

Junior Home Agent

There were some dust plumes off the service road. Phone in one hand, other over the couch back, David watched for his therapist. The rust under the hood of the dead Honda Gallop formed a crescent. His neighbor's Airstream reflected the sun into a hard beam angled toward him. The Death Valley salt flats were a white space in which objects seemed to float independently. There were a total of five objects in view including a silver trash can and the now closer dust-ejecting sedan. There was a hard knock at the door and David, startled, quickly entered into a position to vape. She had come by the other road, so from Chloride City. Looking out, the sedan was the trash man, come to empty the can. Sated after a minute of vaping, he moved to meet her at the door. He stomped his first two steps to buy himself a minute more and refresh himself on her images. It is rude to leave someone waiting in that heat.

"Oh good, you have AC! Sorry, I was just in the bathroom," said David. She brushed past and began to un-Velcro her cooled suit.

"You have a hook? Hanger? Or on the table?"

"On the table is fine." She made a gesture at moving his stacks of mail and folding the vest before laying it open on top of them. Then lowered herself into a conclusive breath.

"Well I'm Cassandra," hand outstretched.

"And I'm David," gripping it. "And I'll show you to the bathroom," where David disrobed and lowered himself into the pre-drawn bath and Cassandra familiarized herself with his oils.

"So what's troubling you, David?"

"Well, it's Fox. Did my profile say much about Fox?"

"Definitely--" fumbling with her phone with an oily hand, "--that she was someone you were in love with. And an internet-famous person, who you only knew from the internet. And I Googled her, and she's like a Charles Manson kind of figure, yeah?"

David produced an exceptional grin. "Well, that's *one way* to describe her."

Cassandra paused and asked, "Well, how would you describe her, David?"

"She was beautiful, Cassandra. Not unlike you. An Asian on the thin side with jade eyes. We met on 0chan. You know it? She was camming there at the time for a large audience. She was a camwhore. But she was uniquely dignified. She never showed any nudity or even talked dirty. It was all in her allure. And I wasn't just another viewer." Cassandra checked her phone. "Other therapists have gotten that wrong." Cassandra looked up at this statement and pocketed her phone. "She called me a lieutenant in her army. You see, she was assembling a sort of army." "David. I think it's nice that you had someone you cared for. Let me say that, first. I have to understand your motivations. But...you know you shouldn't be proud of that. Her followers killed people."

"No, no, I know. I would never. She can't really be blamed, though. She spoke in poetry,"

Cassandra resigned to her work in the bath, "and it was a performance. I mean she said she was a

Nazi, a follower of Manson, Wrath and Natural Selection, you know? Their shirts that day? Every name in the book: Kaczynski, Rodgers, et-cetera. It would be so *on-the-nose* to actually kill in her name, for just that reason. Sounds paradoxical, I know. But that was the beauty of it, like an obsidian blade, the atom-thin difference between truth and irony, you could say. She told everyone that they could only be with her in death. And that there would be 72 of her in the afterlife! You know I helped her come up with that? I had close personal conversations with her off 0chan in private direct messages. She knew my name. So I can say, she didn't really want anyone to be killed. It was just this genius thing. I mean the concept of it. She would *hint* at it constantly, but she'd be cute about it. She said everything softly and like she was shy and embarrassed by it."

"I see. Do you want me to use my mouth?"

"No. Thank you. Not yet. I'm just now getting acclimated to the bath. I know there was a rash of killings. I disavow them. I loved her. And yeah, the point is that I loved her and miss her, and I'm feeling very sad about it. And not just lately. I mean every day I spend cooped up in this trailer. Since she left, I've just...I've narrowed into a point." Cassandra nodded. "The only thing I could still enjoy was Dreamstate, so I came here where it's cheapest, you know? The only thing I was ever *good at* was Logic so that's all I've done for work for years now. I'm just back-and-forth between Logic and Dreamstate, like a pendulum. I get a bus down to the Pyramid for my Dreamstate. Play a lot of Pioneer, lately..." Cassandra again nodded. "Like a pendulum, just swinging, back and forth, back and forth--"

"Well what happened to her? You said she left?" Cassandra coughed, stretched her fingers in a spider-like cycle and shook out her bicep.

