

A MARKET OF THE SENSES

Beyond the station, the entry way into Tranquility, AKA the Big Data, was a dense ant farm of plastic tunnels, chambers, offices, factories and cafeterias, standard office complex, or rather many, folded over one another and compressed together and then crammed into the bottom third of the seemingly spherical shape of the company site. The top third was more or less the same, but of slightly higher build, boasting occasional marble and gold along with slightly cleaner plastic and rubber and served as the administration sector—the governing body of the company, for lack of a better term. The middle third was a gap, a false skyline, television sky shimmering, its technicians having long ago lost touch with regular day and night patterns, thus it changed erratically, invoking many moods and atmospheres and places elsewhere in the world that had usually ceased to be real or never was. Not that reality was valued as it had been in the past...

Reality was a commodity in the Big Data, skimmed and scanned by a million electric eyes and mics, processed into raw capital and shipped around, bought and sold, ending its journeys in the many futures machines that drove the business decisions of the management. Surveillance was the most prominent and competitive industry in the company, bleeding into almost everything. The company appointed sector specializing in this was the naturally named Surveillance subsector in the Department of Safety & Security. The agents, rubber dayglo yellow figures called Watchers, made use of their own custom gear to spy on high profile targets when a simple Searcher wouldn't do. One of these, a woman with a blonde cloud of curls by the name of Ava, designated Watcher 44, sat at a plastic café, eating a late premium breakfast of eggs and hash browns. To all nearby, she was just eating breakfast, unassuming, probably careless.

In actuality, she was working, her systems streaming a series of images and live footage that trickled into her interface from several sources, either second hand use of the company's cameras or her own personal camera clouds that floated about the grounds:

The morning shifters stroll, strut, roll, or skitter into the office, a six by twelve-foot white box—some are affixed to their stations, so they wake up, or, having been 'off the clock' for some time. Bodies and not-bodies are slid into ports, installed and or plugged in for the new day. A hundred plugins, company mandated, crunch and parse raw data, the only real desk work to be done—endless surveys and computer error corrections for the many automated systems—fill the screens... Many of the employees didn't look human anymore, mostly for efficiency reasons—the extra fingers, spider legs, wheels and compact figures help to cram them into the room, concealed by the shadows... of course when the morning bulletins started, or an audit or raid by Sector Security was carried out, the small rooms were always illuminated and opened up, the employees inside writhing like a colony of bugs exposed to the elements... [flip]

Somewhere a bloc of shoppers are being besieged by another out of whack construct on the loose—living dead virtual recreations of Marvin Gaye appearing before them and crooning about how his favorite flavor of ice cream was Norganic brand deodorant before being shot again by a virtual recreation of his father, who morphs into John Lennon who sings a little ditty about how Carbola motor oil is tasty and refreshing before being shot by a virtual Mark David Chapman who then morphs into Lana Clarkson who explains how Mothman cyberarms are good on toast all while a virtual Phil Spector walks up behind her with a pistol... [flip]

Two transports crammed with employees and a dataset that had a 98% similarity to one another were configured for the same routes, and the machines that kept them on time ensured that they had collided with one another at high speed at a junction near a commercial bloc. The impact had made many of the shoppers, who were peacefully going about their business, jump in surprise. A deafening explosion and 278 employees went up in flames, a few of the tougher ones having

to claw their way out, stumbling into the nearby blocs or halls in search of something to extinguish the fires that consumed them. Most of the shoppers glanced at the explosion, took a snapshot, sent a report in or so, and then went back to shopping. In the Department of Infrastructure & Public Works, two coordinators nearly dropped their morning mochass upon seeing the explosion on the security feeds.

“Oh fuck!” one of them, a plastic looking woman exclaimed. The other, a man with a dog head, shook his head and started to make a call to the PR people. The plastic woman turned to yell at a pair of writhing mechanical creatures that were probably fucking on the desk, techs that were supposed to make sure the systems worked properly.

“Hey, assholes, two trams just exploded!!” the plastic coordinator yelled. “What the fuck happened?!”

“Don’t look at us, you freeze dried bitch,” one of them droned out of their mouth (asshole?) from under the other. “We only make sure the damn things run.”

“Yeah, run well!” she pointed at the burning transports on the feeds. “Does that look like its running?!”

“It’s not our problem,” the techs said in unison. “You’re the coordinator, you’re supposed to coordinate.”

