

DYSTOPOLIS

Written, Designed, and Edited by Gremlin

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For

Also by Gremlin:

News of the Stoopid [NotS]

Paroxysm

Acts of God

Terroristan

News of the Stupid

There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge.

—Rod Serling

But the fear of death in the one place was not as strong as another kind of fear, the fear of a world gone crazy, a place where anything could happen, where nothing could be trusted, where nothing was certain. A terrible place.

—Orson Scott Card

It is an unfortunate fact that the bulk of humanity is too limited in its mental vision to weigh with patience and intelligence those isolated phenomena, seen and felt only by a psychologically sensitive few, which lie outside its common experience. Men of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal; that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them; but the prosaic materialism of the majority condemns as madness the flashes of super-sight which penetrate the common veil of obvious empiricism.

—HP Lovecraft

Well, that's the way it goes.

—Rod Serling

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EPILOGUE

She moved behind him, quietly, to look beyond the mirror and out into the real world.

But she couldn't see it.

She wasn't really there.

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CHAPTER ONE

One year earlier:

The sun had not yet risen on that cold November morning; but Dante was already on the road, sealed in leather against the wind, weaving his bike through the sparse traffic along 501st at half the speed of sound.

The dichotomy: it was bullshit, but it was important; it had to be, or it could have been handled from home. His visor flashed subtly on the right, to the edge of the ghostly realtime satmap above the linear display: a kilometre ahead—five seconds away—a smallish Samsung twoseater was stalling and coasting to the side of the road, its powercells depleted just 42.1 kilos from its destination; it had of course already alerted the system, and a taxi had been despatched to collect its driver as per its warranty. Dante eased the bike to starboard to avoid the extinct vehicle, his right foot pressuring the accelerator and surging the bike up to 1000kph—the actual speedlimit for the road.

He didn't like it. Some primordial fear at the base of his reptilian brain nagged at him: people weren't meant to move this quickly, even if the road and his tyres did perform thousands of molecular fusions per second, exterminating the possibility of a skid. It was too fast. Or, as the kids would say, he was too old. The latter being more likely to his objective implants, they released a measured dose of endorphins into his system to keep him happy and focussed. He exhaled solemnly, feeling comfortably warm, as the bike shot through the go at Schwarzenegger Boulevard.

It was bullshit, but it was important; though it was less important now. Sometimes, he hated the emoregulatories; more primordial fears: *you are what you feel; when machines feel for you, you're not really you anymore.*

And then: *damnit.*

Another subtle overlay in his visor: an unmistakable translucent red octagon. The bike began its safe deceleration, the

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system having plotted out its restingplace between a red Ferrari and a yellow HewlettPackard in nanoseconds. At the go, control would be returned to Dante, who could push the bike back up to 1000, or maintain a lazier pace if he felt that conditions required it. Now, slowing electronically at the stop, Dante knew he'd be slamming the bike back up to the speedlimit once it was go; he was in fact four minutes away, with three minutes to get there; the emoregs had dulled his fear of superhuman speeds, but the urgency to get to the office on time remained awake and hungry.

Seconds ticked away: 300 to 290 to 280. The repeating projected satmap in the lower right of his screen replayed his itinerary: along 501st to Reagan, then right, left on 486th, patio, door, lobby, lift. After that, he was on his own. But, the simulation showing him reaching the lift at 0601, he knew he was going to be late, stops and goes notwithstanding.

The crosstraffic began to slow into place in his linear display, the arrows perpendicular to his route growing from green to yellow, and finally shrinking to simple red squares; he got the go, and floored the accelerator, grimacing at the slower Sony in front of him—its pussy little acceleration necessarily limiting his own, the damned system refusing to think creatively and allow him to slip past the Sony to either side. It took him three seconds to get back up to a megametre per hour.

