jaded, used to compete to find the engines. Not that he was around then. But he likes to think of it as a kind of tribute. This is exact the way his spiel always runs, every time he shows me, like

it's a recording and he just has to hit play. And I think this is a side-effecting of getting old.

The image is beautiful, almost black and white, although he shot in colour, just the time of day and the way he's worked the light makes it seem leached out. But it's the simplicity evocative of the contexting, of the meaning an inanimate in a pastoral can represent that's impressive. It's easy to gut wrench historical with people; Tiananmen Square or Hector Pietersen or the Bangladesh children's war, but investing an object with the same quality is serious impress. If I was still at Michaelis, I would make this the focusing of my thesis, but I walked out of classes when dad died and didn't go back to explain and now my bursary is voided null. Jonathan keeps nagsome for me to reapply, to plead family circumstance.

Actual, I wanted to include some of Mr Muller's images from the quarantine series particular as juxtapose with my own for an exhibition. But when I told him about it, planning a contrast between the photos of crams of people fighting through the smoke from the burning tyres barricades and the hack gas verus the shots I took on assign for the PR company of the stadium crowds at the Coca-Cola Extraordinaries concert last year, he told me it was pretentious art school crap that was totally insensitive to what people in this country have endured and thank God I'd dropped out of that awful place.

'So what's it today?' Mr. Muller asks. 'No wait, let me guess. Portraits of street kids holding their only possessions. Reflections in rear-view mirrors. Close ups of people's shoes on the underway.' He's always amused by my choice of subject matter, although the street kid idea is genius.

'You'll just have to anticipate, Mr. M. I think you'll like them though. I've been pushing the film.'

‘And how go your plans for the exhibition? All in order, I trust?’

‘Sanjay’s still not hundreds on the format.’

‘Not convinced? Philistine.’

‘Yeah, he’s still trying to dissuade me. He’s worried that it’s too archaic, that it won’t appeal and the repro...’

‘Yes, yes, you told me. It won’t be perfect carbon copies.’

‘Unless I scan them, which voids the whole concept of non-digital.’

Actual, Sanjay’s already threatened to reduce my space. I know he doesn’t mean it, not really, although he might not take such a risk if it were a solo. But there are to be three of us, two major establish and me, and only for two weeks. And he likes to court the edge.

‘You just stick with what you know. Ignore the bloody lot of them. They’re blowing smoke out their asses.’

Mr. Muller’s usually so gentrified, this makes me choke on my ultra. He does it occasion. I think he gets a kick out my react, although he never shows it. Not quite. Anyway, it’s not only the repro that Sanjay’s worried about. The historical aspect is the main attraction, but there are problems inherent. Some of the film has rotted and the manual is so unpredictable that it’s not even guaranteed that the shots will be the right exposure or even in focus.

Mr. Muller will start the treatment while I’m at work, but we always develop together. Even though I know how to do it all well now myself. I wish I could say it’s become a sacred rite of that alchemical process, a communion, but really, it’s that he doesn’t quite trust me with his expensive chemicals. I’m also not allowed to address him as Dan or even Daniel. Just Mr. Muller, which is so outmode.

‘My goodness. What’s this?’ He takes my arm and pushes up the sleeve gentle. And suddenly I’m embarrassed, which is distraught cos it seems out of place. Of everything, I’m not comfortable entire with the glow logo. It seems gauche, which is clearly the point, to draw attention. But it’s part ‘n parcel and the benefits outweigh. I just don’t think Mr. Muller will get it.

He regards it serious. ‘When I was young, I wanted to get my grandfather’s number from the prison camp tattooed on my arm. A sort of homage to suffering.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘Jewish. It’s not kosher. And it was in remarkably bad taste. I didn’t realise that at the time.’ He shrugs and takes another sip of ultra and moves to pick up one of the canisters on the counter to scrutinise. ‘You know this is cracked.’

‘Yeah. It’ll be curious to see the resultant.’

‘If it comes out at all. I wouldn’t get my hopes up.’

But the potential for flaws are precise what I am hoping for, what interests me most in the process.

Toby

I'm stokeable with my stash: new illicit phone capable of reading illegal downloads without blowing up and a spiffing VIMbot to restore my swivel to the state of superclean it hasn't seen since my old lady first picked it out the catalogue. Not that I've ever been bothered particular about fighting the good fight against creeping entropy like, but it will make for a change.

The little fucker nearly gets away though, when I leave the door of the swivel open. I spill it out of my pack and it goes zooting between my pumas, breaking for the corridor, but the door has already started to rotate away for one of the other apartments. This whole cog system of floors, the entire building gyroscoping in on itself perpetual like, some people don't like it, they get dizzy, but it saves space on doors and it just saved my VIMbot from bolting.

It thwacks off the wall, just missing the gap and I pick it up, legs twitching frantic. The thing is making some kind of godawful from its inner devicings. It's fucking fantastic real, a dirty sound. If a robot could grind its teeth - only VIMbots don't have teeth natural, but you get the image.

I put it down on the kitchen counter, hold it still with one hand and sample it direct to my phone. I can already hear the track unfolding in my head. That metallic teethedge in the backbeat.

Of course, my mother phones in the middle of the sampling and ruins it simunye. It's cool. I'll pick it up later, assuming the bot doesn't self repair interim or something. 'You were late fifteen minutes ago, my darling,' the bitch says by way of greeting and it's true, I've forgotten, but with the amount of sugar I'm doing, she's lucky I can remember the colour of my eyes without referring a mirror. I've told her to upload appointments to my phone. Fucking whore.

My phone is belting out some trigger pop smash loop from Soweto 12 I got from Lerato. Word is he's a virtual, but who can tell? It's not really my swing, but I said I'd give it a listen. I like to mix it up eclectic, got over 150 000 songs on my iPhone, ready to download to the decks and 'bout nine and a half thou records in the mix. Everything from spectro to new bliss jazz and some old time stuff too. And my brand spanking handset will double that capacity now I'm free to loot and plunder without the digital rights management exploding my tech and siccing the cops on me, which happened to a friend of mine, factual, boys and girls. He managed to 'lude arrest but scored some luscious facial scars. You'd be surprise at how explosive a combo a defuser and nasty DRM malware in your music files can be.

Right now, I'm looking for a soundtrack, a way of dealing with the cow. But it's not enough, so I smoke some bliss on the way to the Nova Deli, just to bring me up enough to be able to handle.

I slide in to the booth super winsome deluxe, even pat that disgusting mutacute she insists on carrying around with her, the white tiger-striped slothmonkey, draped off her neck Freda Kahlo. It bares its neat little teeth at me, the only thing brave sufficient at this table to express how it's really feeling. 'Oh Muppet, stop, that.' Mom taps it on its nose and it starts making these warbling purring sounds by way of recompense. I wish she could have settled on one species or two max. These multiple mash-up jobs make me queasy.

Mom is sucking on a nutradiet, blows a puff of vitamin-enriched smoke at me as I sit down. 'Did you call the Sunshine Clinic?'

'Oh, hey, I'm fine, thanks, mom. Just great. Got a regular DJ gig now, Thursday nights, met a cute girl. You'd really like her. She's not my usual type at all, really sweet, you know? Swivel's cool. Got some help, which helps. Or so I've

been told. And it's true, you know, seeing it flesh. And at least it doesn't shed Bengal stripey everywhere like little Muppet here. Oh yeah and planning a commando on a billboard tonight with some whacked out new buds. All the ordinary. And how is Chesrae? Or was it Wynand? I do struggle to keep them straight like.'

'Your father and I have been talking.'

'That's a firsttime.'

'We've agreed that it's becoming a problem.'

'Can I have one?' I ask, reaching for the pack of nutradiets.

'No, Tobias, honestly. They're calibrated for my bio-rhythms exactly.

They'd just make you sick.' Which is a lie straight up, although of course they are personalised for her nutritional requirings, she pays extra for that, but at least we are communicating now.

'So what's the problem?' I say, taking one anyway, igniting it with a light tap on the table.

'Oh my darling.'

'No, serious.' I take a drag and the micro-nutrients kick up the bliss by 100 degrees. I am intensely interested, blistering smart.

'Your habit.'

'Which one?'

'Oh, Toby, please. You make me terribly tired. It's unconscionable. We've decided. Your father and I.'

'And that's it?'

'Well, of course, you have a choice. It's just that we won't be supporting you anymore. We've already advised the trustees.'

I take another drag of the nutradiet. I think it's the zinc that does it, to complement the bliss, I mean. You have to watch it though because vitamin C will kill a buzz dead.

'Oh for god's sake. You're on something now, aren't you?'

I lean back, put my feet on the table to a jangle of cutlery and crock, cos there's not really space for it. If I can get her to cry, points go to me and everything else is void. 'So, how is father? Still *naaiing* his boss? What's her name again?'

But she just looks at me pity, 'Oh darling.' Even the squashy faced marsupial is bored contempt, digging under its armpit with its perfect little teeth, so that I am the one eventual forced to make a scenic, which I do total over-drama, throwing over the entire table, managing to stun the rest of the deli and infuriate Muppet into a brittle chattering fit, but my mother just watches, smoking, holding up a credit card sandwich between her fingers, waiting for the manager to take it, as I skip out ahead of the two burliest waiters intent on getting me out. I shout back, loud sufficient, for the passersby outside who may have missed the actioning.

'Love ya, mom! Byeeee!'

Seed Connect Profile: Lerato Mazwai

Name: Lerato Mazwai

Age: 26

Marital Status: Single

ID Status: Full-time Corporate employ.

Substances: Legitimate controlled. Frequently.

HIV Status: negative (*)

On my bookshelf: Manuals and magazines. I don't have time to read. But I'll be sure to be very admiring of your literary habits if that's what you're into.

In my plays: Soweto 12, The Kill Kittens, Amin Amin, Fernandez, Magents, The James Watson band, Electric Fuck Pirates, Thumper, Lebogang & The All Stars, The Sleepers, early Bruce Springsteen (yes, really), Ministry of Love, Makeba Plural.

On my screen: I've been watching a lot of retro lately. Real nostalgia stuff. Usually, I'm into smart drama like *Eustasia* or *CSI Resolve*, unusual documentaries on the secret lives of housewives or kangaroo rats or glow-in-the-dark mucus worms as well as the smart and/or gratuitously fucked up hyper-reality shows; *Headwrap*, *Rat Park* and *Prison Babes* is probably my current favourite. If only for that wonderfully dark moment Nokwazi totally missed the point of the parole challenge and shanked Letitia in front of the board.

In my room: My bed.

Pluslives: I'm too busy living real-world. If there's a concert or a lecture or other worthwhile event going on in Underworld or AlterLife, I'll pop in. I have to spend long hours virtual in my job, so the last thing I want to do at the end of the day is go back in my leisure time.

The things I can't live without: Sex, sushi, a challenge.

The best lie I've ever told: I don't lie.

More about who I am: I'm hot. I'm smart. And I'm very good at my job. My career will always come first. And I'm not into long-term. Get over it.

What I'm looking for

ISO: Men or Women. Single.

Age range: 18-45.

For: Play, Casual Dating.

How important are looks: Very

HIV status: Negative. Non-negotiable.

Education level: Grad school or career professionals

ID Status: Corporate. Govt. High level contractors. LSM 8-10 non-negotiable.

Substances: Reasonable use.

More about who you are: Attractive, clean, professional level, intelligent, ambitious, driven, entertaining, sociable. You have a life outside your job and virtual, you have a sense of humour, you're shit hot in bed, you're on the upwards trajectory and you're not going to mistake sex for a relationship.

(* family history)

Tendeka

Sent Messages>>

17/9 23h09. Toby. Not answering UR phone. Did U get msg switching the meet? Damn SAPS. SIM denied entry @Don Pedros. RendezV @ 19 lwer main woodstock instead. Unimore Packing co warehouse. Call 4 directions if U need. No rush.

17/9 23h29 Still waiting 4U. Still coming? Havent heard from U. Concerned?!?! Hour late now.

17/9 23h51 Cant do it without our key guy! Dont want to rip the plug at this late. Get in touch.

17/9 24h12 Not cool Toby

17/9 24h17 WHERE U?!?!?!?!?

17/9 24h23 FUCKER. FUCK YOU. YOU FUCK.

‘Little tense, bra?’ Toby calls out, waltzing in to the warehouse and it’s only Ashraf’s intervent that stops me slamming him through a fucking wall of crates. He laughs, ‘Relax, china. I didn’t realise this was a military operationing here. So, we’re a little late. It’s quieter on the highway now anyways.’

‘Are you fucking high?’ Which is a stupid question considering his pupils are so dilate his eyes are black.

‘Yeah,’ he says, looking round, unconcern, ‘What is this place? Boxland?’

‘Jasmine used to work here. She kept the keys. And the alarm code.’ Ashraf says, as if this conversational thread is the one that’s priority right now, as if I’m not going to see direct through his misdirectioning.

Toby scopes her admiring. ‘Jazz, you rebel you. I’ve got newfound for you, girl.’

‘Shut the fuck up, Ash. Who gives a shit. I mean thanks, Jazz, it’s great, appreciative, but Toby you cannot fucking come here fucked up and fucking think you can fuck this for us!’

‘Ooh,’ he says, pulling a face, his lip all curled up, ‘Thanks. Not on the first date.’

‘What?’

‘All the fucking. Not on the first date. Sorry.’ Zuko snickers. This time Ash isn’t fast enough. Toby tumbles back from what was only a shove, into a stack of boxes, spraying the floor with packing material. He rebounds, laughing.

‘Jesus what a rush. Do it again. C’mon. Once more. Hit me. For real this time. C’mon. Just not in the face, okay?’ He bounces, boxer, shaking out his hands, ‘Wait. Wait. Okay. I’m ready.’

‘Fuck you.’

‘Yeah. Already said that. Moving on... We gonna go wreak some havocking on capitalism or what?’ Ash has a gentle restraining on my arm, but it’s chill. I know the fucking score here. I shake him off.

‘Is your friend ready, Toby? Cos if she’s not, you can just fucking go homeward.’

‘Waiting on my beck.’

‘Well call her then.’

‘Ja. I’ll msg her when we’re imminent. Not before. She doesn’t like the prolonged chatsome.’

I pull him aside, admitted rougher than necessary, away from Jasmine, who is already wound up nervy tight and getting more since Zuko started missioning on a systematic sabotage half an hour ago, gutting boxes so that they’ll spill everything as soon as someone tries to lift ‘em, switching labels. ‘It’s bad enough you come here total fried when you know how I feel about that shit, but don’t undermine me in front of my people, okay, Toby?’

‘Okay, bra, we’re cool. I wouldn’t want to affect your statusing with your *people*.’

‘Are you fucking mocking me?’

‘No, Ten. No. How can you think that? Look, I’m sorry. Let’s just hit it, okay? Rewind. Press play. Back on scheduling and everyone’s happy!’

‘All right. But this is serious. This is deep water stuff.’

Toby looks confused.

‘We’re not playing in the shallow end.’

‘Right. Got it.’

I call Zuko off ripping up the boxes. It’s low level stuff and pre-approve standard anti-corp, but Jazz is worried they’ll trace it back to her. I’ve told her it’s cool, but she’s still fret anyway, tuning some crap about how her ex-boss was a decent guy. How decent if he fired her first place? You can’t limit the sentiment to the major scale corporati. Every capitalist enterprise is profligate propagation of the system that fucks people over, keeps the poor and the sick down and out of sight. The only reason I would leash Zuko in is, cos it means we can’t come back. But we’ll find other

hideouts, other places we can pirate the keys and that can't afford private Aito patrols. And besides, Zukes needs to burn off some of that restless.

Ash does a surface on cleaning up, just enough so it won't be immediate apparent and we pull up our hoodies and slip out, all in black, which is only logic at night. I'm already starting to sweat. It's scorch humid, cos of the rain earlier. There's that musky of wet tar in the air but the streets are tjoep quiet. No sign of anyone in semi-industrial, despite the new lofts they've been putting up here, more gentrifying madness, with the windows above the warehouses all lit up. But the loft dwellers are all locked away. All the stuff they need is interior; cafés and laundros and private gyms, so they go direct from garage to apartment, never venturing out on the street unless it's in the secure of their cars. I read about this thing in a comic book about a real-life in the 1970s in New York rape and murder of a woman called Kitty Genovese direct outside her apartment block, went on for like an hour, and there were all these people witnessing from their windows, who heard her screams, but no-one came to help. No-one even called the cops. These days I don't think anyone would bother to look firstplace.

We turn left into Roodebloem, brisking the pace. Zuko is carrying the ropes and the harness, playing handlanger. A test run. I expect massive from him, unlike Jasmine, who gets more nervous every time. Girl's got heart, absolute with the cause, but she doesn't have the nerves to endure the riskable. But then, it's the same for almost everyone who joins us. We've never deluded it. It's a complex operation, jamming, which most kids don't appreciate. We've got a high turnover, to use the enemies' lingo.

The rules are that the targets have to switch constantly. It's self evident, but you'd be surprised at how many don't think that far ahead and get bust when they

hit a board the third time round. It's great that kids are doing it, that they're actually getting out there, but they fucking have to think it through properly. It's not like we haven't made the information available.

Admitted, most of them do it for the thrillsome. And when it comes down too heavy, the first time they get crisped, say, then they're out. They'll still hang in the forums, they might make it down for a protest or a flash mobbing, but they won't go on a raid again. Zuko is going to be different though. I can tell.

'Did I ever tell you about Kitty Genovese?' I say to him, but Zuko is not direct behind me as I anticipated.

'You can tell me again if it'll chill you out,' Ashraf says, smiling wry.

'Zukes, I'm talking to you!'

Zuko is trailing two steps behind with Jasmine, both hanging tight with Toby, who is spouting shit, dragging up the whole Hope Modise thing, as if Jasmine weren't freaked enough already.

'Twenty years disconnect. And the kid was only 14. You didn't hear about this, serious? It was, what, three years ago. There was that whole ad campaign?'

Zuko trots up, obedient. 'Sorry, Ten. Toby was telling us about –'

'Hope Modise, I heard. But he's got it wrong. You've got it wrong, Toby. She was 13. And she didn't get twenty years. They remanded her sentence.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was getting to that.'

'What do you mean, remanded?' Jasmine says, too bouncy in her step by far. Wired on adrenaline as much as the three Red Bulls she's packed away.

'After she hacked Sonica Wireless' servers, some dumb teenage crush thing, sending out a worm that interrupted people's programs with a message about how much she loved this guy –'

‘Her programming teacher,’ Toby interrupts, ‘Who was way older, like 34, and she figured this was the one way she could prove herself. It was total beauty actual. Love made code. Cos she did it all in binary, right? So, you would be working on your spreadsheet or your email or whatever and this thing would pop up, like an animation, but all ones and zeroes just flipping out all over the screen and the gen public didn’t have a clue. Thought it was a crash or a virus. Hit half the world in four days. Something like 6.3 million lost in productivities while they tried to sort it out and I’m talking dolleros. But here’s the stupid thing, cos Hope had stamped it. I mean, how else was her teacher gonna know it was her unless she included his name? Disguised in the code, but they figured it out, traced it back to him and then to her. He got off with a warning, I reckon it’s due to his turning her in, cos by then she’d realised this was some heavy shit and had gone to ground and but no-one was going to lure her out except him.’

‘I think that’s a little far-fetched.’

‘No, come on. Tendeka. They could have nailed him on aiding and abetting, I mean, someone taught her the code, or improper relations with a minor. So he lures her out into the open and he gets off absolute scott and Hope goes down for twenty. Mal Nollywood stuff. Unrequite love and betrayal.’

‘Jesus,’ Jazz breathes.

‘S’okay. It didn’t quite work out like that. So she’s sposed to get disconnect. We’re talking relegated to homeless, out of society, cut from the commerce loop, no government fundings, no transacts, your access to public spaces limited, no phone – ’

‘I think we all know what it means, thanks, professor. I’m on a temporary, remember?’ I cut in, irritated immense at the way this has turned into the Toby show.

‘Oops. Yeah. Sorry about that.’

‘But what happened to Hope?’ Jasmine whines.

‘Sonica cut a deal. Three years juvenile detent to take her up to 16 and legal employable and then they scooped her up. She works for them in security, closing up loops and backdoors to stop the next gen of Hope Modises getting through and causing the same mode of chaosings. And then they turned it into a PR stunt. There’s this luscious ad campaign featuring Hope. I can’t believe you haven’t seen it. You can download a vid of the original msg, without the contagious aspect of the code. Now it’s a fucking screensaver for your phone, a Valentine’s download for geeks. Poor Hope,’ but he says it grinning.

‘Subvertising. Like what Levi’s did when those kids in Brazil hacked their storefronts. Turned it into a challenge, a hack-sibition, appropriated the street culture for their own twisted. Motherfuckers in advertising. Can’t even be bothered to do their own creative now.’

‘I dunno, Ten. Sounds like a pretty creative solutioning to me. Elegant. And aren’t you trying to get sponsorship for your graffiti project?’

‘Well, actually, Tendeka doesn’t want to use corp financing –’ Ashraf starts to say, before I cut in. I wish he’d just leave things up to me.

‘It would contrary what we’re trying to do, which is give kids a voice, not the corporates. They have a voice. They have adboards and push to your phone and into your fucking home. These kids have got nothing. It’s a creative outlet. They’re making a mark on the city, a real visible. It means a lot to them, right Zuko?’

‘Yeah. It’s sharp.’ I wait, but Zuko doesn’t seem to have anything more elaborative to add.

‘So, how’s that working out for ya?’

'We're on a break. We're raising more money. But we're not going to take fucking corporate fundings!'

'Chill, bra. Didn't mean to dis your little art project.'

I would take this up. Do it without his tecster friend. We've done it before, but they keep upgrading the security. It's like a game. We make a move, they up the stakes. It's good to see the impact. And it's a fuck off challenge. Used to be any kid with a decent connect and junior school programming could do this, hack the central server, fuck up all the adboards, project your home cams of your baby sister's birthday party or whatever instead.

When jam society first figured it out, we used to have movie nights, staging screenings of whatever people were working on, animation or documentaries or whatever, broadcasting free to the whole city on the adboards. Ash and I met on one of those rooftop jols, sharing a blanket, drinking cheap beer, watching an animated amateur flick. Something about a depressed clown. I wasn't paying too close attention at the time.

But the bastards caught on quick. They decentralised, so now you can't just hack their broadcast server and interrupt the transmission. It's all independent managed, each company maintaining its boards via satellite downlink to transmitters embedded in the board. One way connection that's complete inaccessible. But that doesn't mean there aren't other ways to fuck with them. If you can chip the receiver direct, you can run interfere, even if you can't upload your own content anymore.

Accessing the boards to chip the satellite receivers is hardcore, no matter what the boasts on the netlines say after. I've read the postings people put out. If the egos get too much, I'll drop 'em. If they want to do it on their own, that's their own indaba, but I'm not having people who put us at risk, especially if they're just in it

for the kicks. Toby inclusive. Or especial. So, I will ignore his barbs pointed. This time.

Besides, we're here. I hadn't even noticed the roar of the highway, like the ocean before they installed the tide drives that levels it off flat and keeps the hovertrains running. And six lanes across, in the central island, the N2 Communique-108x billboard, playing out aspirational various. I am itching to take it down.

We duck off the main drag into Devonshire street and down a side alley that runs between two of the houses, semi-detached Victorians, done up and then delapidate again, to a wire mesh fence that is the only cutting us off from the highway. We checked it out in the scout a couple of months ago. We're always looking for access points. Due caution. Always.

Jasmine snags the fence with bolt cutters and peels it open like a tin can, so we can climb through. Ashraf goes first, with my current status, it's wisest that he takes lead tonight, followed by Zuko and Toby, who winks at her, total unshame. Jazz slips after us, crouching down and sort of scuttling through the gap like an insect or maybe a SCREEbot. The ones they use as ratcatchers.

The adboard is directioned currently towards the traffic coming from town. In four hours, it'll swing round to face the incoming of the morning crush commute, like a sunflower turning towards the light. In other words, it's gonna be major.

The backside facing us is like a blank canvassing set easel on its pylon legs. On the flipside, reflected light from the casting catches the damp patches on the highway and the cars that swish through, tinting them briefly red. We only have to get across six lanes of intermittent trafficking and through the smart barbed coiled round the base, that thrashes random, guaranteed to hook you, and scale twenty five

feet on climbing rope. It's bad danger this, not just for the criminal potential, but the physics involved.

Ashraf is going through the ritual of equip check. Torches, auto screwdriver, rope, harnesses, carabenas. As soon as there's a gap sufficient in the oncoming, we go. Two up. Two at the base, one look-out. Usual, Ash would be recording, for posterity and educational, to post to the triplines, but Toby's doing the honourings tonight with his ridiculous fashion.

The adboard's security runs off the power grid and with one keystroke it can be turned off. The trick is not the blunt of turning it off, it's making it look like an Eskom error, an unintentioned blackout and Toby swears his connect is good enough to disguise our actioning. The only problem is that the adboard freezes for the duration too. And if someone notices too sudden that the cast is caught mid-throes and calls it in, we're done.

'You ready to talk to your friend, now, Toby?'

'Already sent her a text,' he says juggling what is clear an illegit phone.

Ashraf whistles admiring. 'Toby. Where did you pick that piece of prime?'

'I got my means and ways. I can getcha one if you want. Just put in an order. Cost you premium though. It's a pretty though, hey? Real sony. Handles music downloads too.'

'Serious?' Zuko and Jasmine crowd in.

'Can I see?'

'Focus! For fuck's sake. What does your friend have to say?' I say, cutting in. This is all taking way too timeous.

'She's good to go. Whenever you are. Security's going down in... oh, it's down now. We got eight minutes. As of ten seconds back.'

‘Shit! She’s done it already? What the hell— never mind, just go! Go! After this one.’ The car passes, headlights slicing reflective on the damp on the road, and we dash across the highway before the next batch of intermittent trafficking comes through, scrambling up onto the island.

We step ginger between the coils of flaccid barbed, easy when it’s deactivate. I leap up and catch hold of a beam and swing my legs up, scaling quick. It would be so handy to be able to just take the maintenance ladder, but it’s locked off to all but official SIMs, even with a power outage. Try and use it and you’ll be twitching just long enough for SAPS to come pick you up.

‘Tendeka! Your harness.’ Ashraf hisses, displeas, clipping himself in and starting after me, hand over hand up the rope, Toby right behind. Jasmine and Zuko are supposed to stay bottomsides to keep watch, but the kid has other plans. He’s clipping in too. I don’t have time to worry about him though. Not with the time limiting insane Toby’s friend has set us.

I yank up onto the narrow maintenance catwalking that runs behind the adboard and go straight for the edge of the screen. It’s a hackjob. Be picked up within hours, so there’s no need to finesse it proper. It’s the impact that works.

The great thing about smear is that the tech is so new, they haven’t even started on developing protective measures yet. Straight out of the box, compliments of our friends in Amsterdam. Of course, smear’s not the technical. It’s a TSR-3 signal delay device that clips direct onto the motherboard and holds back specific packets of data, so what comes through is garble with the pixels dropping out. The effect is like that painter with the melted clocks. Invented in America to try and shut down video bloggers who were getting too vocal in critting the administration. It’s nice to be able to turn it around.

I snap open the plastic contain, disguised as a flash drive, in case you get random searched in the street. I'm sweating so heavy, I nearly drop the damn thing when I tip it into my hand. Ash nudges his way in beside me. 'Two and a half minutes,' Jazz calls from below. Ashraf's face is wrenched tight and he won't look at me, just inserts the screwdriver under the downside edge of the adboard, expert and brute, wedging it up, so it exposes the motherboard. 'You need to insert it there,' Toby says, his abrupt added weight making the catwalking shudder, leaning over, pointing at the obvious. I ignore him. He closes his hand over my fist.

'I wanna do it.'

'Fuck off, Toby, there's no time.'

'Hey, fuck you, Tendeka. It's my connection, my coat recording your precious operationing. I want to clip it in.'

And then Zuko swings up, so the walkway is very overcrowd, when we should already be down and back across the highway.

'You're risking all of us, you asshole.' But Toby is unmove.

'Yeah, so are you. Let me do it, we can all be gone.'

'96 seconds,' Jasmine calls from below.

'Shit, shit, shit. Everyone down. Now!'

'Let me do it, Tendeka.'

'All right, fucking take it!' Toby shoves past and it's all I can do to stop myself shoving him against the rail, perfect height to come in just above the knees and tip him over into the mesh of barbed below, which would do damage plenty in a 20 foot drop, even deactivate.

'You're on your fucking own.' I swing out round the side and start the descending, not bothering to look back. Ash is already halfway down, but Zuko is

stalling indecision on the walkway, as if seeing Toby thrust his hand into the ragged wound of the board spilling cables like intestines is a big thrillsome.

‘37 seconds.’

‘Would you get down?’ Ash snaps ‘There’s no time.’ Zuko finally catches a wake up and starts scrambling down.

Toby rolls himself over the rail, real drama, mission achieve obviously, and I’m praying that he clipped in incorrect, that his harness is going to spill him, but the carabena catches and he rapels quick and easy overtaking Zuko.

‘Six seconds. Come on!’

I touch down. Ashraf is struggling to unclip and there really is no fucking time when we’re ankle deep in live barbed that is about to reactive any instant. I flick open my Spiderco and rip the blade through the reinforced webbing of his harnessing and we vault over the wire, his hand locked vice in mine.

‘Minus three.’

Toby kicks off hard from the support beams, still relative high, so that he swings out over the highway, clear of the barbed and then simply unclips, which means he tumbles projectory ten feet onto the tar.

‘Jesus fuck!’ He lands hard, hopefully breaking something. Zuko is still only halfway down. It’s going to be total nightmare with his prior offensings. No bail, probably reroute direct back to boy’s town and if he caves and links me, it’s going to be the end of more than his promise junior soccer career.

‘Minus sixteen. I’m sorry, I must have messed up the timing. But it’s going to kick any second.’

‘Jump, idiot!’ And he does, landing hard and catching his boot on one of the barbs, shearing neat through the leather and skin underneath and then he’s in my arms and almost sobbing with relief.

Except the barbed is not twitching back to life. The screen is still frozen in a golden glare, not a flicker of motion stirring. There’s no time to consider. I yank Zuko up, firemans, and pelt across the highway, holding up a hand to yield the oncoming headlights that swerve round us, disappearing into the curve of hospital bend, horn still bleating angry insult.

Toby is waiting on the other side, sitting on the fence and rolling his shoulder. And now the adboard is back up, casting into the night. And I feel that hard kick of victorious. Cos we’ve fucking done it. And now, with the TSR fraying the signal, all those too beauty slebs and models and realife™ virtual spokes frisking in the ocean or nodding the latest cell or acting out in the consumer mini-movies for Panasonic or Lucky Strike or Premiere Recruiting will look disturb wrong, And maybe it will take the commutables passing by a second or two to figure it out. To pick up that the features of the bouncy beach babe or the cool hand smoker in the ads on this board particular are melting, running down their faces. Smeared. And it feels fucking great, even with Zuko sporting a bleeding that’s going to be tricksome to explain at ER. Until Toby opens his mouth.

‘Shit that really hurt. Not advisable to try this at home, boys and girls.’ He registers our incredule. ‘Oh, don’t be so panicsome. I was kidding about the eight minutes. Lerato’s real generous. She gave us twelve. I just thought you could do with added incentivising.’

This time I do hit him. In the face. Full on.

Lerato

I get to work the next morning to discover that Mpho has turned stalker boy. There is an outrageous bouquet of flowers awaiting on my desk, complete with miniature butterflies, the kind genemodded to stay within a hand's length radius of the scent of the assigned homing flower and guaranteed to live 72 hours, if you believe the advertising. Until now, I've never met anyone cheesy enough to fall for it.

Seed has paired us on the MetroBabe Stroller audio job, designing an interface that works for both toddlers and parents. At the touch of a button, it has to be able to play back rockabyes, current hits re-recorded as instrumental lullabies for baby, or MetroBabe's private info station, simply jampacked with useful information to help guide new parents through the special hell they've signed up for. The things already come with two cup holders, one for baby's bottle, one for mom's moccachino or, more realistically, mom's whisky flask.

I wave away the butterflies that are hovering near my screen, attracted to the light and shove the bouquet to the edge of my desk, which will hopefully limit the little bastards' range. There's no sign of Mpho, which is savagely annoying.

There is a MetroBabe audio file in my jobs folder, so I can get some idea of the content we're dealing with. I ignore it for the moment and instead kill time waiting for Mpho by checking my mail, updating my dating profile on Seed and prowling the responses. There's three pre-approved potential matches, all within Communique or affiliated companies, which means no lengthy mutual non-disclosure contracts to sign before you can move on to the sex, one civilian, which I delete without even looking at, at least I can admit I'm biased, and a man of real

interest from a rival corp, which Seed has tagged as questionable, meaning a potential headhunter.