“And you assholes are supposed to make sure nothing has the same route!” she fired back before turning back to her screens, grumbling.

“PR’ll handle it,” the dog headed coordinator cut in.

“Good. Thanks,” the plastic one muttered with a sigh.

The following news report told of a rogue breaker sabotaging the routes of the transports, with the Administration offering birth clinic and repair coupons for the victims... [flip]

Body after body after body in a row, a fleet of data pushers, mostly serfers, sit and stare at screens, watching, selling off whatever they see (if useful), a few haggle, most of them just work part-time either doing the surveys, feeding the machine themselves, or servicing angry customer callers for their sector’s products (“...well yes, those lung models come with an expiration date explicitly spelled out in the contract, page 251, subsection C, if you’d bother to read...”). Aside from that, the day’s another slow one, another grind, time moves by

slower than before (they swear it's the foreman, padding the time out, moving the clock back) suddenly there's an alarm and a squad of ill-equipped figures lays siege to the area. One of them, a figure covered in work boots, screeches as he decks a tech in the face with boot-covered fist, another sprays cooking oil from a bottle through a lighter like a makeshift flamethrower, another, a big boy in a cast iron cooking helmet and massive spoon and cover as sword and shield, rides through and takes out a few of them, but a few retort, the counterattack begins, cables and cords as garrotes and hot coffee is set to boil, chairs converted into battering rams, the battle commences. A defender yells:

“We took your budget fair and square, you fucks!” [flip]

Tech Rich watched his house domicile burn down, going up in great waves of blue and green flames, frowning, somewhat irritated, mostly at the firefighting drones that stood, spraying any flames that carried over to any of the surrounding domiciles, but not his. Rich sighed and looked over his insurance plans. He really should have paid the fire utility fee. [flip]

As usual, the Nu-Life Birthing Clinic was limping along during the dead quarters, low accident and death numbers, so they took to doing more under the table deals for genetic builds—sex amatic versions of various Bonds (in the Connery, Brosnan and Craig builds), Bond girls, action heroes, a galaxy of starlets and stars... yet the most popular were the custom creations. Go figure. One such creation, a custom classic—a catgirl, full anime styled, oversized eyes and pupils, cat ears (empty spaces for the originals were hidden by hair), and furry tail—awoke earlier than she should have. Having been created with the intellect of a cat rather than a human (client's specification), the specimen paws at the tank and begins meowing, doing so until it shatters the glass (using the muscle mass of a fully grown woman), and begins roaming the lab, getting cuts on itself, pissing in the corner, before finding an open window and climbing out. The lunch staff, a lone tech by the name of Donovan sees the mess and immediately puts out an alert to his superior before going after the cat girl, net in hand.

Through numerous cameras and the moving cloud, Ava

watches Donovan chase the catgirl across several rooftops under the shining evening mood of the TV sky above, nearly bagging her several times. Each time the girl would spring out of the way of the net and onto the next rooftop and Donovan would give wheezing chase. They spilled into a nearby commerce bloc, where Donovan finally cornered the specimen in the alley between two shops, only to be attacked by participants of the nearby Venus Immortal rally, who only saw a young, naked girl being preyed upon by a large man in scrubs... [flip]

The next few images are of the futures game, winners and losers of the Need Machine respectively:

A small futures firm contained in a single room buzzes warmly, its owner, a paunchy little goblin by the name of Giro, and sole employee—a halflife girl by the name of Janey—sit and wait for those wonderful numbers to come in from the owner’s many little connections. The girl is contained in a metal box, a young angel floating in a tank of liquids and wire. Giro does a crossword cube while he waits for the futures machines to kick on. The Janey machine speaks suddenly, droning in a voice that was hers and yet not hers, accompanied with print that appeared on his interface after being decrypted:

“Today’s forecast: The new season of *Bunny Baron* has finished production and is projected to have a 20 million plus viewership within the first six months. The Uberbody XL is hitting the stores with an 85% profit margin, with an Uberbody XXL being rolled out shortly. 13th Candle instacrash cyberarms by Black Candle has seen record level preorders from licensed and unlicensed dealers. Target demographics indicate that the forthcoming adaption of *This Way For The Gas, Ladies & Gentlemen* will yield substantial profit among family audiences and older viewers...” [flip]