The fleeting molecular bonds between rubber and road did their jobs, the glistening frost aside. The HamiltonBeach in his rear window shrank away in Doppler, the system unable to cheat its powerplant into making zero to max in under seven.

120 seconds till late. The countdown darkened from white numbers to red.

It was bullshit, but it was important. His peers had come in from all points: Eurasia, Antarctica, Oceania, and even Mars. The investors had similarly immigrated, from wherever those irksome little people preferred to live. The project, if nothing else in the known galaxy, warranted investors; this wasn't recycling molecules into some boring new permutation of existing technology; this was the edge, 150 seconds away, with 100 to get there.

Fuck!

'Ignore,' he told the system; after an instant of calculation, it conceded, surging the bike to 1231kph to make the go with a

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tenth of a second to spare. And he was through. The countdown fluttered momentarily, then added five seconds to his remainder.

The bike, already slowing back to 1000, tripled its efforts, dropping velocity to 325 for a precipitous right at Reagan: molecular bonding nor not, there simply was no turning ninety degrees into a close lane at the speedlimit. Not on *this* bike, anyway. One of the newer iBikes, maybe; but not on a threeyearold relic like his bulky little Nintendo. His bike was fast—faster than most Sonys—but its design sacrificed a bit of speed for a bit of conservation and durability; iBikes newer than his old machine were already dying at the sides of the roads, like the Samsung a moment ago.

Dante had of course driven cars to death in his time. It was better than the old days; there was no question of that. But, still, there was something cold and impersonal about being sent out a taxi to get the rest of the way home, thus ending the warranty and allowing the husk of a retired car to melt back into the cache of expendable molecules. In the old days—and he could just remember it now—cars would break, and could be fixed. Repaired. Modified. Painted, he thought—there had been a time when changing the colour involved some messy process of spraying large globs of molecules onto the surface, waiting for them to dry. Or, maybe he was remembering how paper had once been printed. That was all...nearly a century ago now. Remembering the details was like remembering the first Mercury landing: it happened; he remembered knowing at the time that it was happening; but, now, it was a flash of colours and sounds and possibly smells—the disassociated mnemonics of threeyearolds.

The bike slowed again, though only to 625, to arc wide onto 486th. 14, 13, 12....

Late. There was no denying it: he was late. And he had no excuse. It's not like anyone had nuked 501st, causing a backup while the road repaired itself and the radiationscrubbers converted the isotopes into the cache of expendable molecules. He'd done it to himself, staying awake for six days, finalising the data, pushing his brain beyond the limits of emoregulatory rejuvenation. He'd had to sleep for a few hours. It was that or go psychotic, be tranquilized, and sleep for a few hours anyway. He could have zoned for an hour on Thursday, allowing his nervous sys-

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tem to reboot anew; but it was important, even if it was all bullshit. He'd kept at it for 150 hours in a row.

His time was up: 0.

He could see the office now [he'd technically been able to see it back on Reagan—the upper sixty floors or so, anyway], both in linear and in satmap; it glowed faintly green in each display. -7, -8, -9....

And the computer slowed the damned bike. 800, 600, 400, 200; the molecules bonded between the road and the wheels, between the seat and the leather; 1000 to zero in nothing flat should have been possible, but physics and activists rarely met, but to conspire against the public.

And he shorted out for maybe a tenth of a second. The primordial nagging: *it's all too good to be true, as it is.*

And then it was gone, and he was at the patio, the molecules releasing his clothes from the bike and allowing him to proceed on foot; the bike, alone now, parked itself where it belonged: a patch of Concrete near the door with Dante's name in its screensaver.

Jogging across the lobby to the lift, the leather adjusting to silk, the lines converting from bikewear to officewear, the echoes of the thought fading away: everyone, Dante supposed, at every time, tended to think that it was all too good to be true. Probably, the first generation to fashion tools out of stone thought it was all too good to be true; the first generation to create steel from iron; the first to travel in aeroplanes; the first to compress terabytes of data into portable musicplayers; the first to walk out into the dim, red, peaceful sunlight of Mars without spacesuits; the first to cause death to die.