"She disappeared! You, uh, you coming back? Thank you. Well, none of us knew what to do. One day she's on cam and a guy in a fucking *gorilla costume* -- yeah, weird -- climbs through her window and shuts the camera off, and it's the last anyone hears from her. I mean he knocked her out of her chair and she was screaming. We didn't even know how to report it at first because no one knew who she was, like her real identity. A day later, someone posted a bloody clump of hair -- black, like yours -- in a gorilla hand. That was probably fake, but she is presumed dead."

"That sounds really...traumatic."

"Yeah, that's what it was. Traumatic."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Certainly *traumatized*, although not so acutely lately. Sad? Just generally not very good. Alright, shall we move to the bedroom now?"

David donned a nearby robe and Cassandra, still clothed, in jeans, boots, and farmer's flannel, followed along into the bedroom, which was like a dungeon in both lighting and quantity of apparata. There was a gravity desk, a gun rack, a weight bench, and an animatronic sex doll, and between them all, somehow squeezed in, a bed. Cassandra was not shocked. She would have liked to have been surprised by something else. Rounding the sex doll's cabinet, there was one such thing, which she commented on: "A wooden desk? By a big bay window?"

"Yes! You know I like to disconnect every now and then. To exist within paper, the matrix of graphemes, as in graphite on papyrus: ancient materials. And to look out," disrobed, "at the kind of desert they came from, and that Pyramid in the distance, austere as in Memphis, Egypt, enriched with spectacles as in Memphis, Tennessee. Or I like to exist in the voice; the air. So, about Fox's cabal of killers: I admit: three men were perhaps motivated by her to kill. But she was widely known across 0chan and its online diaspora, so maybe her name just stood, as Hitler's or Manson's otherwise would, for an inherent love of killing," vaping, breathing heavily. "Only one gained national notoriety, establishing a historical link to her name: Philip Mooney, a Melungeon man of 50, killed 20 in a black church in West Virginia with her mask tattooed above a swastika of bones on his chest. This was when the media announced the rise of a 'new kind of killer' and made the public well-aware of her. I never considered doing something like this. I think you either do, or you never do. I don't. Henry Andersson was shot in the lotus position by the Hancock County Sheriff after clearing 15 tourists from the summit loop of Cadillac Mountain. An epilogue in his lap related, among many other things, his excitement to join her and 71 other copies of her in the afterlife. I never took that mythology seriously. A never-apprehended Tucson man scrawled her name in blood on the bathroom mirror of the Frozen Cactus bar after entirely erasing the Sunday afternoon crowd and staff, totalling 10. Aside from these three, others *could* be linked to her more loosely through their internet activity; having r-referenced her in some statement of admiration or identification. The man who bombed the Our Lady of Good Counsel Saturday barbecue social in -- *careful, Cassandra* -- Austin, Texas, and took 6, Timothy Elway, had used her name as his DeviantArt handle. Her Teespring t-shirt, still in my closet in fact, was found in Miguel Ferrante's, too, after he shot 7 Oaklanders in his Walmart of employ. I have never enjoyed making light of these revelations, as some did," wiping the sweat from his brow and replanting his hand by his hip. "One named James Mason who once joked that Dennis McMahon was 'unascended' owing to his poor kill count tallied only 3 himself in an incompetent nail bomb attack on the Austin Alamo Drafthouse showing of The Chainsaw Diary; McMahon easily managed 4 with a pickpocketed RTP pistol before contributing his brains to the meat stalls of Chatuchak Market. Down the peninsula on Tonsai a coconut seller felled Darryl Matthews, originator of Fox's favored anime avatar, with a machete after the deceased had himself wounded 2 beachgoers mortally with the selfsame. A handful of her pictures were found on the desktop computer of 10-child killer Charles Moritz; though in light of his criminal proclivities he was not improbably a simple pedophile, if he was a follower of her mythology, he might have been happy to learn that he mummified upon suicide. Incidentally, there was no gorilla costume found anywhere in his Lodi, California home, though we all called and implored the investigators to search it thoroughly. After imposing ourselves on the San Joaquin County Sheriff's Department so crudely, some of us on 0chan received visits from the FBI. My rather prim agent Chao seemed most concerned with the trajectory of my life. I was then landlocked without a driver's license or job in my childhood home in Longfellow, two years out of college. He was kind. That he seemed to think I was redeemable, but liable to snap