Considering how I got here, to this 23rd floor office, to this desk with its views of the seaboard, you'd think the system might trust me to spot one all on my own. Or maybe they're letting me know that *they* know. Heads up, girl, we're paying attention. Hopefully not too closely.

The guy's profile looks sony, as Toby might say in his maddening vernacular. Stefan Thuys. 41, which is ten years older than my ideal, but hey, I'm open to trying new things. He's a development exec on gamesoft, reasonably attractive apart from the craggy nose that looks as though it may have been broken at some stage, which is unreasonably hot. He claims an interesting selection of media, although his choices are suspiciously hip. But who doesn't paint themselves in a prettier light? And I've always been interested in development. I msg him. He msgs back and we hook up a date for later in the week.

Now, I'm prepared to get round to the Metrobabe audio file. I drag it into my player and crank up the volume. I'll be damned if I have to suffer through the incessant infant-stuff alone.

'...surrogate breast milk is a risk, Noeleen, but it's a qualified risk, if you go through the correct channels, get a certified provider who can provide you with a full medical history. You can get cocktails specially made up to order, get your provider to take vitamins and nutrients tailored to the very specific needs of your baby's gene map.'

Across the office, a couple of people raise their heads. Genevieve mouths at me 'Can you privacy that?', but I ignore her.

And finally Mpho materialises at my desk, pushing a stroller, the dull grey of the plastic marking it as a prototype fresh off the printer. ‘Hey, L. Hope you haven’t been waiting too long. I thought I’d get a demo model from product development so we can *really* nail this thing. Ooops, nearly forgot!’ He produces two lattes with a flourish from the cup holders. ‘Mamselle.’ In four days of getting room service together you’d think he would have picked up that I take my coffee black.

‘But couldn’t you just add those to the content afterwards? Or, I don’t know, give your baby supplements, Dr Redelinguys?’

‘Thanks, babe.’ I toss the coffee, letting it slip deliberately through my fingers, so it drops into the bin, spilling its contents en route. Someone else will clean it up. I probably should have done the same with the flowers, just swept them off the desk into the rubbish. Mpho looks shocked.

‘So, M,’ I emphasise the consonant, how it’s really not a name, ‘You ready to tackle this baby thing?’

‘I’m sorry. Was there something wrong –?’

‘I’m lactose intolerant, Mpho. Thanks for asking.’

‘Shit. I’m sorry. Let me get you another one.’

‘Can we just do this?’

Mpho is insistent. ‘Seriously, let me get you another one. I’ll be right back.’

‘No, honestly...’ but he’s already dashed off.

‘That’s a good question, Noeleen, but really I think we have to look at the way the body system processes nutrients and how that’s passed on to your baby. She really needs all this goodness in a way that’s palatable to her still developing immune system, that she can readily absorb, especially when it comes to HIV antibodies – ’

I click it off. As if actually having a drooling mewling puking little troll weren't enough. If I had to listen to this shit all day, I'd kill myself.

There's a good reason I need to get this out of the way asap. I'm expecting a tech support call-out any minute to deal with a damaged adboard. I stayed up all night coding upgrades for the security software and then covering my tracks to ensure it looks like they've always been there.

When the maintenance team head out, I need to monitor them remotely to ensure there aren't any unexpected surprises that might betray me when the software update goes live. But of course, I'm not yet supposed to know that an ad board has been hit. So, I wait.

Mpho finally gets back, balancing a filter ultra and a selection of every variety of sweetener and possible cinnamon/chocolate/mint additive, just in case. I drink it black just to spite him, not that he even notices.

You'd think I *would* know better than to get involved with someone in my own department. But I'm really crap at resisting sexual tension. Oh, it's entertaining for a few weeks, the fuzzy sting that rushes down your vertebra direct to your groin when your eyes meet, the banter spiked with innuendo, and then it just becomes irritating and you need to get it out of your system. Neutralise it by indulging it, which is fine, assuming you can both keep it tidy.

'You've had a listen, what do you reckon? The prototype isn't functioning hundred percent yet, but you can see the way it's structured is there's one big tactile button for baby right where he can get at it and here, on the pushbar, full audio controls and screen for mommy...'

'I'm just the programmer.' I snarl, cutting him off. 'I'm only interested in the internal processes.'

‘Whooo! Someone is *grumpy* this morning.’ He catches me off guard.

‘I was up most of the night,’ I snip, too defensive. I’ve slipped up, which is a good indication that I haven’t, in fact, had enough rest, but please let him not try and get into the why. Fortunately, the way his mind works, it defaults automatically to the same strand of primitive code every time.

‘You should have called me,’ he leers. ‘I could have come over. Helped you sleep.’

‘The job?’ I point at the screen, impatient.

‘You didn’t even say anything about the flowers.’

‘They’re stunning. Amazing. How did you ever think of such a meaningful and original gesture?’

‘Wow. You are vicious.’ He seems hurt and only because I need him to hurry up and get this out of the way, do I kiss and make up.

‘I’m sorry, Mpho. I’m ratty when I’m sleep deprived. You should tell the product designers it should be a hanging mobile rather than a button. You want something the little shit will want to play with, something sparkly or dangly that he’ll reach for anyway and then it just happens to make a cute sound or play a lullabye or whatever.’

‘Rockabye.’

‘Yeah. Okay. That too.’

‘That’s actually brilliant, Lerato.’

‘I know.’

‘You should be in design. You should be heading up design!’

‘Oh, I know.’

It takes twenty minutes to work out the details of how the interface needs to work and then I chase Mpho off so I can focus on the programming. I have an idea I can patch in a fair amount of the code I used in a previous job on the Prima 'Dactyl Robot Friend, but it's still going to take me most of the morning and I run into trouble with a finicky bit setting up an optional switch to dictate whether baby's or mommy's command takes precedence if they're both executed at the same time.

Toby calls, just as I'm about to crack it. Okay, so I'm nowhere near cracking it, but I tell him it's his fault anyway. He's not sympathetic. 'Don't dump me with your dilemmas. I need serious work-related tech support.'

'Uh-huh?' I say, carefully neutral and surreptitiously activating privacy on my cubicle so the audio dampeners kick in, just in case he's stupid enough to make any passing reference to the adboard, which there still hasn't been an official report on. Not that I don't know invoking privacy automatically means that Seed tags my conversation, all phone calls will be recorded for quality assurance purposes blah blah blah, but I've got misdirects in place. I have a mix of pre-recorded conversations, from the polite and cursory catch-ups with my sisters, when Zama can be bothered to call, to a variety of hot and heavy that gives the spyware controllers upstairs something to do with their hands. The only hassle is constantly updating them, so the monitoring boys don't get suspicious. I needn't have bothered on this one. Toby's 'dilemma' is almost a legitimate request. Easy enough. And fucking hilarious.

'Whenever you're ready, sweetness,' Toby says, put out, which only makes me laugh harder.

'That's a new record in lame, Toby.'

‘Yeah, let’s see how *you* handle getting cut off from your trustfundable by your motherbitch.’

‘Oh nice, Toby. Real nice.’ The only thing I ever got from my parents was a kickstart into corporate life.

‘You know what I fucking mean. Don’t get touchy.’

‘Fine. But you owe me.’

‘Rack it on my tab.’

‘And you’re still king lame.’

‘Love ya babe. Gotta run, got little kiddies to kill for fun and profit.’

It takes a minute and a half to reroute Toby’s IP address so it looks like he’s logging in from Melbourne rather than Cape Town, which should sort his little problem out.

And then, at last, the adboard call comes in. I’m not technically involved in the maintenance process, but I have access to the job sheets and it’s not unusual for coders at my level to monitor the execution. Yusuf and Petronella get the call as the closest technicians in the vicinity. I couldn’t have calibrated it any better. Yusuf is smart but lazy and Petronella is just plain lazy. They’ll be worried about the damage Toby and his friends have done to the hardware than any inconsistencies in the software. Assuming my code holds, all will be well. And it does and it is.

The thing is there’s an excess of people who do what I do, to the extent that I’m surprised they don’t consider culling. Good programmers are as easy to score as a blowjob on Lower Main road and just about as cheap, or so I hear. You really have to distinguish yourself if you’re going to make any progress.

It was easy getting noticed at 19, but I’m getting on and if you haven’t cracked executive by 28, your chances of doing so decrease exponentially for every

year you add to your CV. I'm not ending up like Jane. Rather be a startling failure than a benign success.

I figure my options are pretty limited within Communique. But with the penalties for inter-corporate poaching running into the hundreds of thousands, it's going to be difficult to persuade another corporate that they need me, when they can get fresher and younger talent straight out of the skills institutes for much, much less. Unless I have something to sweeten the deal. Like a back door, say, installed in their rival's security software on the adboards that allows you to access Communique's proprietary information, track the data and the response rates. Call it market research. 'Corporate espionage' is so over-dramatic.

A monarch alights on my keyboard, flexing its wings, flashing the striations of velvety orange and black, gratuitously. Strayed too far from the nest, little guy. They don't like that around here. I crush it delicately under my thumb.

Kendra

Jonathan and Sanjay are examining my prints, laid out on the floor, mosaic, when I come in, late, admitted, but they weren't supposed to start the select without me. Sanjay is squatting, shuffling crab between the prints. He's already set aside three. He flashes a smile at me when I come in, slightly strained.

'Have you gained weight?' Jonathan says, by way of greeting, lighting up a cigarette and sussing me with the quick up-down, like he gives the models in castings. It's old habitual, he's told me, from the job. Don't take it personal. On any other day, the cigarette would have pissed me off serious when he's supposed to have quit again, but it makes me feel smug that I have a secretive from him. It counterbalances the elation, like a puppy leaping in my chest at seeing him and all the self-loathe that comes with that, so I'm able to gather enough self-possession to be cool.

'Thanks. It's good to see you too. You shouldn't be smoking over the prints.'

'It was just an observation, baby. You're way too tense.' He starts to reach for my shoulder, to knead the knots in my neck, too familiar, but I brush his hand away, irritate. He holds up his hands, mock defensive like.

There are to be three of us in this groupsome; Johannes Michael who does intricate paperwork mobiles massive scale and is taking up Propellor's entire second floor and Khanyi Nkosi, legend at 26, who I am either privilege to be sharing a space with or at a serious disadvantage because no-one is going to pay my work any noticing with her audio animal installation overshadow. She's only bringing it in last minute, because of the controversial.

It's the first time I've seen all the prints laid out together and despite the intimidate of cohabiting with Khanyi Nkosi, I'm delirious happy about how they've come out. I already know exact which ones are going in and where, although I'm glad to see Sanjay and Jonathan have already picked out the portrait of the drag queen for include, caught candid camaraderie, bumming a light from a garage attendant. I've blown it up, abstracted it by focusing on the detail, so it's the edge of her face all texture, the make-up caked in the lines around her mouth pursed around the cigarette and the flame proffered. This particular came out perfect.

The others have not and Sanjay is still a tad uncertain like about the whole shebang, hence the strain in his smile. The over exposed and under, bleached, washed out, over saturated with colour, blotches and speckles and stains like coffee cup rings or arcing buttresses of white that frame the horizontal top and bottom, where the canister has cracked and let the light slip inside.

My shrinkable tells me I'm codependencing; my father's death means I'm paralysed, afraid to make my own decisives, so I defer to Jonathan because it's easy and this is my problem, core. Well, actual, he didn't, he let me figure that out for myself, which cost a little more, a few months more of therapeutings, more wasted time, when apparent, he had the answer all along.

What he does tell me, legit, of his own accord, after this revelation, is that I should move out and cut Jonathan off, get some distancing to regain my equilibrium, to recover a sense of self. He uses a lot of shrink speak which doesn't translate, like it's only applicable to someone else's ordered life, where the rules work.

So, I am still speaking to Jonathan, still hanging out with him, still sleeping with him – when he comes round. Still deferring to him on the important, like this exhibition. Because he's the orchestrative behind it. Because I don't have his pull or

his contacts, like Sanjay, who is premier reputable on the international art scene, responsible for launching the trajectories of people like Susu Ngubane or Cameron Sterling, whose sculptures now go region of R700k. Jonathan deals with Sanjay on all of the finer of the exhibition. Or should that be exhibitionism, because isn't it my soul laid bare here?

I know he's been seeing at least two other women that I know about in the times between, when we are off, on, off. Because we are just 'casual' he calls it, because quantifying something puts it in its place. But sometimes I feel like he's reminding himself rather than me. Maybe that's just wishful. He is only the fourth man I have slept with.

I met the one, Stacy, at a party. One of those awful media blitzes, hanging off him like she was his handbag. Old bag. Cos she was. 38 at least. An editor at one of the pushmags he works for occasion. One of the perks of the job – fraternising the help. Of course, Jonathan is 32, so he's right up there with her. Closer to her than me. And was it just imaginings or did she scope me with just a shade of pitiful?

I asked to take her picture and delighted, Jonathan whispered to me, 'You cunning little fox, sweetheart.' And kissed me on the forehead. 'You just guaranteed yourself a publicity splash. We'll have to make the event worthy of the write-up.'

But, really I was more interested in reducing her to planes of colour, the hard sculptural of her bones. The print I went with was an accidental, a misfire, while I was adjust the light settings. She is sitting on the edge of a twist of fire escape stair, on the balcony outside the apt. The focus is on the shapely knot of her knee, her one hand resting in the dark fall of her skirt, that is only a black blur, the other touched to her mouth, although you can only see the angle of her jaw tilted out of frame. It makes her look vulnerable.

When I asked him about her later, sitting in the window of his loft, the night bitter cold against my naked back and the traffic streamer below, what he'd told her, he evaded. But I know I am cast in the role of Poor Thing. The doomed unrequited who can't quite let go. And it is my fault that we still fall into bed. A mercy fuck, in Jonathan's throwaway. But really, I think the word should be mercenary. For his coldness, for my added benefits; the loft, the career guidance.

'Do you love him?' my shrink asks and I feel angry because it's the obvious and is this really what I'm paying for? But I don't have a cohesive in response. I love his ferocious confidence, the way he charms strangers, so they flock to him like tame little birds to peck at the beguile complimentings that drop from from his lips and the way you know it's only crumbs and long for more.

But I have a greater sense of his physical. The image I have of Jonathan, one of the first, that I have tried to document on film countless, but also keep in my head, are the lines that crease the corners of his eyes in bright sunlight when he smiles. Why this and not any of the other details – the triumvirate of moles in the crook of his arm, his lips, slightly too plump, too voluptuous for a man, his giant paw hands that eclipse mine total, his knuckles like the tight skulls of some strange little animals – or the whole, I don't know. But then Jonathan says that's just like me, to take in the partials rather than the composite.

The shrink doesn't even bother to make notes. When he gives me the bill, I include it in my expensives and Jonathan pays it without comment.

'Hey! Sleepy girl!' Jonathan snaps, waving impatient from the other side of the room. 'This is your exhibition, you want to pay attention?' I set down the print and drift across the room. Not telling him about the branding feels like my counter to the Stacys and the times he doesn't answer his phone. An amulet of protection.

'Babes, you can't be serious about this,' he says, tapping one of the photographs, already mounted and leaning against the wall. It is my favourite.

'I mean, really, Kendra. Don't you think this is childish deluxe?' They are both waiting for my reaction, Jonathan irritable like, waiting for me to agree with him and Sanjay polite, but evaluating at the same time, like he already has the measure of my work but not yet of me. 'What do you think?' I ask him.

'No ways. You're delusion if you're making that the centrepiece, sweetheart. It's not right.' Jonathan interjects, but Sanjay gives me a little nod of approval.

It reminds me forcible of the night dive Jonathan and I went on in Malaysia. It was only my eighth dive, and I wan't qualify for dark, but 200 US meant the dive master was willing to overlook. In the boat, accompany by the clank of the oxygen tanks against their restraining, and the nasal whine of the boat engine, Jonathan teased me about being scared, winding me up on how suffocate claustrophobe it would be. And it *was* terror, when we rolled backwards through the surface and into the engulf of the water, but not because the dark closed in on you, restrictive or the clamping cold. Because it made the sea wide open. What I learned quick on those first dives, is that visibility limits your imagine of the ocean only as far as you can see, 10 metres, 15 maybe. But it's only in the utter black that you can feel the true scale, the true volume and weight of that gaping unknowable between continents.

The photograph is called *Self Portrait*. It is a print from a rotten piece of film. 1 x 3.5m. It came out entirely black.

Tendeka

Ash refuses to be riled from his afterglow mellow. Rolling over in bed, he takes my hand and works it expert with his fingers, massaging deep into palm, dragging out my fingers and kissing the tips, almost, but not quite distracting me from how annoyed I am with Jasmine based on the SMS that just bleeped in. Not the quitting on us, cos I knew that was imminent, but because she let slip that she went home with *him*.

‘Give her a break, Ten. After you stomped her crush, anyone would have needed some warm comfort to take the sting off. It’s just bad luck Toby was the closest.’ He nips the pad of my pinky, mischief.

‘Ow! It’s not my fault. I don’t encourage them.’

‘You don’t *discourage* them either, baby. It’s all right, I’d much rather you were flirting with girls. Although I do wish you wouldn’t marry them.’

‘You’re not going to start with that, now.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t wear it, is the only.’ It’s not the only.

‘And what am I gonna do when home affairs comes knocking? And interrogates me on why I’m not wearing the ring?’

Ash snorts derisive. ‘In light of all the transgress? The heady whirlwind of the whole week-long romance before you got married? Or that she lives in a totally different part of the city? Or, you know, that minor detail about you not being female-inclined? The ring is the least of it.’

‘Then you don’t need to uptight about it. Jesus, Ash. She’s a fucking refugee. Have some compassionate.’

But when we go to the Green Point Makt prearrange to talk about the upcoming verify interviews, Emmie is AWOL. Initial, Ash tries to convince me we've got the wrong row, but I know exact where her stall is suppose to be, wedged between the downloads booth and the overpierce goth chic with her radical handmade, all velvet, lace and PVC with complicate lacings, now also available in pluslife, a sign in dayglo purple highlight says. So, I know we are in the right place, only instead of Emmie with her plastic chickens and wire jewellery, there is an aggro Kenyan punting kangas and cowrie bracelets and for all I know dodgy defuse interferences under the counter, who starts screaming at me when I ask how the fuck he's working the stall registered to Emmie Chinyaka? Especial when Ash had paid the full month's rental advance two days ago.

Eventual, we cause enough fracas that the makt manager, who intros himself as Mr. Hartley, no first name provide, materialises, all conciliatory and takes us to his office stadiumside to resolve somewhere we won't freak out the tourists.

It seems Emmie terminated her contractual yesterday, and took a refund on the rent, no issue when there are so many clamouring to fill the space. Only 50% of the R8000 though, cos of last minute notice clauses. She sold off her wares and her shade cloth to some of the other traders and packed up the scant remains and just left. No, unfortunately, terribly sorry, he doesn't know where she went or why.

'You should look better after your wife, hey?' The Kenyan cracks, all smug now. If I didn't have to sweat the cops making enquiries into the statusing of my marriage, I would wipe that smirk off one time.

'Have you tried the hospital?' Mr Hartley says, all sugar concern, like we wouldn't have thought of that already. She's not due to pop for another month, unless it's a miscarriaging or a premature. Which is one of the things that freaked

Ash about the marriage first place, that it would mean legal paternal oblig to a baby whose father is an unknown and Emmie won't talk about. Ash reckons it's because it was a rape, some UN soldier at the border demanding privilegings or one of the militia. But my thing is the kid shouldn't have to carry the karma. This is the chance to make something good out of the worst possible. And it's not like we haven't talked about having kids before.

'I'm sure she's at home,' Ash smooths, 'Thanks for all your help, I'm sorry if there was any misunderstand.' I hate it when he apologises for me.

It takes an hour to get to Delft by train with the strikes. Of course, these don't affect the corporate lines. It's a two kay walk from there to temp residential hostel where Emmie's been staying; a severe practical three storey block, identical to the hundred other severe practical blocks surrounding, like a warren of concrete bunkers. We've offered open invite for Emmie to come stay with us, at least until she has the baby, but she always refuses, which Ash is not so secret relieve about.

'Temp' residential is a hideous joke, of course. The two girls she shares a room with have been there for three and a half years and still no word on when their assign RDP housing is going to come through. It's a perfect sampling of the system failing egregious. There's a backlog of 190 000 or something, and that's just counting the legal, not the African nationals refugees or the rurals coming in under the radar, who can't afford to wait around for the proper health clearances.

A man, scrawny and dark, not local, opens the door to the dank stairway. 'What do you want?'

'Is Emmie here? We were supposed to meet her at the makt...' Ashraf starts.

‘She’s not here.’ He tries to close the door on us, but I lean on it full weight, so he’s forced backwards.

‘Emmie! You here? You all right?’ I’m aware of Ashraf and the guy following in my wake as I pound up the stairs, three at a time. A kid, six years old with snot crusted down his lips, peers down, blank disinterest. Light spills from open doors. A woman in the communal kitchen looks startled up from the *Daily Voice* with its screaming headline ‘Dying For A Cure? Muti Murders Multiply.’

‘Emmie?’

Her door is wide open, casting a rectangle of light into the corridor, but just before I get there, the security gate clangs hasty shut and a fumble of keys locks it tight.

‘Emmie. What are you doing? We spent hours looking for you. We had a meeting, remember? For home affairs?’

A pair of hands curl round the bars of the security gate, real Pollsmoor, apart from the misshape of her belly that keeps her arms length. I feel that telltale knot at how painful young she is, how naïve and far out of her comfort. She doesn’t look up at me. ‘Go away. I can’t see you today.’

Behind her in the room, there’s nothing as obvious as a half-packed suitcase lying open on her bed, but something has changed among the heartbreak neat of her room; the three beds barely a foot apart, with bedsheets hung divider, the paraffin safestove, the brokedown 50s kitchen cabinet that might be worth something restore, Ash would know, on which a small TV is balanced precarious among a clutter of cheap cosmetics. A piece of cardboard, an advert for a Sunlight Soap competition, is taped to the window to cover a broken pane, clamouring a prize of R1 000 000, all

those zeroes insulting unreachable, above the face of a grinning little white girl in pigtails.

We've drawn spectators; the snotty kid and the reader, who I recog now as one of Emmie's roommates, and door guy who is plucking at my arm insist. 'You must go.'

'Fuck off, bra! Emmie. Listen to me. This is major important. I don't care what you did with the rent money from the stall. We'll get you another spot, more stock. Whatever. But you can't pull this disappearing. If home affairs suspects this isn't makoya, you'll be deport.'

'I'm not staying'

'Don't be mental. Where are you going to go?'

'You must leave, please.' I shrug door guy's hand off my shoulder.

'Emmie. Be reason. You have a job here. You have a real possible of a good life. What about the baby?'

'You have to go. You must get out,' door guy is trying to tug me out.

'Jesus Christ! Will you get off!' I shove him against the wall and Emmie gasps and then only do I click the fucking obvious that's been staring me facial all along. The bedsheet with its pathetically fade floral print hung from the ceiling has been pulled closed around her bed for privacy. And among the zambuk hair wax and coconut butter and hand-cream and mascara is a man's deodorant, a man's brand shaving cream.

'Ah, fuck, Emmie. Is this -?' But of course it is. Door guy blinks hard when I round on him, but then draws himself up, resilient, and why not? Compare to the arduous he must have had getting here, who the fuck am I that he should be fearful?

‘Emmie. Why didn’t you just tell me? Do you realise-? Fuck! I could go to fucking jail, Emmie. They could disconnect me for this. Permanent.’

I shake the security gate, so it judders from the shock and Emmie cowers back, automatic putting one hand to the bump straining against her shirt that has turned her bellybutton into a jellytot protrude. Baby daddy puts his hand over her fingers still clutch on the bars, all reassure. But where the fuck was he two months ago, when she was beg on the street corner, filth and gaunt around the swell of her stomach?

‘What about your baby, Emmie? What are you going to fucking say to your baby when you’re all fucking starving to death in some under-resource camp in Lilongwe? Huh, Emmie?’

‘Tendeka.’ Ashraf says.

‘I don’t fucking care. You still have to do the interview. You are not going to put me at risk. And you are not getting your child deport. How long is the legit allowable before divorcing? Two years? You’re not going anywhere until then, Emmie. You hear me?’

‘We need more money,’ she says, meeting my eyes for the first time, quiet, drawing strength from baby daddy, closing me out.

‘Fine. Of course. Whatever you want. How much?’

‘Five thousand. Mr Hartley only gave me half...’

‘Yeah, you should have thought that one through.’

‘C’mon, Tendeka.’

‘Cut it out Ashraf. She can have it after the fucking interview. You hear me, you manipulative lying cow? After.’

Ash wants to talk about it, all the way home, but his wounded look says I told you so. I don't need to hear the words accompany.

'You're misreading, Ten. Please, baby. That's not what I'm saying. I just think maybe we need to devise an extracting. Go to home affairs, turn her in, claim you were duped, you married in good faith, it was rash and velocity, but you were in love and it turns out she lied to you. It doesn't even have to mean she gets deport. If we give them warning sufficient they can still disappear.'

'Fuck that.'

'Ten, don't be stubborn, please. Think it out full. It's two years that you have to keep this up. Two years of making sure she doesn't run off and the baby and the legal guardianship. It's a nightmare bureaucraties.'

'No ways. Forget it. I don't believe in the tyranny of artificial impose national borders. Or that people should be restrict to seek the best lives potential for their children. This is my stand against all that shit. And if Emmie and her pop-up boyfriend don't understand the total imply, then I'm just going to have to hold her hand through it.'

'But this is not a moral standing, Ten. This is our lives.'

Toby

My fucking mother. Although truth, my old man is not innocent total in this sorry either. But I have my ways. I don't need their trust bankable. I got my means. The immediate requires Unathi. And the main hinges on K.

I really like her and that's a bad signing. The last person I was this interested in was Liezel and she was psycho deluxe, especial when she bust me and Nokulelo together. But what was she expectin' like when we hooked up when I was still with Jenna? No matter the rational, they think they can change you. Rearrange the furniture.

Stacy is lank keensome on the idea when I call her up to pitch. 'Send me a proposal,' she says, 'A proper one, Toby. With real sentences and everything.' What really sells her is the footage of the fight that I upload to her phone, just a snippetsome to whet her tasting. 'More like that', she says, 'And provided you do some actual research for once, we're talking heavyweight syndicate. Forget *Radar*, or even *BoingBoing*. We could sell this puppy to *The New York Times*.' But her 'we' is freaking me. It's not like she's some bigtime agent and there's only so far you can frog-leap on her reputationing as *Kwaai*'s editor. And see, now I'm skeeming screw the word slots. Articles are so outmode when you can skip direct to Oscar-winning documentary exposé. In that eventing, it would be good to have a tight legal backing behind me, but I don't know that *Kwaai* retains that level lawyerly firepower.

But meantime, I have more urgentsome, particular on the cash front. I need to upgrade the audio on my coat, if I'm going to do this proper, stock up on new memory and heck, the fridge while I'm at it. It's marked empty, like my bank balancing, which is already looking unhealth deluxe. My mother doesn't realise how

much maintaining my accustomed chows up. She would have to cut me off mid-monthing. Cunt.

So, it's off to hook up with Unathi and some quick cash in phone. Digging through my laundry to find some relative fresh suitable for public consumption, I happen on Jasmine's scarf that she left here after the raidsome on the board two nights ago. It smells like her, faintest through the musty of the wool and the overwhelm of Bodyshop Caramel, cos Jazz isn't the kind of girl to wear perfume, but she's not the great unwash specimen of activist neither, which I appreciate. I inhale it deep and sweet and then trash the thing. It's not like she's going to be coming back to get it.

Course, Unathi doesn't appreciate my attempting at hygiene, when I finally make it through the trafficking to his squat down dockside. Borderline illicit, especial cos of the health hazard he and his slumfriends pose. But they're not drug dealers or terrorists, which is all the cops care about real, even prepared to overlook the unpaid connect of all their electronics gear to the electrical. Occasion they get harassed and they've had to move twice previous in the last six months, but it's par for the lifestyle. As is the creepy entropy of the room that Unathi is envelop in.

A shaved-headed someone so nondescript I can't distinct if its guy or girl, shows me without so much as a heita and then vanishes into the maze of backrooms that smell of burned rice and the heavy sour of overcram humanity.

Unathi doesn't bother to surface from the sagging wallow of the couch, which is the only dismal furnishing in the room, apart from a deflate beanbag and the scramble of consoles and wiring and six different screens blaring a mash of content into the lounge and also providing the only light. He's still wearing the same leopard

print vest I saw him in last time, but when I rib him about not having any other clothes, he claims it's just cos he's got three of them. And he's shaved his head also, so between him and the nondescript, it's beginning to look real cult round here.

'I don't know, man. When was the last time you played?' He says when I outlay my proposition. He's fiddling with the frayed tassle of the seshoeshoe throw that has clumped and solidified from stains unidentify in curving folds like a topographical topview complete with the craters of cig burns.

'Quit the sceptic. You know I can handle.' Truth is I can't remember though, the last time, which is a combo of doing too much sugar and being preoccupy with other. 'I've been busy, man. Writing. Doing some reviews for *Kwaai*. Games and gigs and shit. You might have checked it?'

'No.'

'Working the decks,' I half raise my phone to transfuse him a copy of the flyer, but he's not keen. Never one for social, 'And girls,' I add, cos I can't resist and this is a dig at him, locked up in his pre-demolition 24-7 by 7, getting it on only in pluslife. Only now I've cocked it up royal cos now he ain't gonna swing me anything juicy.

'Uh-huh. Maybe you could bring 'em round some time. Get me a piece of *your* pie. For once.'

'Sure, man. I'll do that.' And this is a lie deluxe and we both know it. Although at least it resolves the gender question of nondescript baldy.

'Yeah, that'd be kif.'

'Kif like a spliff.'

'Want one?'

He tosses me a bankie of sugar, A-grade and isn't that always the way that someone who never fuckin' even leaves the house like should score the premium? I start rolling while he plugs into my data.

'You're way outdate.'

'So?'

'My clients won't dig that.'

'If I can get the shit, who cares about my track?'

'It's real competitive like, Tobias. Real lucrative.'

I don't say anything. Lick the ends of the paper, fuse 'em together, which is a waste of time, real, cos the paper's self adhere, but fuck it. Light up, take a toke and pass it on. Unathi takes a deep hit, makes no sign of passing it back.

'How about we start you off gentle?'

'Whatever.'

'There's a new weapon in Nemesis Redux that everyone's after, but I doubt you're up for that right now. Doesn't look like you played it before either.'

'Fuck you. I can handle.'

'Uh-huh. How about Kiwi Pop?'

'What, the *kid's* game?'

'You'd be surprised how many parentals want to indulge their kiddies their any heart's desirable. It's war out there 'specially in virtual mutacute land.'

'Isn't there an age protection plugged in? Precisely to stop people like me from amokking among the kiddies?'

'Yeah, but I got a hack. Like candy baby. How could you resist?'

'Exact. I just wouldn't feel right.'

'Coming over all moral like? Please, Tobias, spare me the consciencing.'

'Don't you have *anything* else?'

'How do you feel about meatspace?'

'Do I have to dress up?'

'You'd look so cute with pointy ears.'

'Not a chance.'

'Okay, okay. There's a new title, just hit the makt a couple of months ago.

Scorpions Elite?'

'What's the involve?'

'Pseudo-cop shit. Mix of gamespace and meat. In game, it's busting heads, fragging bad guys, typical shooter. Real world is mainly detective work, interacting, shaking down informants kinda thing. It's quite kif, cos it's not only game employees, it's other players too. It ties into FallenCity Underworld, so you have other people playing bad guys. Oh yeah - and some laser tag battles in publisher approved locations, natural. Although it might be too complex for you. Bit rof dead away when you been off the circuit so long.'

'Piss off, Unathi.'

'Yeah, I think we'll kick you off soft, initial. Til you get a feel for it again. Here's your user ID.' He flips me a game token marked with Kiwi Pop's mascot, a spiky little black blob with stubby little wings and huge eyes. Moxy. I only know this from too many afternoons spaced with kiddies' TV.

'I got an order for a purple Blinka Stinka. It's worth fifteen hundred. That's 800 to you. Purple. Okay? Any other colour is not gonna cut it. It's somewhere on North Island, level six. Apparently. Shouldn't take you longer than a couple of hours.'

Back in the relative civilise of my swivel, I clip the chip into the game socket and instantaneous there are little blobby monsters bouncing around all over my projecta walls and *singing* which after all the sugar gives me a headache massive. I reduction the display to just one wall, skip the jangle and choose the first character I'm optioned (some furry blue thing with oversized paws –RomperStomp, special move the Shaker-Quake) and connect to the gameworld along with the 1 487 763 other players currently online, 99% of which are in the eight to twelve demog. The remaining are like me, gate crashers cashing in on the system or maybe paedophiles looking to hook up. I s'pect the former group is the more evil of the two.