The lift saw him coming, and conjured a shuttle for him; he being alone, it was all of a metre wide, diagonally, and little more than his height. Dante lurched inside, adjusting quickly to the designated footprints, letting the molecular handshake set and getting the lift underway. The lift announced: 'Doing floor six three seven; thank you', and Dante's stomach fell away faster than the implants could dredge it back into place. People weren't meant to move this quickly.

Too good to be true....

It was weird that he'd think that, when he was late to the meet. Early, maybe; but there was nothing good about being late.

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Not that he'd be fired over it; no one really cared at any important level; it was just tacky somehow: interplanetary damned visitors, all waiting for him at the site. Bullshit apologies would be in order; additional downtime while they joked about the weather and complained about the traffic. Dante lit a cigarette; the implants released the proper endorphins to fool him into thinking it was real.

'Floor six three seven done; thank you.'

The wall disintegrated, allowing Dante to step out onto his floor before the rest of the elevator car disintegrated after it.

'Doctor Dante!'

Fucking Chang. Here it comes....

'Doctor Chang. Morning. Sorry I'm late; couldn't do it in time.'

Chang shrugged, aloof but competitive: he'd got here over three minutes ago. 'Weather?'

Dante nodded. 'Ice.'

'Bad?'

Dante shook his head, shrugging as well. The basic *whatcha gonna do* of a world in which the average vocabulary of a thousand words was rarely expended in a week.

Chang shrugged in return, agreeing. 'Let's do.'

Dante nodded, looking over the room. The rest were there and in place, most playing with their phones, not a few probably ignoring the meet in favour of simple little videogames. He smirked flatly at the probability and flicked an eyebrow subconsciously, moving toward the deck at the centre of the room. There, he turned back and cleared his throat, getting attention.

'Thanks for doing the meet,' he began, 'You'll see: the new bits do better than you know.' That explained, he slid a thumb over the biosensor on his phone, dumping the data to the main system. The result was a sporadic blitz of images—some still, others fullmotion—conveying the entirety of the project in a matter of seconds, wordlessly, beneath computerassisted incidental music.

Chang et al absorbed it, most nodding approvingly.

'Good,' Cohen said, expounding: 'Good, good.'

'Questions?' Dante asked.

Connor nodded. 'How's it do the punch?'

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Dante glowered at him, then gave the biosensor a swipe with ingrained precision; the staccato presentation rewound to a midpoint, replaying the particulars.

Connor nodded. ‘Got it.’

Dante raised his eyebrows in lieu of reiterating his offer.

‘When,’ Chang said, ‘Soon?’

‘Weeks,’ Dante returned, ‘Couple months, maybe.’

Chang considered. ‘Good. Do it.’

Dante looked to the investors, who had naturally collected off to the side. The details of the matter were unimportant; if they could make money from it, they were in. A few shifty glances betwixt them, and their foreman gave Dante a hasty nod.

Dante nodded back: *good call; you won't be disappointed; you know what to do next*. None of it in fact was telepathy; but, as readily as people could read expressions, no small thanks to deepbrain processors extrapolating meaning from invisible variations in muscular activity, there was no need for any sort of paranormal extrasensory perception; the machines handled it all.

Therefore: it was bullshit; but it was important. It was curious that trust was so limited in a world of proverbial undo buttons—so long as the implanted computers remained undamaged [and, worstcase, the latest backups residing on secured servers], death could be undone, the pain inherent in death could be unremembered, the fear of the pain could be forgotten—but, when the time came to make real decisions, which might affect generations to come, no one was willing to teleconference; everyone had to be in the room, analysing facial ticks and pheromones and tells of intent.

That Dante had been a number of seconds late had undermined the precarious trust to a slight extent; but, he perceived from the meet, that *faux pas* had been forgotten now [or, to be honest, *forgiven*, nothing being truly forgotten without a conscious effort] and he was go on his project after all.