at any time, might have been enough on its own to cause my impending push toward self-improvement, but it is hard to say; days later I passed out drunk and lit my bedroom on fire with a cigarette, injuring my mother. Regardless, Bart Osmon of San Francisco fired an RPG into a synagogue weeks after liking Foxy-chan Fan Page on Facebook. Kenneth Samuel Rodriguez liked it, too, before shooting 2 parked New York cabbies and running the second's Toyota into a *Sephora*, ah. Yes. Peter McDouglass of Paradise, Nevada was found eviscerated in a remote ditch off the Red Rock Canyon Loop, beside him a man dead of fentanyl overdose, David Arnaud, wearing a molded plastic fox mask. There were three more killers in nearby Death Valley. A never-apprehended man left a similar plastic fox mask at the scene when he abducted a graphic designer from her apartment in Furnace Creek and deposited her body in the small, clear pool that sits perfectly still, green and blue like a replica Earth in glass, at the outskirts of the Ash Meadow National Wildlife Refuge (I have been there). In Death Valley proper, 10 movie-goers were bombed by a one-time adopter of Fox's fan hashtag, FoxHound: William Bilger. The manager of the Foxy-chan Fan Page, stopped, at one point, in the process of illegally obtaining a rifle, was, until his suicide by helium, a primary suspect in the still-unsolved knife murders of several Facebook content moderators living in the Chloride City fridge slums. Among those who had ever visited the Foxy-chan Fan Page or its equivalents on other platforms, we can count the Nichupte Hotel Zone Shooter; the Lake Champlain Shooter; the Cleveland West Side Market Shooter; the Orlando Mayday Shooters; the Quebec City Funicular Sniper; the Newseum Shooter; the Granby man who held four women hostage in the Hampshire College cafeteria; the Nashville Riverfront Sniper; and the Boothbay man who set fire to the Buffalo Wild Wings in Bangor, Maine. It is worth stressing that Fox had already made herself a global meme by the beginning of the time period in which most of these killings took place, and that hers would likely have been just one inspirational figurine among hundreds on the cluttered mental desks of these killers. So an assignment of moral responsibility to her for all but the first three killings would be, I think, tenuous."

Cassandra, quiet, allowed David to move her aside. She tensed and gripped her phone as he pulled a tacklebox out from under the bed and unlatched it, and loosened when she saw an Oculus.

"Cassandra, not to be rude, but this isn't working. Do you mind if I use this?" Oculus headset with a black orb webcam attached to the top straps, to be mounted on the head, "To overlay her onto you?"

Cassandra, cross-legged, squinted up. "Those things wig me out. Don't you hear about all the accidents? I heard a local guy left it on overnight and woke up thinking he was really in the Congo, like in Call of Duty. He shot his breakfast man."

"Oh, they oversell that. It's always the really bad addicts, and I hardly ever wear it. And besides, so what if I thought you were Fox? I love her! I would never hurt her, so I would never hurt you." His big grin was back, now beneath the bug eyes and flopping antennae of the Oculus. He

crooked his head and flipped the switch by his ear. Fox's face danced on the surface of Cassandra's like an oil spill. "Okay..." Her and her Fox mask's lips synced perfectly. "Okay," tightening the head straps and steadying the webcam, "We're almost done here."

Done indeed, like a guessing game in one question with its ultimate "Aha!", it was out for Cassandra and back for David into the soft, supportive shackles of his gravity desk. Hung high on a padded crucifix before an encompassing screen, the Logic mounted itself upon him from all angles, lurching like factory robotics till fixing a circuit through the core of his slippery know-how. Integrated, the machine sent a knot for him to untie, which he did in twenty minutes, or twenty hours, of muscles spasming, eyes rolling, liquids and vapors chewed down to empty and a tie-dye of pain and peace painted and thrown away. That was every day. Money paid for knots untied: a way into the Pyramid. Every night away into the cool, wet Pyramid by free shuttle.