The trip connects and RomperStomp shimmers into existence in some cheesy-ass neo-classic archway in a candy coloured jungle, oily bubbles burped up from swampy pools releasing weird little fluttering manta rays when they pop and in the distance weird looming rock things like you get in China, craggy columns with a thatch of greenery on top and a path of floating step blocks leading away. It's vomitous cute.

I haven't made it two steppings from the entry portal when three furry blobs land on top of me, all claws and teeth and I haven't even figured the fucking buttons yet. 'Shit! Wait!' The wall blanks sudden and Moxy fills the screen, wagging his claw and shaking his head all disappoint like.

➤ So sorry! You have been booted from Kiwi Pop!
If you promise to play nice and not swear any more, you
can play again for sure!

I'd forgotten about the vocal interact. I turn it off, no sense betraying my age by my voice, and click on the 'I promise to behave' button.

I respawn in the arch only to be ambushed by the little bastards again immediate, who are clearly waiting for me.

'Hi guys! Will you be my friend?' RomperStomp says, one of the default pre-selects in case you're too lazy to type or vocalise in interacts with other players.

'Die newbie scum!' the one called Fluffoki yells in an eight year's old little girl's voice positive brimming with malicious.

I hit back, punching and kicking, but they've got more experience and there're three of them. I've just got the hang of the Shaker-Quake, knocking Fluffoki off her feet and doing some damage serious when one of her little chums takes me out with a blow to the head, zeroing my health one time.

The screen blanks again.

➤ So sorry! You have died. But at least you tried! Would you like to try again? You've still got nine lives out of ten.

This is Unathi's revenge for the chicks dig.

Lerato is the antithesis of sympathy, when I call her for help, giggling so mega hysterical I'm sure she's gonna pop a valve. Which would serve her right. 'That's a new record in lame, Toby,' she says, breathless delight, and then gets all touchy when I bitch about my mother, because somehow this is a slightable against her situational. Like she even remembers. She's told me before, it's all mix in her head with the stuff she's seen on TV, dusty green hills and emaciate dying in a rural clinic in a clean white bed with curtains aflutter, which sounds way too

cinematographed to be makoya. She can get real drama, Lerato. But she cuts me slack and saves my ass.

It only takes genius girl a minute and a half to circumvent the entrance portal where Fluffoki and co. are waiting for me in ambush, rerouting *home's* IP address so it looks like I'm logging in from Melbourne with a whole new character. She's done this before on my *home* sys back when we did that transact on those med grade biogen 'shrooms from Berlin. Took us three months to get the damn things with the bouncing around to fake addresses, but it was worth it total. We spent the day on Communique's private beach in Clifton, fucked out of our brackets, building sandcastles like little kids, having really bizarre conversationals with her coworkers and giggling a lot general. When I started freaking out about the water catching on fire, though, she hustled me out of there simunye, said a major scening might reflect bad on her prospectives. Like anyone would care. As long as it doesn't interfere with your job, what you do with your recreational is entire up to you. Not that I'm unappreciate of getting a backstage pass to the highlife and all the premium restrict zones reserve for the exclusive of the corporati.

Anyway, thing is, spawning is random first time you play, but once you touch down in Moxy-land, whichever portal you emerge out of becomes your home base. You die, you go back there again, and again, and again and if some psycho bratlings are waiting to maul you every time, it gets real sisyphusian quick quick.

I re-surface as an all new-character, a Popling Ludo, special move the Reverb Roar, in an all new home-base, this one pseudo-halloween with creepy husks of trees and glow green moss bearding off the branches, miles away from that little bitch Fluffoki and her crew.

This time, I'm prepped to deal with any juve delinquents who even think of jumping me. I ditch the greets, just wade in bloody as soon as any new character makes an entrancing, despite the shaky finger and more trite couplets from Moxy. 'On your scorecard, here's a blot, for playing mean, that sucks a lot.' Who writes this shit? And worse, gets financial remunerate for it? I need to get in on that game.

It takes four and a half hours to battle it out to level six, get to the sacred Maori hideout in the Waitomo caves and beat the pulpings out of the guardian spirit, which resembles a giant cuddlesome platypus, until he surrenders the purple BlinkaStinka. Trophy in paw, I invest another hour twenty backtracking to find my original spawn-in spot and reduce Fluffoki and her little friendlings to so much dead flesh, although truth, being a kids' game, they die in splatters of sparks rather than the satisfact of bloody gibbs. Fluffoki *does* break out some very bad words, not entire appropriate for an eight year old.

Finishing touch, I put in a spec request to Lerato to trace the little bastards user names and get them banned official from the gamespace for violating protocol. The pretextual I ask her to use for locking them out of the game is killer. Overage players.

Tendeka

It's total shock logging into Avalon. My envire friendly house and the three houses surround have been replace with loxion sprawl shelters, the tinshacks appalling incongruous among the mansions and manicure lawns, so I am backfoot when skyward* walks out of the corrugated door, his avatar grinning idiot wide and extending her arms expansive with a little twirl, presenting like a Miss South Africa contest.

>>skyward*: tada! what do you think? do you like it?

>>10: What the fuck? I didn't authority this. You can't just hack my dwell.

>>skyward*: it's a new direction. we're abandoning the subtle approach.

>>10: It's definitely not subtle.

>>skyward*: should it be? does subtlety cut it? how was your green house working out for ya?

>>10: It's an idealisation, it's setting an example, showing people an alternative to what a perfect world might be -

>>skyward: is it enough to set a good exampling? how many people paid attention? how much of an impactful have you really made here? and what the fuck does that matter anyway? it's not real.

>>10: I don't understand. I DO real shit realworld. Massive shit.

>>skyward: you have struggle royalty in your family, right?

The part of me that is not still reeling from the unanticipated of my dwell transmog into shack chic, is impress that he remembers this from the conversational we had when we first met through the future*renovate site last year. But I may have overemphasised the connect. It was a second cousin by marriage, whose mother helped shelter Ruth First, a communist journalist who ended up splattered interior by a letter bomb in the 1980s.

>>10: Yeah. And?

>>skyward*: you ask that cousin about the efficacy of subtlety, of polite asking for change, of peace demos and the total fucking pointless of street theatre or civil disobedient or democracy.

>>10: She's dead. She died last year of a heart attack. We flew up to Jozi for the funeral.

>>skyward*: whatever. it's time to radicalise, 10. assume you're ready for more ambition? but maybe i've misjudge? based on your upset by such a minor adjust? it's just a virtual house after all.

>>10: No, you just, you caught me surprise. I wasn't expecting -

>>skyward*: best time to catch someone, wouldn't you agree? unprepare. is your protégé full recovered from his scratch, btw?

>>10: What?

>>skyward*: your soccer boy. he got injure?

>>10: Oh. Ja. Mostly. He's taking some downtime.

The meds patched him up sweet. He spun them a story about falling off a roof, doing stuntsome trying to impress a girl.

>>skyward*: i posted the video from your friend's wardrobe to the net by the way. it's doing the rounds of the jam circuit and there's already viral spillage into the mainstream too. a colleague in New York sent it to me via her phone, didn't have the faintest of my involve. She thought it was cool.

>>10: But we haven't modded it yet. You can see all our faces. That was strictly for your personal view.

>>skyward*: don't worry, it's all taken care of. we edited it beautiful, distorted your voices, smeared your faces and it's total untrace, you have my assure. we rerouted it via an anonyma server in trinidad.

>>10: Are you sure? Jesus.

>>skyward*: are you worried? don't fret it. it's all taken care of.

>>10: No, it's just. I've got a lot of shit going down current.

But he's not particular sympathy when I tell him about the situational with Emmie.

>>skyward*: your boyfriend is right. you should do exact what he says. to the letter. you can't afford to go down now. we have too much to do. and stop fucking around with the art project. you need money to make it happen. just take the corporate cash.

>>10: But-

>>skyward*: what do you care?

>>10: I dunno. It feels taint. It's opponent to all our principles. I mean, you talk about making a real impactful, what's the point if you're doing it dirty, breeding more miserable. It's like terrorists funding kidnaps or hijacks with drug money. It's a cycle of dark.

>>skyward*: terrorists? drugs? hijacking? come now, are you saying we're same level? you don't think of yourself remote as terrorist do you? it's an absurd compare. i expected more of you. what we have here is a world that is more apathy and more violent than ever prior. the newscasts are so individualised filter, people only ever hear what they want to and genocide, let's call it what it is, the genocide in malawi, once the very model of peaceful african democratics, not only doesn't make the front page of the news sites, it barely ranks a mention. and you can't solve it by marrying a refugee, as i think you may have realised.

>>10: Actual -

>>skyward: i'm not finished. call it mass scale compassion fatigue or selfish genetics or the obvious end result capitalism has always been headed for, but the short of it is people don't give a flying fuck. and all the old strategems, they've seen them all before. they're tired. worse, they're boring. and if there's one thing our culture doesn't stand for, 10, it's boredom. you know that. we have to jolt them, surprise them, it has to be spectacular. we're compete with media and advertising and promotionals and Plus worlds to escape confronting harsh reality. if people won't face the truth on their own, we have to make them, however we can. in ways that will drive home the point. that will make an impact. and we can't do that without money.

>>10: Okay, okay, I see where you're head.

>>skyward*: do you? let me pose it to you this way. does anything you've done compare to what the corporates have done?

>>10: What do you mean?

>>skyward*: corrupting govts with their own agendas, politicians on their payroll, exacerbating the splintering of society along economic lines and the gaping just getting wider. building in social controls and access passes and electroshock pacifiers into the very technology we need to functional, so you've no choice but to accept the defuser in your phone or being

barred from certain parts of the city because you don't have the ranking clearance. you tell me how that compares to you hacking an adboard.

>>10: So, we're not doing enough.

>>skyward*: hallelujah! yes. precise. nowhere near enough. we need to jar people from their apathetic. we need spectacle. we need to fight the corporate own terms. counter exploitive.

>>10: Using their money.

>>skyward*: what better way to subvert them? it's not just perfect. it's beautiful.

>>10: I guess.

>>skyward*: you guess? there's no space for hedging. if you're not up for the serious, i can find someone else. it'll take time but you're not irreplace, 10. don't flatter yourself. don't you want to be part of the revolt? of something much, much bigger than you.

>>10: Yes.

>>skyward*: yes what?

>>10: Yes, I want to be part of something bigger. I want to rearrange the world for real. Okay? Is that fucking good enough for you? I'm total fucking commit to whatever needs to be done. Whatever that means. All right?

>>skyward*: you see what i'm saying? trust me, 10, what we have imminent, is going to be massive. the

ripples are going to be felt global. and we couldn't do it without you. so, what you doing thursday night?

>>10: This sounds like a bad pick up line.

>>skyward*: ha. it's going to be better than sex, 10. Assurance. it's going to be beautiful. the city is a communication system. we're teaching it a new language.

kendra

The sight of the woman seizing on the pavement outside the bottle store shouldn't have been a bigtime deal. Normal, I wouldn't pay a defuse slightest, but today I find myself crossing the road to gawk like a rubberneck. I'm not the only. An Aito is loping up and down on the kerb beside her, whining impatient and yipping in excitement. No sign of his citicop master.

'What? Never seen a robbery in progress, honey?' the liquor store owner snaps at me, watching satisfy from his door, arms fold. I haven't actual, although I've seen plenty of defusings, but that's not why I stopped. Truth is I don't know why I stopped, why I'm so fascinated with this everyday.

'Move along, chicklet. This is nothing to do with you.'

'Okay.' I say, but don't move. The woman's seizures are coming control now, the drumming of her dirty bare feet less manic tempo against the concrete. The ravage of her face and the downmakt of her clothes marks her as sprawl or street. She must be mid-50s and scrawny as a child. Complete harmless, surely?

The seizures are downscaling, she's twitching less and this seems to calm the Aito a little. It stands quiver in excitement, shoulders hunched, ears pricked forward, total intent on her. More like a cat than dog. Although who knows what goes on in that re-engineered brain.

More people have gathered around now to look. Some passing shoppers and a crew of street kids. Mainly, I 'spect, because I am.

'Nothing to see. Move along. Get going! You want I should crisp you too?' The shoppers shuffle off indignant, but the street kids stick around, just far enough away that they're out of the Aito's immediate reach, but not far enough for the shoppie, who flaps his arms disgust.

The defuse has stopped final, and the woman lies there fish gasping, her eyes scrunched tight. The Aito delicately raises a paw and puts in on her chest proprietary. Despite myself, I step forward towards her. The Aito raises its head, instant alert and its snout twitches as if to peel back its black lips a snarl. But then it meets my eyes, gives a little 'whuff', an exhalation, and turns its attention back to the woman full.

'You and this doggie got something going on, lady?' The shoppie says, to the delight of the street kids who howl with laughter and catcall, slapping their thighs as if to call the dog – or me - over. He scowls at them and takes a determined step towards them, but they've sussed him, that it's only half-heart and don't even flinch, which only pisses him off more.

I sink down next to her on the street, neverminding the filth. There is a chappies wrapper crumpled in the gutter and some unidentifiable mulch of food waste or other organic. I don't look too close. She lies complete rigid now as the Aito noses round her body, sniffing out for drugs or other, under the shock-sharp rankness of her. It's like the rat that died in our ceiling in Durban and lay there to rot for three weeks before my brother finally climbed up there, swearing at my dad profuse for using the cheap exterminate – the kind that doesn't auto-dissolve the bodies. But there's another smell as well, ozoney cold and chemical.

She's making horrible little mewling sounds in protest, her eyes still scrunched shut, while the Aito's shoves its snout into the saggy folds of her oversized tracksuit, as if she'd been liposuction fresh this morning. Her fingers flop and twitch on the pavement, reflexive, but she knows enough to keep her hands down, her arms by her side, while it snuffles around her.

'You a cop? You with the guy inside?' the shoppie says, bending his knees to talk to me confidential like. 'Cos, it was legitimate, okay? Bitch started pulling down the merchandise, falling around. Dronkie. She's been in here before, causing kak. Stealing shit. And talking of shit, do you know how long your friend has been in there?' Behind him, out of range, the street kids are capering and strutting, waving their arms in mock imitation of his injured affront.

Her forehead, when I lay my palm on it diagnostic, is clammy. But what else was I expecting? I don't quite know what I'm doing or why I can't leave it alone. At my touch, her eyes flare open. She stares at me frantic, her lips popping bubbles of spit as if she's about to say something, but then the Aito rumbles once, warningly and she squinches her eyelids shut again, clamps her lips as if she could suppress the tight squeaks escaping her throat

'You check my records, kay? You'll see. Always, every week, some bergie shit or skollies causing trouble for me. What are my customers supposed to do?'

I raise a hand slow-smooth, placatory, keeping the other on her forehead. The Aito whuffs and then lifts its paw off her chest, now disinterest. It swipes its head up and down the street once, scanning and then starts digging unconcern into its flank with the edge of its teeth. I guess fleas are a problem when you come close contact with the homeless and crims.

'I'm logging one crisp every coupla days. And now I gotta pay extra cos I'm over the limit? It's not fair. It's not my fault you can't take care of this shit. Now I gotta do your job?'

The woman opens one wary eye, and blinks it. And then the other. The effect is sit-comic.

‘I wasn’t...’ she starts in a voice so little and pathetic, I have to lean in to hear. Her breath is ripe with cheap papsak.

‘Hey, you even listening to me?’ the shoppie snaps.

And sudden, the Aito lunges forward, leaping over the woman’s body, shouldering me aside and grabs one of the street kids, who has got too close, fastening its mouth bear trap on his arm and crashing him down to the street in one movement. There is a branch-crack of bone followed immediate by the inevitable screaming.

The other kids scatter. Gone before the Aito looks up, like roaches skittering away into the city’s dark places. Without thinking about it, I already have my camera out, am snapping the dog hybrid standing hunched over the child, growling fierce, the boy’s left arm dislodge and twisted awkward neath his body. The shoppie sprawled on the pavement where he’d stumbled and fallen with the surprise. And I know this is illegit, that you’re not supposed to photograph police procedurals unlicence, but I don’t care.

Behind me the woman sees her open and scrambles to her feet and takes off down the street. The Aito cocks its head at me with what I swear is disbelief. It snaps at the boy, closing its teeth with a sharp clack hair’s breadth from his face and then bounds after the woman, almost playful. And then, it’s gone. The feeling, the compulsion, whatever it was, is vanished. I snatch my bag, from where I was kneeling – was that what the kid was after? – and stow my camera deep inside.

A citicop emerges from the liquor store, doing up his belt, relief apparent on his face, ‘Thanks, man,’ but his expression changes rapid when he sees the scene, the child writhe and screaming, holding his arm.

The shoppie turns on him, 'Finally! Look what your dog has done while you were fucking around in the toilet!'

'Excuse me? You can't talk to an officer like that.'

'Look at this shit! This is scaring away my customers!'

'You want I should fine you for verbal abuse? Hey, you, girlie, get away from that kid. You don't want to interfere.'

'His arm is broken.'

'I can see that, lady. But this is police business.' He softens with a sugary leer, 'Don't worry your little head, sweetness, he'll get the medical attention he needs.'

'Hey, she was taking photos!' The shoppie, seeing his opportune to worm out of the hot spot, flings an accusatory finger at me. All the attention is now divert on me, no-one paying slightest to the kid sobbing through his teeth in haking breaths.

'Was she now?' The cop saunts over, too close into my personal, so I can smell his sweat and the cinnamon of his gum, the pink chewed lump lurking in the back of his mouth, near his molars. 'I'm sure she didn't mean anything by it? Né, cherry?'

'I'll delete them. I'm sorry.' I'm fury with myself for apologising, for the instant wave of guilt as if I'd done anything serious crim.

'What's with this hair? One colour not good enough?' He moves to touch my hair and I twitch away, which makes him laugh. 'What's your name, meisiekind?'

'Kendra.'

'Ag, don't worry, *Kendra*. I'm not going to take your camera or even put in a log on your unauthorise. This time. But I'll be watching out for you.' For an awful

moment, by the way he's leaning in, I think he's going to ask me for a kiss on his cheek in grateful. 'Now shoo, we're busy here.'

I turn on my heel, burn with humiliate, in the opposite direction of the Aito, which is standing guard over the once again subdued homeless woman and walk brisk away from the howling child and the burly cop and the snickering shoppie. And into the first spaza I can find for a Ghost.

Lerato

Zama calls. And it's not even my birthday. Of the three of us, Siphokazie is the only one who cares enough to try to hold us all together and, naturally, that's what she's calling about.

'You've forgotten, haven't you?' Zama says, her tone dripping accusation.

'No.' I say, 'Of course not.' but I have. Who has time to keep track of these things? And it's morbid, dredging it up year after year. The past only holds you back. It's like a drift net. The kind you get tangled in and drown.

'It's important to her.'

'Yeah, yeah. I know. Which day is it again?'

We tried to do a pilgrimage a few years ago, at Siphos's behest, to visit the clinic where they died, because we don't have a clue where the graves are. But two days before we were set to leave, the govt announced a new round of quarantines, which made travelling into the Ciskei impossible. When Zama and I pulled out, she tried to go anyway, on her own, without a car, with some of her Buddhist buddies tagging along. You can guess how far she got. Turned around at the first checkpoint.

She nagged for a year after that, but there was always an excellent excuse not to go, and I didn't fabricate all of them either. I've been doing a lot of travelling lately. For the moment, she's content to settle for the memorial ceremony, but I live in dread of her suggesting another attempt at our own personal hajj.

Zama gives me the day and the time we're going to meet at Cape Point for the 'ceremony'. She guilt-trips me into agreeing to hosting dinner as well, although she's horrified when I suggest using Communique's chefs.

'We have to cook a meal together, it's traditional.'

'I don't cook.'

‘Fine. Siphoh and I will cook. You do have a kitchen, right?’ I have to think about that one, about when last we used the hob. I manage to convince her we should just go to a restaurant, maybe the one at Cape Point, because if Siphoh cooks, we’ll be eating some vegan lentil mush like last time that you had to chew for ages. This is my idea of family, actually, a sticky morass you can’t chew your way out of. We wrap up, but I try and spin out the conversation a little. I can tell Zama is secretly pleased and flattered, but it’s only because I need extra material for my pre-records to throw off the spyware.

Zama likes to play the family historian. She’s a font of all these great stories about our parents, but the Eskom orphanage – let’s not cop to the PC term of ‘trade school’, even if they are cultivating proprietary workforces – has always been more vivid in my head than my idea of home, which is a patchwork of broadcast images. Green hills and sky and a threadbare chicken with long scrawny legs scratching through dust that will never yield a juicy maggot, let alone mielies. It’s all cliché, a communal sepia-toned memory that all us Aidsbabies have in common.

I was only four at the time. The baby of the family after Zama and Siphokazie, and Tebogo, who succumbed even before our parents. I just have to accept whatever Zama says, the stories polished and brittle from so much repetition.

I think I remember a clinic with walls painted a sickly avocado green and playing Darth Vader in the sterilmask until I got a smack. In my memory it’s Zama who did it, but I suppose it could just as easily have been a nurse.

She says we used to walk miles along the railway tracks, picking some raggy weed, cosmos, I think, to give to our mother, that the nurses predictably always confiscated when we go there for fear of contamination. We weren’t even allowed to touch them.

I remember rows of beds crammed together and sour metal smells and a man, with limbs as spindly and sharp as a locust, who terrified me. It's going to sound harsh, but I'm glad I never had to go back there, never had to deal with the reality of Thomokazie and Sam Mazwai, which is all I have of them, their names on my birth certificate. And the legacy of two sisters, one turned hippie vegan Buddhist dropout, the other fermenting in her dead-end job at Eskom, never having graduated beyond our first parent company.

It may be partially my fault Zamajobe never made it out of Eskom. I probably had some kind of familial obligation to tell them when I figured it out that the brightest and most productive get out – to better companies that pay a premium to Eskom for the privilege. But they were older. They should have been guiding me. And besides, the competition was too hectic to allow for nepotism. Within a year, I'd been handpicked to go over to Pfizer SA Primary in Cape Town and suddenly the story sums in class were focused on medication doses rather than wattage and the school didn't have the same level of desperation. There weren't girls selling themselves at the side of the road to the truck drivers.

At 14, I had my pick of bursaries at secondary institutions run by Telkom, Cisco, Wesizwe and New Mutua. I knew I wanted to get into media and I knew, by then, how to negotiate, how to play the system. No more fucking around in squalid dorms with the hordes. When I took up New Mutua's scholarship, I demanded a private room.

Communique got me through a Plus life chat room. It was music sharing and flirting, before the record labels started imposing criminal sentences and meshing their crippleware with defusers. I met my first handful of boyfriends through the chats. But then one of my online friends made me a proposition of a different nature.

By the end of the day, New Mutua knew all about it and I was being forcibly evicted, marched out by security guards with Aitos, not even allowed to go back for my phone. Now, I think, it's obvious that my new friend ratted me out to make sure I didn't change my mind. I never learned his real name. Headhunters are only as effective as their anonymity.

Technically, I still had another four years of training before I should have entered the workforce officially, but Communique was willing to let me skip two, provided I waive my gap year, that all skills institute grads are legally entitled to, to figure out if this is where they want to be after all. But I've been here six years, almost seven and that's starting to feel like a very, very long time

When I get off the phone, with a whole half hour's worth of filler for the spyware boys, I find a summons to Lesley Rathebe's office, which clamps my stomach with a momentary pulse of dread, because there is always the possibility that someone has picked up the miniscule drop in bandwidth of data being siphoned off the adboards through my back door.

But the meeting with Rathebe is not a disciplinary. It's about the report on the MetroBabe Strollers and how very much she liked my out of the box suggestion about using a kiddies' mobile as an interface and how very wasted she thinks I am in core coding. There's a position that's just opened up in strategic, developing new tool sets for existing technologies, and she'd be happy to back me if I were 'gutsy' enough to apply for it.

I could bring Mpho Gumede with me if I like, she says. We seem to work well together. I decline, politely. Regrettably, I tell her, and only under duress at her prompting, he's too volatile. No imagination. He nearly jeopardised the Bula Metalo job.

I know, I know, it's heartless. But if I am stuck in Communique for the duration, I can't afford to be coupled with someone who might hold me back.

Toby

In the fourth corridor, I find something useful potential. Graffiti tagged up giant scale and kif skilful of a Nguni cow in profile. The kind you only ever see now emaciate in the background of the politsoc broadcasts about how fucked rural is now.

This pastoral beast in comparison, is plump as my mother's credit rating and all velvaglow. But I realise quick it's not just paint rendered ultra-real, it's actual hide (brown speckle fractal on dirty cream) cut to shape and mounted up fresco on the wall, which is a tad creepy. Still not helpful exact but disregard at your peril, boys and girls, when you got niks else to go on after thirty nine rooms abandonment already and that fucking noisome getting closer and still no sign of anything resemble the Redux Core, which is the last, best, only hope for the Nemesis star system.

Under the sound of the dripping, like fucking Chinese water torture in the reverb, and the skrawk of rusted pipes, susceptible apparent to shifts and groans, and the machinery clanking off-kilter on twisted gearings, so it's not a smooth loop at all, is a sound distinctly kitchen. And if that doesn't sound particular fearsome, consider the gurgling of a drain remixed with the metal screech of the garbage disposal, only more organic like - that sound emergent from a larynx. It's not exactly encourage like. And like I said, it's 'proaching speedy. Or I think it is. Can't tell with all the ambient.

But the cow. Can't be distractable. The cow is almost a storey high, near reaching all the way up the factory wall to the narrow row of filthy windows (too small to climb out, too high to get to -I've tried already). Where they're broken, light comes in so bright sharp it slices the gloom in thin geometric slits, all aswirl

with dusty. I've been avoiding them truth. It's superstitious, like not standing on the cracks, but also I don't want to be exposin' myself unnecessary like to whatever is making that noise.

It's a bull, truth. Unless cows too have horns menace sharp and glint. Never paid attention to the biologicals really. And cos it's seems the obvious – although it wouldn't in realworld – I collect some of the industria crates scattered oh-so-convenient close and push 'em over to the wall in a precary teeter pile to get a better look like.

It's beautiful done, but strange like. The beady eye is a dissected marble, like the toy, the kind with a green cat's eye twist in the centre of the glass, so it looks real fakey. And the hooves and the horn are especial weird, cos they'd be the one thing easy to get actual, right? But they're made up of big oval sequins, misshapen and discolour and overlaid on each other like scales.

On closer inspect, the hide is patchwork – no cow big enough to cover this mural on its own, but meticulous done – you can barely see the seams. It's all bristle and glazed with fine dust that lifts off it in plumes when I run my hand over, against the grain, investigative like. And there it is. I'm lank disappoint. Could they have been more fucking obvious? A keyhole. Now if only I had a key. I must have missed it on level 15. Fuck.

There is a scritchng sound. I feel like it's been going on a while, subcon and I'm only just clicking on to it– too involve in the goddamn moo. Or maybe it's only just started. I turn rapid, in case it's the tick of claws on the concrete behind me, yanking out the Luger from the back of my jeans. There's only one shot, and that's if it doesn't jam.

But there is only the clank and creak and dripping. The factory floor is empty, natural, as far as I can see into the dark recesses on the other side. The slices of light coming in from outside make it harder, throwing out the contrast, but I've already freaked myself one too many straining to detect movement in the shadows. And 'sides, anything could be lurking anyways hidden 'mongst the carnage of decrepit machinery and tumbled crates and the stacks of packaging. (Styrofoam. Already cut one open, spilled out the spongy S curls onto the floor – was using them like a trail of breadcrumbs until I twigged that it would lead other things to me as much as leading me back).

The scratching comes again and I realise only now that it's been absent a second how close it is. Right here. I crook my head real careful like, angle over my shoulder, bringing up the Luger soft like, watching for the hide to stretch and distend cos I know, I just fucking know something grotesque is scratching patient on the inside, like a dog at the door.

There is movement faintest and it takes me a second to pinpoint it. There is a shift of light on the hooves and I ease up the Luger, please fuck let it not lock up, placing one hand against the hide for balance, which is warm now and moving steady cos the fucking cow is breathing and the sequins aren't sequins at all, but nails, fingernails bruised black and stained and I can tell this, that this is what they are, because there are rotten fingertips emerging behind, scraping out and over the other nails, so that there are six layers of intertwined wilted hands tearing their way out from the wall.

As I throw myself back, pull up the gun to fire - two things happen simultaneous. The Luger clicks, cold. And my sudden shift in weight shifts out the pyramid of crates. The air opens up behind me abrupt, so I'm looking up as the

things seethe out like poison gas, murky taloned things, clawing past each other to get at me, making a rustling like rice paper. And what strikes me as I strike my head on the concrete is that they're not even the gurgler.

>game over

I toss the plug-in one side in disgust and wedge myself out of the gamewomb and into the cosy dim of the barcade, lit romantic so that pulling out into realworld isn't so awful jarsome. I stumble over to the bar and get distract by a girl with black hair cropped jag and a mole above her mouth, old-Hollywood, sitting alone in one of the perspex booths and the only game she's playing is voyeur, on everyone else's, multiple screens projectin' the actioning.

'You buying?' I say, pulling in next to her.

'Excuse me?' she says, all cold surprise, like she's never been hit on before.

'C'mon. I'll get the next one. You can make it expensive. But you buy this round. I just got fragged one time and I need a commisaratory.'

'Oh right. You're the one who just got torn limbless by the Dark.'

'That's me.'

We sit in silence for a long moment. She's waiting for me to get discomfort and leave. But I'm not shifting a mili and eventual she can't resist, if only to drive in her superior.

'You need the BFG automatic. It's in the substation behind the geyserings.'

'I looked there.'

'It's up, not down, wedged behind the pipes. And you missed the key.'

'So, if you're the res expert, how come you aren't playing?'

'How do you know I'm not?'

I tap the tabletop to pull up the drinks menu, skim it, but it's same old.

'Tequila?'

'You are incredibly forward.'

'Do you play? Or do you just like to watch?'

She doesn't say nothing like, just looked at me unbeliever.

'Cos I didn't used to. I skeemed it was all time wastage, you know?' And this is true, boys and girls. I was big time ambition once. 'When I was a laaitie I only ever used the educationals.'

This riles her. 'You can't simplify like that. It's all blur now. The lines between education and entertain.' And I've hooked her.

'What, like the kid's games? Murder and mayhem. Training 'em up real savage like, don't you think? Even the cute ones. It's not about making friends with laaities all over the world, it's about getting ahead, getting one over.'

'But don't you think it's appropriate like? Considering.'

'The world you mean? That's a tad harsh. Is that it? Won't they learn that shit later?'

'All right. So, what should they be learning?'

'Compassion? Empathy? How to get along? Life skills and shit.'

'You're an idealist.'

I shrug, all modest coy sudden, as if she's bust me. Look down at my drink, cos the tequila has arrived now on the conveyor that runs between the terminals, so the players won't be distracted by comings and goings, so they'll stay longer, spend more money.

'To compassion.' She grins, ironic, taking the tequila.

'To beautiful women with a mean streak sarcastic,' I toast back.

Later, she comes back swivel with me. They always do.

Lerato

The date goes much better than I'd anticipated, but for all the wrong reasons. Stefan is as craggily beautiful as his profile photograph and smart and lucid and engaging and funny and refined – and gay as a rainbow bumper sticker.

'I fucking knew it.' I say, sipping on a papaya mojitos, which he's taken the liberty of ordering for both of us because it's Gravity's speciality. Gravity isn't my first choice of afterhours, but in its favour, entry is strictly corporate pass, so you don't have to deal with pleb civilians. And it's set on the 44th floor of the Vodacom building on a revolve floor, so the view rotates at a gentle clip around you, mountain-city-sea, ideal for those with a short attention span for the spectacular.

'I'm sorry?' he says, slightly taken aback. Normally, I enjoy the deft manoeuvring around what can't be said, the subtle, skillful politicking of negotiations. I had an Iranian friend, Shaheema, who taught me the finer tactics of never saying what you mean, when she came out on exchange to Communicate from the Emirates office. It's as useful in the secular of the corporate environment as Arabic society. Which is not to say I'm prepared to abandon subtlety altogether when monitoring is a real concern. I lean forward, exposing maximum cleavage, and touch his arm, lightly intimate.

'We're both adults, Stefan. We both know why we're here. Why don't you and I just skip straight to the main course.'

'Uh – I thought perhaps we could just have a quiet drink, get to know each other.'

'We could go back to my place. But I have a roommate, which might make it, tricky, if we're to make all the noise we want. What about your's?'

He's confused utterly, the poor thing, but then his eyes crinkle and he half suppresses a smile, shaking his head, wryly. 'I thought you were serious. I have an audio interference if that's what you're worried about.' He clicks the silver pen lying on the table beside his notebook. 'We can make all the noise we like. No spyware's going to pick it up.'