Algorithms screaming gold, the Disney rep drone reappears from the hidden bunker in the wastes to present a dev kit for the seventeenth remake of *The Wizard of Oz*, set in the early 21st century War on Terror and a modern sound track boasting 50 recreated dead stars with pending *Toy Story* and *Shrek* remakes and a swath of fully combustible contracts if the mouse isn’t honored... [flip]

The ad campaign for the premiere of *The Sprawl* required several platoons of mercs, a fleet of breakers, and several automated AIs, who proceeded to run amok across the Big Data, assaulting media firms and hijacking their feeds, busting into as many employee interfaces as they could, or just flooding the feeds with advertisements for the show. In some cases, a few of these ads, usually at random, would brick a few hapless employees or cause irreparable damage, or a few of the merc groups would end up getting into a shootout with Sector Security. Casualties were unavoidable and, if anything, simply boosted the amount of attention for the show. [flip]

Elsewhere, a large, snow white alpha wolf modder sits, hind paws cross legged, lets out a mournful whine as he douses himself with a bucket of expensive replica ethanol, letting it soak into his fur and trickle down onto the rug he sits on. He sits in the center of an empty office as a secretary pours more fuel and sets him alight with a flare. He goes up in seconds, a pillar of fire shoots to the ceiling, darkening the room—orange and yellow in black. The burning figure in the center of the fire pillar sits peacefully and is consumed in penance, for the catharsis of the investors who bet wrong on his word. The investors watch the scene through a series of cameras, the lenses reflecting the burning modder like stars in the dark. [flip]

Several now: One arms an IED and blows him and his team to smithereens with someone somewhere profiting off a dead pool... An analyst from Thoughtbase has every investor who appears in person gifted a throwing knife to be used on him after a lengthy apology and explanation... A few live streams occur of a few analysts and firm owners willingly entering a ring with a Bloodhaus fighter or are strapped, awake and conscious, to an operating table, or be willingly framed and given to JAMBI, or be put in a hangman stream, etc... One or two simply off themselves, by gun or by noose. A few do so comfortably (by pill and by overdose). A few brokers jump ship, burning their firms to the ground, dumping their identities, digging up new/old ones and trying again from scratch. A few of these runners are hunted down by irate investors, tracked down by hungry searchers and watchers

and are dragged out of their new lives to be strung up and liquidated. The smarter ones vanish completely, becoming new people entirely, experienced new meat, sometimes into the same jobs with the same partners... [flip]

The last flip turns to a darkened room, an ageless man in cobalt and white heavy armor sits in some sort of seat, face faintly resembling a vintage action hero—shaggy hair, thick trimmed beard, reddish brown, pale green eyes frozen in vague irritation, face illuminated by a dashboard of instruments—suddenly the man’s eyes dart up to the screen, aware of the camera.

“Good morning, Ava,” he intones, his voice is impassive, but has a tinge of comfort, bringing up a mug from just off screen to his lips, fresh coffee.

“Hullo, James,” Ava giggles into the man’s interface. “When will you ever let me get the drop on you...?”

“I’d be a shitty security man if I did, now would I?”

Ava sighs, smiling, teasing. “You’re no fun...”

“Not on the job I’m not,” the man replies.

“Bad day?”

“Latest of many...”

The man in the screen is James Maynard Kincaid, Director of the Department of Safety & Security. He is currently dealing with the morning onslaught—review and approval of new sectors, equipment orders, and new hires, new patrols, restructuring proposals, stock reports, efficiency reports, arms reports, effectiveness reports, etc—all trickling down the various screens inside the little room, actually a cockpit of some kind, Ava could see. His eyes occasionally flickered, showing that a lot was going on his interface too. Something popped up in Ava’s interface too, a warning from her plugin, an impending crime in progress. One check and Ava passed it on to Kincaid.

“Heads up, Sector 5252 is being hit up. Illegal op.”

Kincaid frowned. A sigh seeped through his lips as a warning by his own systems confirmed it. Nothing on the boards about a factory raid, on a high end one, no less. He popped into the reserves and found them all on vacation. “Aw shit. Not a single available unit. Alright, lemmie just find the nearest exit...”