One-hundred-fifty degrees at the base of the stairs up to the entrance, which he'd take in total without a suit, for the release of disorienting temperature sickness self-alleviating on his way down-shaft to the Main Chamber. Shoes off in the lobby and down black marble steps running with water, he'd get to the base and be greeted with water knee-deep and lilypads and beautiful nurse technicians in black rubber garments, and be lowered into the water, placed underwater, washed with oil and gelatin and caked in pads and wires in the cool, clear water. His head would be in a gel bag. Everyone, hundreds, in the room would be as perfectly silent as in a religious hospital. The spasms or coughs of his pale fellow users would always be met swiftly by caresses from silently swimming nurses. A slowly spinning celestial chandelier would hypnotize him over and above the slow waves of those gently injected knockout drugs, and he would be gone into the black and beyond.

Months later he was -- knocked out and gone -- beyond the black to the world on the other side called Pioneer, just like any other night, perhaps tended to by a therapist during the preceding day, unlikely Cassandra, or any one woman a second time, perhaps having worked out some Logic that day. The days were an extended morning routine, of shuttering away every practicality in preparation for this much longer night, as the point of his life, and many others' then, was sleep, specifically Dreamstate: Orange's conquest and technological perfection of the dream. For the price of bouts of troubled Logic in that cloistered desert trailer, David's every dream, for years, had been made lucid, rationalized, and populated with interesting others. He happily considered these dreams his life's days.

"Would you cut me a strip of bacon, David?" asked Hope, his wife. He saw the fire's waning embers and so made haste to the wagon. More wood would be hard to come by in the Canyon. "You'll want a few, and pancakes." The fiddle was folksy and nearly inaudible.

"While you're in the luggage, honey, what does that map say? How much longer do we have to trudge through this damn canyon?"

"It says a mile as the bird flies but this river curls like a scared snake. Untying said knot, as it were...four. But best to think nothing of its length, or the time. We are on a road, and roads have ends, and we're flush with food. How many pancakes would you like?"

"Two."

"That's the spirit, wife! I'm raising your mood. Good food, clear skies, and air hot like a hot tub, or when cool, like a beer!"

"You have such a way with words, honey. Sometimes I hardly know what they mean."

"Thank you, dear! Would you like to hear a new poem? I was all night at my desk on it like a hunter lurking, until finally firing the fatal shot, and the result is beautiful."

"Your desk?"

"Yes, my desk, dear. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes." David stood up from the griddle and padded the dust from his pants. Hope began tearing off pieces of pancake to bite. Bacon sizzled. David paced and cracked his neck.

"So be it. *Achem*:

*Here I lie with intestinal blight,
Bedbugs advancing;
Over there, still noise and light;
I hear them dancing.*

*She promised--she is late--
She would be mine;
But like a dog I wait,
And there's no sign.*

*She swore again and again:
Was it by rote?
Does she run after all men,
Just like a goat?*

*You give yourself such airs:
Who gave you silk?
How do I know who shares
Your goatlike ilk?*

*We're poisoned by love when we wait,
It makes us barbaric:*

*Thus damp nights generate
The fly agaric.*

*Love eats me like a blight,
It is the seventh hell.
I've lost my appetite:
Onions, farewell!*

*The moon set in the sea,
The stars fade in the sky,
The day is dawning gray:
I'd like to die.*

That's it!"

With that, David lowered his eyes from the sky and shook himself out of poetic reverie. Great plumes of black smoke billowed from the bacon. They enveloped Hope, who lay dead against a boulder, already subject to a crow's curiosity. "Shoo, bird!" David macheted through the smoke and kneeled, gripped her chin and turned her homely face up from sideways. Blood poured from a hole in her head. He tried for a moment to plug it with his thumb. It continued pouring and soaking her dress. He unbuttoned and jerked her out of it, balled it up and used it to scrub the blood from her neck and shoulders. Needing her body upstream from the continuing flow, he laid her again against the boulder head-down now and rescrubbed her. He then wrapped her head in the dress and tied it off tightly. It quickly turned totally red. He was momentarily unsure what he was doing this for, her now naked body before him with a totally red head, and considered that someone must be around here who just shot her.