I bite my thumb coquettish, keeping up the flirtatious masquerade for the sake of anyone watching. 'And how do I know you're not with...'

'Internal investigations? That this isn't a set-up?'

'I do have a history, Mr Thuys.'

'Don't we all, Ms Mazwai. I'm afraid I don't have anything to offer to placate your fears. You'll just have to trust me.'

'Give me a secret. One that I can verify.'

'Why?'

'Leverage.'

'I'm not in the habit of trading secrets with beautiful women, especially not so they can blackmail me.'

'Only beautiful boys?' I've managed to get under that meticulously moisturised skin. He unfolds and refolds his legs.

'You know, if I was from your current employer's internal investigations, you would have already incriminated yourself.'

'I really don't know what you mean. I was in the middle of asking you if this was another one of Genevieve's half-baked romantic set-ups. You interrupted, rudely, before I could finish my sentence. It's hardly my fault if you jump to wild conclusions.'

He slaps his leg and laughs loudly enough to disturb the suits on the couch across from us, because the audio interference only works on electronics, who glance over briefly. ‘You really are something. So, what would it take to – uh, get you into bed?’

‘I’m not a whore, Stefan. But if you’re asking me about my ambitions, my dreams? The kind of things we might discuss on a date? I want to live up to my potential. You know I was raised in a skills institute? Eskom Energy Kids.’

‘I saw it on your CV.’

‘Compared to tooth and nailing it against 3000 other Aidbabies, believe me – corporate life is a breeze.’

‘They say good wine depends on terroir. So what *are* your dreams, Lerato?’

‘All the things any girl wants. A pony. True love. A diamond ring. A generous car allowance. A sea view, a space to call my own, that’s really my own, sans roommate. Work that is meaningful, you know, where you can make a real and valuable contribution to society, although I’d settle for challenging and remarkably well paid with international firstworld opportunities. Maybe one day.’

‘Maybe soon.’

‘I’ll toast that.’

Toby

It was only when I was already in deep that I realised the idea of shortcutting through the Church street overbridge to Unathi’s pad in Little Angola was way *deurmekaar*. I should have gone round streetside. Ever since the vendors hooked up here, it’s been unreal. Needless, they’re all licensed, but it’s dirty, you can’t barely see out of the glass of the tunnel, and it’s mad-crush, and reeksome with the assort

of delicacies, offal and smileys and chicken's feet being stirred up – but the real trauma? The real trauma is the goods.

Their wares are outmode serious not only the kind of cheap useless they're trying to sell, cos who really needs a tube of bondglue or six, except for the street kids and there are better highs for less, but cos they're all fucking chipped. This is nonreg, but the cops have better shit to worry about, especial when it doesn't inflict on the corporati like, least not here.

Truthful, the whole audio chipping thing was illegitimatised almost as soon as it hit. Oh, it was bigtime when the first ones came in. Cereal boxes that sang their own jingles. Could've been all bran flakes and the laaities would have gone mal for it. But then all the marketing pimps fevered and next you know, the whole fucking supermakt is noisome deluxe. Jingle hell, jingle hell, jingle all the way. But not just jingles, boys an girls, promos, sound effects, cleb endorsements. House spouses wearing ear blanks just to get through the grocery grind. Lasted six months before it got uncontrol complete and they outlawed it.

Most of the cheap useless comes from the east or down from Africa central like, so it's worse cos it's not even in one of the eleven nationals. It's a fuckin' bazaar of babel in here. Chips chirping self importance, hawking their own appeal in everything from Moroccan French to Mandarin. Anything but English or even Xhosa. It's a mess.

In his pad, Unathi is still wearing the leopard print. I study it careful attention. The stains look ident locationing to the previous occasion. 'What is with you? Stop staring at my tits, man!' He hands me a gamechip. 'Congratulations, you made the big league. Realspace and you don't even have to go elf. Personal, I don't

think you're qualify for this, but some chick did a recommend on you. Julia Thambo? Know her?'

I shrug, non-commit. Fucked if I know. Which is probably exact what happened.

'Said she saw you play in the barcade up StJohns Wood way? She's quite the cherry. You better not have fucked her, you twat.'

Again I shrug, which winds him up more than a straight confessional would have.

'Asshole. Anyway. Their clan has a last minute casualty. They need a replace. Don't go thinking this means you get to play with the grownups regular.'

'So what's the game?'

'Load up the chip, asshole, and see.'

I slot the card into the gameport on my phone. Instant, the screen goes blue as it connects to Playnet, that particular balance of cyan that quicks any realspace gamer's pulse, because now it's all happening, boys and girls.

FallenCity Scorpions Elite

>Welcome agent **BUZZKILL**

'Great call sign, you've preselect for me, Unathi, thanks.'

'Thought you'd appreciate.'

'How do I change it?'

'You're stuck with it. The account is all paid up. That's your call signing.'

'You are such a major prickable.'

'Just read the assignment, asshole.'

> You have a new mission briefing..

Brief Date: Tuesday 19 September

Operation: Rosa Parks

Type: Real world

Location: Adderley Station Deck, Adderley Street,
Cape Town City

Risk Level: 4+

Mission Objectives: Find and subdue terrorists on the underway and recover and disarm dirty 'briefcase' bomb. This is a multi-operative mission.

Execution: 20h05, Saturday 23 September

Detailed briefing: Scorpion Elite's intelligence agents have uncovered a terrorist plot by militant mercenary group MaVIMbi, to plant a 'suitcase' nuclear bomb on the M line train with the intention of detonating it once the train reaches Robben Island Memorial Industrial Park, with the intention of destroying it. Fall out will affect the entire East City coastline. Projected casualties are 16 000 on Robben Island alone.

The carrier is believed to be the terrorist known as **UNITY**. No further information is available, but s/he will certainly be disguised as a corporate and will likely have fake identification. S/he may have additional terrorists travelling with him/her as protection and cover.

Your mission is to infiltrate and take-over the corporate coaches on the M line underway at Adderley street station, subdue all passengers, prevent the train from departing the station, identify and subdue the terrorist/s and find and disarm the suitcase bomb (Scorpions Elite Bomb Squad operatives only)

Because of the scale of the operation, mass action is required. You will be required to coordinate your action with one or more teams. Mission control can assign you to a team should you not already have one.

Advisory: This mission will take you into civilian territory. Discretion is advised. *

All operatives must tag their SIMS with PlayNet **FallenCity** chips to identify them as players.

Disclaimer: **FallenCity** is not real. **FallenCity** does not have any real-world affiliations with the Scorpions

or the criminal underworld or terrorist organisations. InGame agents are actors employed by **Inkubate Inc.** to validate and enhance the player's experience in real world play and advance the game.

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By entering into game time, **FallenCity** players agree to the terms and conditions of play and acknowledge that they are fully aware that **FallenCity** is only a game.

Players are solely responsible for their actions in real-world play and any repercussions thereof.

By registering on the system, players acknowledge that they are of sound mind and not taking any stimulants during the course of play that could impede their judgement and are fully able to distinguish between gameplay and reality.

Players who enter real-world play without chipping their SIMS with **FallenCity** identifiers or create a public disturbance or interfere with non-player civilians will be suspended from gameplay for the period of one month. Repeat offenders will be disbarred from the game.

Players who break the law in the course of play or enact physical violence on any persons (players, InGame agents or civilians) will be barred from **FallenCity** and all other Inkubate Inc.'s titles and, if necessary, their files will be uploaded to the SAPS.

** All passengers in the corporate coaches on M line are InGame agents. Please do not interfere with other passengers on any other lines or in the station.*

>Do you wish to accept the mission, **BUZZKILL**?

>>YES

> You are registered temporary affiliate with Scorpions Elite **CLAN STINGER**. Would you like to maintain this affiliation?

>> YES

>> Operative status confirmed. T-minus three days to execution. Further details will be uploaded to your FallenCity chip. Proceed with caution **BUZZKILL**.

>> LOG OUT.

Tendeka

Zuko rattles the can of spraypaint, showman and much longer than require for freshpaint, but he's working the crowd – the kids he's instructioning and the passby traffic stopping to watch, considerable at I Iam on the Grand Parade on a Tuesday. It strikes me that this must be one of the only occasions that the kids are drawing positive attention from the public. Zuko takes to the lead instant, showing the kids how to hold the nozzle so you get a smooth flow without collateral on your clothes, why you have to wear the fumemask and if he catches anyone huffing paint, it's a red card. Not that we're too harsh by the book. The kids who live street make their own agendas, so we're not overconcern if they don't rock up first thing or leave before 4pm. They can come and go as please, the only rule is they can't be fucked up or get fucked up while they're work with us.

I've got no illusionings. I know precise where they go when they peel off at two or three, after lunch, because that's the deal, four hours work and you earn a decent meal, and that they won't be coming back 'til they've slept it off tomorrow. The thing is to respect them and how they run their lives. We can't force them to be here, but we can offer an attractive alternate to scrummaging garbage. We're building a conversational, not handing down a lecture on high. Respect is reciprocate.

It's remark how fast Ash pulled it all together, two days, once he got over his shock that I'd had a heart change about the sponsor.

First time round we put up chatter posters on the streets with built-in squawkers, cos most of these kids are illiterate and, natural, they don't have phones. Now our big and powerful sponsor insists we include an optional, so the msg isn't

blaresome at every pedestrian who passes by, that you have to physically stop and interact with it. Which means we had to send them back for a redesign to make them as lush enticing as possible to the kids, who are jaded overwhelm with all the attention grabs in Long Street.

We hit all the shelters again, to speak to the kids, personal, and get the social coordinators, like Leonie back on our side. She's bitchy about the whole thing. 'I really hope this isn't going to fizzle, Tendeka,' she says, 'A lot of kids backslid major.' Like I don't know.

But even Leonie is impress when she comes down to see. It's disgusting how much of a diff real sponsorship makes. Instead of bad-printed tees, the kids have navy overalls, with the logo stitched tasteful subtle over the heart and the stitching on the back boasting 'Investing In Our Youth'. Instead of cold potjie stewed at home with whatever ingredients Ash could find, we have freshmade nutritional-amped hamburgers delivered prompt at quarter past twelve from the kitchens of Standard Bank's headoffice, two blocks over.

Unfortunate, we have to take the overalls from the kids at day's end. We tell them it's because we need to wash off the paint, but actual it's at Standard Bank's insist, so they don't go off and get vrot and harass people still wearing the logo. Likewise, no-one's allowed to leave with paint, in case they tag with it, or worse, inhale.

Practising is all designated zone, although all the kids get branded sketchbooks and a box of pencil crayons (because you can huff koki) to take back with them. It's an inspired touching gesture, which could have only come down from a corporate social investment dick who doesn't have a clue about the streetside reality, where kids get mugged for anything vague precious or personal.

We've pulled some 17 kids, itching to get their hands on the paint, but this is not just tagging shit. There are techniques to be mastered. Those kids with no artistic will get to do the manual, the fill jobs, but even that requires a measure skill, using tight little circles, like the Karate Kid, which even these streets have heard of, wax of, wax off, or precision strokes to make sure the paint doesn't run.

The LEDs, on the other hand, are plug and play. Tiny bulbs the size of the head of a drawing pin. We're using magnetic paint, so it's just a matter of positioning and they self-adhere. It was what sold Standard Bank total on the idea – that we could embed lights in the shape of their logo, which would light up at night so all the lofts neighbouring could see, all the incoming traffic. You can pre-program patterns to add dimension or random fractals or words. Peace. Love. Ubuntu. Revolution.

Imported special from Amsterdam – the paint and the lights. It's easy to embed other things in magnetic paint too. Totally stable, skyward* assures me. I wouldn't expose the kids to unnecessary risk.

We're doing up all three of the panels on the side of the ex-library, up there with the logos and adboards and videomercials beaming down. All in the name of a Good Cause, the street kids channelling their frustration into something useful, something beautiful. Something the public can feel good about.

Watching Zuko workshopping to the rapt assemble, spraying up an outline of letters, 'LOVE' the style mesh somewhere between the fat curves of 60s hippie typo and the jagged elaborate intertangle of 80s New York subway bombing-style, I don't know why we didn't do this prior.

So, when Ashraf comes back from giving some of the Standard Bank employees, idle curiosity on their lunch break, a little touring, I tell him as much and

that I'm proud of him. He blinks fierce, touched, which makes it harder not to tell him about the extra mural. But I know he won't approve, especial of me using the kids.

But they're homeless already. They have nothing to lose as long as we don't get caught. They can't be disconnect because they don't have phones. The disenfranchise will get their moment of glory. I've discussed it length with Zuko, not with all the details, but he's up for more serious and he can recruit some of the other kids too.

The only worry is the dogs, but there are ways, skyward* says, of dealing with gen mod animals. And making headlines sametime.

Kendra

There is already spillage out the doors by the time I get to Propellor, which can only be a good sign sure, seeing as its only six thirty. Although it only makes me feel more fractal. It's nerves definite, but also maybe that I'm on my fourth Ghost in under an hour.

'You're late.' Jonathan latches onto my arm at the door, waiting for me, apparent, and swishes me interior through the crowd. 'Christ, Kendra.' I can't believe how many people there are, crowded into the gallery. There is a queue tangling up the stairs to see Johannes Michael's atom mobile, but the major thronging is in the main room, and not, I am regret to say, for my retro print photos.

They're here to see Khanyi Nkosi's sound installation, fresh return from her Sao Paolo show and all the resultant controversial. She only installed it this afternoon, snuck in undercover with security, so it's the first time I've seen it flesh. It's gore-deluxe, red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and schmangled unrepair, half collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers, which makes the name even more disturb – 'Woof & Tweet.'

I don't understand how it works real, but it's to do with reverb and built in resonator-speakers. It's culling sounds from around us, remixing audio, conversational, footsteps, glasses clinking, rustling people sounds, through the systems of its body, disjointed parts of it inflating, like it's breathing, spines quivering.

It's hard to hear it over the noise, but sometimes its like words, almost recognisable. But mostly its just noise, a fractured music undercut with jarr sounds that seem to come random. Sometimes it sounds like pain. Cos it's an animal, right?

Or alive at any rate. Some lab-manufactured plastech bio-breed with just enough brain stem hard-wired to respond to input in different ways, so it's unpredict - but not enough to hurt apparent.

'It's gratuitous real. I mean she could have done it any other way. It could have looked like anything. It could have been beautiful.'

'Like something you'd put in your lounge? Please, Kendra. It's supposed to be revolting. It's that whole Tokyo tech-grotesque thing. It's so fucking derivative, I can't stand it actual, can we move along?'

I run my hand along one of the ridges and the thing quivers, but I can't determine any difference noticeable in the sounds. 'Do you think it gets trauma?'

'It's just noise, okay? You're as bad as that nutjob who threw blood at her at the Jozi exhibition. It doesn't have nerve endings, okay? Or no wait, sorry, it does have nerve endings, but it doesn't have pain receptors.'

'I meant do you think it gets upset? By all the attention? I mean, isn't it supposed to be able to pick up moods, reflect the vibe?'

'Christ knows. I think that's all bullshit, but you could ask the artist. She's over there schmoozing with the money, like you should be.'

Woof & Tweet suddenly kicks out a loop burst of a jagged fragment of a woman's laugh, that startles me complete, before sliding down the scale into a fuzzy electronica.

'See, it likes you.'

'Don't be a jerk, Jonathan.'

'There's a journalist who wants to interview you, by the way. And he's pretty cute.'

My stomach spasms. This is another thing Jonathan does to keep me in my place, to make it razor that we're not together.

'Great, thanks. I need a drink.'

'I'll get it. Just go talk to Sanjay. What do you want?'

'Anything.' It's unlikely real that the gallery would have Ghost on hand, although I want one desperate.

Jonathan propels me in the direction of Sanjay, who is standing deep conversational with a little cluster of people. The one is clearly money, some corporati culture patron or art buyer, the other, I realise is Khanyi Nkosi. I recognise her from an interview I saw, but she is so warmly energetic waving her hands in the air to make a point and grinning, that I can't match her with her work. And the third, I realise shock is Andile. It shouldn't be surprise, considering he picked me out based on my work, but although Jonathan slept over, for the entire night, yesterday, I still have not come cleansome.

I realise I can't deal and checking that Jonathan is intent on the bar, pushing through the queue, I detour back towards the entrance and the open air – only to stand on someone's foot.

'Hey! Easy!'

'Oh god, I'm sorry.' Shit, I really, really, really need a Ghost. I wonder if I can make it to the caff down the road and get back before Jonathan notices.

'No dilemma. You're the famous artist, right?'

I have been so distract, I didn't even realise it was Toby whose foot I crushed in the 40s-style blue velvet high heels I bought special occasion for tonight. He's cocked his head, facetious.

‘Maybe not the famous one. I mean, I’m not, the thing, it’s not mine. But you know that.’ I laugh, self conscious, still thinking desperate about a Ghost, wondering if they serve them at the bar.

‘So, is now a good time to get an interviewable?’

‘*You’re* the journalist?’

‘Ouch!’ He mock staggers back, clutching his heart. ‘Yeah, actual. I brought my own iphone mike and everything.’

‘I’m sorry. That’s not what I – Oh God. Can we just start again?’

‘Sure. No prob.’

He turns away, clears his throat and then does a little twirl, one hand raised in salutary, talking red carpet announcer-style.

‘Hello. I’m Toby. I’ll be your journo for the eve.’ He shakes my hand over enthusiastic and I can’t help but laugh. ‘Do you have a drink?’

‘No, thanks. Someone’s getting me one.’

‘Rocking.’ He turns serious sudden, ‘Okay, now listen, sweet K, if you want, we can talk later. I know it’s your opening and you’ve got things to do, people to schmooze. I will total understand if now is not a good opportune.’

‘Actual, do you want to get out of here?’

‘What?’

‘Just for a sec. I need some fresh. And a drink.’

‘I thought someone was getting you one.’

‘A non-alcoholic.’

‘Ooooooh. Right.’ He winks.

‘You want to come?’

‘Sure. Can my iphone with mike come too?’

We're not the only hanging outside. We have to push through a crowd, including an astonishing gorgeous blonde, with fucked up hair, cut purposeful ugly, who makes me feel conservative, and a dark haired boy, who seems familiar vague, likely from other events.

We get halfway down the block before I take off my heels in disgust, much to Toby's bemuse. 'That doesn't make it into the copy, okay?' He holds up his hands, placate. 'Do you see me making notes?'

We walk in quiet for another block, stepping over a bergie passed out in the street, the burn smell of piss around him. And I'm relief to feel no sense of urgent attraction to touch him. And no sign of Aitos.

At the spaza, Toby opens the fridge at the back, 'Ghost, I'm assume?' putting it on his phone at the counter swipe and it's cold and crisp and clean it hurts my teeth and I realise my hands have been shaking all this while or maybe it's been me trembling, my whole body like. And this can't be good, but it doesn't feel bad.

'Mind if I join you?' he says, cracking the seal on another can. 'Wow. You really are addict deluxe.' Toby says, a tad too admiringly.

'Coming from you?' I know his reputable. But he is nonplus.

'At least I'm open status, baby girl. Hey, did you check my coat?'

'Yeah?' His chamo jacket is total black, which is relief compared to the goreporn he was projecting last time I saw him.

'It's my little shout out to Self Portait.'

'Cute. So, do you want to do this?'

'Am I allowed to take notes now?'

'Yeah-yeah,' I wave my hand impatiently.

He hooks a mike into his iphone and points it at my mouth. 'So. What's with the old school?'

'Didn't you read the press release?'

'Let's say I didn't.'

I quote it from memory. 'Adams' use of non-digital format is inspired by her fascination with the capacity for error...'

'Okay. Let's skip the press release.'

'Ah, it's just – film is more interesting than digital. There's a possibility of flaw inherent in the material. Cos it's not readily available, I have to get it over the Net and some of it has rotted or it's been exposed even before I loaded it in the camera, but I don't know that until I develop it.'

'Like Self-Portrait?'

'And it's not just the film. It's working without the automatic. The operator can fuck up too.'

'Did you fuck up?'

'Ha! That's the great thing about working with intentionally flawed materials. You'll never know.'

'It's the same in audio. Digital was too clean when it first came out, almost antiseptic. The fidelity was too clear, you lose the faintest sounds that envelope the one that you're recording, the ones you don't even pick up, but it sounds dead without them. Background noise that creates the context for the sound, like an aura. So, they had to adapt the digital to synth the effects of analogue. How insanity is that? It's contentious though, now the audio techs are saying it's all along been bullshit, just nostalgics missing the hiss of the recording equipment. So it's revert now again.'

‘That’s exactly it. You can do the same thing in photography. Apply effects, lock-out the autofocus, click up for exposure, all to recreate the manual.’

‘And you’re looking for the background noise.’

‘Yeah. Or something like.’ I set down my empty can neat beside my shoes.

‘Got enough?’

‘Yeah. I’m good. You give good soundbite,’ he says admiring, flirtatious, so that another Ghost down, we’re still sitting on the pavement, just talking, away from the madding, when the dark haired boy, who I recognise now as the guy from the band, from Andile’s office, comes walking down towards us.

‘Hey, photographer girl.’ He says, friendlier than last time. ‘Damian, remember? From Kill Kitten?’

‘Hey, Dame.’ Toby says. ‘How’s the bandscene? Did you like the write-up?’

‘Yeah, man, it was killer. Shot. We really appreciate the expose.’

‘Only writing what I scoped. You guys were tight.’

‘Well, it was kif, man, thanks. We’re playing next Saturday, if you want on the guest.’

‘Thanks. So, how do you know our star rising here?’ Toby asks, nodding at me. We are both still sitting, sprawled on the kerb, so Damian is looking down at us. There is a drawn out of uncomfort silence.

‘Ho-kay,’ Toby says, in mock defeat, ‘There’s obvious some deep unspoken going on here and I do not need to know the goresome details.’

‘It’s nothing like that. We’re –’ I look to Damian for approve, but he doesn’t seem concern. ‘We’re both branded.’

‘How come you’re not chugging the Ghosts, then?’

‘Are you kidding me,’ Damian laughs. ‘I’ve had three already tonight.’ The tense is broken now and he drops to sit on the pavement beside us.

‘How much do you drink in a day?’ I ask, too light.

‘Six, seven? Somewhere round there. My girlfriend keeps tabs on me.’ I don’t say anything. I’m doing nine to twelve a day. This is my seventh since 4.30.

‘It’s luck you’re both the same brand,’ Toby says, and do I detect a hint of envious in his voice? I’m overburden with complicate men tonight. ‘What if you were competitive? There must be a clausing about that. ‘Section 31c. Thou shalt not fraternise with the enemy’.’

‘Ja, can you imagine,’ Damian says, ‘Coke wars for real.’

‘No rival soft-drink friends for you!’

‘I don’t think that’s going to be at issue anytime soon,’ I interrupt their banter. ‘You’re the only other person I’ve met, Damian. Andile said they’re not doing this with other brands just yet. Ghost has it proprietary license for three months.’

‘Ja, but we’re only first gen. They’ll be popping out sponsor babies like toast.’

‘I hate that word.’

‘Toast?’ Toby chirps, trying to find a way in.

‘And what happened to the exclusive?’

‘You’ll be able to buy your way in. Got enough cash, enough cool, you’re representing. Just like the cosmetics.’

‘So, we’ll be outmode already.’

‘Bleeding edge no more.’

‘So, Dame, where’s yours? Can I see?’

‘Toby!’ I say, scandal, but Damian shrugs it off.

‘S’cool. I don’t mind. I signed up for the freakshow.’ He turns his back to us and pulls out his shirt to reveal the faint radiant of the glowlogo between his shoulder blades.

‘That doesn’t seem exact high vis.’ Toby says.

‘Not now, but I have a tendence to take my shirt off on stage. It’s not like I think I’m sex appeal or anything. I get hot. Hey, are you recording this?’

‘Sorry, bad habit. I’m a junkie for collecting vid. I can delete it if you want.’

‘No, it’s cool. Hey, Kendra, shouldn’t you be heading back? Aren’t there supposed to be speeches and shit? And I know Andile wanted to say what’s up.’

‘You go ahead, we’ll catch up.’ Toby says, laconic and this sudden strikes me as a very Jonathan thing to do.

‘Actual. I think I’ll go with him. We’ve been gone a while.’

The gallery seems less oppressive, but it’s easier now. I’m less freaked, even when I see Andile conversational with Jonathan, which is the last I want to have to deal with right now. I get distracted by Mr Muller, who kisses me, ‘Congratulations. It’s wonderful. Wonderful. Although I’m not sure about this messy animal thing. It’s very Damien Hirst. Cheap shock treatment stuff. Yours is infinitely superior. And people will see that.’

I’m still afterglow, when I overhear some over-groomed loft dwellers giggling into their wine. ‘And this. I’m so tired of Statement! Like she’s the only angst child ever to embrace the distorted body image.’

‘Oh Emily. I quite like the undeveloped. Because she is. You know, still young, coming in to herself. The artist in flux, emergent.’

‘Well precisely. It’s so *young*. You can’t even tell if it’s technical good or not, it’s all so... damaged.’

‘Don’t let the heathen savages get to you,’ Toby says, loud enough for the woman to hear, but I’m more amused than insulted. I’m about to lean in, to point out that under the black of *Self Portrait* is a photograph of a photograph, clutched in my fingers, captured in the mirror with a reflected flash of light. That it’s all meant to be damaged. But then I realise I don’t have to. I don’t have to make my motives transparent.

Damian appears at my shoulder, with the astonished blonde, who he introduces as his girlfriend, Vix, who is a fashion designer for her own small label. Vix distracts Toby, the two of them heading off to the bar to lay in supplies for all of us, convenient for me to ask Damian if he’s experienced any weird effects side. He seems puzzled.

‘Like what? I had really miffed flu for about four days. Sinuses and sweats, but it worked its way out.’

I try and tell him about the thing with the Aito, but it comes out all garbled.

‘It doesn’t sound that freaky,’ Damian says, ‘You felt sorry for her. You stopped to help. That’s pretty awesome.’

I’m miserable that he doesn’t get it, that sudden there’s this gap again dropping away between us. ‘It wasn’t empathy, or altruism or anything else. It was like I had to, like a real compulsion.’ The same way we are compelled to drink Ghost, I don’t say. But Damian is distracted by watching his girlfriend across the room, trying to interject into the crush around the bar, while Toby clowns around, making her laugh with a tad impatient. It makes me feel lonely. All these people circuiting, like Johannes Michael’s swirl of paper atoms upstairs, but the connections are only tenuous to me.

‘You know the dogs also function on nano?’ Damian says, ripping his eyes from Vix. ‘Maybe you got crossed lines,’ he jokes.

‘Maybe.’

We’re cut short by a flurry of activity at the door. I’ve been aware of a low clamour periphery, but now it erupts fullscale. There are people shoving, wine hurtle from glasses and yelps of dismay ‘This is a private function!’ Jonathan, of all, spouting clichés. And a rush of people in black are pushing in through the cram, their faces blurred like they’re anonymous informants in documentary footage. It is so disturbing and the first time I’ve seen it real, that it takes me a second to recognise they’re wearing smear masks. Another to realise that they’re carrying pangas and a prog-saw.

A few people scream, sending out a reverb chorus from Woof ‘n’ Tweet, the crowd pressing backwards automatic clearing a space for them. But then the thickset guy in front, yells, ‘Death to corporate art!’ and the woman (Emily) laughs scornful like, real loud, ‘Oh god! Performance art. How dreadful gauche.’ And there are murmurs of relief and snickers, the crowd now pressing in again to see.

Damian grabs my arm and pulls me back out of the front line, because I haven’t moved this whole while, just as one of the men (women?), towering over the others, grabs Emily by her hair and drags her forward, forcing her to her knees, spitting with contemptuous, ‘Don’t you dare make me complicit in your garbage!’

The black-clad raises the panga, pulling back Emily’s head by the roots of her hair, exposing her throat. Emily raises a hand to her mouth, pretends to stifle a yawn.

‘Are you going to chop me into little itty bitty pieces now? Oh please. This is so drama overt.’ And it is. The crowd is rivet. But I didn’t ‘spect this kind of promo stunt would be Sanjay’s thing. From the bar, Toby catches my eye and mimes mock

applause to the spectacle. Vix has her hands clamped tight round his arm, looking shocked and excite. And that seems to be the prevail. Not outrage or fear, but excite. People are grinning, nodding, teeth peeled back rictus, eyes overbright, which seems to make it all the more horror.

But what frightens me serious is the react of one of the men in smear. When the protag in this sordid yanks Emily's head back further, he moves forward as if frightened himself, as if he's trying to prevent it. 'What are you-?' he starts, but the one with Emily's hair twisted round his wrist gives an impatient jerk of his head and sympathy guy backs off. Bowing his legs, he moves his arm as if to slice across her throat, only at the last instant - so late that she winces back involuntarily - deflecting instead to a sideswipe hack - not at her, but at Woof 'n' Tweet, just in front of them. The thing emits a lean crackle of white noise. The audience is rapt, camera phones clicking, a scattershot of applause, and laughter, as the others move in, four of them and one guarding the door, to start into it. It's only when the artist starts wailing that we finally spark that this was not part of the programme intention and only then do the smiles drop from mouths, like glasses breaking.

The rest of them leap in, all except sympathy guy, awful overeager, pangas flash, tearing into the flesh and ribs of Khanyi Nkosi's thing with a noise like someone attacking a bicycle with an axe. The machine turns into a high hat backbeat for the melody assemble from the screams and skitters of nervous laugh. It doesn't die quiet, but more for the disrupt of the audience, than any self produce noise. Or maybe that's how it screams whatever sense of life it has away, through our voices. It's transmuting the ruckus, the frantic calls to SAPS and Khanyi wailing, clawing, held back by a throng of people. It is only the bright sprays of blood that makes it real, spattering the walls as the blades thwack down again, and people's faces, my

photographs. The police sirens distant, are echoed, distorted as Woof collapses in on itself, rattling with wet smacking sounds.

They disappear out into the streets as quickly as they came, shaking the machetes at us threatening, don't follow. Whooping like kids. With the sirens closing, the biggest guy spits onto the mangled corpse and then, before he ducks out the door and into the night, glances up once, quickly, at the ceiling. No-one else seems to notice, but I follow his gaze up to the security cams, getting every angle.

I'm sick with the adrenaline. The woman who was taken hostage (Emily) is screaming in brittle hyperventilating gasps. Her friend is trying to wipe the blood off her face, using the hem of her dress, oblivious that she has lifted it so high that she is flashing her lacy briefs. Khanyi is kneeling next to the gobs of her animal construct, trying to reassemble it and when that fails, she smears herself with the bloody lumps of flesh instead.

There is a man trying to comfort one of the drinksgirls, but he is the one weeping, laid waste by the shock. Toby is clambering down from the bar, why I don't know, Mr Muller sitting heavy slumped on one of the steps, leading to the upper, hugging the banister like a friend. Vix is fumble with lighting a cigarette, her hands shaking, until Damian materialises by her side, takes her hands in his and holds the lighter steady. She folds into him like a collapsible paper lantern. And even from here, I can see him mouth her name in appease. I hadn't even realised he was gone.

There is still prevailing undercurrent of thrill, a rush from the gratuitous violent, because no-one was harmed outside of Khanyi Nkosi's thing. Everyone is on their phones, taking pictures if not talking. Toby is shouting above the ruckus, into the phone bonded to his head, his other hand clamped against his ear, so he can hear.

There are even more people trying to wedge into the space, so that the cops, who have arrived final have to shove their way inside.

Self Portrait is covered in a mist of blood. I move to wipe it clean, although I'm scared the blood will smear, will stain the paper, but just then Jonathan wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck unexpected. And now its my turn to collapse concertina and shaking into a warm body enfold. 'It's okay, sweetheart, everything's going to be okay.'

Tendeka

Out the door and everyone scattered immediate. If there's one thing street kids know, it's how to vanish effective. Ashraf is still shaking by the time we make the refuge, a garage in a neighbour apt block. skyward* has given me a basic key SIM, that jimmys a signal to get in doors that aren't coded high security. It's a blunt hack job, but it works.

Previous protests we have arranged have all been phone-based. SMSes being the most convenient, the cheapest way of relaying information instant. 'Someone arrested.' 'New rendezvous.' 'Take Strand Street, cops are waiting on Riebeeck.' But tonight there are no phones. No way of passing on msgs or warnings or being tracked down. It feels unburden.

'This is what we should be campaign for,' I try to tell Ashraf, that we need to create an alternate economical that doesn't rely on SIM IDs and credit rates. We should all live like Emmie and our street kid army conglom. But he is too wrapped up fury to listen.

'You told me the knives were just for show.'

'It's not about show. Not anymore.'

'Oh cut it. Kill the bigspeak. For Christ's sake. They're children, Tendeka.'

'They're disenfranchise. Society's drop outs, the lost gen. We're giving them purpose.'