And it *would* succeed; he had no doubts about that. The math was right; the technology was caught up and ready; the future was around the corner.

Allowing himself a smug little smile, he turned to the looping presentation, wishing he could see it all with the new eyes of the layman: the machine; the process; the insertion; the plunge itself. The breakout into the next dimension.

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CHAPTER TWO

Mon 15 Nov; 0608

Dante had no need to remain at the office—the project itself would remain on hold while the money transferred and the team and gear assembled, the latter literally. He had therefore no need to remain in the building, much to the surprise of all who learned how far out on 501st he actually lived.

He should have abandoned the house he'd bought seventy years ago; intellectually, he knew that it existed at a meaningless geographical position, and that everything important about it could be replicated to the molecule within the starscraper containing his office on 486th. But he was happy there. So, he thought, was Rebecca. It was quieter where he lived; at least, it felt that way to him, the sounds and silence entering his brain being regulated to his liking by the machines.

The sun was finally beginning to rise as he collected his bike from his parkingspot [**Have a Nice Day**, the Concrete display encouraged in a simple, happy, sensible font] and cruised it toward 486th at a single kilometre per minute before slamming it into fullspeed amidst the thickening traffic. His receptors adjusted, as they had entering the lobby a few minutes ago from night- to dayvision, this time to fifteen percent echolocation—the sun in his eyes or not, the edges of all obstacles would remain evident.

Not that it was necessary: he could have slept on the bike all the way home, the thing capable of driving itself, and his clothes with him inside them incapable of slipping off the seat. But, like most people, Dante needed constant input—something resembling importance and possibly fear. And driving into the sun, blinding in the pollutionless morning sky, with only the hints of flatshaded polygonal edges illustrating the locations of the curbs was just enough to raise his bloodpressure to the extent that it felt like it served a purpose.

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Again the fleeting thought: *it's all too perfect*. This time, it made some sense to him. He'd just won. For the moment. There would of course be the delays and whimpering attrition from the investors who could never properly translate *weeks or a couple months* to *half a year* in realtime. Presuming—and he was—that the project was faultless on paper, as it were, and allowing that, at best, it could be brought to market in six weeks, the sad fact remained that it was likely to be late summer before any results were really ready to show the moneyguys. If they'd been capable of thought beyond the magic of throwing money at a thing and making tenfold in return, they'd have caught on to the reality of industrial timelines by now.

Too perfect. But it wasn't perfect. It was the first step of a steep uphill climb—nearly a battle—to reach the goal. Soon would come the threats and blubbering: *March has done and done; show stuff or pay*.

For the record, Dante's own vocabulary wasn't so limited—wasn't really limited at all. Neither, he supposed, were those of Chang or Cohen or Connor or anyone else with a PhD. The investors? Possibly. Though, functionally, even *they* must have learned and therefore electronically remembered a million common words, half or more in English. But no one used the words anymore; Dante had tried them on people; and, while the people had seemed to understand the definitions and usage, they'd always replied in the lazy newspeak common to busy people at the edge of the future. He'd tried the simplest English forms—*I have an idea*—which elicited promptings like *you do?*, and esoteric Elizabethan quips—*I shan't phonest thou, lest serendipity avails*—triggering, apart from strange looks, *'kay*.

They got it, as he got it; none of them used it; there was no need: a picture being theoretically worth a thousand words, a squint was functionally worth a million. It was a world of shrugging savants. A starsystem, in point of fact. He made the turn from Reagan onto 501st at 625, it being a wide left, and punched the bike back up to the limit. *Too perfect*.

Today hadn't really been the first time he'd got that...impression. It wasn't really a feeling, his feelings being regulated by implants; but it also wasn't quite a hunch; it was simply a curious certainty which impossibly lacked any evidence: everything being right with the world, something was certainly wrong.