"Are you going to fuck her?" asked a young woman from the depths of the nearby brush. "Yeah, someone just shot her. I did. Why would you fuck a dead one, anyway? Just get a new one and rape them," the bushes rattled, "I'm coming out. Don't kill me. I'm not an NPC. It's Fox."

And it was; Fox, Foxychan, pulling a donkey and holding a rifle. In just the outfit she wore all those years ago: a red and white checkered dress, plus a cowboy hat, now. Characteristically pale as a ghost, too, despite the desert sun. As she neared, donkey a might uncooperative, she held up a peace sign, hunched and squinted. David was broadly dazed as she got within yards of him.

"I'm sorry I killed your wife!" He aired many protests and confusions, but she calmed and led him like a donkey to the sitting logs by the bacon fire and dead wife character, sat him down and patted him on the back.

Under the setting sun she made servings of cowboy coffee and recalled him things -- remember when Isaac killed himself on stream? when that agent dialogued from one posting ID, telling his

puppet to commit the impending Byrne assassination? -- and so built David's trust that by nightfall he could hear her whole story.

"Okay so basically that monkey came into my window and took me and put me into a van."

David sat cross-legged with back against the log beside his dead bride and eyed the tent. He looked back to her, Fox, and rubbed his hands and searched the space around her words for paths into that tent with her. "That must have been so scary."

"No it was okay. They pricked me with a needle so I went to sleep in the van and I woke up in a hospital. I don't remember a lot from there but they kept giving me drugs. I couldn't see or hear or anything but I could feel, and for a long time I was just laying in the bed. Then I could feel them undress me and lower me into a pool of cold water. I thought I was going to die because I was totally underwater, but I kept breathing. Then felt nothing, and..."

"It sounds like they were putting you in Dreamstate. They didn't have it back then, but..."

"No, Yes, that's exactly what it was. So, I popped up in this white space as a circle and their text and voice told me some bullshit about how I was found in a ditch raped and killed by that monkey, which I don't remember anything about. They said they Robocopped me into this Dreamstate, the best they could do to save me because of how badly my body was destroyed, like stabbed? 100 times. And then I was supposed to like, do weird experiments and fill out surveys for the rest of my life, as an abstract circle, to help them test the virtual reality and save more people. And I was thinking, this is bullshit! So I was thinking of how to escape, but I was just a circle."

"So what did you do?" David engaged, wide-eyed, forgetting his earlier efforts.

"Well first I could only make text and numbers and draw lines and move between tabs, windows, like I was in a computer, but then they gave me avatars to move around and languages to use for the testing, all the puzzles. Logic."

"Oh! Yeah. Logic and Dreamstate. That's my life, too, humorously enough! You know we really should catch up. I could show you where I'm living these days. I have a great setup in Death Valley. You know there's a city there now? I've really missed you, and..." eyeing the tent.

"Well that's the problem I'm getting at. I'm still stuck in there, only I just slipped out into here the other day and looked you up. It's complicated. Let me finish."

"Wait, so you can't get out of here? Well that's not so bad. I mean, this place is better. And we could..." eyeing the tent.

"Shut the fuck up! Shut up! I understand that you want to have sex but please let me finish the story."

"Okay."

"Okay, so they bring in more software, like they're just testing out products at this point. By now I've been doing Logic for years -- like four years? and testing fucking store check-out systems and piloting drones and shit, new stuff every week. Then they had me test Pioneer, about a year ago, and that let me remake my body, which obviously was awesome. But I was playing some

version with no other players. I never got to talk to anyone else human or even see the news except bits and pieces that showed up in things I was testing. And I was back to doing that kind of boring testing for another year after I got to do Pioneer. But then one day, this was two days ago, I got deployed here to test a mission and I noticed that there were definitely other people -- unless AI had gotten really good. But I checked and saw that there were a bunch of other people on the server and like, me and everyone else could just exit the testing server and join a regular one. And I did, and so I searched for anyone I knew from Ochan and I guess it was just you, Dragon, and Hot Coffee, and you know they're really fucked up so I came to you. Sorry for killing your wife."