'Anyone can give a child purpose! They're operating out of that most danger of combos - innocence and ignorance. You can twist them whichever way suits. Especially if you're letting them vent gratuitous violence. You can't leash that once you've set it off.' He scrapes his hands through his hair. 'I just don't know what you

were thinking. This wasn't plan, was it? This Lord of the Flies shit? Please tell me that.'

For once his frustration with me leaves me unmoved. There are bigger things at stake than Ashraf's inhibition. He registers my cool collection. 'I don't need your stubborn right now, Ten. God, you make me crazy. This is jeopardy of everything we've done. You want to talk violation. This – fucking this is the antithesis of everything we work for. This is going to make the news in Tibet!'

'That's what I'm counting.'

'You really don't get it. I mean, you really, really don't. Did you see the fucking cams in the gallery? Do you know the license you've given them to crack down? Terrorist action.'

'Looked right at 'em. That was the point. skyward* said we needed a splash deluxe, precise to make the news global, to force their hand.'

'You don't even know who skyward* is. He's an avatar. A fucking persona online whose orders you're just going along happily, like a lapdog, rollover, play dead? You don't know anything about him.'

'I know he sends us first-class tech. Shit we'd never get our hands on. Shit so new they haven't even drawn up countermeasures on paper, let alone implemented. The smear, the LEDs for the graffiti project.' I've let slip too much, but Ashraf doesn't even notice.

'So fucking what? How does he get access to this shit? You don't know who he is. What his motivations are. If it's even a hell in the first place.'

'I understand his motivations better than I get your agenda. At least he's committed to a revolution...'

'Don't be like this. Baby.'

‘...Not just play-play in amateur hour.’ I’ve wounded him real. Something in his shoulders collapses, but there’s no room for compassionate now. He has to face his errorings. He nearly fucked up the whole thing, inside, with his interrupt. It’s not like I was going to hurt her serious. It was only intent to scare. Part of the act. I was total control at all time. It’s not like it felt good.

‘I’m afraid for you,’ he says real quiet, real heartbreak.

I’m not made of vibracrete. I pull him into a hug and we just stand like that for long minutes. Until he murmurs, ‘We have to call off the pass protest.’

I pull back the better to assess. ‘We can’t. It’s all arrange. We’ve been plan for months.’ And we have. The effort involve, only to abandon it before we even kick off - impossible. This will be the ultimate to stark demonstrate the divisives in our society between the Emmies and the Zukos and the corporati with their goldplate all-access passes and the unreason preventative taken against the population to preserve that. ‘The gamehack has already gone into effective. All those FallenCity players roped in for in, unsuspect. It’s so much work to throw for nothing. If we’re not forefront someone else will be and they’ll fuck it up. Then it’ll be risk. You think you can stop those kids going? Zuko will lead it personal if we don’t. Do you know what the end resulting of that would look like? Those kids running rampant with the players?’

‘I can’t. Tendeka. You shouldn’t. I’m tired. It’s too much. Please.’

‘One more, okay, baby? Just one more. Then we can laylow, I swear. This is massive. This is the culiminate of everything. You can’t let this incidental throw it off. I’m sorry. I fucked up. I admit. It got away from me. I won’t let it happen again.’

‘No more violent. And you don’t put the kids at risk. Disenfranchise or not.’

'Zero. Not from us.'

'Because if there is...'

Toby

Stacy is orgasm-sticky-delirious with overjoy. The footage from the secure cams in the gallery is playlist on all the newscasts, animal rights activists gone serious mental, causing furorings deluxe with a ranging from the Minister of Safety and Security, swearing to step up measures against those terrorists to arts crits decrying it as a publicity stunt or, alternate, genuine perform art that outstrips anything done prior. In other phrasing, it's huge.

But truth, boys and girls, you got to play it strategy. So, Stacy has worked up a connect with a guy at etv, who has a contact at Reuters Alternet, and we've sold the capture on my coat of the incident entire worldwide as additional eyewitness, with most territorials also buying the article accompany. Not that there weren't plenty watching already, with cellcams and chamo clothing, but I was the only one with sense suffice to jump on the bar counter during, to lock the superior angle.

The article went live this morning, in two versionings: lingo and language, for the upper economics not down with the wordscape. I prefer the vernac version, obvious.

Young Blooded

by Toby Left

Kendra Adams is a sell-out. Her shocksome intimate portraits taken on old photographic stock interplay light and texture Dutch-master with the effects of disintegrate film that casts rings of light and stain speckle, so the work is inherent flawed, inherent

damage. Her first exhibition for this artschool-outdrop has been unprecedented success, every work snapped up in a bidding scrummage that forced the prices up to eight times the sticker.

But the striking technical mastery of the likes of 'Unspoken' of a woman's jawline arching out of shot, delineate against the twist of stairwell behind and the arc of city lights, or the harsh real of a homeless woman twitching defuse or the whimsy, witty statement of 'Self Portrait', a 1 x 3.5, entire black, is, no insult to the artist or her visioning, *not* the reason her work is sudden so popular. It's that her photographs are newly flawed that is flooring the critics and the art-buying public, hunger to claim a whiffsome of scandal, a bloody scrapping of current events.

Those 14 introspectives of people she knows or refuges from the city's underlife or economic disenfranchise, all carry the mark of violate from the unfolding invasive of Thursday eve when animal rights actives hacked apart *enfant terrible* Khanyi Nkosi's controversy grotesque bio-mod creature, *Woof & Tweet*.

Nkosi retorted bitter, 'It's utter revolting that anyone would try to profit off my loss. This is an atrocity. It's up there with blood diamonds and wartech corps racking up their cash registers over the stink of corpses!'

Prices for her work have already rocketed sky, especial on her other almost-animals *like Sweetheart Sputnik*, an oversize heart riddle with receivers, that quickens or slows its rhythming accord to signals incoming via SMS from the audience. And the corpse of *Woof 'n Tweet*, stinking or not, has already been sold to a Dubai businesswoman who paid, it's rumour, in the regional of R1.7 million for the bloody gibs, together with the video footage and one panga leftover.

The 22 year old Adams was unavail for comment, recovering from the fraught of the eve, although her manage, Jonathan Rider, said, 'We hope to assure Khanyi Nkosi that no-one is trying to undermine the agony of what she must be going through. I don't want to suggest that it's egomaniac to believe that the only reason Kendra's photographs have sold so well is because they have some residual of blood from her piece's awful pre-emptive disassemblage, but I believe Ms. Nkosi is quite undone by the grief. It's terribly unfortunate that she's demanded a share of the profits on Kendra's sales, considering her stature internationally in the art world and Kendra a young blood, fresh initiated to the scene. Kendra's work speaks for itself and it obviously speaks to its audience. And that's really all there is to it. We've also offered to have the prints professionally

cleaned and restored, removing any traces of body matter, for those buyers who request it.'

So far to date, none have.

<follow up story Monday 25 September>

It's enough to spike interest, a sweet calling card that serves intro on me to the world to drive up a more generous pricing on the candid with Kendra and Damian talking about their allnew injectable tech.

I've posted a snipsome to a vlog online and now I'm just anticipate on the offers to start spinning in. There's already consider interest, but I'm waiting for the players major, Fox News or Sky or Miramax up for funding the documentary.

I've already got the first sentece for the sequel, prepare. 'Kendra Adams has sold out in another way entire, as one of Ghost's sponsor babies.'

I'm making her reputable global.

Interim, Unathi is not letting me squirm out of the FallenCity shit. And sure, I've got bigger to fry, but all I'm doing now is waitsome. And I'm anticipate of blowing some shit up tomorrow, blowing off steam by fragging a few people realspace, real satisfy, before moving on to rip up the dance floor at Replica.

And seeing Julia again, seeing as how Kendra is not speaking to me current.

kendra

Jonathan pries apart the carcass of another prawn, a real one, with curled scratches of legs, not the genmod easy-peels – which makes it deluxe expensive. So expensive, that there are conspicuous intimidatory blanks on the menu where prices would normal appear. It's a species removed from the café fare and readymeals I'm used to, or even the upmakt where Jonathan has taken me before – and a whole genus from *my* cooking. But I'm secret disappoint and somehow that's more gleesome than if it had lived up to my expectant.

Despite it being my first time, despite the ultraglam ivory LV dress Jonathan sent over by courier to the house this afternoon and the industria minimalism of the décor, fit for any of the style mags with its bare-stripped walls and sharp white scatterlights like an interrogation room, it's not what I'd imagined. Even Naledi Nxumalo, sitting opposite, pointed not talking to the rugby captain, whose name eludes me, but I've never been sportsfan, is strange inadequate flesh, like she's a watercolour version of the woman in the soap, somehow diluted by the assertions of the interior, so purposeful dilapidate.

The waiter greets him by name, which tells me he's a frequent and admitted I'm feeling fray and stunned from the news reports and Toby's story, but I ask, barbed, 'So, Why didn't you ever bring me here before?'

'Why didn't *you*, sweetheart?' He's intent on his dismemberment, deftly cracking the carapace open and scraping out the meat with his fingers, his hands like skittery undersea things themselves in the way they pluck and snatch at the crustacean pyre.

'I couldn't even get into this place waitress. I don't think I could afford the breadsticks'

‘I didn’t want to spoil you,’ his fingers scrimmage in the remains, ‘But you know,’ he pecks at his mouth with the linen napkin, ‘Now that you’re famous, I expect you to keep me in the lifestyle to which I’m accustomed.’

‘So, I get to keep you?’ This comes out more clingsome than I intended, but Jonathan takes it stride.

‘It’s a little known fact that you can determine the appropriate time to introduce philosophics into the conversation by using the number of glasses of wine already imbibed as a measurement. And, sweet Kendra, we are still at least three glasses shy of being anywhere near that mark. Not least because you are not drinking any. Or anything alcoholic at all.’

‘I think you’re covering for both of us.’

‘And plus, I don’t think I have ever been in a situation where I have been forced to pay corkage on colddrink. We may never be able to return here. So, take it all in! While you can.’

‘You know I’ll pay for it.’ If I sound defensive, it’s because I am. I know it’s overboard total. Even if the maitre d’ hadn’t handled it with excruciate courtesy that was more telling, more squirming embarrass than a smirk or arched eyebrow.

‘Don’t be patronising.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it. Not when you already have a patron encouraging your dreadful habit.’

I raise my glass in mock salute and take a long slow sip of Ghost to irritate him. ‘At least it’s not heroin.’

‘I don’t know. I believe heroin can be very stimulating, creatively. And very credible with that whole artist culture thing. You know, we need to cash in on your

cachet. We can only coast so far on the scandal. Maybe a lesbian affair with Nkosi, in the wake of her devastation.'

'You're a mean drunk. You should stop drinking. '

'Someone has to. Or would you rather I switched to your beverage of choice?' He leans across and takes my glass. 'Does it have any effect on us ordinary mortals?'

'No. It's just a soft drink. It's how it interacts with the nano. Didn't *Andile* tell you?'

I don't know why I entertained the conceptual for an instant that there was something I could accomplish on my own steam. I'm furious for not guessing this was Jonathan's doing from the initial, for not recognising the mark of his blunt fingerprints, so deft skilful, like when he can be bothersome to massage my shoulders pre-sex.

He was the one who put forward the recommendation to me to Andile, an old business acquaintance, back dated to the years when he compiled the Nokia Fashion Week catalogues. It could just as easily have been any other young upstart. I only made the Ghost program because of Jonathan's intercession. I have tried to explain the undermining of this, but Jonathan just laughs and trundles out hackneyed lines about who you know. Or, I snap, who you are fucking. He tells me I'm too tense and I am. The articles are freaking me, but this is something I can't readily forgive him for, because, dammit, this was supposed to be *mine*.

He takes a sip. 'Urg. That's nasty. The vanilla's quite nice, but the aftertaste. It's so chemical,' he thrusts it back at me. 'I suppose you're right, though. The lesbian affair *is* very passé. Right up there with the heroin thing, and you're a new breed. My little art star.' He leans over the table to kiss me, awkward.

‘You mean your meal ticket.’

‘Same thing. So, how are we going to reproduce your first dazzlement.

What’s next? You said something about streetkids and their pitiful possessions? Oh.

Kendra. Don’t cry.’ He is more impatient than sympathy.

‘I’m not crying,’ but the act of defensive only makes my face slip more.

‘You’re being way too sensitive. You shouldn’t take it personally.’

‘It’s my *work*, Jonathan.’ I’m desperate aware of people in the restaurant looking. Naledi Nxumalo leaning in to the rugby player with the exact brand of gossipy gleam in her eyes that she wears in *Heita Mzansi!*.

‘And your work is very, very good, baby.’

‘Don’t patronise me. I feel – vacuum. Limbo. I want to sledgehammer my cameras. I want to set the filmstock aflame.’

‘Not a bad idea for a performance piece. Okay, I’m sorry. Don’t look like that. I’m sorry.’

‘I wish you would take me serious.’

‘Kendra,’ he says, taking my hands across the table. ‘This is the best thing that could have happened for your career. You couldn’t have planned it.’

There is something in his voice, a wink, pride that tips me off. And I realise something which has been simmer since I first saw the newscasts.

‘The security footage had audio.’

Jonathan grins, gloatsome. ‘Don’t be so naïve, my darling, of course it did. We had it specially installed.’

I drop my fork clattersome and shove the chair back from the table so that Naledi Nxumalo and the rugby captain and half a dozen other tables perk up with rivet interest.

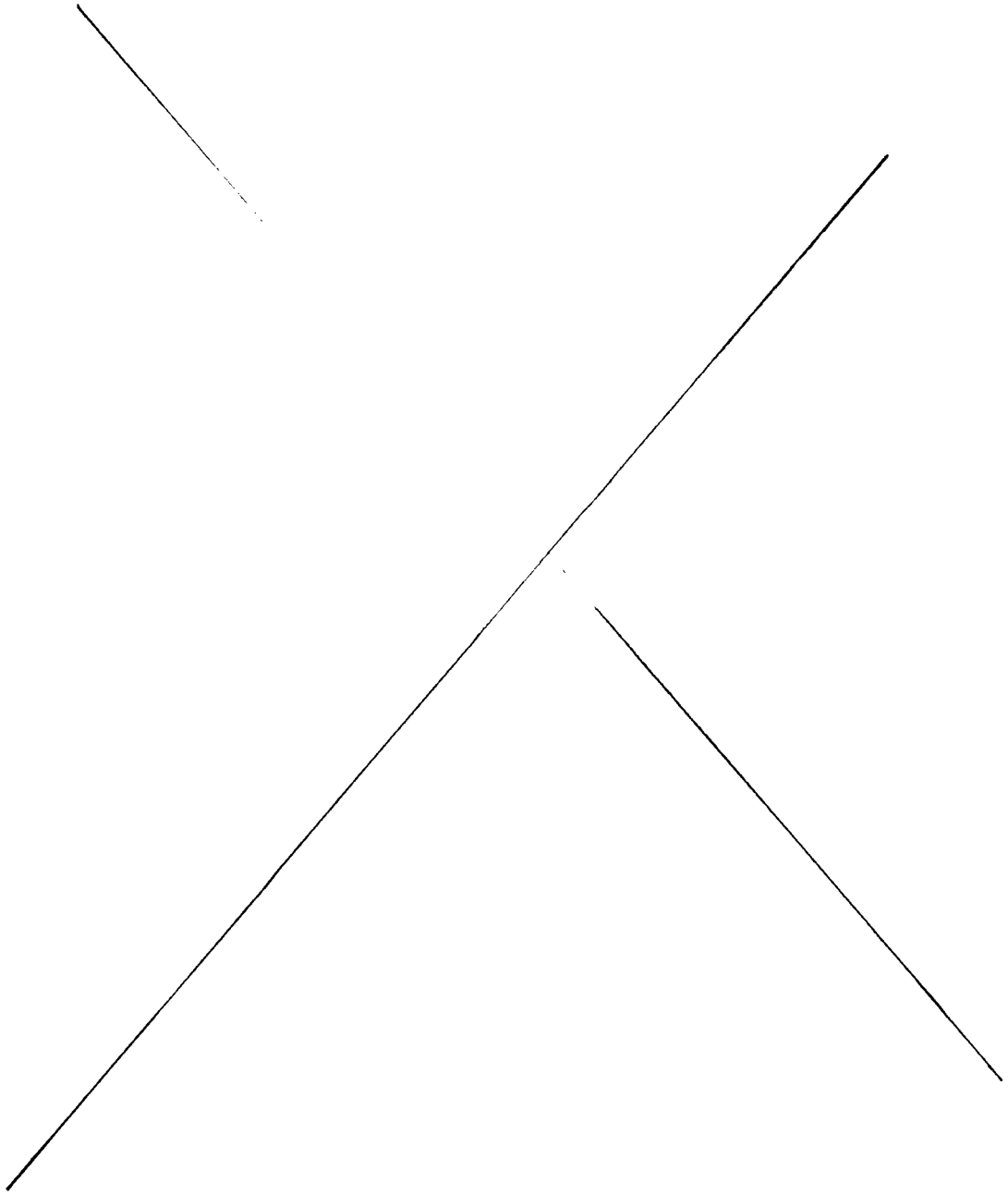
‘Don’t be so dramatic.’ Why is it that his admonitions to me are always ‘don’t’? ‘Come on Kendra, there aren’t even any press here. It’s wasted effort. Sit down, please.’ And despite my best defiance intentioning, I do.

‘You’re a rational animal, Kendra. You know what this means for you as an artist.’

In my head, I am fashioning righteous scathe putdowns along the lines that I wouldn’t expect someone who never graduated from photographing fashion shoots, even if it is for *Vanity Fair*, to be capable comprehend of artistic integrity, but somehow these don’t make it to vocalise. Because I am afraid. That he’s right. That I am non-entity without him. Girl in limbo.

Jonathan orders me another Ghost, unasked, and I realise this is the end of something. Maybe it is not limbo I’m in, as much as the falling space between, like the moment caught after you’ve thrown yourself backwards off the boat, your hand on your regulator to stop it jerking free, but before you hit the water.

Tomorrow I will spend the day apt hunting. I will find a place to stay, no matter how hovel, that is mine, that is nothing to do with Jonathan. In the evening, I will take the underway down to to Replica. Maybe hook up with Damian and Vix. Make new friends. I still have Toby’s comp. That e-vite feels sudden like a passport to somewhere other than here. And maybe tomorrow, everything will be different.



Lerato

The day it all goes down, I'm with Siphos and Zama, holding a meaningless memorial to three people I don't remember. If I'd been around, if I'd had a heads-up, I could have done something, could have taken my passport and made a break for it.

Instead, I am standing on a cliff at Cape Point, enduring the battery of the galeforce wind and the tourists who are looking on, charmed, cameras clicking, as Siphos throws herbs into the wind, only for the dried leaves to whip straight back at us. Why Cape Point, because Siphos says we can't get any closer to them with the quarantines, so we might as well go to the furthest point and throw our prayers out to the wind and sea to carry. It would be touching, if it weren't so Hallmark, if we hadn't done it all before. As remembrance rituals go, it's a cock-up.

'If we were following tradition, we would kill a goat,' Zama says, sagely, as if she hasn't made some variation on this insight every year, while Siphos chants some Buddhist shit and jettisons more little bits of crushed leaf, just adding to the flotsam already whirling in the wind. This just makes me lose my patience completely.

'As if we would get a licence to kill a goat public. As if our Buddhist vegan over here would stand for it. But okay, Zama, assuming we could get that all worked out, then we could all have a big party, just like tradition specifies, eat our goat, drink mqombothi which you would have brewed up as the eldest, and each of us would get a snarl of bloody sinew and hide tied onto our wrists to dry out. Because nothing says thanksgiving to your ancestors like a bracelet made of smelly goat's flesh.'

Zama is pissed with me. 'I think it sucks that you don't have any respect for your culture.'

'I think it sucks that you're deluding yourself that you have some deep connection with tradition, like you didn't just read it on Wikipedia. What fucking culture, Zama? I was raised in a skills school same as you. Don't give me this crap. Where does Siphokazie's Buddhism fit into your 'culture'?'

Fighting instantly reduces us to being seven and four all over again, with Sipho trying to play peacekeeper in the middle, spinning her hippie crap about the moment and how we're ruining it.

'Please guys. Look!' Sipho pulls out a bundle of red elastic bands from her pocket.

'Stealing stationery from the monks again?'

'Lerato!' Zama snaps, scandalised, as if she doesn't agree with my diagnosis that Sipho's a nutjob.

'No, look. It's not goat. But it's something.' Zama is on the point of blinking back tears. 'This is really...Did you bring this along specially?'

'No. It was what you were saying.' She is so sweet, so much a naïf, you can't really be mean to her. I wonder if she'd be tougher, smarter, if she wasn't always trying to balance us out. I snap the elastic on Zama's wrist, stretching it out far, so it will hurt. 'Uh yeah, but isn't this more kabbalah than Buddhist? Now there's a tradition.'

They both glare at me.

This is my sense of what family is; the people who irritate you the most and the most effortlessly. If it were anyone else, I wouldn't give a shit and it bugs me a

lot that I let them get to me, like a rash. Zama's superiority, her assessing and Siphos absurd flakiness. Not for the first time, I swear this is the last time. That I'm not coming out here again. I will stop returning phone calls and emails. I will cut short conversations. I will forget birthdays and not be able to make anniversaries. I will let this drift, like continents, slowly, imperceptibly. Or fuck it, just put one between us. My exit plan is my faux goat red elastic, my backdoor embedded in the adboards, sending me secrets worth money to the right eye. If Stefan doesn't come through, it's all I have to hang onto.

We sit in awkward silence inside the restaurant, protected from the wind, but not the uncrossable distances between us. The only part of tradition we get right is the getting drunk, so that when I get home, I pass out and miss everything.

Toby

The underway is so jam total I have to loop and thread between the press of commutings. No worries for a boy on the skinny, nipping the gaps, but I *am* worried, (but only bare and only cos they're paying me the second instalment after), about the rest of Clan Stinger in the wake. Doyenne especial. Built sumo that girl is. Glance back reveals she's handling all well just on her own. Ploughing that construction worker bulk through regardless. And the crowd, sensible like, makes way for her and Rachel Rivener, who is, natural, Julia from the barcade, slipstreaming behind. I've lost view of Twitch, aka Eddie Gxwala, but I'm sure the little shit can take care of himself all well.

Course, I'm not supposed to know their real names, but where's the gleesome in that? I'm also not supposed to be skeef right now.

Doyenne is a taxi driver, real, Mary McGanthrie, Congo émigré, and at 43, a tad decrepit for fun and games still, but who am I to thwart her recreational? Cos that's what it's about, right? Re-creations of lives you could never live.

We're all civilian. Specs were undercover, although I couldn't resist wearing my chamo coat, cos it'll look fucking great on the game casts after. It's switched to live feed, no delay, so it's recording all the actionings around me. And convenient also cos it hides the telltale of the .44 riding on my hip.

On the escalator, standing behind me, Rachel aka Julia uses the reflect of the vid capture to check her lipgloss. Gotta admire a girl who has the presence to touch up her prettifiers pre-combat. She's been relative cold to me since we reintroduced, but then, I didn't call. But then, I never do.

‘You activated?’ she murmurs behind me, so soft only I can hear, cos we’re pretending strangers for the moment, until such time as Doyenne decides we’re good to make our play. As soon as Twitch has scoped out the situ.

I don’t bother to answer. As if I would have forgot in the heatsome. My phone is already blinking blue, logged onto the Playnet and all legit with the relevant authorities like - although admitted, I’m registered under a fake name, some dodge Unathi dug up for me. Not entire necessary, but I’ve developed a taste for the anonymity like, for taking on an id artificial, playing another one.

At the top, I grab hold of the rails with both hands and flip myself over the top step, sending my coat flaring behind, like a kid coming off a swing. Rachel Rivener pushes past me abrupt, just another underway annoyance, her boots making sharp clicks cicada on the vibracrete as she vanishes into the cram. I swivel on my heel, still playful and prowl over to the newsstand to buy a bottle of water. No sense going into this dehydrate.

It’s still lank early. 14 minutes ahead of schedule. We’ve got time to kill. Doyenne’s strict on the punctual, Twitch told me while we were sitting in the taxi, waiting for her to come back from the petrol station loo, cos she has spastic colon or some such. He was switching through the motions on his rifle, checking the mechanicals until the constant clack got me too edge and I grabbed his hand to stop him doing it.

‘Cut it. It chills him out.’ Rachel aka Julia said from the front of the car, not even looking round.

‘Well, it’s riding me one time.’

‘He needs it. He’s OCD.’

‘For fuck’s sake. Can’t he take meds? Or a hit of sugar?’ My luck to latch with a crew with suffice med ailments to fill a waiting room. And that’s not even counting the guy I’m replace, who broke his collar bone moving a fridge.

‘Nah. Meds blunt his focus. And we don’t shine to illicit substances, honey. Best you’re not on any or if you are that Doyenne doesn’t find out about it.’ She cocked her head over her shoulder, but only just, presenting a shadow of profile, enough so I could see the dark mole at the corner of her lip that makes her mouth look misshapen faint. ‘And besides, he’s 14. So lay off, okay?’

‘Okay. Kit kat!’ I lifted my hand off his and the kid went right back into the damn clicking, sliding open the ammo clip, slamming it back in. ‘Do your parents know where you’re at tonight, *Twitch*?’

He looked puzzle, although at least he stopped with the damn clicking for an instant to consider and then goes back to it straight, not looking up. ‘For your informational, fuckwit, my mom was the one who hooked me in.’

From the front, Rachel aka Julia snickered.

I take a sip of water and flip casual like through the racks, sneaking previews on some of the push mags, particular not to skeem the gaming titles, cos you don’t want to be too obvious. Keep it tight.

‘You gonna buy that?’ The shop chic, a bovine dumpy blonde, eyes dulled by one too many soapcasts, gnaws at the edge of her fingernails, intent on the blurbvert playing on the screen above the till.

‘Me? Hmm. No. Actual. I don’t think so.’

‘Well, then skip it.’

‘Hey, I already bought the water. Doesn’t that entitle me like to browsing rights?’

‘You gotta buy.’

‘Fine.’

I skim the shelves and grab a dark porn push, way up top, hand it to her to scan and flash my phone at the till. And then I crack the seal and start paging it in front of her, pausing to show her a grotesque especial on page six, cranking the volume high, to really piss her. She grimaces, managing to look even stupider and uglier than previous and leans back on her stool, pumping the sound on her soap to try and drown me out.

I’m enjoying this real now, finding another disturb to show her, her react kicking up the rush of the sugar bliss mix, when I glance up, just to check the mission status like. No sign of the little monster. Doyenne is standing peering at the map, playing lost touristical, but really scouting the junction below, looking through the plastex board to the platforms and lines one floor down, Rachel/Julia, sitting prim on a bench, reading a book, her knees clamped together, her posture straight as narrow.

Someone in the crowd jostles me harder than necessity, so’s I nearly drop the pushmag. Normal I get off on the tight; walking so close you can feel the swerve of the air currents between you and the people coming opposite directional. And it makes people major uncomfot, which is always fun. But the crush is even thicker now, like fuckin’ rush time or like there was a match on. And last time Orlando Pirates played the city stadium, eight people got squished fatal in the departing.

By the time I react to the shove, there’s no indicatory of who did it, but I catch a glimpsing of a mucus sludge colour hoodie bobbing away, carried off by the

surge and recog it as Twitch's signature style – or the lacking. Which either means he's fucking with me, or it's time.

I glance over at the team's positions. The bench is already vacated, no visual of Rachel/Julia anywhere and Doyenne is heading down the stairs at an easy amble. Nice of them to keep me notified. I sneak peek my phone, which is thrumming insistent with an in-game messg and an attach of ID images.

****SECURITY ALERT. #SD-17. SCAN CAMS IDENTIFIED FOUR (4) KNOWN TERRORISTS IN IMMEDIATE VICINITY.**

I dump the push in a pocket, saving it for later, and let the throng sweep me towards the lifts, as per our blueprinting. It's basic stuff. Rachel/Julia and Doyenne take either end of the train, work their way down towards the other to try and find the one called Unity who has the dirty bomb, while I maintain the platform - and the little shit keeps a beady on all of us from above from some disused maintenance cube lodged in the ceiling. How they got access to a maintenance cube was a flukesome. Took them 18 hours solid gamespace to crack a drug bust mission and when they'd fragged every junkie in sight, they found all kinds of useful tucked among their stash, including an access card that unlocks certain game places real world.

I click open the folder, flip through the images, supposed uploaded fresh from the station security cams. Not actual, sorry to disappoint you. It's all pre-scan. As lucrative as play is, and trust me, Inkubate Inc is paying Metro bigtime for the rights to enact on the underway and set up game places like Twitch's maintenance

cube, they're still not allowed to interfere with realworld functionings in the public domain, which includes linking to the security cams for our gaming enjoyable.

The photo-IDs are, in order: A heavy in a gold vinyl tracksuit rubbed shinesome with wear, although it could be distressed purpose, I guess. Blonde curls wound tight and a jaw designed to shatter all the bones in your fist like. A shaved-headed girl, round my age, done up all pantsula in pinstripes and carrying a black steel case, which is so obvious blatant, I reckon it has to be a decoy. Another macho, business slick in a suit with a gym bag slung casual over his shoulder, but clear weighing heavy, which is a tad more promising. And. Shit.

I reverse directional abrupt, grinning. Of course, I'm obliged contractual to let one of the fulltime take the glory, but is it my fault if I'm intuitive? If I've encountered the target previous? Of course, I send a msg to the crew, but who knows how long they'll take to get back up here.

The people behind me don't take too kind to me switching against the flow. Some of them have their phones up, arms length, beaming laser sloganeerings in all caps above their heads 'ALL ACCESS' and 'PASSES FOR THE PEOPLE'. Some of the protests don't smell too fresh and there seems to be a higher content of street kid per capita than usual. And finally I twig that's why it's so packjammed down here. The protest. Great fucking timing, although maybe that's the point – to make it more challenge.

I nudge and stitch my way through the flesh press back towards the kiosk where the podgy girl is attending to a protestor with springy little dreds and a leather bandolier strung with audio chips instead of cartridges that are broadcasting slogans at decibel in most of the languages official. 'I'm sorry, did I leave my phone

here?’ I have to shout over the chips, pushing blatant rude in front of the protestor, who gives me the dirty, to get at the counter.

The apparently not-so-dullard cow ignores me complete. And what choice do I have real? The 44 is already in my hand, it’s only a 30 degree flex of my arm to pull it out of the holster and swing it level with the bridge of her rather neat little nose. ‘I’d suggest you surrender the merchandise.’ The protestor squawks and leaps backwards, knocking over a rack of mags, but the resultant clattering is drowned by the electronic chatter of the chips and the ambient surround, the protestors and the traffic.

The cow whimpers, gone all pasty sudden, which throws her zits into relief. Cunning bitch. Gotta admire the acting talent. You’d think she was real deal.

‘I don’t have time. Just give it over.’

She opens her mouth as if to say something useful, but then just goldfishes, her lips making dry little popping sounds open and closed.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake.’ I press the gun against her forehead. ‘Three, two...’ And sudden she finds her vocal.

‘I don’t got nothing! Please!’

‘And the package?’

‘Take it! Take it!’ But she fails to hand anything over, covering her eyes and quivering instead. I’m aware that a space has cleared around the kiosk behind me and my phone is vibrating frantic in my pocket.

‘Just give me the package and I won’t have to shoot you,’ I say, real slow, so she can’t misunderstand. Maybe I got it wrong and it’s the hip gangster girl or one of the heavies after all. In which case, I might have blown the whole fucking mission, exposed us too early like. Fuck. And now I’m not so sure I looked at the

picture right first place. Maybe it was some other ugly fat girl real and I was just wishful. Or maybe she's the mule unwitting.

I vault over the counter. She shrieks and wedges herself into the corner, weeping now and I pull her down, so that we're out of the lime, crouched behind the desk. 'Everything's sony, honey, just be chill. Stay right there. Don't you move.' I keep the gun on her, hunting around. 'Where's your bag? Where's your fucking bag!'

She points wordlessly at a shelf at a cerise tote. I press it into her hands, careful like, although she won't take it, initial.

'Open it.'

'I don't got nothing. I don't.'

Did anyone ask you to hold something for them? Or give you something? A present?'

She's scrabbling in her bag, spilling prettifiers onto the carpet and sobbing so hard her words hitch. 'My... my... boyfriend.'

'Yeah? What did he give you? Where is it?'

'Th-this.' She yanks off a plastech keyring attached to the bag's handle – a figurine representational mini of Anika, the virtua pop star.

'Be careful like! Shit.' It's not inconceive that the bomb would fit inside a keyring. I place it real gentle like inside my coat.

'Now close your eyes.'

'Why?'

'Cos I've been wanting to do this ever since I met you.'