With a motion of his hand, the darkness of the cockpit was eroded by a greasy vomit mixture of multicolored lights pouring forth from in between the parting windshield panels. There was a glimpse of a massive concrete tunnel, lined with holiday lights, moving past at high speed, before a foam snowman suddenly appeared, flying into the screen, bouncing harmlessly off of it and out of sight. Several more followed, Kincaid, glancing at his other screens in irritation to find a crashed truck of makers, of which were now running amok in their display modes (holiday style), pumping out an avalanche of foam snowmen that uttered approved holiday slogans and waved at people. Kincaid's hopper, a black and blue shard of glossy metal, cut through the avalanche with ease and continued onto the first bloc, rounding the corner to find a dense cluster of morning traffic—several transports loaded to the gills with employees sat next to several custom hoppers and a slew of smaller hoppers, a floating wall of multicolored metal beetles. With another wave, Kincaid's hopper dropped to the blacktop beneath it all, and continued on, passing by a few wheeled vintage vehicles and units. Ava's voice drifted into his ears again.

"You on an all-night shift again?"

Kincaid sipped more coffee. "Yep. Another rally last night. More false flag attacks. Of course, no one gives a shit that my boys taking the brunt of it all. I gotta talk to Adder soon."

"And how is the big boss of this fine establishment?"

"Quiet. Probably another long gaming session. Hopefully he snaps out of it in time for this coming meeting."

As Kincaid's hopper screamed down the loop, under dense clusters of transports and hoppers, bits of holiday flair and décor falling from the morning congestion like a bad parade pelted the hopper.

"Fucking holidays," Kincaid muttered.

"Oh, such a festive mood you've got!" Ava commented. "You know surly men are in, right?"

Kincaid snorted. Ava continued.

"Speaking of which, I heard you're in the dating market..."

"Considered it," Kincaid said, looking up, his frown bending into slight smile. "You really gotta give me some privacy now and then."

Ava giggled. "It's my job to spy on you, remember?"

"For me," Kincaid corrected. "Besides, I have a date for the holiday ball."

"Liar. I can see that smile... Unless you mean with me..."

Kincaid was going to reply, keep up their little game, when there was a brief bleep from his gear and Ava spoke, the tone of her voice going full professional.

"You're coming up on the site, Breaker 1."

"Roger," Kincaid replied, doing the same. The clock was on, the logs were rolling, the job had officially begun. A new report template popped into his vision and was promptly autofilled. "UNAUTHORIZED TERRORIST OPERATION", the felony read. The factory, a large, flat rectangular cube of concrete just past an overflowing commerce bloc, appeared around the bend of the tunnel. Kincaid's hopper slowed to a low hum.

"Good luck, Breaker 1," Ava said.

Across the rooftops in a factory bloc, shadows in a sea of black move invisibly, flowing around projection after projection and each light from seven different directions. A momentary lapse of effort reveals a short, strangely proportioned, black clad humanoid, holding a SMG... A flash and then back into the sea of shadows. The shadows spring, gooey, stretching, from the black and onto the factory's corrugated rooftops, breaking up into numerous shadowy figures, humanoids, squat, in a loosely disciplined formation that scrambles across. Below, the factory hums quietly, automated innards at work, a line of packages are loaded up by a sorting machine, several metal ivory spiders attached to the ceiling, each 'leg' tipped with a delicate claw that grabs a box and loads it onto a pallet. The packages together form a cube. The cube is then coated in a saliva like layer of plastic that cools and toughens, spat upon by another spider like machine, and then it is carted away by moving block on wheels. Repeat. The whole process moves faster than several seconds and putting your limbs anywhere in the space would guarantee you'd lose it.

In a disused office space across the street is a lookout, a bunny headed girl in all black, watching through a pair of

plus-eyes, irises expanding and contracting like shutters to focus on the stockpile in the yard—the many shipments pallets neatly placed side by side, cubes of plastic wrapped packages forming a rapidly assembling army that glistens under the spotlights. The bunny headed girl scratches an itch and cuts herself again, forgetting, cursing, and then trying to focus through the pain on the many little machines moving across the plastic covered shipments, matte painted bodies creating dark figures. Occasionally the shapes stop and stare, inspect for a bit before moving again, fluidly. The assault began with a whistle in the front of the factory—a pinwheel of sparks from the darkness landing in the front door, perplexing the guard units momentarily, until the pinwheel revealed itself as the burning fuse of a pipebomb. The blast is somewhat weak, barely blowing the legs off of one of the guard units, and shattering a few windows, but there's more: A series of pinwheels, fly from the dark and pelt the front of the factory clumsily, followed by a series of the same explosions, this time, gathering in a palpable string of explosions that rattle the factory.