"Oh, that's fine. You know she was just--"

"So, so, so, last thing: I'm guessing that they fucked up by deploying me with other normal people and that, like, they have a bunch of people in there who are just slaves and aren't supposed to get out. I don't know how soon they'll figure it out so I need your help to get me out as soon as possible. I already tried logging out to the body lobby but it gave me an error and also it's probably just a bad idea because I must be in some special section of the place?"

"The Pyramid."

"Okay. So you think I'm in there somewhere?"

"Probably. But this isn't the only Pyramid anymore, and it sounds like they put you under somewhere before even building the Pyramid. They could have moved you a bunch of times, too. Oh! You can check in your menu to see real world information, weather and such. It's under "Apps", then "More Apps", then "Info", with a little globe next to it. Where does it say you are? Mine is Death Valley Pyramid."

"Orange Grove Testing."

"Oh. That's probably not good. It's the company's campus in San Francisco. Orange."

"Okay you have to go there and get me out."

David looked instinctively to his dead wife for backup to say, "I don't know..." but finding no support from her, adjusted his back against the log and considered more seriously the possibility between sips of coffee. Campus security would be stiff and so on. Whole heist movie "this is impossible, unless?" line of thinking. She looked to him for an answer and he held the silence for a moment with a raised finger, still thinking.

"Will you have sex with me if I get you out?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. But only when I'm fully out. Not here."

"What about in AR at my place? I already have your avatar for Oculus. I think it would be fair to at least do that first, since...hm?"

"Wait. How would you get me out there?"

"Oh, well...I don't know if it would work but you should be able to just log out to the lobby and join my Oculus chatroom."

"Ahhh, yep. Okay, awesome. I'm going to try it. If I pop out of here, meet me there, I guess."

Fox disappeared.

Back in his trailer, David stands before the acrylic cabinet containing his featureless Realdoll. It looks like a mannequin, or a gray alien -- perhaps it was the Grays who opened factories to produce these bodies on Earth, Trojan whores, whose man-friendly software would one day be cleared to make way for their minds, loaded with all of their plans of conquest over Earth. Fox would dig this, another new toy born in her absence. He dons Oculus and flips her on. She flutters into appearance before him in a modern version of her standard clothes, selected, presumably, from the in-chat store. Again, he wants to have sex with her. "Hey! So check this out..."

The Realdoll hisses on and passes through the parting cabinet doors with some awkwardness before calibrating itself to its surroundings. It then elegantly waves and stands at attention. Meanwhile, Fox paces the room in David's view, testing her avatar in the virtual environment contiguous with David's real one. To her, David appears polished, cloaked in his own avatar (not dissimilar from his true body). Having no physical impact, she can climb any object in the room like a stone statue. So she sits atop the head of the Realdoll as David continues, "I can put you into this thing and let you control it. It'll basically be like having a real body."

"Okay!" and he does. She is still her avatar in the space defined by David's Oculus, floating on the surface of the doll. She slams her hand into the cabinet, shaking it. "Awesome! I haven't touched anything in years. I guess I'd like to feel it, but yeah." She slams it a few more times with both hands and a leg, emitting light whirring and hissing noises.

"Okay, you're still in Oculus chat. So the last thing is to send you into the Realdoll and use its eyes. Wherever you have your CAD and voice files in Oculus, just drag that into the same folder in Realdoll and it will morph around to look like you." That it does, as her Oculus avatar flicks off, with some magic of inflatable microbeads beneath the doll's silicone skin. Here is her face in every way but the eyes -- but those are so complex as camera lenses and flutter so subtly under her control that they convey her in just the same biological way.

David takes off his Oculus rig to see her more clearly, more clearly in fact than he has ever seen her before. This is more realistic than any old video stream or bot skin he's bought of her. Again and again, like a strobe light now, he wants to have sex with her, a fact she again addresses. "So let's not waste any time, David. Seriously. This is great. And you have guns! I swear to God I want to fuck you but you're telling me I'm somewhere in that campus and they could switch me off any second, we have to go. It's like a 10 hour drive?"

"I...just," motioning to the bed.