She shakes her head vigorous, sobbing again hard now. I shrug. She should have known what she let herself in for when she took on the game time assign. And pull the trigger.

The 44 roars metallic and kicks back in my hand, real satisfy. Which should have been the end of her, only the blobby is still shrieking, scrabbly at the wet gobs splattered across her face. She starts squealing even more over volume when her hand comes away sticky with sheen. And I'm way pissed now.

'What are you doing? You're analogue, baby. You're out. Fucking go down.' She holds her hand out to me, all shaky disbelieving and catches me leftfield total by starting to cry, little pathetic mewlings.

'Oh. Hey. Everything's sony, okay? It's not... Look.' I'm about to wipe her forehead to show her, but I don't want to get the dye on my Babystrange, so I grab her by the wrist instead. 'It's purple, see?' Inexplicable, she starts crying harder. 'It's not blood. You don't gush purple like. It's just a game. It's icy. Okay?' But she's sobbing so uncontrol, I don't know if she's savvy.

I holster the gun and start slidin' away from the violet blubbering, making sure I still have the keyring secure. The hippie with the audio chip bandolier barges in to the gap, 'Bru, that was so uncool.'

'Hey! She was registered gameplay. It's not my fault she's rookie.'

'Oh ja?' He bends down, comes back with her handbag and dumps out the phone, turns it over to show me. It hasn't been chipped for in-game, is so out-mode actual, it wouldn't even support the tech. Shit.

I tail it through the crowd, ignoring dreadlock boy shouting recriminates from behind me. The protest is going off, it's too thick to move without worming between the bodies and the vocal amplified is deaf making. I duck down besides a

motobin that's been stopped in its circuit loop by the human traffic, humming quiet to itself, and check my phone, which displays various riffs on the fury of where the hell am I from all three of my clan mates like.

Surprising, Rachel/Julia is the most graphic of all of them, threatening my mother with vile and violent if I don't get my skinny down there immediate. Maybe I'll take her up on it later like. But I'm not real concern about what they're doing right now. I skip the rest of the msgs and load the target list again, flipping through to saggy cow, who is, indeed the girl I just fragged in the face, down to the last inflamed zit. This is all too lank dubious.

>CONSIDERIN' MISSION ABORT?

I sit tight. The motobin is a little slow, only now detecting my proxim. It swivels on its axis and gapes its flap at me hopeful like. But there's no answer return, not even from Twitchy who is sposed to be holed up high altitude. Fuckit. What else am I going to do. I gooi myself back into the fray, all bargey elbows to get through the toyitoyi, because the protestors seem to be holding a position, inconvenient deluxe. If they were hopeful of stopping the functional dead here, they're doing well.

From the plastech pedestrian tunnel that crosses over the junction, I can see its mal chaos rampant below. On the platform, there are only heads visible in the mesh of people, like pixellate static flickering random, indeterminate whether to shove towards the actioning or away. The trains are standstill, but there are bursts of flashfire going off inside the compartables, six or seven sparking in the seconds while I'm watching. Skeem I'm not the only player with faulty data like.

The audio chips go menace quiet sudden all at once in a ripple of unsound spreading out from one side of the station, as if they've been dampened. The protests' voices sound hollow without them, too warm, too varied without the mechanical and even the voices are catching, fading in the same kind of dread patterning. I can't see shit, but I've been in kak sufficient to anticipate the oncoming.

'This is the SAPS,' comes broadcast over the PA as the protests fall quiet, the ripple spreading so now we can hear the shouts from the platforms below. They falter in their shuffles, turnin' expectant to the entrance where I get a glimpsing of uniforms flanked by Aitos, already growlsome, coming en masse formation down the stairs.

'This is an unlawful, unlicensed gathering. You are advised to disband immediately.' It's impossible to tell which is doing the announcings. They're all indistinguish purpose behind their flicker visors and it's probably pre-record anyways. Legislate banned the cops from opening their mouths unnecessary – too much capacity like for human errorings, which meant ammo additional for the human rights groups. I start edging towards the lift.

The stillness has turned ultra keen, expectant. 'Repeat: You are advised to disband immediately. You are in violation of section 14(ii) of the Transport Authority Code as well as section 11.2(vi) of the Commerce Protection Act.' The spiel standard labours on, but I've no intentionings of sticking around to see it play through.

'Warning: If you choose not to disband immediately, it will be assumed under the Tacit Liability Act that you are fully aware of the potential repercussions of your unlawful actions and that you waive your right to seek any kind of legal

recourse or financial compensation for any injuries or damages incurred in the course of law enforcement response.'

The uniforms have stopped, arranged in an invert V down the main stairwell, while the Aitos disseminate through the crowd, yipping excitement. It's enough already to get some people dispersin' like, hands raised placatory as they head for the exits, real slow like, so as not to excite the Aitos any more. And it's easy as cake to join them.

'This is your last warning.' The tension dies unexpected like a battery sudden out of juice. It's like the crowd collective all shrug at once and start disassembling peaceful and really, what optioning do we have? But then the lift doors schick open and it becomes obvious the messg hasn't reached belowground. Doyenne bursts out, splattered with dye, but not enough to take her out of the game like, grinning blood lust maniac. I'm close in the press enough to be able to see a smear of purple across her mouth, as if she's wiped her hand across it. She grins wider and launches into the opening scene dialogue hackneyed over-use from Raydar9, 'Brothers and sisters! Philistines! I regret to inform you, it is time to die,' and opens random fire on the crowd general.

Chaos breaks in shockwaves from the epicentral of the lifts. People drop, screaming, cos some still haven't caught on that it's game-mode, despite that you'd never mistake the sting of a dye pellet for a bullet real, others caught overwhelm by the panic surge towards the exits. And then with one convulsive move, *everyone* drops, twitching and lashing to the ground, phones all asparkle as the defusers kick in.

Natural, mine *doesn't* go off, which is worrisome plenty in this situation if the uniforms notice the illegal modify. I fall, delayed reaction, and curl up foetal

among the lashing limbs surround. Raising my head an inch, I can steal a glanceful at the unfolding and it's immediate clear I'm not the only one with illegit tamperings to my phone. None of the protests, or rather, let me amend, almost none, are crisping. There are some forty standing, defiant despite the jitterings at their feet of the crisped. 'What will you do now?' some guy shouts out, can't see who, but the sound is amplified, wired through the station speakers, which must mean its coming cop frequency, but it's definitely not SAPS. And despite the audio distort, I'm sure the voice is familiar. 'Your weapons are useless. We are voluntary disconnect. Voluntarily disenfranchise. You don't have control.' And then I catch on, that it's Tendeka and his boyf. surrounded by all manner of ragtag; bergies and skollies and street kids who all have one thing common – they're homeless and phoneless. Which only makes me think that when the dogs are called down, the bloodrush is going to be overboard savage. Already the cops are switching over to canister guns. It's all strict procedural, the measures endorsed in response to any given. Verbal warning. Defuse. Dogs. It never takes more. Even the most defiant of violent shuts up quick in the face of growlsome teeth.

In the lift, Doyenne is scrabbling with two Aitos, one worrying at her jacket with its teeth, jerking her gun hand, but she's still pumping slugs into the crowd and swearing soldier, clubbing at its head with her free hand while the other nips at her over-generous ass. Two pellets explode across the second dog's flank, the trajectory coming from somewhere up high, like a ceiling hidey hole, maybe. Fuck, Twitchy. That's a disconnect offence. I duck my head, smirking, as an Aito bounds across the spasming flesh, its paws coming down heedless on groins and heads and arms and legs akimbo.

A lady cop fires a chem cap into the thicket of the protestors, hitting Ashraf solid in the chest, so he staggers back with the impactful, dousing him with the chem scent that will draw the puppies to him and already the Aitos who had Doyenne down under a fracas matt of fur scrabbling, are perking up, noses catching the telltale and switching their attention.

The next bit is mess. Tendeka and his scrappy army yank out pangas. The first dog to reach Ashraf goes down with a meaty thwack, more robust than the art thing, which goes to proof, boys and girls, that the attack at the gallery wasn't truth about animal rights at all. I file this for referencing. The Aito howls, comes back up, it's lip hanging off its jaw, exposing the teeth, real gruesome. One of the kids shrieks back and it goes down under a torrent of blows, real Rwanda.

On the stairs, one of the cops raises her baton and then lowers it again, uncertain. Several of the others are locked in scream discouraging because now we are out of bounds of the procedural. People aren't supposed to attack the dogs. The teeth edge whine of an ultrasonic reverbs just below comfort audible and the Aitos lose interest all at the same instant. Together, they all raise their heads, from whatever body they were savaging or the bloody fray against Tendeka, ears pricked forward and then, simultaneous, all bound back to the cops, to the tune of their master's audio command, leaving their targets regardless.

But it's only temporary. There's gonna be a bloodrush for sure and it's only going to get hideouser. I'm preparing to scam, shifting my weight onto my knees so I can launch at the inevit, when something else happens entire.

The cops wait for the dogs to reach them and then turn sharp in their boots and tromp abrupt up the stairs, withdrawing.

It's apparent no-one knows what the fuck this means. There's a wailing from the other side of the hall, like someone knows this signifies real heavy shit, but then minutes pass. And there's no indicator that they're coming back. People start scrabbling to their feet, helping each other up, laughing in relief, although there are some bleating too. The civils don't know what hit them and even some of the gamers are displayin' classic shock. Couldn't cut it real space after all.

Natural, I'm already up, halfway to the exits by now, when runt boy peels out from behind a pillar and tedious deluxe, sticks his gun in my gut. 'Oh fuck off, kid, the game's null.'

'We're gonna go find Rachel. And Doyenne,' he says, all steely determination, despite that his hand is trembling so hard, he has to steady the barrel against my navel.

'You fragged a police dog, little Eddie. You think they can't trace your bullets?' They can't, but I'm not gonna tell him that.

'Only with dye! I thought it was - ' His left hand is switching the safety relentless.

'Part of the game? Got carried away? Please. Like that's going to stand you in civil rehab. Still an attack on police com property. Might downgrade to defacement if you're lucky.'

I shove the gun away, dye pellet that close would bruise nasty, and just for spite, ruffle his hair. He barely notices. His eyes are bugging, but he won't let up on that damn safety catch. On/off/on/off, not unlike the malfunctional in his brain, staring blank out into the crowd, trying to pick them out.

'But what about Rachel?' he whines.

‘I’m sure *Julia* will be fine.’ To my satisfy, he winces at her real name and the imply I layered with it. Seems little Eddie is nursin’ a schoolboy. ‘Mary, though, she’s probably gonna need a whole lot of patching. You pissed off those Aitos serious. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s pissed off with you too after your interferin’. I were you, I’d bail speedy before they all come looking.’

And right then, as I’m ‘bout to make my breakaway final, dumping the kid and the whole bad situational, the sprinklers embedded in the ceiling open, misting down fine.

‘Wha-?’

‘Shit, don’t let it touch you!’ I pull up the hood on my coat, tuck my hands under my armpits, but it’s too late, there’s already a dusting of damp on my skin exposed.

‘Why? What is it? What’s the matter?’ At least it’s got him to stop his fidgetsome.

Some of the assembled are raising their faces to the spray, some crustie chic in beads is dancing in it, kicking out her legs awkward and singing.

‘Chem marking. So the Aitos can trace us back to our homes. Fucking pricks.’

A vocal crackles over the intercom again, not the unseen protests’ though, this time. This time it’s official – the chirpsome feminine of SAPS’ PR, sounding both smooth cheery and regret simultaneous. ‘Important informational message. Brought to you by the South African Police Services. We regret to inform you that due to an attempted insurrection by terrorists using banned technology, the SAPS have had no recourse but to make use of statute 41b, Extreme Measures, of the Neutralisation Act,’ she says.

'In accordance with this statute, you have all been exposed to the M7N1 virus, a lab-coded variation of the Marburg strain. Do not panic.' This has the opposite intentional. A shock of people rush for the exits and against my better judging, I pull Eddie out of the way, so that we're both wedged tight behind the pillar while the crush surges past.

'I repeat. Do not be alarmed. The Marburg variation is only fatal if you do NOT report to an immunity centre for treatment within 72 hours. It is NOT fatal if you present yourself for vaccination. Vaccination is absolutely effective and a free service offered by SAPS. Within one hour of vaccination, your system will be clear of all signs of the virus.'

'If, however, you do not report for vaccination, you can expect to experience the following symptoms. In one hour, your throat will become sore and inflamed. Your mucus membranes will become irritated. Within three hours, you will experience coughing and sneezing. Within 12 hours, your eyesight will become blurry. You will present with flu-like symptoms. Within 24 hours, your muscles will ache, you may be prone to prolonged coughing fits. Within 48 hours, you will feel weak, you may notice traces of blood in your mucus and your urine. This is an indication that the virus is taking hold and beginning to break down your soft cell structures. By 72 hours your organs will have started to liquefy and collapse in on themselves. In 73 hours, you will be coughing blood uncontrollably, if you are still capable of breathing. In 74 hours your stomach acids will reach your heart and your lungs. The virus is limited capacity and is not contagious.'

'It is highly advisable that you report to an immunity centre immediately. Should you be too weak to report to an immunity centre, please feel free to call

SAPS and we will dispatch a mobile service to collect you. Again, this service is absolutely free, provided in the interests of public health and safety.'

Pressed against my chest, Eddie starts to cry. It seems the appropriate. Talk about a come down.

We coop up in the kid's sniper hidey to wait it out – actually a maintenance cluster, where the VIMbots go to recharge, all happy and humming, behind the men's bathrooms and none too delicious, despite being central to the nest. Maybe they don't register so close to home. We had to boot some out to make space for us, not like they didn't have work to do with the spillage outside, although I suspect they're not fully equipped for viral mop-up. It was squeezesome deluxe, but the risk wasn't worthy going out immediate. Just because we have to turn ourselves in doesn't mean the fuckers wouldn't have been waiting anyways with a little encouraging.

When the tedious and the crampsome gets too much, I send Eddie out for a suss, mostly hoping he wouldn't bother to return like. But a couple of minutes later he crawled back in with me, so's I had to fold my knees again to accommodate and just when the the pins and needles were settlin'.

'Well?'

'I didn't. I was - ' The little shit can't even look at me.

'Oh for fuck's sake. You're hopeless real world, Eddie.' I scoot past him on my butt, which is the only way to do it in a space apparent not built for two, and right then, a VIMbot, not expecting to be encounterin' any fleshies in its space like, zooms in regardless and rams throttle straight into my shin. 'Fuck!'

I chuck the VIM out the cluster unceremonial and drop down out after it into the cubicle, nudging the door open cautious with my boot. The bot is already full recover, righted itself and skittered away by the time I nip a glance round the edge of the bathroom door. The station is creepsome desert, although there is a droning coming from somewhere near the entrance. There are no trains running, or at least not in this station, but there's a dull sound that could be rumbling in tunnels further away. The space is gaping without people, hungry. Dejavu city. I'm almost expectant to hear a rusty gurgle.

The surfaces are coated with a damp beaded film, like the walls have been sweating. And although I'm already infect, I avoid touching anything, cos who knows how this fucking thing works? If you can double dose accidental?

There is a bundle collapsed on the stairs, which I have every intent of ignoring. I touch my hand to my gun. Even though it's only loaded with chemdye. I'm still trying to figure out whether its better to head down to the tunnels, try and find a service exit or just, fuck it, go out the front, when there is the squeal of takkies on wet marble from behind. I tighten my grip on the gun. It's only Eddie, looking even more pale and scared than previous, squelching in the damp, obliv to the noisesome he's making. I gesture irritated and he gets it, shifts to his toes so that the rubber doesn't squeak so much.

He whispers, cos speaking would be too loud in all this gaping, even if we *were* for sure there was no-one else around, pointing at the bundle, 'What's that?'

'Don't worry about it. It's nothing. Leave it.'

'Is she – dead?'

'How the fuck should I know. Just fucking leave it.'

'But what if it's-'

'It's not.'

'Oh.'

'C'mon.' And he pads after me, obedient as a pup, up the far side of the stairs, far as possible from the bundle.

The murmuring is getting louder, '***Please be advised...***'

'Hey, Buzzkill?' I wince at the stupid banal of the call sign Unathi picked out for me, especial now.

'It's Toby. Okay? Just -'

'Toby?'

'I said don't look. Just ignore it.'

'Toby. She's *moving*.'

'I don't care.' But I look anyways, despite. And I don't know what I'm expecting, her face to be caved in, spillage from inside, even though I know this fucker doesn't work that fast. But who fucking knows. Could be three hours or three months. They could have released the wrong fucking bug. For all, it could be the fucking flu. I look long enough to see that the pink sheen pooled under her is not liquefying body interior, but part of some slinky of a dress. Long enough to see that it's not Julia/Rachel with her fall of black hair. 'It's niks to do with us.'

'***...is closed.***'

'But -'

'Just shut the fuck up and just fucking leave it, okay!'

But it's like the gun all over again, the misfire in his brain, like worrying a scab cos you can't help it. 'Toby?'

'I'll leave you here. I swear.'

He doesn't reply for at least five seconds.

'More info?'

Then, sullen, 'Your coat is still on.'

'Taxis are wait-...'

'Thanks.' But as I touch the seam that deactivates the image capture, there's a snatch of green and silver glow reflected in my sleeve.

'... transport you to Junction.'

'Shit.'

Kendra-sweet is glazed total, limp and unyield when I yank her to her feet and slump her on my shoulder, my arm around her waist, ignoring the gloppy strands of puke clinging to her hair and streaked down the front of the pink dress, like she's been on a particular hero binge. 'Dammit. Help me!' But Eddie is hesitant like.

'Please be advised...'

'What's wrong with her arm? What if-?'

'It's not.'

'...to terrorist action.'

'But how do you *know*?'

'More info?'

I pull the gun on him. Precarious, cos I'm holding up K, still unconscious and leaden against my hip. Eddie blinks at it stupid. 'You're not allowed to shoot a clan mate.'

We load her up between us, though the little shit is careful not to touch her or the spillage on her dress. She gags like she's going to kotch again and Eddie nearly drops her. I cuff him with the back of my hand, the one that's not holding her up, so I knock his hoodie back off his head with the muzzle of the gun.

At the entrance there is a row of lumo orange infocones in a row sharp as soldiers, cordoning off passage effective.

'This station is closed. Taxis are available on the concourse to transport you to Junction. Please be advised. This station is closed. More info?'

Kendra

‘Don’t.’ I try to break away, but they won’t let go. I can’t stand the proximity, the nauseous suffocate of the ambient heat of their bodies, too close, too tight. Until I was about three, I couldn’t handle anyone touching me, I’d scream ultrapitch if they tried. It’s common apparent with premature babies, but it’s not like I remember it, really, only what my parents told me. It’s a implanted memory. Maybe they got it wrong, maybe it was my brother or another baby entire. Maybe I never felt like this before.

They ignore me total and it’s easier to go along with them, because the stairs seem terrible steep sudden and labour, like the axis has been overtilted Escher. The emergency exit doors start incessant howl as we push through them and into the night. It’s drizzling and the wind is icicle. I don’t know what I did with my jacket or my bag. I try to look back for it over my shoulder. One of them yelps, ‘Hey! She’s going to kotch again.’ I feel vague insulted, but then I’m distract by swathes of blue strobing the side of the building. The flash of lights seems warm. I’m drawn to them, but we go the opposite instead and then there is a car, and I am leaning with my head out the window and a hand on my back and cold air and rain sting against my mouth and I’m getting wet but they won’t let me back inside. And then there is shouting and we’re all bundle-out and the car screeches away and we have to walk.

And then I wake up.

‘Well, hello sunshine.’

I close my eyes again immediate. But it’s too late, I’ve already let in the light and with it sparking dazzles of pain.

‘Hey? Hell-o? Eugh. Shit, Eddie. Didn’t I tell you to clean this up?’

There is a moist dabbing at my chest and I open my eyes full glare, to see Toby, cos who else would it be, working the front of my dress with a dishcloth. It smells, distinct, of vomit. The couch I'm lying on is damp with sweat. And I would feel miserable humiliate if the pain didn't override.

'Easy tiger,' Toby says, 'Take it you're feeling more upsome?'

I touch my face, feel a welt on my jaw, raised sullen, where the cop got me with his baton. He would have got me again if his partner hadn't intervened, did actual, but only glancing across my kidneys as I scrambled past him.

Toby gives me the cloth. 'What *were* you doing, baby girl?'

'Going to Rep -' I say it again, because the first time comes out croaksome. 'Going to Replica. For the party? I was meeting friends.' Realise hits. 'Oh God, they must think I stood them. Where's my phone, I have to call...'

'It's almost three in the a.m., sweet,' Toby says, wry sympathy.

'Up and about?' A large skittery man with a shaved head pokes his face into the negative space between the door and the wall. 'Good. Okay. Then you need to get out.'

'Would you just chill, Unathi?'

'Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, no. You said til she's conscious. And now she is. You have to vamos. Andelay.'

'I want to go home,' someone whines, and I notice, now that I'm able to focus, that the *sshhhs-ssshhs* sound I've been registering subcon is a kid with bad posture and a worse haircut, ensconce in the depths of a beanbag, rubbing his palms down his corduroy thighs, over and over, relentless.

‘Can I use your bathroom?’ I sway slight when I stand up, or rather the world does, taking an unnerve dip that forces me to blink, hard, to get it to realign. The lights are way too bright, flattening out everything into dull planes of colour. Or maybe it’s just me.

‘No. No ways.’

‘I have to pee.’

‘You’ll just have to wait.’

‘Dude.’ Toby chips in, reproachful.

‘Is it through here?’

‘No, you can’t. You have to leave. Right now.’

‘Or I could pee on your rug.’

I push open the door into a dingy room overloaded with consoles and projectas playing unique on every wall. Games, I think, and a vid chat sesh going, with dozens of little faces squawking at each other. I pick my way over clumps of empty boxes of instant tofu meals that have bled weak blemishes of miso, I can only hope, into the carpet, and stagger into the bathroom.

There’s no lock, or at least, no key, so I shove the laundry bin against the door. I wash my face without looking at it, avoiding my eyes mirror. My mouth is fucking sore. I can feel the bastard split my lip where the edge of the baton caught, swollen and bloody.

I shrug off the dress, which coalesces at my feet, step into the bath and turn on the shower fullblast, without waiting for the temp to adjust. The pressure is stinging and the cold comes so brute, it snaps something in my chest, but I refuse to cry. Not here. I lean my head against my arms and let the cold surge over me until it turns hot.

'Hey, K. You okay?' Toby raps on the door.

'Is she coming out?'

'Yeah, she's coming out. Just relax.'

'I didn't say she could use the shower, man.' The door shifts, but jams against the laundry bin.

'Just los her. Shit.'

'I'll pay for the fucking water.' I shout back.

There's no shampoo, unsurprise for a bald guy, so I use the sludgy bar of green anti-bacterial dishwashing soap on my hair. I collect the dress from the floor and try to deal with the stain. The bile and blood are too thoroughly bonded and there is a faintly chem odour too, residual, ozoney, like the overwhelm that came over me just now at the station, when the dogs surged forward at the protests. I couldn't help it. I did too. As mindless obedient. I scrub it with soap, but all I'm doing is rubbing it in.

I dry myself with a blue towel musty, the only one I can find. Scratching around in the hamper, I find a green t-shirt that isn't too apparent stained. I wring out the dress and roll it down around my hips, tucking in the wet spots as best as poss and pull the tee over it. It has a decal that says Ecco-5, which I think is a game. Or maybe a band. I avoid the mirror.

'Finally!' jittery bald guy says as I slide open the door. He pauses, the gears in his brain pop and grind. 'Hey, that's my shirt.'

'Are we going to get out of here?'

'I dunno.' Toby is suddenly nervous. 'Maybe it's not a good idea. After, well.'

'Hey. You absolutely cannot stay here. I am not kidding.'

‘I mean, have you thought about it?’ Toby says.

‘What?’

He laughs, nervous. ‘Whether we should go or not. Or wait. To see, you know?’

‘No, bullshit! You guys need to get to one of those vaccine places soon as.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, are we in your way, Unathi?’

‘This isn’t my plak, Tobias. You shouldn’t have come here.’

‘You were the one hooked me up with the fucking mission! It’s exactly your plak.’

Their fighting is making it worse, the pain in my head is like a flash bulb popping, like the veins in my temples are threads of filament burning out. ‘Do you have any Ghost?’ The questions shuts them both up.

Baldy – Unathi - whatever, smirks. ‘There’s a caff. On the corner. On the way out.’

The kid with the bad hair – I still don’t know his name - tramps sullen after us through two sets of security doors, which buzz open in succession to let us out through an alley that backs onto the delivery entrance of the caff, which is closed.

‘Tighter than a nun’s –’ Toby starts to say.

‘Okay. Just. I’m sure there’s another one.’

‘Not in this neighbourhood.’

We’re not exactly residential. It seems to be main warehouses and stacks of metal containers, which cue me that we’re somewhere near the docks, not too far remove from the station. It’s total abandon apart from a rat, loathsome huge, perched on a mound of rotten package foam. It stops to look, vague curious, and then resumes cleaning its face in little circulars with both paws.

‘We’re never going to get a taxi now.’

‘Couldn’t pay for it anyway,’ Toby says.

‘What?’ I glance at my phone to check the time, but the screen is blank
unsettle. I hit the power, but the screen doesn’t light up reassure, my sig start-up
tune doesn’t kick in. I pop the battery, click it back in and thumb it again, frantic,
but there’s nothing.

‘Yeah, they amped up the juice when the defusers weren’t working.’

‘Fried everything one time,’ the kid says, genuine admirable.

‘Even my illegit handset got toasted,’ Toby says. ‘How do you think we
ended up here?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘No phone. No cash. The last taxi kicked us out.’

‘Does this mean I’m disconnect?’ The repurcussion potential is too much. I
sink down heavily on the kerb, not even worried about the rat, which seems equally
unconcern about me.

‘I don’t know. We’ll have to see.’

‘My mom’s going to butcher me if I’m disconnect,’ the kid says glumly,
flicking a polystyrene curl at the rat, which only twitches its thick pink ropey slug of
a tail and then goes back to cleaning obsessive.

‘Hey come on. Don’t cry.’

I brush my eyes, furious. ‘I’m not fucking crying.’

The kid looks away embarrassed. Toby checks his watch. ‘Okay. Look it’s
3.18. My place is nearby relative. It’s about six kays, we can walk it. And we’ll go
just chill out until morning, maybe email some people. Persuade someone to make a
call our behalf.’

'It's been random.' The kid says by way of greet.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm not sticking with you, that's sure. I'm going home, to my mom.'

'Fine, fuck off then.'

'Fine I fucking will!'

The kid shoots up the finger, already skulking away, his hoodie pulled up.

He's terrible young to be alone and disconnect at night. But, it strikes me, so are we.

'And then what happens, Toby?'

He yanks me to my feet. 'And then we'll go see my friend who might be able to sort us out or go get a vaccine and deal with whatever comes with that.'

Toby's apt is immaculate groomed, which surprises me, even though I know that's an unfair assume. But when I comment on it, suddenly feeling awkward discomfort in his home environ, after the walk, bitter chill for endless kays, more than six, surely, he laughs and drops a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket onto the floor. Instant, a VIMbot shoots out from under the couch, scoops it up and then darts under the nearest cover again.

'My secret sharer,' he says, all at ease now, collapse into the couch and sliding off his boots with his heel. After the tense silence of the walk to get here, the mission at the entrance to convince the doorwatcher to let us in without the benefit of Toby's SIM to ID him, it's a relief just to be inside, to be safe, albeit relative. But I'm still feeling jittered.

'Is that a ref to something? Am I supposed to get that?'

'Oh god, how pretentious like. Sorry. It's Conrad. Ostensible, I'm still studying my lit degree. At least as far as my folks are concerned. Don't ask me to

recommend him though. The book was boring as fuck, but all his stuff is. Total wank.'

'I didn't take you for the literati type.'

'Well between that and bioscience...' he shrugs.

'Or the studying type, actual.'

'There's no reason to be rude. Long as my darling mother is happy to keep up the tuition pay – although it has been what, four years now. Hope she's not holding out.' He lifts one shoulder, half-heart, 'Hey, what was I going to do with a lit degree anyway. You want some sugar?'

'Got any Ghost?'

'You really don't let up on that shit. Have some sugar, it'll chill you serious.'

'No, I really don't –'

'Whatever you want to do, sweetness. Doesn't affect me slightest.'

He stands up and disappears barefoot into the kitchen. A cupboard door bangs harder than necessary like. I sit down on a folding chair at the dining table / desk pointed, so that he can't sit next to me. 'Maybe it's not a good idea to take drugs on top of the infectious.' The desk is stacked with neat piles of paper, the edges perfect aligned.

'Best time,' he shouts back. Another bang disproportionate to whatever the hell he's doing.

I start flipping through the pages, and although I'm tempted sore, I'm careful not to ruffle the straighten. It's not like he's the one who is gonna have to tidy it up, nor stacked it so anal first place. But when I see my name near the head of the page, I drop it, burned.

He stalks back in, carrying a silver cocktail shaker. 'Hey, cut it out. Do I come to your domestic and go through your shit?' He sits down in another folder, direct beside me, intentional and unscrews the shaker, knocking a fair quantity of white sticky onto the surface of the desk.

'You didn't have to be so mean.'

'In the article? I wasn't mean. To Khanyi maybe, not you.'

I shove back in the chair, stand up and prowl to the other side of the room, with the intentional of checking his bookshelf. Meantime, he's sifting the powder, dextrous, for clumps.

'Shouldn't we contact your friend?'

'When I've had a joint, okay? Besides. You may not have noticed, with all that beauty sleepful you got in, but it's really late.'

'I said thank you.'

'Don't need your appreciative, baby girl.' He sweeps the powder into a tidy line with a pencil and wraps it up with two short twists of Rizla.

'Well I appreciate it anyway.'

'Noted duly.' He seals it with the edge of his thumb. I notice, distract, that he's been biting his nail, but only on this finger.

'Look, should I just go? I can sort this shit on my own, if I'm an inconvenient to you. I was so stupid to come here. Shit.' I'm ready to slam out the door, walk another eight kays across town in this oversize shirt and the dregs of my ruined dress and my broken heel, but I can't find my damn bag.

'Would you just sit down?'

And then I catch on that it's still at the station. With my camera. I didn't even think about it previous. Jesus. I wonder if it's still there, if anyone's taken it, if

the defuser amped would have fritzed it too. It's manual though, it should be fine. But then I start thinking about what's on the film, what I've lost, what I can try and duplicate.

'Hey.' Toby gently presses me into the couch. 'Sit down and have some sugar with me. All right? And then we can do whatever the fuck you want. Get hold of Lerato or your dad or the cops or whoever? Okay?'

'I've left my camera behind.'

'Least of our worries, sweet K. We could be dead in 48.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Not thinking about it.'

'I have a headache.'

'Me too. Sugar will chase it. Here.'

He hands me the joint and squeezes in next to me.

'We're not supposed to. The nano. It was in the contractual.' On page sixteen, a list of non-standard chems and supplements that are absolutely prohibit. Accompanied by dire warnings, long term damage potential, unpredict results, permanent health risk, poss heart failure.

'Don't fret it. It's not going to respond ugly. They would have tested, definite. They just don't want some kitty freak oh-deeing and making bad publicity noises like. Of course they're gonna tell you not to take illicit.'

'I haven't -'

'I know. It's cool. Hold it like this.'

He lights it for me and I inhale, deep and instant, every invisible dust mote in the room flares golden, like we are the centre of a vortex of candyfloss. Toby pinches the joint from my mouth, his fingers brushing ever so slight against my

swollen lip, unbearable, so that I flinch away. And I've already chosen what comes next, even before the air goes total shimmer. Even though I know its only comfort. Because we're both afraid.

Toby

She's bold unexpect, pulling into me even before I'm anticipatin' to reach for her like, which pisses me off little, cos where's the fun in that? I pull away and then reconsider, kiss her back and hard, devour, so that she winces where her mouth is still wounded. By the time we make it to the bedroom, her legs are pretzel round my waist and she's mewling with the want of it. Third time, I don't even get to the condoms.

'S'okay,' she whispers, all sultry lethargy like, 'Nano'll kill anything you got.'

'Did it say so in the contractual?'

She laughs and bites my neck and we fuck twice more again until I'm raw and aching and glazed with the exertion.

Or that could be the virus kicking in.

I'm woken by K's fingers vice uncomfot on my shoulder. 'They followed us,' she whispers.

'Mmmggh.' I try to shrug her free and roll over, cos I'm still mostly uncons, but she won't let go, like one of those undersea giant clams things.

'The chem spray. They tracked us.' She's breathing rabbit panic. Shit, I do not need this.

'Go back to sleep. You're just paranoid.'

They're right outside. Toby.'

'It's the sugar. You're not used to it.'

Only then there's a noise, a scratch of motion.