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As if he hadn't made this precise trip thousands upon thousands of times, his visor hit him with a proximity warning: his house—a small, quaint, threestorey job with a simple little lawn—loomed ahead on the left. And the bike infuriatingly slowed in imperceptible pulses, to 900, 800, 700...ultimately back to carpark speeds—about 60k; it barely leaned into the turn as it swung into his driveway to deliver him at the mouth of the walkway before parking itself in the garage.

He disengaged the helmet, letting it recede down into the nape of his transmogrifying collar even before he was out of the sun—a quick tinge of disorientation and subtle pain as his eyes failed instantly to adjust, panicking the bionics and inducing the flatshade anew. *Too perfect; no fear.*

And that was true: there was nothing to fear but fear itself, some president had said, in the nineteenth or twentieth century [he could have known the guy's name if he'd had to; it was in there somewhere, awaiting random access]; and, as was often completely misunderstood, fear without basis was like laughter without humour: a reaction to nothing, for the sake of nothing, but perhaps ones own fleeting amusement. The door saw him coming, and got out of his way.

Rebecca was upstairs on the sofa by the pool, playing *Bi-oNightmare*—a simple killthezombies immersion. He slowed to a silent stop, then crept up on her; inches from the back of her head: 'Brains!'

She spun about, levelling the gun between his eyes [but out of his reach] with the precision of a cyborg—which of course she was—and emptied the magazine into his frontal lobes before recognising him. He smirked at her: *you're taking the game entirely too seriously, my dear.*

Her portside eye twitched minutely: *don't take that magniloquent tone with me; I've not yet begun to fight.*

He was preparing a counterscowl when he instead smiled naturally. 'Hey, Babe.'

'It work?'

He nodded. 'All in. We're go.'

'Cool.'

He smiled more broadly. Decades ago, in college, he'd been sleepsurfing when he'd come across a word he hadn't learned from the dictionary: *gamerbick*; despite the etymology, it'd

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had nothing to do with rotting poultry, but described early twenty-first century female videogamers; further descriptions suggested that they were highly competitive, and often grossly overweight. His wife wasn't overweight—she was about 175 centimetres and maybe sixty kilos—but, otherwise, *gamerchick*, as it had once been used in the world, fit her quintessentially. She squinted: *what are you on about this time.*

He shook his head: *nothing; all's well; go back to your zombies.*

She shrugged, and did, nailing the closest to her, which—the game having been left unpaused for the last few seconds—was now on this side of the pool.

Why she left the pool on while the game was running, he'd never know; he switched it off, letting it drain residualessly but for the hydrogen and oxygen reassigning themselves into the furniture of the lower entertainment pit. He sat in the closest new chair, watching the zombies advance on all sides in casual, fearless amusement.

Then, a zombie shuffling in from behind him grabbed his arm, yanking him bodily out of his seat and sinking its teeth into his arm. 'Multi off,' he told the house; and the zombie's tactility faded, its teeth slipping through Dante's arm and clacking together within. Dante fell back into the chair.

Rebecca pointed to a second gun sitting atop the console, opening her hand, palm up: *you could get in on this, if you like; I'm not going to mind.*

Dante shook his head, with a slight, distracted tilt: *I've got other things on my mind; my recent activities impress me as having been imperfect.*

Inferring that, she dove into the lower pit, firing three shots and executing three zombies in the air, landing in the chair next to his. 'Pause.'

The zombies—including the falling shot ones—froze in place, the bloody slime running from their mouths trapped in glistening icicles. Dante raised his eyebrows at her.