Instantly the alarms go off, the defense systems kick on, defensive drones and security units awaken and emerge from their closets and march to the front. However, it's all sluggish, orders and connections hampered, dragged down, diagnostics point to a cyberattack: The actual assault group waits in an old ice cream transport just down the block, beastkin and modders wrapped up in armor and assault gear, rifles, shotguns, and SMGs, ready for war. They kneel in a circle and cite the Litany of Bunny Von Rictofen:

“Our father from the burrows, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in the earth as it is in heaven. Give to us our daily berry, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us...”

“What the fuck are they doing?” whispers a woman in military fatigues, short shock of dark hair, military type, the name on her jacket reading “JANE ZERO”, seated near the cab of the transport on a footlocker. Besides her is a man in black, vintage cigarette hanging from his mouth, face beheld an eternal look of vague amusement, now contorted into a

mask of concentration given a ghoulish disposition by the dark and the light of his machine. His hands, pale spiders that move on a rubber keyboard, show two more fingers on one hand, and an extra on the other, his temp profile showing identifying him as John Dove, or as he is usually known as, John 13.

“Battle litany Bunny Baron does before taking flight,” John 13 replies. “Ain’t you seen the show?”

“No, I’m a security gal,” Zero replies, sitting back against the wall of the transport next to the little temp cockpit 13 had set up. “I got my own little world to worry and keep up with.”

Jane sighs, staring up into the one meager light illuminating the truck. The assault team, half modeled after characters from Bunny Baron, at least, as evidenced from their silhouettes, rise to their feet, and after a short burst of German, they immediately burst through the rear doors and sprint into the darkness.

“Goddamn muties selling my contract off...” Jane grumbles. She pauses, glancing at 13. “No offense.”

“None taken,” 13 replies. “I have no love for the church.”

“You get it worked up yet?” Zero questions, checking a pistol, inspecting its parts.

“I’ve already hosed the security systems, but there’s like seven backups, so...” 13 just shrugs, glancing at a camera feed showing the distraction team attacking the front, before switching it to the other showing the recently departed assault team now moving about the cubes of plastic-coated merchandise, tossing incendiary bombs here and there, string the whole place to blow... One of the team members stops to tear at the plastic, revealing the package—a premium edition Bunny Baron Bunny Von Rictofen tm Smart Companion. Besides 13, Zero reads the manifesto set to be published for the third time, and like the previous two times she struggles not to laugh, only now finally cackling audibly, shaking her head.

“...the indomitable Bunny Von Rictofen, being the main character, should be represented in meatspace with precise and strict standards to its approved designs. The arms are furry, like an actual rabbit’s, and white, not flesh colored... it is unacceptable for this disrespect for the character—” Jane

recites mockingly before sitting back and grimacing in pain. “Goddammit, I need some better contracts...”

“Don’t worry,” 13 replies. “I’ve made some proper connections, so we won’t have to slum it out for much longer.”

“And why are you here?” Zero replied, eyeing him irritably. “To watch me suffer?”

“I wanna test my gear against Sector Security,” 13 replied dryly, lips curling into a smile. Zero frowned.

“Ok, two things—one, it’s the holiday season, so good luck. That’s why these fuckers are doing this now. Two, if Sector Security shows up, I’m out. Docked rating be damned. I have friends and connections there. Don’t wanna shit where I eat.”

“Fair enough,” 13 shrugged, turning to stare back with his suave, mischievous smile. Fuck. Zero’s extra senses feel out and know he’s eager to see some shit go down, and she finds herself more so endeared to his little meatball. Two weeks and Zero knows she’ll be around this joker for a while. The only mutie she knows that’s decked out with some good gear, and can use it, mutations be damned. It’s like gravity: it’s so natural, they both know it, so they don’t rock the boat. Zero’s already used to it, but 13 might think it odd... 13’s gone back to work, fingers moving faster, scripts running, several streams of information piped in from some nearby operatives giving him ammo to keep on. He stops, lips curling into a smile, eyes dangerous.

“A Sector Security unit just pulled into the commerce bloc over yonder.”

“Goddammit...” Zero mutters, arms folded. “You better cloak us then, fucker. I’m not getting snaked out.”

“Alright, alright...” 13 replies, running a few programs, a few scripts, enshrouding them in digital secrecy. “There. We’re invisible.”