She makes a small choked off sound.

‘It’s just the VIM, baby.’ I pry her fingers loose from my shoulder. ‘You need to drink something.’ I scramble for a glass of water, but of course, it’s not there, cos my little cleaning friend is too particular in its habitings. Grudging, I peel back the covers, which are sticky with all manner. How did I end up in the wet spot?

As soon as I stand up, though, my head swarms with inky and a nervous jazz beat of pain embedded behind my eye sockets. I stagger, mostly blind, in the general directioning of the kitchen. Credit to the girl, she comes after me, naked and armed with a book off my bedside - the collected works of Curtis Malebi, whose prose is dense enough to kill anyone, real. And thick enough to cause concussioning, maybe, if your aim was good. I haven’t opened it in months. But the gloss cover makes for a toyota rolling surface.

While I’m very focus on getting to the kitchen, she stealths towards the front door, trading the book for a steel vase, which holds the calcified remains of a chrono-orchid. Not as unkillable as the product blurb would have you believe.

‘Hey. Do you want to get your own water? Cos I was quite happy ensconced.’

She shoots me a look so tortured, it makes me laugh outloud.

‘Baby. It’s okay. It’s just the drugs. There’s nothing out there.’ She’s so sweetly lost, I can’t resist her. I go over and wrap my arms around her and she’s shaking, wired with adrenalin. But also very soft and curvesome, which stirs my lustings all over again.

‘I can tell, Toby. I can feel it.’ She whispers, barely audio.

‘Shhh. It’s okay,’ I keep my voice as low as hers’ so’s not to freak her out more. ‘Come back to bed.’ I lure her back reluctant like into the warmth, but she’s not up for any other. And truth, boys and girls, neither am I.

Tendeka

It's over.

Ashraf is gone.

Taken S'bu and Ibrahim with him and any of the other kids he found route. Gone belly up, slinking off to the nearest vaccine centre. The responsible actioning. Too impatient to wait it out, to call their bluff. Too coward. Isn't this what we'd been working for from the initial? Pushing our corporate masters this far overline so everyone can see?

skyward* says not to stress. He's msging direct to my phone now. He says it's going to be beautiful, not to chicken out at such a crucial juncture, when the bigtime is imminent. They'll never know what hit them.

skyward* says we have to do it now, immediate. Trigger the lightbombs, hit as many of the vaccine centres as we can. We can't let them submit. It's a trick. There's worse waiting than arrest, disconnect. They'll be shipped rural, put into camps, detain as terrorists, even the underage. They might not come back. This is just ultimate proof of what the bastards are capable of.

But I'm confused. I thought it was a bluff. Not real. Not cause for concern, not reason sufficient for Ashraf to leave me. skyward* is reassure: yes, of course, but if they're so casual about inducing widespread panic, lying to us like this, then what else have they been lying about? We have to stop it. We have to expose the real underlying. This is not the time to be vacillate.

And then Zuko comes back, staggering in, half fucked on glue, which I would hak him for ordinary, but under the circumstantial today, I'll let it slide. Because he's true believer. And there's work to do, as skyward keeps reminding me,

the msgs coming urgent interval, like a sharp stick. I don't know how he got my number.

Kendra

When the swivel grinds through its rotate to open onto the landing, there is a notice placked to the outside of the door. 'For your convenience, please find enclosed a digi map to your nearest immunity centre. This is a SAPS public service announcement.'

'Cunts. Jesus. Motherfuck.' Toby wipes his nose, with the back of his sleeve, rips off the map-chip GPS attach and scrunches it under his heel, no avail. 'Fuck!' He picks it up and hurls it across the corridor, but it's so light it drifts to the left and ricochets gentle, with a dulled plastic ting off the wall. He kicks the wall for good measure and then punches it for additional.

He comes away shaking out his hand and still swearing sailor. He looks shocksome, his eyes are pouchy, his hair dishevel more than unusual and his scrag of beard unnatural dark against the palour of his skin. I still haven't been able to face myself in the mirror, although thankful, I'm not feeling it like he is. He's already taken three painkillers this morning.

'Come on.'

He cringes as we step outside the building and tries to go back for his sunglasses 'There isn't time, Toby.'

'Are you chaffing me? We still got 34 hours at least. And if we don't make it, they can always come get us. They should have a roving unit. Door-to-door delivery. Now that's servicing the community.' But he is meek obliging despite.

We still don't have a phone between us. When we tried to log in this morning, his connection was down. 'The cabling in this fucking building,' he said throwaway. 'Does it go down a lot?'

'No. However! It's exactly the kind of shit that the board would slip up on.'

But I could tell he was disquiet about it.

Before we found the warning on the door, cos that's exact what it is, the plan was to find a public terminal, to get hold of his friend, Lerato, but now, I don't know. We might just be bringing the shit to her.

'She can handle it,' Toby says, 'She's a big girl.' He spits out a glob of phlegm onto the street in front of Truworths. A young hausfrau, coming out, pulls her black leather handbag tighter against her and steps pointed wide berth past us. 'Yeah, fuck you too,' Toby snarls and starts coughing so bad, he has to lean against the window. Inside, there is a fluster of motion and I grab his arm and pull him away before the security guard lumbers out to chase us.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of reflection in the glass of the window among the moto-mannequins in gleamy fabrics. My face is total healed.

Tendeka

The thing is transparency only works as a policy if you're success in making the unwanted invisible to anyone looking. We're here to make sure there's no possible of hiding what has happened.

Who would have thought that there were so many, already so ready to give it up, turn turtle before it even kicks in, before they even know it's going to kick in at all? Traitors to the causing. And cowards.

The emergency room at Chris Barnard Memorial is street level, a little glass box beside the ambulance parking and the ramp that leads up and away to the parkade. There is already a queue of people outside, disrumples like they've been up all night, so everyone looks homeless. They're pale and shock and some pathetic have convinced themselves they're actual suffering, doubled over and coughing, psyching themselves out, buying in, pushing to get to the front because they're more urgent cases. There's no sign of the media. But there will be.

There's been nothing on any of the newscasts, not even a suggestive on the alt channels, which implicates that the clampdown on info is already in force. There are probably S&D teams roundclocking, scanning every blog, censoring every newswire. Suppress and destruct.

'Here?' In the street opposite the hospital, adjoin the glitzy restaurants in Heritage Square, Zuko, tosses a soccer ball deft from foot to foot, ignoring the carguard, who beckons that he must skop the ball over here, man, have a little game. This is not the time for play.

We will already have been marked by the cams. Reviewing the footage after will allow an easy identify, but I don't think it's worth pointing this out to Zuko,

who is tense eager underneath his cool, still fucked on glue, and wound up from watching the Grand Parade light up spectacle.

‘Yeah. It’s the most access.’ We’ve already checked out two other temp vaccine locations, one actual in the CBD police station, the other set up at the main entrance to the station, but there are dogs lurking, which started barking when we came too close, picking up some residual of chem scent.

No-one will get serious hurt here. The explosive is low capacity RDX. Limited ‘blast phenomena’ according to the packaging. The nearest will suffer flash burns maybe. But they’re right next to the ER. They’ll be able to get medical treat right away. Sometimes small sacrifices are necessary. Collateral damage. And there is zero chancing Ashraf is here. He would have gone to a more convenient. Definitely.

Zuko shrugs, team player, and strolls across the road, dribbling expert, easy dodging a car, while still keeping the ball going and sommer follows it past the doors, getting a prime angle to score. Just a kid messing around. The security guard is too preoccupied with managing the line to hassle.

Zuko bounces the ball off his knees a couple of times, fearless, as if it were not packed capacity with RDX, and then lets it drop. Before it has a chance to touch the ground, with a swift perfect sideswipe, he lobs it direct at the auto doors, which detect the incoming momentum and slide open, so it sails inside.

I click the phone in my pocket, subtle as possible, already walking away. The bomb rips through the building with a shudder of glass and concrete and clouds of dust that coats everything radius, total overkill.

I don’t look back for Zuko.

Lerato

An incessant bleeping with an undertone of tango drags me rudely from the depths of REM-sleep. I've been dreaming about cars loaded down on their axles with trickle castles, like the kind you make dribbling mud between your fingers at the beach, like Toby and I did a couple of years ago. Sturdier than dry sand, but still only sand.

Almost awake, at first I think Jane's set off the burglar alarm accidentally again and I'm going to have to fend off the security Aitos bounding in to the rescue, but then I realise home™ is playing Buster Jungle's *Asphalt Sonata*, the song I assigned to my personal work-related messages.

It's from Rathebe, calling me in to work. On a fucking Sunday. Her hyperbole paints it as some national crisis without getting into any of the details. What I think at the time is that it better a new outbreak of the superdemic to force me into the office on the weekend while suffering the side-effects of too much alcohol consumption. It better not be some baby stroller issue.

There is a weird vibe on the underway on the way in, an undercurrent frisson (almost sexual) even though it's almost abandoned, mostly people coming home from partying, a couple of churchgoers. But the clampdown means I'm oblivious to the reality, until I actually reach the office and find out what has gone off overnight.

Communique's offices are a study in controlled frenzy. The ultra caffeine barristas are doing overtime. I don't even make it as far as the elevators, before I am whipped away to join Rathebe's task team, which has commandeered the boardroom and an additional coffee machine. There are 23 people crammed in with their laptops, all monitoring the triplines, killing the most damaging of commentary before it gets

out, because anything is allowable when it comes to national security and govt. is a big Communique contract. To my disgust, Mpho is already in the thick of it.

I pull up a chair next to him. I'm dying to slide into my backdoor to get the full story, but it's insanely risky with the kind of scrutiny currently going on.

But when the first bomb reports start coming in, I don't have a choice. The techniques are so inventive they leave me breathless and everyone else clutching for information and something to do with it, before it gets out on the newslines and worse, the video blogs. There's no way to contain this one, only spin it. We're shutting down large parts of the network with service errors to try and keep it contained. Later, we'll blame this on an underground cable being damaged by the bombs. Of course, I recognise the signature. Soccer balls and graffiti aren't exactly terrorism 101. I have to be circumspect.

Despite all the caffeine consumed in the marathon inside, it's luck or fate that I'm the only one in the stairwell bathroom. The red mosaic tiles seem menacingly shiny, but I know I'm just tired and hungover and not thinking clearly. I take the third cubicle, in case the one on the end is too conspicuous and click my back-up SIM into my phone, which is not, need I tell you, coded to my identity.

Communique is willing to indulge us our whims and little vices – just about anything to appease the talent, lest we defect. But a fake SIM ID is serious contraband. Two years jailtime if I'm bust with it. I'm mad to use it here.

The phone powers up on silent, logging on to the maintenance subnet which controls the building's cleaning bots. A neat little loophole I discovered by accident rewiring the VIMbot Toby stole from my apt block. It doesn't work unless you can connect to a booster site to get the signal out of the building, but I already have that

set up in every Communique billboard Tendeka and friends have hit with their smear boxes.

It takes me a minute to track the reroute msg Tendeka sent out via a mirror in Singapore, tracing the trajectory all the way back to the Cheaptime Trip Bar in Little Angola, terminal 14, sent at 23h18. It helps that I know his hang-outs, that I know who he was sending to and can backwards engineer it. At least he was using a fake SIM. User ID chipped as Rutger Harlin, Dutch nursing student, 24, resident in UCT's Slovo Res.

Still, can't be too many people hanging around at that time in Cheaptime Trip and the cams would have picked him up in the vicinity. Sloppy work –the guy shouldn't hazard tech on his own. But it's not his solo that worries me.

It takes another two minutes to crack Cheaptime's timeclock database and delete all the records. I take their server down too, just for good measure. I just hope they're sufficiently smalltime operators that they don't have back-ups or at least that it will take them several hours to restore. It's a hack job, but there's not enough time to finesse it, with 23 other people in the room across the hallway, all on a similar tack, trying to dig out the terrorists and it's only a matter of time. Although hey, if anyone *does* stumble across this, hopefully they'll just assume it was Tendeka and pals, trying to cover their tracks, that they're clumsy amateurs.

I consider sending Tendeka a warning, something obtuse enough to be innocent via the soccer club's fan board, but I figure he's probably not smart enough to pick it up. I can't risk anything that will link me with him.

It's absurd how sloppy he's been, the sticky fingerprints he's left over everything. He accessed his banking at the Cheaptime Trip, wired cash from one account to another, so I follow the trail, closing down the links, deleting the cache,

covering his tracks, because it's all here, a fishing line snarl, a subway map of connections.

The Cheaptime leads to a soccer game, by way of him checking on the match scores, which leads to his underprivileged kids soccer club in Imizamo Yethu, which leads, via one of the kids, Zuko Sephuma, who is signed up in both, to the graffiti project sponsored with street kids on Grand Parade where a wall just happens to have exploded minutes ago, causing minimal damage, but a lot of fright, which is enough to bury him, assuming he's not all over the cams.

Tracking that kid who is mutual to both, Sephuma, leads to a video blog on future*renovate, some anti-corporate community in Amsterdam and the impenetrable moniker '10'. Christ, Tendeka.

Lots of postings from 10, IP address links back to the Cheaptime, couple of phone access log ins and back to the soccer club. Rants on the board, video clips of some of the 'hits' posted as instructional guides. I didn't realise he was filming any of it. I feel ill. And I'm running out of time, before someone else comes into the bathroom, wonders where I am.

It takes me less than a minute to crack his future*renovate email account. Penile enhancement ads. Newsletters from groups with dubious titles, like WorldChanging or Guerilla Corparatista, mostly unopened. Messages from fanboys and girls.

That was the sickest video yet, man! How did you pull that shit off?

Zuko cropping up once again, quite the disciple. But it's suspiciously empty, like he's been systematically trashing everything. I could get into the cache on the servers, but that would take hours, which I don't have. And I have to know if there's

anything incriminating. Sent items and trash are cleaned out, but the schmuck didn't clear his IM conversations.

The bulk of the chats are with somebody called skyward*. What's with all the damn asterisks? Mostly bullshit, heavy talk about co-opting the revolution and other doggerel, but then I come to one which mentions me by name.

skyward*> how goes your tec contact? like to put her in touchable with some of our other operations. she does good work.

10> Lerato? Yeah, I really only know her through Toby and he's too prick to work with. We'll have to find another.

skyward*>pity

I look up the IP address for skyward*'s email address because now I'm going to have to hack into HIS email account and clean up there too. I feel sick at the thought of how much is to be done, how much time it's all going to take and the hundreds and hundreds of interconnections. I can't believe he mentioned me by name.

The IP address is not in the Netherlands at all. And at first I think I've made a stupid mistake. And then I catch on.

I eject the secondary SIM. My first instinct is to flush the incriminating evidence, but if I can get out of here, I'll need it. What I really need is my passport. There is a noise outside and in my panic, I do the cheap smuggler nasty and tuck it into my cunt.

I flush the toilet and emerge to find Jane, leaning against the row of giant bowl basins, waiting for me. The relief is mixed with irritation at her timing. I can't begin

to imagine why she's come all the way up here. I've never bothered to visit her office in accounts, five floors down.

'Hey Lerato. I've been looking for you everywhere. Gotta minute?'

'Jesus, Jane. Can it wait til I get home? I'm a little tied up right now.'

'There's someone who wants to see you.'

'What? No. Rathebe will flip. I haven't even had a chance to process...'

She flashes a card at me, a visual ID. And it doesn't register initially. How can you live with someone for eight months and not know them at all? I should have seen it coming. I should have guarded at home as carefully as I did at work.

She guides me to the elevator. As I pass the boardroom, I will Mpho to look up, to help me. But he's panic stations like everyone else, heads down and what would he do anyway. Rathebe glances up, but sees I'm with Jane and gives a little nod of acquiescence that lets me know I'm really fucked, even before the lift doors open to reveal a security guy with two (!) Aitos flanking him, putting paid to the half-baked plan I suddenly realise I was entertaining, to take her down in the lift, still get away. I take a step back but Jane takes my arm.

'It's okay, we can fit.' The guy whistles and the dogs press in tight against him, making space, but it's still a squeeze. I can feel the hot pressure of Aito's breath on the back of my legs. Jane slides a card key into the control panel. I feel sick with stupidity.

I fucked a boy for a couple of months whose motto was it could always be worse. Which used to piss me off because it was so blatantly obvious as to be worth stating. Of course it could always be worse. If you were buried up to your head in the desert waiting for the vultures to eat out your eyes, someone could piss on you, fire ants could get into your mouth. Burrowing rodents could be eating your feet.

But this is bad. This is as bad as it could possibly be.

Because the IP address for skyward* comes back to Communique's corporate pipeline.

And the ID Jane flashed me in the bathroom had the logo of spyware controller. Internal affairs.

Toby

Of course I've noticed that her face is total heal. Think I'm a moron? So, when she stops to admire her reflectings, I hustle her forward. 'C'mon. Keep moving. You want to bring attention down on us?'

'But-'

'Yeah, yeah, I know. Lucky for you. Wish I had some nano to stitch me up sweet from the inside.' The headache is eating through the painkillers, chowing down on the edges and I'm itchy as fuck and my nose won't stop running, so's I have to wipe it with the back of my hand and wipe the snot off on my jeans.

'Charming,' she says, real helpful like and refuses to take my hand again. I hadn't even realised we were holding. I'm fucking starving, maybe even dying and she's concern about playing miss manners. Which sparks me off on my motherbitch and how the least she could do is download some cash so we can buy breakfast and a Ghost for K, who is jonesing badtime and some cheapnasty sunglasses so I can deal with the glare. I mean what are parents for?

But the catch is that we're still phoneless. It took fifteen minutes just to get out of my apt block, waiting for someone else's SIM ID to trigger the door so we could slip out. Pretend making out in the hall, so we had an excuse to be hanging bout.

I accost a pedest on the sidewalk, a man in a red leather jacket unlocking his car, who looks more open-mind that the rest of the wageslaves already off to work.

'Hey, excuse me, sir? My phone is down and I was wondering...'

'No. I'm sorry,' he says, super-brusque in the brush-off, already getting in, adding, 'God bless you,' through the window as he zips it up, to placate me like I was some filthy riff. Like a riff could afford to be traipsing in a Babystrange coat,

even if it is fritzing, blurting random images from its memory. Shit. At this rate we're going to be walking to Lerato's.

It's the same story at the underway. The auto-doors won't fucking open to let us entrance the station, let alone the trains. I don't see how they're expectant that we'll report to our nearest handy vaccine centre if we can't fucking get there in the first. And no-one will let me cadge a call.

K is total distract, she keeps touching her mouth over-careful, like she's just making sure it really is all there.

'Do you think you could stop playing with your face and give me a hand here?'

'What do you want me to do?' she says, real sullen like, as if this is all my fault that we're stranded, isolate. Disconnect.

'You're a girl. You're cute. Get someone to let you use their phone.'

'What do you want me to tell them?'

'That you dropped it in the toilet. That you were mugged. I don't care. Anything. Wait, here's the number you wanna connect,' and as I'm writing it down for her, I realise I don't know the fucking number. It's autodial, preprog 9, starts 074-311 something something something. And what would she say to my mother besides? Of course, I don't know Lerato's digits either or even that side-swipin' skank Unathi's. Which doesn't leave us much in the way of optionals. My stomach is knotting audible with hunger.

Someone tugs on my sleeve. 'Buy me a bunny chow?' It's a streetkid, winsome in filthy men's shoes that swallow his feet, tufts of newspaper sticking out like ruffles, clutching a brown paperbag like his life depended and faintly reeling already at this time of the a.m.

‘Aw, c’mon don’t touch the fashion. Not now, okay? Just piss off.’

The kid is nonplussed total. He plucks at my coat again, skitting out of reach when I move to grab him, laughing. ‘You should check, my larnie. Your fashion is fried.’

‘Do I know you? Fuck off!’

‘Toby.’ Kendra says, putting her hand on my arm and I’m so fucking sick of people touching me. I jerk away from her, sour.

‘What?’

‘Maybe he has a phone.’

But the best the mangy street kid has to offer is a browning banana, which he proffers like it is serious benevolent on his part and Kendra accepts it same, taking it in both hands, like you’re supposed to with Japanese business cards. ‘Thanks,’ Kendra says, genuine grateful as if it was even the same fucking species of usefulness as a phone. So much for the black markt, the underground economy. Seems the dispossessed are also disconnected; the great unwashed, unphoned.

I grab it out of her hand and hold it up to my ear, feeling how it’s already turned too soft and squidgy inside its skin. ‘Hello? Hello? Mom? Yeah, send the fucking cavalry already. Oh, what’s that, you say? I’m sorry, you’re breaking up.’ This cracks the kid, especially when I crush the banana in my fist so that the skin splits and the insides squelch out either. ‘You could do with an upgrade,’ I say examining the sludge in my hand, ‘This one’s fritzed,’ and hand it back to the street kid, who declines, shaking with laughter, fit to epileptic. I shrug and chuck it into the alley, wiping off my hand brisk on my jeans. And it occurs to me that’s what my insides will be doing within the next 48, liquefying inside this bag of skin. The kifness novelty of being on the run is wearing off quick.

'We could have eaten that,' Kendra sweet says, grudging, as I pull her away from the kid and down the street.

'Least of our urgents.'

'Toby. I'm hungry. If I don't get something to eat –'

'Then, what buttercup? You might get hunger pangs in your tummy?'

'I'm hypoglycaemic, you asshole.'

'Oooh, so what, you're gonna faint on me!' She punches me in the chest, harder than playful. 'Don't be a dick.'

'Cos if you did, I don't know if I'd have the strength immediate to pick you up and carry you. I mean, maybe you want to go back for that banana. You could scrape the leftovers off the wall still.'

She is nearly in tears. I check all the signs, her complexion gone blotchy, the liquid shine in her eyes. I hock another thick logey of phlegm onto the pavement.

'Tell you what, baby girl, I got it all worked it out. But I'm going to need you to take one for the team.'

'Toby, stop it. This is serious.'

'And I'm deadly.'

'You shouldn't spit. You don't know it's not contagious.'

'Oh baby girl. You think I give a shit about these people?' I tuck her under my arm, pressed hard up, so I can feel the expansion of her ribcage as she grunts in surprise, and whirl her around for a little scenic. And all that nano, little microhordes of VIMbots, sopping up the viral mess inside like the biologic that eats oil spills.

'I hope all these fuckers get it. They deserve it. And you know, I don't know why the fuck you give a shit either.' I crush her tighter against me, hoping to squish

some of the damn nanobots in the process between her bones and mine, not really bothering with the logicals of whether it's possible or not. She squirms away, furious now.

'It's not my fault.'

'Hey. Hey, I'm not holding it against you, sweetness.' I kiss her nose, wondering if a nanobot bruise would look different from norm, whether the colours would be a giveaway. 'Chin up, okay? We'll get you something to eat just as soon as. But first we need to get connect, we need help. Agreeable?'

'Yes,' she says, her face stormy petulant.

'So, we're gonna walk into that internet caff over there, and I'm gonna have a little chat with the guy behind the counter and then you're going to offer to suck him off in exchange for some time online.'

'Jesus, Toby.'

'Or maybe he'll settle for a handjob.'

She stares at me fixed, with her cheeks flushed in fury, humiliate. It's a good look for her, near radiating good health.

'Although you know, your technique could use some work. Speaking from personal experience.'

Abrupt, someone changes the channel on her expression. I wish my Babystrange was still functional. It would have been great to capture the transition, trace the twitch of muscles that have morphed her facials from shock-wounded to contempt. I glance away, unintentional, biting the nail on my pinky finger, absently, glancing over at the caff in question.

'Fuck you, Toby.'

‘Oh ouch. Like no-one’s ever said that to me before.’ I stagger back a step, clutching at my chest, but she is already walking away, too fast, her shoulders tight as if they’d been strapped to a coathanger. Which makes me think of how the skinny blades jutted like amputated chicken wings as she arched her back against me. ‘And besides, you already did, sweetheart!’ I shout after her, so that several of the pedestals cock their heads in our direction. ‘Remember?!’ She doesn’t turn around. The shouting rasps in my throat and segues seamlessly into rackingness as my body works overtime to eject what amounts to a thumbnail of sputum that blends seamlessly into the street along with the pigeon shit and gunk. Hardly seems worth.

Inside the caff with its windows dimmed to cut the glare on the screens, I dump the Babystrange bundled on the counter, still damp with the residual of cleaning wipes. Usual, this would make me wince in anticipation of the drycleaning, which doesn’t come cheap on wired fabrics like. ‘Hey man, chase-cutting the chitchat, how many minutes can I get for this?’

The guy behind is trying too trendy for his age, with sideburns razored in sharp isosceles, a sideshow to distract from the balding on top. Seems the blow-out with K was pointless. Judging by the rip beneath the black vest, this one is more into the boys than girls.

‘This isn’t a pawn shop, china. And even if it was –’ he rubs a pinch of material between his fingers, the picture distorting, ‘This thing is not well.’

‘Yeah, well, neither am I.’ And I know I check it too, the shivers now and the damp sweat and I can’t stop scratching, like a junkie real with no fix in ready.

‘Man,’ he sighs, with resignation real, ‘Don’t make me call in a defuse at this time of the morning.’

‘Go right on head. I don’t have a fucking phone, my friend.’

He looks skeptic. 'Well, that's even more reassuring. Do you know what kind of shitsville liability you are to me in here?'

'Come on. Give me a break. The quicker you let me use a machine, the quicker I'm gone. As opposed to standing in here, breathing my disease all over your estab.'

He is unmoved, starts reaching for the phone.

'It's designer. It's worth 12k least new, seven second-hand. Cost you maybe two to get it rewired. Five gees for five minutes, doesn't sound like a raw to me.'

'How do I know it's not stolen?' He shakes it out, cursory, looking for bloodstainables.

'Aw c'mon, like you care? And besides, I got the sneaks to match. You get a lot of colour-coordinated skollies in here hawking previously owned?'

'Okay, okay. Five minutes.'

'Thirty.'

'You just said –'

'Ja, I got stuff to do. Takes longer than five.' Check the newsblurts, send Lerato a chirpy, get her to meet me.

'Whatever. Just do me a favour and take one of the consoles at the back.'

'So I don't freak out the paying?'

'Sharp as your sense of style,' he comes back, folding up the Babystrange with a certain proprietary. I feel a twinge of loss. Or another coughing fit eminent.

Kendra

Is it perverse to feel liberated? Not just ditching that asshole, just another Jonathan, but the grounding of being disconnect that sets me sudden separate from the swirl around me. The remote real for once, not artificial imposed and filtered through my camera, once species removed from the bustle; the commutings and people opening up the storefronts. It's striking beauty. Although totally impractical, natural, the squeeze in my stomach reminds me.

I realise I'm not so far from St Michael's, but without my SIM ID, the front door to Mr Muller's belowground doesn't recognise me. It takes a long time for him to answer the intercom.

'Who's that?'

'It's me, Mr Muller. Kendra.'

'Kendra! Why don't you just come down, sweet girl?'

'It's my phone, Mr Muller. It's...'

My voice cracks unintention. There is a brittle anxious pause. I haven't seen him since the exhibition. I should have called, just to see if it was okay after the shocksome, but I have been preoccupy.

'Come down. I'll put on the ultra.'

By the time I get down, it's just starting to infuse. And he has food. A slightly stale bagel with peanut butter. But no Ghost. I wonder if I can convince him to go with me to the building's caff, even a subterr must have one, when he points out the news footage, which he has maximised so it plays all over the walls, tuned to different channels.

'Did you see this? This bombing?'

I haven't. It's rivet. The footage holds on the wall of the old city library done up mural with a ball cupped in two hands forming a heart with the word UBUNTU

bannered across in that signature graffiti scrawl, embedded with glitter, no, lightbulbs, LEDS, lightshow in patterns, so that the ball becomes a globe, a soccer ball a skull. And then the bulbs suddenly all pop, not quite exact coordinate, with a noise like firecrackers, spraying twinkles of glass, so that the people passing by cringe and duck. A few, automatic, sort of half run away, hands up above their heads before they catch themselves and look back. The bulbs crackles and snaps for another few seconds and then a thin drift of chemical-colour smoke peels off, leaving the wall cratered, like acne scars.

‘If they had an agenda, I might be able to understand, but this nihilism... Six dead, 19 wounded. What are they protesting anyway? Capitalism? As if there’s a alternative. Where do they think their fancy technology comes from? And don’t get me started on the kid’s dream of economic equality. Society has always been structured by privilege. This is the best we’ve had it. You work hard, you put your back into it, you get to claim the rewards. Freedom is a state of mind, Kendra. How old are you? Too young to remember what it was like.’

I’m not really paying attention. Most of the channels are on what looks like warzone. Rubble, people screaming, a glitter of broken glass and blood and a torn-apart car, like the truck in my favourite of Mr Muller’s photographs. The footage plays back in slow-mo. A line of people, with the desperate look of refugees or rural, waiting outside a glass box marked Casualty, a twist of tar leading up into a parkade, like a loll of grey tongue in a butcher’s window, an ambulance parked beside. A soccer ball floats surreal towards the building and, more surreal, the doors slide open to let it in. A woman smiles, delight and points. And then the building turns itself inside out. I sit down heavy on the couch. It’s too much.

‘Compared to living in fear, terrorised by criminals, the hijackings and shootings and the tik junkies ready to kill you, shoot you, stab you, for a watch or an ipod, I’ll take those modified dogs and the whaddayacallit, the cell phone electrocutions, any day. But these people don’t understand what they’re trying to achieve.’

Every channel comes back to it, repeat. Like the chorus of a terrible song.

‘Anarchy? Undermining our way of life? And what’s that going to prove? More to the point, what’s it going to change? Do you think this will change anything? It’s only going to lead to more severe controls. But we need them, Kendra, I’m telling you, humanity is innately damaged. It’s a flaw in the design code. We’re weak. We’re fallible. We need to be told what to do, to be kept in line.’

He notes me shrinking deeper into the couch, misery. ‘Forgive me, I’m ranting. You know what happens when you get me started. What’s this about your phone?’ The sudden generosity of all his attention makes me want to weep with gratify, so I stagger over my words.

‘It’s dead. They blew out everyone’s. I don’t know what to do.’

His voice takes on a sharp note of query, ‘When was this?’

‘Last night. The station. There was a protest. I guess it dropped off the scanner in light of – this.’ I wave my hand at the overwhelm visuals cramming into the lounge

Mr Muller’s face solidifies around his jaw. ‘You can’t stay here. You have to get to a, whatsit, immune centre. You’re *sick*.’ The word strikes me like an accusation, not only the usual general pathological, the weight of the superdemic associate which makes it such a dirty word, but it feels like a personal attack too, for the genetic potential of a dark rotting hole to flower in my gut, like my father.

‘But I’m not. The nano – ’, but suddenly it feels like too much to explain. And *can* I really explain? Would any explanation encompass?

‘Are you part of this? Are you associated with those terrorists? I know what art school is like. And my God, that *thing* at your exhibition. You are part of this. If you don’t leave my house immediately, I *will* call the authorities. There’s a number. On TV. I’ll call them. I won’t be an accessory, Kendra. I’m an old man.’

‘Mr Muller, please,’ I laugh, despite myself, at the quaver in his voice, at the absurdity. ‘Look, whatever they said on the news, it’s not the story comprehensive. Did they say it was a complete overreact to a peaceful protest?’

‘Those kids had weapons. They showed it. Hacking up the dogs. People were next.’

‘You talk about controls, but this wasn’t control. This was a...’ I cast around for the right word, and as soon as it’s out, I know it’s a mistake, the end of our rational, ‘...a holocaust.’

He takes out his phone and starts hitting the keypad, his hand shaking so hard I’m sure he’s going to drop it. ‘I’m calling them, Kendra. I’m calling.’

It’s more pity than fear that incites me to leave.

Toby

I leave a voicemail for Lerato. And send a msg. And an email. But there's no responding. Of all times. The manager guy comes over, all nervous like. 'Hey, man, listen, I changed my mind. You can have the coat back. But I really need you to go now.'

'What the fuck? I've still got four minutes remain.'

'It's on the news, china. You should, wow. You need to get medical attention.'

This is not exactly a revelation, although truth, I'm feeling more up, which is probably due to ditching Kendra. Girl was winding me serious with the little princess thing. Course, I'm gonna have to find her again, cos this is exact the kind of shit I should be getting on cam. Documenting how the nano cleaned her up like a Catholic in confessional. I scratch my beard. I'm not particular interest in the news.

'Fine. But I'm gonna need all the hardcash in the till too.'

'What? Hey, come on, man. That's not cool.'

'Neither is Marburg. Wanna risk it that it's really not contagion?' I cough for dramatic effecting. He doesn't need to know it's faked.

I'm prowling the street, trying to figure which navigational Kendra would have taken, when the same damn street kid from previous skanks up to me again.

'You Toby?' he says, uncertain.

'Look, kid. Serious. Now is not the fucking time. I'm busy. Piss off.'

