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For Feòrag, with love

ences it, microelectrodes in his hypothalamus trigger sensitive neurons. Revulsion and shame flood him at the sight of her face, the sense of his vulnerability. Manfred's metacortex, in order to facilitate his divorce, is trying to decondition his strange love. It has been working on him for weeks, but still he craves her whiplash touch, the humiliation of his wife's control, the sense of helpless rage at her unpayable taxes, demanded with interest.

Aineko watches him from the pillow, purring continuously. Retractable claws knead the bedding, first one paw, then the next. Aineko is full of ancient feline wisdom that Pamela installed back when mistress and master were exchanging data and bodily fluids rather than legal documents. Aineko is more cat than robot, these days, thanks in part to her hobbyist's interest in feline neuroanatomy. Aineko knows that Manfred is experiencing nameless neurasthenic agonies, but really doesn't give a shit about that as long as the power supply is clean and there are no intruders.

Aineko curls up and joins Manfred in sleep, dreaming of laser-guided mice.

. . .

Manfred is jolted awake by the hotel room phone shrilling for attention.

"Hello?" he asks, fuzzily.

"Manfred Macx?" It's a human voice, with a gravelly East Coast accent.

"Yeah?" Manfred struggles to sit up. His mouth feels like the inside of a tomb, and his eyes don't want to open.

"My name is Alan Glashwicz, of Smoot, Sedgwick Associates. Am I correct in thinking that you are the Manfred Macx who is a director of a company called, uh, agalmic dot holdings dot root dot one-eight-four dot ninety-seven dot A-for-able dot B-for-baker dot five, incorporated?"

"Uh." Manfred blinks and rubs his eyes. "Hold on a moment." When the retinal patterns fade, he pulls on his glasses and powers them up. "Just a second now." Browsers and menus ricochet through his sleep-laden eyes. "Can you repeat the company name?"

"Sure." Glashwicz repeats himself patiently. He sounds as tired as Manfred feels.

"Um." Manfred finds it, floating three tiers down an elaborate object hierarchy. It's flashing for attention. There's a priority interrupt, an incoming lawsuit that hasn't propagated up the inheritance tree yet. He prods at the object with a property browser. "I'm afraid I'm not a director of that company, Mr. Glashwicz. I appear to be retained by it as a technical contractor with nonexecutive power, reporting to the president, but frankly, this is the first time I've ever heard of the company. However, I can tell you who's in charge if you want."

"Yes?" The attorney sounds almost interested. Manfred figures it out; the guy's in New Jersey. It must be about three in the morning over there.

Malice—revenge for waking him up—sharpens Manfred's voice. "The president of agalmic.holdings.root.184.97.AB5 is agalmic.holdings.root.184.97.201. The secretary is agalmic.holdings.root.184.D5, and the chair is agalmic.holdings.root.184.E8.FF. All the shares are owned by those companies in equal measure, and I can tell you that their regulations are written in Python. Have a nice day, now!" He thumps the bedside phone control and sits up, yawning, then pushes the do-not-disturb button before it can interrupt again. After a moment he stands up and stretches, then heads to the bathroom to brush his teeth, comb his hair, and figure out where the lawsuit originated and how a human being managed to get far enough through his web of robot companies to bug him.

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While he's having breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Manfred decides that he's going to do something unusual for a change: He's going to make himself temporarily rich. This is a change because Manfred's normal profession is making other people rich. Manfred doesn't believe in scarcity or zero-sum games or competition—his world is too fast and information dense to accommodate primate hierarchy games. However, his current situation calls for him to do something radical: something like making himself a temporary billionaire so he can blow off his divorce settlement in an instant, like a wily accountancy octo-

pus escaping a predator by vanishing in a cloud of his own black ink.

Pam is chasing him partially for ideological reasons—she still hasn't given up on the idea of government as the dominant superorganism of the age—but also because she loves him in her own peculiar way, and the last thing any self-respecting dom can tolerate is rejection by her slave. Pam is a born-again postconservative, a member of the first generation to grow up after the end of the American century. Driven by the need to fix the decaying federal system before it collapses under a mound of Medicare bills, overseas adventurism, and decaying infrastructure, she's willing to use self-denial, entrapment, predatory mercantilism, dirty tricks, and any other tool that boosts the bottom line. She doesn't approve of Manfred's jetting around the world on free airline passes, making strangers rich, somehow never needing money. She *can* see his listing on the reputation servers, hovering about thirty points above IBM: All the metrics of integrity, effectiveness, and goodwill value him above even that most fundamentalist of open-source computer companies. And she knows he craves her tough love, wants to give himself to her completely. So why is he running away?