Jane frowns. “Wait, just one unit?”

“Yeah, it seems so,” 13 replies. “Just one grunt... he’s on foot, moving across the bloc, from what I can see from the cameras...”

“What’s he look like?” Zero was already next to 13, eyes wide, leaning over 13’s shoulder. He frowned.

“Whassa matter...?”

“If it’s just one, it could be one of Kincaid’s lieutenants,”

Zero replied, sounding shaken. “You don’t fuck with them. They’re always strapped with the best gear and armaments.”

A pause of reflection. “Always wanted to join them...”

On the camera feeds, the attackers, agents of the Kaninchenbau, are being pushed back, the ones in the back moving faster, now battling it out with the strange shapes, revealed to be guard units. The image switched to a shot of a packed food court, glossy and glistening with holiday cheer and lights and logos, people politely parting to allow the one grunt through, and no sooner does Kincaid come close enough to recognize does his irritable green eyes dart up to the camera, meeting 13 and Zero, the latter of which gasps.

“Oh fuck! Ok, we are fucking out!” Zero replies, moving up to the front of the transport, pushing through the cab door. There’s a squawk of surprise and pain, and then the driver, a tech in the visage of Enrich Houndog, is pushed out onto the street. Before 13 can even talk sense into Zero, the transports already moving, almost knocking him over, the ground falling away through the concealed window in the side.

“Ey, babe, calm the fuck down—”

“Keep those cloaks running, you fuck!” Zero calls from the cab.

13 goes to ask when his own systems warn him of prying eyes. Two of them. Moving quick through the layers and the proxies, good gear, strong gear. 13 almost resorts to his emergency nuke before Zero slings the transport out into the tunnels and around several corners, the ice cream jingle blaring. The hands fall away. His machine had shut itself off—the first cautionary trigger.

“Oh shit,” 13 comments.

“You’re goddamn right,” Zero says. “Fuck it, we’re gonna hit up that church, empty that collections box and then lay low, ok?”

“Relax,” 13 replies. “Those connections I’ve got’ll help.”

Zero snorts. “I hope so. Still hitting up that church though...”

Ava watches the ice cream transport scream away, jingles running rampant down the halls, with a smile and a sip of coffee. The meatball within was good. Pretty good. Not quite

primo stuff, but he managed to get away, which was always a sign of quality.

“Smart,” she comments. To Kincaid: “Breaker and what I’m assume was a getaway guard, both hired guns, just skedaddled. Couldn’t identify, and I’m sure they’ll junk the transport. Still, less problems.”

“Figures,” Kincaid replied, trotting through the bloc. “If I had backup, they wouldn’t gotten away, but it’s nice to have some people run away for fucking once...”

Kincaid moves through the crowds, systems overtaking the remaining voodoo of the mutant in the truck, and now moving onto the factory. Already he’s snaked the manifesto and his mood sours more. His forearm ejects a thin, long block of metal that unfolds into a rifle. The systems have already pegged the attackers and their identities, no matter what crappy little cloaks they use, and Kincaid sends a request for control of the immediate skybox.

The fighting at the factory slows, the gimped security systems overtaken by the assaults, seconds away from burning the merch, one bomb has gone off prematurely, melting a few blocks and a bunny modder in the process. Drunk on the power, the fighters move to attacking the factory instead of falling back, shooting wildly at the equipment, living the dream—

So, they’re a bit surprised when the darkness falls away, the sky suddenly brightens up, a square of bright sky in the dark of the comfy holiday night above the factory. A red block also appears with a warning: “ATTENTION FUCKHEADS. SCATTER NOW BEFORE I BLOW YOUR HEADS OFF. LOVE, JAMES KINCAID, DIRECTOR OF SECTOR SECURITY.” Most of the attackers stop in their tracks, confused, a few see the words and immediately bolt. In the front, the assault team stops and sees Kincaid waltzing up to them, a lone grunt, sour faced, rifle in hand, but lazily pointed down. Most are unsure, and most freeze in terror when they see the certified identity, but... His voice echoes from the factory speakers now:

“Attention, once again, this is Director Kincaid. You are performing an illegal op and I’m going to ask you to surrender

or clear the premises. If you don't, I'm legally not responsible for what will happen to you. Read the ToS."

A few do bolt, but too many are still out of it and they turn their guns towards him.