'You okay?' she asked. Her knitted brows elaborated: *you don't look okay, you know; tell me what's wrong.*

He shrugged noncommittally. 'Dunno.' A wrinkle formed along his cheekbone—ninety-seven though he chronologically was, he looked all of thirty—and the corner of his mouth

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drooped slightly on the other side: *something's wrong; but it's nothing I can identify; it's just a strange feeling I have.*

She lifted her chin by a millimetre: *tell me what you can.*

He sighed and got out of the chair, looking over the room. 'This,' he said, passing a hand through the closest incorporeal zombie—*look at this; it's not right somehow; you must see it; it's obvious to me.* 'All this.'

She looked the room over. 'Zombies?'

He deflated slightly, his eyes rolling by a few degrees: *not the zombies; not the game; something larger; something more important.* 'We....' Eyes up and to the side: *the world; everyone, everywhere; the entirety of the species.* 'All.' Eyes down, shoulders slumped a bit: *the history of the species; everyone since we expanded out of Africa 160,000 years ago; maybe since vertebrates crawled out of the seas.* 'Perfect.' He squinted: *there are better words for it; but none fits the application correctly.*

A slight smile came to her face, and her eyebrows, released from their concerned knot, rose into a caret wrinkling her forehead: *life being perfect, you're upset?*

Exhaling, he tilted his head into a shrugging shoulder, conceding: *I can't explain it; it's just something I've got on my mind.*

Eyebrows resetting, her amused smile shifted toward a wry smirk. 'Save; quit.'

The zombies disengaged: colours fading to flatshade fading to wireframe fading to nothing; the gun on the console and the one in her grip evaporated as well.

He blinked; and then his eyes were to the side: *I've distracted you from the game; that wasn't my intention.*

She shook her head: *it's no problem; I was just killing time.* Though her pupillary reaction and heartrate sold her out: *it was fun; I find myself missing it now; I wasn't entirely ready to quit.* Aloud: 'Tell.'

Rolling his eyes, he shuffled to the chair, lighting a cigarette and dumping calming, slightly euphoric endorphins into his system. Thinking for a moment, his nose wrinkled to one side: *it's barely worth worrying about, whatever it is; it's just something I'm unable to shake.*

She smiled again. 'Let's do stuff.'

His eyebrows snapped together: *stuff like what; where'd that come from, anyway; what are you planning now.*

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She shrugged, a slight frown on her face and her eyes drifting slightly to the side: *whatever; it doesn't matter what we do; but let's go find something to take your mind off this until you can make more sense of it.*

He pondered his cigarette: it wasn't getting any shorter; it never would; the smoke it harmlessly produced was pulled from the cache of expendable molecules and allowed to drift through the air until it dissipated and returned to its source; it was nothing more than an avatar—something to play with while the implants secreted its atavistic effects into his bloodstream. He mashed it into the ashtray in the arm of the chair, where it would remain for a moment before following the zombies and guns into the cache. 'Okay.'

She arched an eyebrow: *so, what would you like to do?*

He entertained his options for an instant, then realised that it was the infinite menu of possibilities itself which was causing his mood: he could shoot zombies, or fly to Europa, or ride hadrosaurs down 501st, or nuke any number of countries into the stone age. He was omnipotent, limited only by the suspicion that he wasn't really supposed to be.

Gamerchicks, and for that matter their male counterparts, had once cracked videogames and virtual environments—*CounterStrike* and *SecondLife*—to grant themselves deital powers: flight and immortality and plagues of reproductive organs raining from the skies. But those had been games; rumoured psychotic breaks notwithstanding, the pioneers ultimately backed out of the virtual worlds and went back to serving time upselling potatoes boiled in grease at plastic restaurants through which people drove cars. Had the gamerchicks been able to remain in their virtual worlds, sleeping there, eating the food within....