'Jussus. No need to be so rude, my larnie. I got someone wants to see you.'

'Oh, look. I appreciate the sentiment. But I got my preferred. And I really don't like buying my illicit street, especially here with the cams watching. Tell your friend he may want to consider a relocate to a less patrolled.'

‘Toby. You’re Toby. Come with me.’ The runt is so insistent, I follow him down the sidestreet into a parking lot, quiet abandon on a Sunday, half underground, to find Tendeka huddle convincing bergie behind an Alfa, a hoodie pulled low over his face. He looks like shit. It’s the texture of his skin, main, sort of murky beige and doughy. It looks damp, like it might slough off his skull or you could gouge it with your fingers.

Tendeka’s all skitter, something about a blow up. The street kid looks on the point of tears.

‘Okay, I did it. Can I go now?’

Tendeka waves, tired, dismiss, ‘Yes, Whitey. Thank you. If you see Zuko. Or Ashraf... No. Never mind.’

The kid waits, squirrely on the balls of his feet in those oversize shoes, to see if there’s gonna be more and then scuttles away, too extrafast to be polite. That motivator right there, I’d say that was fear. Tendeka agrees.

‘He’s frightened. I’ve lost everyone, Toby. I don’t know where they are. When I saw you, across the street...’

‘Jesus, Tendeka. You are pretty fucked up.’

‘Not looking so great yourself.’

‘You could hit me. That always seems to make you feel more upsome.’

‘I would if it helped. But it doesn’t work. You’re still a fucking prick afterwards.’ We share a camaraderie moment, grinning and I think the situational we find ourselves in current probably warrants it. And I know what will make it even better.

‘Just hang on a sec, here, okay?’

I exit the garage, noting that their CCVTV sys seems fritzzy judging by the wires swinging fray from the cam by the entrance boom, so at least Tendeka is choosing his hideys well, and swing by the bottle store. I pay hardcash, which makes the cashier skeef me suspicious, but a little flirtatious goes a good way, even scores me a slight discount. And come back to Ten with a bottle of cheap scotch. We get shitfaced.

He says it's the end of the world. We're of a difference of agreement here cos I'm beginning to be of the opinion it's all a hoaxing.

Sure, we might feel like death set on defrost, but how else are they going to make it seem authenticity? It's a bluff and I'm calling it. I'm not going to roll over and hand myself in at one of their immunity centres. Immunity from the virus supposedly about to chow down on my spleen, but not from the nice officers waiting to arrest me for illegal protest. And I know it's a hoaxing because it's letting up, although I'm still itching furious, especially my arm. The inside of my wrist is red from scratching.

And Tendeka stems same, on the not going in part at any rate. But see, this is where we part ways because he's swallowed the hoaxing wholesale. I try to explain that it's some minor bug, just sufficient to scare us, but he just grins and tells me it's exactly what they planned, him and his tjommies in Amsterdam. He tells me he's going to die. Because that's the only way to expose it, for the outside to know it's real. He yaks about some bomb thing, can't believe I haven't seen the footage, but when have I had a chance to kick back with TV? So, he set off this bomb, cos he says it's better if it's not just him. If it's just him, they can cover it up. But the bombs will focus attention. It'll stop people getting the vaccine. They'll die. In the limelight.

He's total befok. It's hilarious. So, when he asks me if I'll come with him and bring the Babystrange, for the record, cos his camera phone's fucked from the underway thing, and he needs to get this down, who am I to say no?

Kendra

It's not so hard. Without Toby looking sketchy and virtually dying at my side, it only takes four attempts, sugar-coated grovelling admitted, to get someone to let me make a call. 'I dropped it down the stairs,' I tell the lady at the bookstore, who lets me use her phone, fluttering in the stacks near to ensure, I guess, that I don't make a duck with it. As if it would be any use to me without her unique bio-sig. I dial Damian's number from the flyer he gave me. I'll be damned if I'm phoning Jonathan.

Vix answers. She seems less than stoke that it's me. 'You didn't rock up, hey?'

'I know. I'm sorry. Please can I just? Speak to Damian? It's urgent.'

There's a scufflesome and then Damian comes on, sounding sleepy. 'Hey Ghost girl, you missed out.'

He hasn't heard about the bombs or the 'incident' on the underway, as they keep phrasing it on the news. He hasn't even got up yet.

It takes work to convince him to come pick me up to take me to Andile. And when his car pulls up outside the bookstore, a skedonk of a VW Passat station wagon done up with decals of skulls and bunnies, Vix is sitting passenger.

She turns round in the seat to look at me, accusatory. 'You don't look sick.'

'Well, we don't know that, until she's been checked, right?' Damian says, putting a hand on her knee placate.

'Are you sure it's not contagion?'

'I don't know. I'm sorry. They said it wasn't. It would be mal to unleash an infectious.'

'Sounds pretty mal as is,' she says crisp and bitch. 'You do seem to attract bigtime drama.'

‘Victoria!’ Damian looks at her, scalded.

‘I’m just saying!’

Outside the world seems remove, glancing past the windows of the car, which are rain-marked with dusty fingerprints. The inner city is usual so quiet on a Sunday, but today there are road blocks and reroutes, blue and red lights sirening around the diverts near Bree, where the hospital used to be.

Initial, they won’t let Damian’s car into the Inatec property. The security cop is steadfast that there’s no chancing, his Aito padding round the car, sniffing intent. His logic is sound, if we had a permit, the gate would have accessed us already.

Vix takes total charge. ‘Would you just call, what’s his name?’

‘Andile Cwane.’ I contribute from the back.

‘Andile Cwane. Tell him it’s about his sponsor babies and there’s a huge issue that would upset the Coca-Cola company greatly.’

The security guard doesn’t seem convince, but he steps back into his booth and dials someone, maybe Andile, maybe higher level security.

His Aito loops around the car.

‘Can you do up the window, please?’ I ask.

‘Why? I’m just going to have to unwind again when he comes back,’ Damian says.

Abrupt, the dog jumps up against my window, its breath huffing against the glass, claws scratching against the bodywork. Damian startles and moves hurried to do up the window fast as poss.

‘Shit!’

I don't flinch. The dog is so close to me, through a millimetre of glass, I can see the sheen black of its gums around those pointsome teeth, the Braille of its tastebuds on its grey-pink tongue.

'Get down! Get down! Dammit!' The security cop bats at the dog, which whines its agitate. 'Okay. He's on his way. Five minutes. You can go through and wait in the parking lot. The silver Chrysler Spitfire. That'll be him.'

Andile emerges from the gunmetal shark of a car with Precious.

'Woah, hectic mess you landed in, babes! Real history stuff. Don't worry, we'll sort it out. You didn't get caught up in all that ugliness did you, Dame? No? No antibodies required for you, china! Well, come on, Kendra!' He ushers me giddy towards the doors. Damian and Vix are still hesitant at the car.

'Should we, uh-? Do you want us to come in with you?' Damian says.

'Ag, no! She'll be fine! Really. You'll be bored. All the scans and samples. Nothing serious. Just procedure. You know what it's like. But it's a lengthy one. No point waiting around. We'll get her home.'

Damian looks wary sceptic.

'It's cool, Damian. Serious. Thanks for getting me here.'

'No. I think we should come with,' he says, slow.

Precious steps up to him and says something real quiet like. Vix gives me a sharp quick glance, but the way Damian studious *doesn't* look at me is more alarm.

I smile, uneasy. 'Is there something I should know?'

Andile waves a hand, dismiss, escorting me through the doors, while Damian and Vix linger behind. 'Precious living up to her name. Doesn't like people hanging around when she works. She's such an artiste.'

The sound of a car door snapping shut makes me look round.

‘I think she’s jealous of you,’ Andile shakes his head, commiserate as Precious walks in behind us and, beyond the glass doors, the Passat reverses into a slow inexorable parabola out of the Inatec parking lot.

Tendeka

‘So what are you gonna do with your stuff like?’ Toby bounces beside me, facing backwards on the street, so that he nearly crashes into a flower seller struggling with two plastic buckets bristling with bouquets.

‘I’m dying,’ I tell the flower seller cursing at Toby, by way of apology. She recoils behind her buckets and the flowers. I can’t tell what they are. The colours blur when I try to focus. ‘No sir, I don’t got no flowers for that!’

‘Too dramatic,’ Toby muses. ‘Cliché. Flowers. Bad. No. I thought you planned all this meticulous. You can’t go whimsy all sudden. And, ‘sides, you’re frightening the lady.’

‘She should be frightened. We all should be. Here.’ I pass him the transponder.

‘What’s this?’

‘Remote link-up. It’ll transmit your coat’s cameras to the billboard. The city is going to bear witness.’

He looks uncomfortable. ‘Yeah, about that.’

‘You can back out. I don’t mind. Go running to an immunity centre, get your life-saving shot and your arrest warrant all in one, let them fuck you, let them fuck all of us. Just leave me with the coat.’

‘Jesus, all right. Just don’t get so worked up.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say, ignoring the smear of bright red on the back of my hand when I wipe my mouth. ‘You still don’t believe it, do you? We’re dying, Toby. Both of us.’

‘See, here’s the thing. I don’t feel like I’m dying. factual I... jesus mother fuck.’ He catches me as I list forward, bracing me against his chest and his shoulder,

laughing. I hadn't realised how skinny he is. 'This shit does not agree with you, Tendeka. Hate to blow your big momentous, but you're going to have to get to a hospital.'

'No.'

'Okay, well then we have to get away from here. People are staring like.'

'I want them to.'

'But you don't want the cops to come ruin all your fun, right? You don't want to premature, not on your martyrdom eminent. Come on.' He slips in under my arm and we slope down the street.

'I'm fucking dying!' I scream at two young men, about to step into the Steers. 'Pay attention. Open your eyes!'

'And I have fucking leprosy!' Toby shouts. 'And scabies!'

'Stop it. This is real. Stop fucking around for once in your goddamn life.'

'Hey, Ten, can you walk on your own?'

He shrugs me half-off, leaves me unbalanced just sufficient so I am forced to admit that I can't.

'Thought so. C'mon. Let's find a locale appropriate to last standings.' And I'm forced to follow along.

Lerato

‘You’ve violated company code, Ms Mazwai.’ Jane sits sprawled on the couch, her arms across the back, smug, patient. I don’t say anything. Her casualness is what’s really terrifying, more than the dogs panting in creepy synchronised tandem, or the man standing behind me with an AK-47, neatly subverting the cosy domesticity of our little scene. I have to confess, I was expecting a blank interrogation room, not a lounge on the penultimate to penthouse floor. I smile, carefully cultivated, loose and easy, slightly rueful. The punch of adrenaline in my gut sharpens everything. I echo her pose, consciously, cheap tricks of body language. She notices and leans forward on her knees, irritated. ‘Don’t you have anything to say in your defence?’

I shrug. Laugh, a little. ‘You bust me. What am I going to say? I’m sorry? I didn’t think it was such a big deal. Is all this,’ indicating the man with the gun, the dogs, ‘really necessary?’

‘What were you doing in the bathroom?’

I stare at her, amused, puzzled. Then spell it out slow, as if she’s a moron. ‘Okay. If you really want to know. I was taking a dump.’

She waits, lets the silence draw out between us, the loaded kind and despite myself, I plunge into it.

‘Bad crayfish. Last night. Upset stomach.’

‘So why isn’t a big deal? Being bust?’

I shrug, look away, bored with the proceedings. ‘Like you’ve never abused a company credit card.’

‘You think that’s what I’m here for? What this is about?’

‘Why don’t you tell me what it’s about, Jane? This *terrible* thing you think I’ve done.’

Another silence, fraught and frigid. Like Jane herself, now that I think of it.

‘Can you stop doing that? It’s really tacky.’

‘Does it bother you?’

‘I’ve read the same books you have, Jane. The manuals on intimidation techniques. Please. It’s too tedious. Can we just skip to the bit where you accuse me of the heinous crime?’

‘Intention to defect.’

Shit. I knew Stefan was a fucking plant. I knew it. But still, it’s not so bad, not irrecoverable.

She lets a long pause play out before she adds, ‘Corporate sabotage.’

The adrenaline ratchets up a notch. ‘What?’ But I don’t let it show. I am the very essence of incredulity distilled, made flesh.

‘One count direct involvement. Four conspiracy. Eleven aiding and abetting.’

‘You think I did what?’ I am standing up now, radiant with outrage, doing the maths in my head – they’re way over, which means, maybe, that it’s a bluff. Or they’re trumping up the charges. The Aito at my knee grumbles a bass warning in the back of its throat. ‘This is absurd.’

‘Sit down please. We have records. Instant messenger chats. Phone calls. Photographs.’

‘Of what?’ Both dogs are growling now, but I stay standing. I am righteous indignation personified. I am the wrath of the falsely accused.

‘You violated Communique’s trust, your contract.’

‘Please. Where’s this evidence?’

‘You aided a terrorist.’

Fuck. Still, not like I wasn’t expecting this one. I shake my head in pained disbelief and sit down with a sigh. ‘These are pretty hectic allegations, Jane. Do you have any proof?’

‘Are you denying them?’

‘I want to know where your proof is. You’re accusing me of... insane actions, conspiracy against the company, corporate sabotage, terrorism! That could lead to serious jailtime, disconnect.’

‘Execution even. Worse.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘We’re 32 storeys up.’

There are employee suicides, occasionally. Wall Street Crash syndrome, even though those reports of executives throwing themselves from tall buildings like lemmings in 1929 were apparently severely over-exaggerated. They can’t hack the pace, typical burn-out, but sometimes it’s attributed to the overwhelming guilt or shame over some scandal, siphoning of public funds or selling proprietary information to a competitor. But then, usually windows in skyscrapers are designed *not* to open. Jane catches me looking, surreptitiously.

‘You have to break through. Hell of a momentum required. Or we could toss a chair through first.’

‘I want a representative.’

‘Would you like to see?’

‘A lawyer? Yes. I would, actually.’

‘No. The evidence.’

She picks up a remote control for the wall2wall display. Jane taps the remote against her lips.

‘You sure you want to go here? It’s not too late.’

‘No, no, I want to see.’ How bad can it be? How much can they have? I wrap my hands around my knees and lean in, rapt, concentrating. I am the anticipation of vindication.

She hits the button. The wall powers up on a folder system I recognise immediately as our central *home* cache, accessed remote. I relax, imperceptibly, not so it shows. I’m meticulous about cleaning up, about auto-deleting, running shells and re-routes. If this is all she has... but then she clicks through to another folder entirely, her stash of Mexican soap operas. Episode 212 of *Ángeles de la calle*. Which is not, when she presses play, the story of love and life and death and betrayal in the favela. It is a recording of every transaction I’ve ever performed on my cell phone, which means they chipped it, downloaded it direct, every message, every time I connected to the triplines, probably my calls. Jane smirks.

I have nowhere else to go.

‘You’ve been an awful bitch to live with, you know that?’

She blinks and now I lean forward. ‘You’re boring. You’re anal. You have no imagination and almost no talent to speak of. This - ’ I waft a hand at the dogs, the man with the semi-automatic. ‘Why doesn’t this surprise me?’

‘You’re not taking this very seriously, Ms Mazwai.’

‘You’re a pathetic gutless bureaucrat who couldn’t hack it in the real world, Jane. I always wondered how you got to this level. Are you even genuine internal

affairs or just some nasty little snitch spying on your colleagues? And cut the Ms Mazwai crap. I've shared a bathroom with you for over eight months.'

'This isn't helping you.'

'Get me your superior officer. Now.'

'We've been watching you.'

'Who is it? Rathebe? Mogale? Give me a name.' I pull out my phone. The man with the gun shifts behind me, causing the dogs to stir. She makes an impatient placatory gesture, testing me, waiting me out.

'How do you think you got away with this?'

'This is bullshit. This is not company policy. This is intimidation. This is fucking blackmail. Give me a name.'

'You think you're that good?'

'Fuck this. Fuck you, you crazy bitch.' I speed dial reception thirty one floors down, entertaining visions in my head that they will charge upstairs.

'You think we wouldn't notice?'

'Thembi? Hey, it's Lerato. Can you put me through to internal affairs? Someone in charge. I have a situation.'

'We let you.'

I look at her blank for a moment. But I don't press end call. I lower the phone.

I am a crumpling façade.

Toby

Once it breaks, it's kiffness deluxe. Total 360, matter of what, half an hour?

From liquefying in my own skin, spitting up blood, to an endorphin overload equivalent of a bliss hit. I wonder if that's intended, designed to make you more willing to hand yourself over, flooded with goodwill and lush happy, or if they fucked up the formula one time. Maybe it's the scotch, burned up in the alcohol content we just poured into ourselves. Maybe they didn't factor that in, didn't get the lab rats loaded before they made 'em sick. Course, the half bottle we sunk between us is starting to catch up with me. I smack my tongue against my parched palate.

Tendeka is looking savage grim, but it'll wane soon soon. It's cos I'm thin, I tell him, fast metabolism, but he's still on his apocalypse trip. He's still trying to explain it away, 'It's your body's natural response. It's an old evolutionary for your mind, flood your system with happy chemicals when you're dying.'

'You don't understand, buddy, I'm hundreds.' I lug him towards my apt. Despite his good intentionings, I'm not going to hang around the street corner while he screeches lyric about the repressive regime and rights and clamp downs. Not when I've managed to avoid the cops, being arrested, the freaking Aitos prowling outside my door. And by the end of this, I will get hold of a new phone, find a legitimate why mine was stolen or schmangled and everything will be back to normality.

Tendeka slurs something horribly.

'What? I can't understand you.'

'Alcohol. Adrenaline.'

'Alcohol and adrenaline what?'

'Why you're feeling better.'

‘Yeah, yeah. You’ll see. Wait til it hits you. Any second now. It’s not the booze.’

‘My tongue is swollen.’

‘That would be the scotch talking.’

‘No, it’s...’ He wrenches forward and katches a thick splodge of blood onto the pavement. There are globby bits in it. It’s serious vile and maybe I’m underestimate on how he’s handling. Lucky, then, boys and girls, that his primitive hackjob of a key works perfect on my apt block’s systematic. We have to swipe it a few times over the door scan, which squawks protest, but just when I’m ready to concede like, the override goes through and it clicks open. It’s a handy real thing to have and when Tendeka doesn’t ask for it back specific, I pocket it in my chamo’s inner.

He’s serious delusion by the time I lug him onto the roof of my apt block going on about getting skywards and future renovations, as if this were the time for home improve. It’s serious pretty up here, with the lights of the city all splayed out, I should come up here more often. If only the wind weren’t howlome, Cape Town typical.

‘Is it casting?’

‘Course, man. Would I let you down? Oh there I go.’ This is a joke see, cos I’m easing him down so he can sit, only he sort of keels to the side, so he ends up lying on his back instead. And then he curls half foetal on his side.

‘Nice position.’ I say. ‘I did first aid. There’s a reason people lie on their sides like that, instinctive, to recover like. I’m not remembering what it was though, present. But it’s good. You got it right. Good going.’

‘Where’s the camera?’ His eyes dart around, hunting out the lenses in my coat.

‘All over. They’re like a thousand of them embedded in the fabric. Miniature.

You can’t see ‘em’

‘Okay, tell them...’

‘Tell ‘em yourself. You’re going out live. Just speak to the jacket’

He looks up and grits his teeth, focuses. ‘My name is Tendeka Mataboge’

‘Excellent start.’

‘I’m 34. I’m dying. It’s the only way to show... I’ve been infected with the M7N1 virus as an act of govt-corporate censorship, repression. This is human rights violate. It’s... It is casting, right?’

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah.’ I’m getting bored with this whole shebang. ‘Oh hey, I can see it from here.’

‘Where?’

‘No, no, don’t sit up.’ I point and watch the LG billboard flashing through its routine. Smiley models selling petrol and consumer electronics and cars. ‘Trust me. It’s going out all over the city. I’m surprised they haven’t sent out the helicopters yet.’

‘Good. That’s good. That’s...’ he feels for my hand. ‘Important, Toby.’ I grasp his hand in both of mine. ‘Do you think Ashraf is watching? Will you tell Emmie? It’s, I’m doing it for the baby.’

‘China, I don’t know what you’re on about. You just hang in there, Ten. Get your strength up and then you can finish the cast.’ He looks up at me terrible grateful.

I’m so looking forward to him pulling outsome and how stupid deluxe he’s going to feel when he does. Whimsy, I hit record on the Babystrange anyway. It might just record something anyway. It’s always good to get live action of humiliate.

Tendeka

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Not so bad, not so bad. Had food poison once. Worse. Like someone twisted my guts round a fork. Like spaghetti. Can't open my eyes. Too stark pain. Too bright. Light hurts anyway. Climbing into my head. Breath is liquid. Can't find my pump. Where's my fucking pump? Catching in the back of my throat. But it's casting already. If I could open my fucking eyes. If. I could see the reflectives off a hundred fucking adboards. All fucking casting already. Casting the capture of us dying. Captive audience. Me and Toby of all. Everything clenches. Jesus fucking mother fucking Christ! Every muscle. Squeezing overhard. Doing damage inside. I can feel it. My muscles spasming. Too fucking tight. Too. Christ. Toby, I've changed my mind. Toby. FUCK! I've changed my mind. I want – Toby's wrist is glowing green. Try to grab it. Show him. Tell him cos I've figured it. What was I-? The cast. The cast. The fucking cast. No-one will be able to ignore or suppress. Going out. FUCK! I have to chill, I have to relax. I have to fucking relax. Fucking fuck fuck. I have to relax. The spasms in wave. Clench. Un. Clench. Something rips free of the inner. Mouth is full of molten copper. I can taste the light. Force my eyes open. The city is shimmer Christmas. Red and blue and green. Beautiful. Like skyward* said. Worth it. It's okay. Ash will be proud.

Lerato

‘Are we done fucking around now?’ It’s the first time I’ve heard her swear, but she does it so level, so cold, not even bothering to raise the intonation of her voice, it’s delivered like a slap. They have played me, given me enough just enough rope to loop around my neck.

‘I won’t testify.’

‘You don’t have to. That’s taken care of.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Everyone involved in the *incident* has handed themselves in already. And those that haven’t –’ She doesn’t even bother to shrug, as if that would commit too much energy, ‘They’ve made that choice. Now your choice, if you want to call it that...’

A door opens across the lounge and Stefan strolls in. Behind him, I can see a bank of monitors, a screen showing the inside of the lounge, so he has been watching all along. Defeat tastes like sour milk.

Jane takes some unspoken cue and stands up. The deference in her manner makes me suddenly, badly scared. More scared. She snaps her fingers impatiently at the man with the gun and he turns to follow her out, with the dogs.

‘Good luck,’ she mouths at me, as the lift doors close, leaving me and Stefan alone.

‘No papaya mojitos today, I’m afraid.’

‘So, are you Mr Wall Street?’ I would stand up to face him, but I don’t trust my legs to support me, or for that matter, my heart not to burst.

He laughs. ‘I’d very much like to hope we’re beyond that stage. We haven’t come this far with you to... waste your potential. No, I’m the closer.’

‘Ah yes.’ My mind fails to come up with a snappy comeback as evidence of how little he’s intimidating me. ‘And here I thought you were in recruitment.’

‘You could say that. You’re an exceptionally bright woman. We’re quite in awe of your work - and your arrogance. It borders on sociopathic. But you’re remarkably inventive; the faked phonecalls for spyware, the backdoors in the adboards! Unfortunately you missed the reportback feed, which sends us full diagnostics of the systems’ functioning, including unaccounted siphoning of bandwidth or information, no matter how miniscule. I’m afraid to say you’re not the first to try. Although you’re the first to get our own technicians to install it. Your only mistake was thinking we wouldn’t notice.’

‘What would I say that would make a difference at this junction? I still want a lawyer?’

He nods to himself, just a tight little nod, as if he’s decided something. ‘Let me lay it out for you, Lerato. You keep your job. Things carry on exactly as per normal. Three months from now, you will be transferred to Bombay, into another department. Your contact with your former coworkers and Zamajobe and Siphokazie will dwindle away. You’ll be too busy to correspond and within a couple of months, they’ll stop bothering. It’s not like you have any meaningful relationships anyway.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You’re being promoted. Unless you’d rather -’ He tilts his chin at the window and smiles. He’s smiling because he knows that even though I can’t refuse considering the unscheduled flight that would entail, I wouldn’t anyway. But I’m still apprehensive.

‘What would this reassignment be?’

‘It’s sensitive. Govt linked. But you already know that. Doing what you’ve been doing, all that subversive you so perversely enjoy. We feel we haven’t been challenging you sufficiently. We feel you’re ready for more responsibility.’

He hands me a page of twelve names. I recognise the one immediately. Tendeka would too.

‘You’ll be running several identities, posting, inciting, organising, whatever’s required.’

And it makes perfect sense. The process has to be managed. Fear has to be managed. Fear has to be controlled. Like people.

Kendra

This part of the building wasn't inclusive tour last time I was here. It's maximum clinical, double doors for gurneys leading past wards and theatres and a row of metal cages, the smell of sterilise chemicals and corridors the colour of off-sick mint. Under the hum of machines and the muffled clomp of our shoes on the polish floors, the silence is stinging burden.

'I wish Damian and Vix had stuck', I say, to break it.

Andile grins. 'Ah, you wouldn't have wanted to make them wait around. The labs can be creepy when no-one's around.'

'Why *is* no-one around?'

Precious sniffs dainty.

'Sunday, babes. Or are you working on a different schedule? Ah, here we are. Come on.' He makes scoot motions with his hands, towards a small theatre. There is a cubicle one side, with a curtain the same queasy as the walls and a catscan machine and sonogram and other equip I can't ready identify.

Precious goes over to a metal basin outside and starts washing her hands, methodic. Andile holds open the curtain for me.

'Put on the smock please.' His voice has taken on a flavour of detach authoritative.

The cubicle is cramped. Barely sufficient space to manoeuvre. I fold up my clothes on the bench and reach for the green smock, hanging on the back of the door.

'Front or back?'

'Doesn't matter,' Precious says, although it's hard to think of her so familiar when this is the first thing she's said to me. Hard to call a doctor by her given. 'It's procedure for the scan. You can put your clothes back on when we do your blood.'

‘How serious is it, doctor? Andile won’t tell me,’ I call out from the cubicle, fastening the gown in the back, playing it light because they’re both so tense.

‘Tsk.’ Andile says, aggrieve.

‘Can’t say until we’ve got the results.’

‘I wouldn’t stress it too much, babes. I already put in a request for the vaccine, so when it gets here, we can do everything at once.’

‘When?’

‘When what?’

‘When did you put in a requesting on the vaccine. I didn’t see you.’ I throw open the curtain, ignoring the undignify vulnerable of the smock.

‘When Murray phoned me from the gate. Immediately. Babes, you have to chill out. You’ve been through a hell of a time, but we’re on your side. Now, take it easy. I’m not the doctor here, but you don’t seem to be showing any of the symptoms. I’d say your sponsorship paid off.’

‘Can you sit up here, please?’

‘What about the dogs?’

‘Andile. I can’t do my job if she doesn’t cooperate.’

‘Babes.’ He opens his hands, but I already know he’s not the one armed syringe. I get up on the table, obedient, rouche up my sleeve for the good doctor.

‘They run on a similar system,’ she says, prepping the autosyringe.

Andile shifts his weight, one foot to the other. ‘Sure, a similar system about five generations ago and like a hundred times less sophisticated. It’s reptile brain stuff. Different animal. Literally!’

The doctor straps a blood pressure inflatable to my arm.

‘Pump your fist for me, please.’

‘I think... I know. I want it out.’

‘Out? Babes, you know it’s permanent. You agreed to that. Got your DNA signature on that.’

‘It’s not permanent in the dogs.’ I am near hysteria and I don’t quite know why. I feel like I’m no longer limbo from the rock I’ve leapt off, that the water is closing over my head.

‘Different tech, I told you. It wears off in the dogs because it’s pure tech, the nanobots have a limited lifespan. Maybe ten years before they wear out. Your nano is much more sophisticated. It latches onto cells as a power source. It reproduces itself.’

‘What happens to the dogs after?’

‘They put them out to pasture.’

‘So you can’t adopt? Or use them as guidedogs or something?’

‘I’ve never heard of –’

‘Impossible.’ The doctor says, ‘The technology is intellectual property. It’s very closely guarded. They put the dogs down.’ She sees my face, ‘But don’t worry, they don’t feel anything. Just a prick. Then it’s over.’

She positions the needle against the crook of my elbow. ‘Make a fist for me.’ Normal, I look away, even though I don’t mind needles particular, but this time I’m watching as the slim metal head bites into me, how it catches on the skin. She pulls back the plunger a fraction, so that blood floods into the cylinder.

I look up to see that she is watching me, intent. ‘See,’ she says, ‘just a little prick.’

Still holding my eyes, Dr Lasson pushes the plunger all the way in.

The world tilts to the right precarious and then everything swarms up to meet me, claustrophobic. Suddenly I'm scared. I struggle up through the tightening dark, sealing in on me, like the crush of water.

'Don't fight it.'

My pulse batters in my ears. I try to open my eyes, but they're too slug, my arms are deadweight. Dr Lasson or Andile is holding down my shoulders. But I still try and push up, through the dark, which is wide open, too open, so I'm drowning in it. Then I calm. It's just like diving, following the bubbles upwards, knowing that soon I will break surface.

Toby

When do I finally tweak what's happening? Not when he snatches my wrist, so tightsome I can feel the bruises burst under my skin. Not when he starts shaking violent or when his eyes roll back and his jaw clamp locks and he starts making true hideous sounds through his teeth, with his lips peeled back, little wet squeaking shrieks. No, the indicator here that this is some serious fucking shit is when he starts bleeding from every exit point. And first I laugh, because it's so overboard gruesome, total b-grade horror, and so badly done, it just starts oozing out too viscous thick, in dark runnels of the stuff and then it's pouring and I try to pull my hand away and he won't fucking let go. It's like he's dissolving. Like someone turned on the liquidiser inside. It's serious disgusting and I cannot get him to release.

'Tendeka' I shake his shoulder, but he's just gushes out. And it freaks me because I think it might be worse because I jarred him. It's soaking into my shoes. The hem of my Babystrange is dipped in the darkness ebbing out from under him. Jesus. I'm frantic to get away from it. I'm wresting his fingers. Bending them back. Gagging. And then he squeezes once more, convulsive and lets go. I hurtle backwards, clutching my wrist, and fall in the blood, the soles of my takkies squeaking in it, so I leave tracks and a handprint. And now I do vomit, kneeling in Tendeka's insides, pooled around him. When my stomach stops contracting and there's nothing left except spit, I look down and see this muck mixing with his blood and I try and brush it away, scoop it up with my hands, so it doesn't. 'C'mon Tendeka.' I'm whispering, rocking back on my heels and forwards and back. I want to shake him, scream at him, even though I know it's pointless, that he's not teasing. That it's not some hoaxing. I can't touch him. And oh jesus motherfuck, if it's not a hoaxing, how long do I have? I can't. Not like. Jesus. I can't even look. I fall onto my

knees again and dry heave some more, which somewhere betweening turns into dry sobbing.

The coat. The coat. The fucking coat. I check the playback. But there's nothing. Static. Blur. White noisings. I rewind, fast forward and there! It's messy, but it's there underneath the fritz. 'Human rights violate' and my snarky overlapping. Oh fuck, Tendeka. Fuck. I'm sorry. Maybe it can be cleaned up. If I can get it to I dunno, someone, upload it to some geek site, let them clean it up. And get to a clinic. Get the vaccine. Turn myself in. How long do I have? I still feel wholesome total.

I look up for helicopters. But it wasn't casting. I'm okay. They're not looking yet. I hit save. I sprint down the stairs. I don't look back.

And it's only when I'm back in my apt, with the door doublelocked and the fridge up against it, already uploading the files to my machine, that I notice my wrist is glowsome green, a pale jellyfish phosphorescence shining through. I switch the channel on my screen to mirror for scrutiny. I look immaculate health. I close my eyes, probe how I'm feeling. Freaked. Definitely. But not sick.

It gets worse. The RSS news feed pops up on my screen, above my upload window. I'm about to click away annoyed, when I see that Tendeka's face is on every channel, his face dominating the screen, Osama, coupled with some kid, already arrested, so filthy haggard it takes an instant for me to catch on that it's little Zukes.

My first thinking is how much shit I'm in. How I need to just set fire to my entire apt and all the evidential and walk away, disappear. What flammables do I have at handy?

Or.

Or I have the total sony exclusive on the untimely and grotesque death of a terrorist.

Or a martyr. Depends who's paying.

I can't stick here, though. They've already been here once. And they're sure to notice Tendeka's corpse above. Hard to miss with all the splatter.

I stuff the coat, spare clothes and my laptop and fuckit, the VIM, cos wherever I'm going, I'll still need a clean-up. I step out the door into my whole new bright, feeling exhaust and exhilarated.

And thirsty.