"Alright, if that's how you want it—"

A few suddenly open fire, their little rabbit and dog hands moving fast—but not fast enough. From the darkness perimeter comes a ray of light, shining sapphire, that swings across the front of the factory and a few of the attackers and blinks out. Suddenly their bodies slide off a fresh smoldering cut, falling to the concrete in two. Two more try and fight back, but Kincaid's already shooting them, rifle springing up, two rounds neatly cleaving their heads off. Four attackers, still armed, but not engaging, watch this in horror and after a moment's thought, drop their guns and immediately flee.

"Good," Kincaid mutters as he approaches the factory.

It's not much better in the back. A dog headed modder in black sprays a guard unit with his SMG, and goes to toss an incendiary bomb, but an arc of white lightning shoots from the darkness and sends the modder into seizures. The incendiary bomb goes off and melts the dog modder and two more agents as well as a few blocks of merch. A squirrel headed modder springs out from behind a few blocks of merch to spray gunfire into the dark, into the origin of the lightning. The response is a rapid flash from behind, and suddenly the squirrel modder explodes in a thousand places, a rapid series of eruptions that liquefies him. A few more arcs of lightning reply to gunfire, as do more of the rapid flashes. More combatants fall to the floor, either charred or liquefied. The attack force crumbles, most abandoning their weapons and springing over the gates. A few surrender. The invisible attackers make themselves known: drifting from the dark into the artificial daylight are two drones, spherical, containing one eye, one containing a small barrel, the other a kind of pronged fork. The barreled drone is emblazoned with the word "TAXT", the pronged drone with the word "ULTRACHEESE". A third, appearing to join the other two, this one with a glossy lens, is labeled "CERPIN".

The drones drift cautiously forward into the factory to meet

their operator, who has found the ring leader—a rabbit headed coordinator by the name of Jesiah Le. The modder, dressed in black and wielding an SMG, holds up a remote detonator to Kincaid as he approaches her in the control room.

“Don’t come any closer!” Le squawks. “I push this, the whole factory blows! And then you fuckers will learn to respect the rabbit!”

Kincaid sighs, rifle in hand, but not pointed at her. “Would you just put that down and go home? I don’t even care about the factory, but you’re just giving me more reports to write.”

“We are the Kaninchenbau! We are legion! Kaninchenbau uber alles!”

She holds the remote up, systems informing Kincaid that her muscles are moving to press the button. Then, a flash. Another ray of sapphire flashes across the room, moving expertly across the girl’s arm and then her hand falls to the tiling, leaving a smoldering stump at the wrist. The girl stops and stares at her stump, momentarily knocked from her hysteria. She sees the detonator and goes to reach for it with her good hand, only for the severed hand to suddenly erupt into a series of small explosions. The hand and the detonator vanish into metal pieces and giblets as Taxt floats into the room, Cerpin and Ultracheese behind it. Kincaid just stands bored.

“Go home or I’ll have Cheese give you muscle spasms for a week.”

In the distance there are siren, several grunts off duty have clocked in and are now finally arriving, making Kincaid sigh.

“Goddamn holidays...”

Back on patrol, screaming through the tunnels of the Big Data’s loop, Kincaid tops off his report to Moreland, one of his lieutenants. On the screens, an obsidian man, bald, glossy dome, and an amused smile listens to Kincaid.

“Arms,” Kincaid reiterated. “That’s why they attacked. I swear we’ve got to corral the marketing people sometime...”

He was pouring some authentic whiskey from his stash into his morning coffee. Moreland just chuckled empathetically.

“I’ll put some sanctions on the Kaninchenbau. That might keep them from pulling this shit for a while.”

“Thanks, Thebe,” Kincaid replied. “I’ll see you at the office.”

“Roger,” Moreland reported before vanishing.

The following moment of silence was broken by a faintly audible giggle in his ears.

“And thanks to you, Ava,” Kincaid intoned before taking a sip. “I’ll put in the invoice real quick—”

“Why don’t you pay me in dinner tonight? Hm?”

He sighed, evidently cornered. “If I can find the time. Ok?”

“You tease,” Ava replied. A pause. “Ok, it’s a date!”

“Employee fraternization is frowned upon,” Kincaid intoned in between sips of coffee, teasing right back. “But I’ll make an exception this once.”

“One day you’ll let your guard down around me...” Ava muttered.

The pair continued teasing and flirting as the hopper screamed around the late morning’s congested traffic. Another day was in full swing.