The reason he's running away is entirely more ordinary. Their unborn daughter, frozen in liquid nitrogen, is an unimplanted ninety-six-hour-old blastula. Pam's bought into the whole Parents for Traditional Children parasite meme. PTC are germ-line recombination refuseniks: They refuse to have their children screened for fixable errors. If there's one thing that Manfred really *can't* cope with, it's the idea that nature knows best—even though that isn't the point she's making. One steaming row too many, and he kicked back, off to traveling fast and footloose again, spinning off new ideas like a memetic dynamo and living on the largesse of the new paradigm. File for divorce on grounds of irreconcilable ideological differences. No more whiplash-and-leather sex.

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Before he hits the TGV for Rome, Manfred takes time to visit a model airplane show. It's a good place to be picked up by a CIA stringer—he's had a tip-off that someone will be there—

and besides, flying models are hot hacker shit this decade. Add microtechnology, cameras, and neural networks to balsa-wood flyers, and you've got the next generation of military stealth flyer: It's a fertile talent-show scene, like the hacker cons of yore. This particular gig is happening in a decaying out-of-town supermarket that rents out its shop floor for events like this. Its emptiness is a sign of the times, ubiquitous broadband and expensive gas. (The robotized warehouse next door is, in contrast, frenetically busy, packing parcels for home delivery. Whether they telecommute or herd in meat-space offices, people still need to eat.)

Today, the food hall is full of people. Eldritch ersatz insects buzz menacingly along the shining empty meat counters without fear of electrocution. Big monitors unfurled above the deli display cabinets show a weird, jerky view of a three-dimensional nightmare, painted all the synthetic colors of radar. The feminine-hygiene galley has been wheeled back to make room for a gigantic plastic-shrouded tampon five meters long and sixty centimeters in diameter—a microsat launcher and conference display, plonked there by the show's sponsors in a transparent attempt to talent-spot the up-and-coming engineering geeks.

Manfred's glasses zoom in and grab a particularly fetching Fokker triplane that buzzes at face height through the crowd: He pipes the image stream up to one of his websites in real time. The Fokker pulls up in a tight Immelman turn beneath the dust-shrouded pneumatic cash tubes that line the ceiling, then picks up the trail of an F-104G. Cold War Luftwaffe and Great War Luftwaffe dart across the sky in an intricate game of tag. Manfred's so busy tracking the warbirds that he nearly trips over the fat white tube's launcher-erector.

"Eh, Manfred! More care, *s'il vous plait!*"

He wipes the planes and glances round. "Do I know you?" he asks politely, even as he feels a shock of recognition.

"Amsterdam, three years ago." The woman in the double-breasted suit raises an eyebrow at him, and his social secretary remembers her for him, whispers in his ear.

"Annette from Arianespace marketing?" She nods, and he focuses on her. Still dressing in the last-century retro mode that confused him the first time they met, she looks like a

Kennedy-era Secret Service man: cropped bleached crew cut like an angry albino hedgehog, pale blue contact lenses, black tie, narrow lapels. Only her skin color hints at her Berber ancestry. Her earrings are cameras, endlessly watching. Her raised eyebrow turns into a lopsided smile as she sees his reaction. "I remember. That cafe in Amsterdam. What brings you here?"

"Why"—her wave takes in the entirety of the show—"this talent show, of course." An elegant shrug and a wave at the orbit-capable tampon. "It's *good* talent. We're hiring this year. If we re-enter the launcher market, we must employ only the best. Amateurs, not time-servers, engineers who can match the very best Singapore can offer."

For the first time, Manfred notices the discreet corporate logo on the flank of the booster. "You outsourced your launch-vehicle fabrication?"

Annette pulls a face as she explains with forced casualness, "Hotels were more profitable, this past decade. The high-ups, they cannot be bothered with the rocketry, no? Things that go fast and explode, they are *passé*, they say. Diversify, they say. Until—" She gives a very Gallic shrug. Manfred nods; her earrings are recording everything she says, for the purposes of due diligence.

"I'm glad to see Europe re-entering the launcher business," he says seriously. "It's going to be very important when the nanosystems conformational replication business gets going for real. A major strategic asset to any corporate entity in the field, even a hotel chain." *Especially now they've wound up NASA and the moon race is down to China and India*, he thinks sourly.

Her laugh sounds like glass bells chiming. "And yourself, *mon cher*? What brings you to the Confederation? You must have a deal in mind."

"Well"—it's Manfred's turn to shrug—"I was *hoping* to find a CIA agent, but there don't seem to be any here today."