But, he supposed, they *had* been able to. *Were* able to, even now. The games had expanded, and integrated, and become the world itself. There had been films—literally thin bits of plastic onto which static images had been emulsified in sequence, but ultimately digitally enhanced renderings of activity—in which those cavemen had fictionally begun to build the world as Dante had always known it: *The Matrix*, *Ender's Game*, *The Lawnmower Man*, *Tron*, *Neuromancer*, *Star Trek*. There had been books—copious strings of needless words scored to rectangles of recycled trees, some weighing a kilo or more, meant to convey the imagery

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when filmmaking failed to approximate the idea—some of which had depicted relative futures not entirely unlike Dante’s present: utopoli in which everything was possible and nothing was interesting, to the extent that prosaic, elemental evils had to be invented against which the characters within could fight—Rebecca’s zombies, in any number of incarnations.

Back when storytellers had been required in order to allow the audience to experience the fantastic and absurd, they’d always invented antagonists from which the everymen had hidden and against which they’d fought, whether those villains were other people, monsters, deities, nature, or simply circumstances. To Dante’s knowledge, no storyteller had ever told a simple tale of people in the world being happy; or, he supposed, if they had, they hadn’t produced anything especially interesting. Now that people, monsters, deities, nature, and circumstances could be drafted on a whim from the eternal cache, the storytellers were extinct, and the villains, while more real than ever, were also more feckless.

It was, in short, too perfect.

He blinked, and looked at her. She was still sitting quietly in her chair, letting him think through whatever he wasn’t able to convey. He smiled sadly: *I’m fine; I understand the problem; and I understand why it is and isn’t a problem, all at once—the problem is that there is no problem, and that single problem is without functional solution.*

She smirked slightly: *you’re not making any sense; but I suspect that, if you did, I’d be amused beyond precedent.*

He shook his head. ‘I’m okay. Kill zombies.’

She gave him a quick, questioning look: *you sure about this; you’re okay; we could do something else, if this is boring or annoying you.*

He smiled: *I’m sure; everything’s fine; do your thing; it’s not bothering me.*

She shrugged. ‘Reload BioNightmare.’

The house reacted: the zombies building back up into wireframes, simple molecules filling out toneless flesh and clothing, and pigments comprising the textures; on the console—the only real thing [insofar as it remained after everything else returned to the cache] related to the game—the pair of Heckler&Koch MP7s compiled and sat waiting, shiny and new. She pointed at one until it glowed slightly, twisted her hand into a

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loose fist, and waited for the gun to hover over to her; then: ‘Un-pause.’

The three zombies she’d shot a moment earlier completed their journeys to the floor, lay inert, flashed a few times, melted to two dimensions, and faded into the cherrywood like toothless cheshirecats. The rest resumed the attack on Rebecca.

Dante sat back, loosely watching the game, still thinking about the problem of problems being without solutions for being unproblematic.

That, he supposed, was why he worked. The world being perfect, poverty being extinct through the evolution of surplus, pain and illness and death being taken from nature and molested into fleeting experiences available on demand for those who happened to miss them, too much entertainment becoming ultimately banal, he like most of the world continued to operate as though he required a paycheque, simply to have something to do which lacked any certain, prescribed outcome. That he happened to hold one of the only jobs requiring him to meet investors was coincidental: if he’d liked cooking to any great degree, he could have made food for people in restaurants; if he’d been more creative, he could have written and maintained the coding allowing Rebecca’s zombies and his implants to do what they did; but he was a scientist: he liked discovering the new things, whatever application they might later serve once the hackers and cooks had got hold of them.

The discovery he’d been attempting to make for thirty years now was the ability to puncture through the fabric of the real world and glimpse whatever might lay beyond, if anything at all. The gamerchicks had performed wallhacks and overridden the clipping in their games, allowing them to see and even walk through the virtual surfaces into other rooms. Dante’s plan was to wallhack the edges of nature, see beyond them, and, if possible, walk into another segment of timespace, if indeed that was what might lay beyond the galaxies his species had to date managed to map.

It excited him, even if zombies in his livingroom didn’t. That there was no new thing under the sun didn’t mean that there was no new thing under *other* suns. Or, in fact, that all *old* things under Sol had yet been discovered, analysed, and catalogued.