"That is not surprising," Annette says resentfully. "The CIA thinks the space industry, she is dead. Fools!" She continues for a minute, enumerating the many shortcomings of the Central Intelligence Agency with vigor and a distinctly Parisian rudeness. "They are become almost as bad as AP and

Reuters since they go public," she adds. "All these wire services! And they are, ah, stingy. The CIA does not understand that good news must be paid for at market rates if freelance stringers are to survive. They are to be laughed at. It is *so* easy to plant disinformation on them, almost as easy as the Office of Special Plans . . ." She makes a banknote-riffing gesture between fingers and thumb. By way of punctuation, a remarkably maneuverable miniature ornithopter swoops around her head, does a double-back flip, and dives off in the direction of the liquor display.

An Iranian woman wearing a backless leather minidress and a nearly transparent scarf barges up and demands to know how much the microbooster costs to buy. She is dissatisfied with Annette's attempt to direct her to the manufacturer's website, and Annette looks distinctly flustered by the time the woman's boyfriend—a dashing young air force pilot—shows up to escort her away. "Tourists," she mutters, before noticing Manfred, who is staring off into space with fingers twitching. "Manfred?"

"Uh—what?"

"I have been on this shop floor for six hours, and my feet, they kill me." She takes hold of his left arm and very deliberately unhooks her earrings, turning them off. "If I say to you I can write for the CIA wire service, will you take me to a restaurant and buy me dinner and tell me what it is you want to say?"

. . .

Welcome to the second decade of the twenty-first century; the second decade in human history when the intelligence of the environment has shown signs of rising to match human demand.

The news from around the world is distinctly depressing this evening. In Maine, guerrillas affiliated with Parents for Traditional Children announce they've planted logic bombs in antenatal-clinic gene scanners, making them give random false positives when checking for hereditary disorders: The damage so far is six illegal abortions and fourteen lawsuits.

The International Convention on Performing

Rights is holding a third round of crisis talks in an attempt to stave off the final collapse of the WIPO music licensing regime. On the one hand, hard-liners representing the Copyright Control Association of America are pressing for restrictions on duplicating the altered emotional states associated with specific media performances: As a demonstration that they mean business, two "software engineers" in California have been kneecapped, tarred, feathered, and left for dead under placards accusing them of reverse-engineering movie plot lines using avatars of dead and out-of-copyright stars.

On the opposite side of the fence, the Association of Free Artists is demanding the right to perform music in public without a recording contract, and is denouncing the CCAA as being a tool of Mafiya apparachiks who have bought it from the moribund music industry in an attempt to go legit. FBI Director Leonid Kulbyshev responds by denying that the Mafiya is a significant presence in the United States. But the music biz's position isn't strengthened by the near collapse of the legitimate American entertainment industry, which has been accelerating ever since the nasty naughties.

A marginally intelligent voicemail virus masquerading as an IRS auditor has caused havoc throughout America, garnishing an estimated eighty billion dollars in confiscatory tax withholdings into a numbered Swiss bank account. A different virus is busy hijacking people's bank accounts, sending ten percent of their assets to the previous victim, then mailing itself to everyone in the current mark's address book: a self-propelled pyramid scheme in action. Oddly, nobody is complaining much. While the mess is being sorted out, business IT departments have gone to standby, refusing to process any transaction that doesn't come in the shape of ink on dead trees.

Tipsters are warning of an impending readjustment in the overinflated reputations market, follow-

ing revelations that some u-media gurus have been hyped past all realistic levels of credibility: The consequent damage to the junk-bonds market in integrity is serious.

The EU council of independent heads of state has denied plans for another attempt at eurofederalism, at least until the economy rises out of its current slump. Three extinct species have been resurrected in the past month; unfortunately, endangered ones are now dying off at a rate of one a day. And a group of militant anti-GM campaigners are being pursued by Interpol, after their announcement that they have spliced a metabolic pathway for cyanogenic glycosides into maize seed corn destined for human-edible crops. There have been no deaths yet, but having to test breakfast cereal for cyanide is really going to dent consumer trust.

About the only people who're doing well right now are the uploaded lobsters—and the crusties aren't even remotely human.

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Manfred and Annette eat on the top deck of the buffet car, chatting as their TGV barrels through a tunnel under the English Channel. Annette, it transpires, has been commuting daily from Paris, which was, in any case, Manfred's next destination. From the show, he messaged Aineko to round up his baggage and meet him at St. Pancras Station, in a terminal like the shell of a giant steel woodlouse. Annette left her space launcher in the supermarket overnight: An unfueled test article, it is of no security significance.

The railway buffet car is run by a Nepalese fast-food franchise. "I sometimes wish for to stay on the train," Annette says as she waits for her *mismas bhat*. "Past Paris! Think. Settle back in your couchette, to awaken in Moscow and change trains. All the way to Vladivostok in two days."

"If they let you through the border," Manfred mutters. Russia is one of those places that still requires passports and asks if you are now or ever have been an anti-anticommunist: It's still trapped by its bloody-handed history. (Rewind the video