"We have to go right now, okay? There really isn't time to relax," pulling an AR-15 from the gun rack and tossing it to David, and taking another in her doll hands. "Batteries for this thing and bullets. Where is your car?" 120 down 190 on his motorcycle with guns slung over their

shoulders and no talking until stopping for gas in Bakersfield. There an attendant in his own drone body sells them sledgehammers and bandanas from the comfort of his sofa in Serbia, a Colt stowed in his leg-mounted cup holder stopping them from robbing him for kicks. For the next four hours their shared playlist is sufficient to state their increasingly hardened shared resolve to do whatever necessary to free her body for copulation. She whispers at spaced out intervals and he always says simply, "Yes," accelerating or decelerating. The author suggests queuing up and listening to the last three of these songs, here listed along with Fox's whisperings, in the leadup to the closing scene of this story, in which an extremely online man and his reified waifu together commit a mass shooting on the campus of a big tech company with hotly debated weapons.

Dawn breaks and the first stream of employees swipe into their buildings and offices as the pair cross the Oakland Bay Bridge. Some Oranges (Orange employees) working in Dreamstate have noticed the standing whiteboard signs labelled "Dreamstate Labs" leading from the main gate to their innermost sanctum, and steel themselves for yet another surprise parade of potential investors. "Whatever happens, I will always love you." "Plastiphilia" by Dopplereffekt plays as her steel-boned arms grip round his chest more tightly round the dark bend. Called in early for disrupting DreamCon. Five people have died in Dreamstate, and they know it. And they're trying to put as many people in as possible. We have a right to protest. People in pods, you can see the look in the founder's eyes about this. Probably another team cohesion consultant waiting for us on top of whatever Saudi investors poking their noses. Never Americans, always Saudi or Chinese. They're more than happy to lock us up in our dream. "They're being evil." "Describe Reality" by Anthony Rother plays as she kisses his neck at the first faint sign of sunrise. Did you guys see these signs? Do you think it's Ma again? What do they expect us to do here for two hours? This is the last straw for me. I have other offers. "We'll be together forever, in this life or the next." "Julie Is A TV Set (1983)" by Ohama plays as she dismounts and pops the guard through the then-reddened glass of his aluminum shed and David sledges its door open so she can get at the slippery gate button, and upon its soundless folding aside they remount and rip to the main lobby. Again they sledge themselves in, shower of broken glass and brandished weapons sending service workers sprinting in all directions. They follow convenient signs up the escalator to a long corridor toward Dreamstate Labs, passing a handful of heads poking up from behind pieces of furniture in the conference rooms to their sides. Fox receives fire from behind, a bot not unlike her own popping its Glock -- this is Bob McDonald's first winning bid all morning and it's shuttered in an instant by her hail of semi-automatic rifle fire, concentrated on the legs to knock the bot over and with that, its camera out. Cheap Chinese shit. Hell if they make me pay for that. David is hyperventilating. Fox, eyeing the door at the end of the next sign's arrow to the left, presses him against the wall and grabs his groin. "It's a game. We are winning. Baby, it's a game. We're winning." Through the door and down four flights of stairs, the next door takes quite a bit of sledging. It's quiet underground, plausible that no one down here heard what

happened up there. Past the mangled door is a long corridor lined with a library of technical journals and cabinets of electronic parts. "This is it," the door emanating light at the end of the corridor. Hearing undisturbed, casual conversation from the far side of the open office space, they enter quietly. David considers nonviolence but catches Fox's drift -- she has her rifle trained on a man in an Orange hoodie who is asking around, "And does anyone know what the 'Prototype Room' is? Is that some ploy? There's a sign up on the--" His head caves like a crushed boiled egg and bends onto the conference table like a felled palm tree. Blood there pools and from his neck sprays against two front-end engineers in turn turned to ragdolls upon the table. Two distributed systems engineers have erupted from the table, one springing his chair over with a plastic "twang" and "thud" and falling down on his side, out of sight for the moment. The other, large, huffs away from Fox toward a back office and collapses forward from three shots in the upper back. David approaches the fallen engineer tentatively as Fox clears a conference call cubbie of product managers and moves on to the project managers making themselves small under a lunch table. Under fire these three curl up and fall over stiff like burned spiders. The hardware guys crawling across the catwalk fall flat like they're failing their last pushups. "Where" asks David of the thoroughly frightened man, "are the test subjects? The stolen people? The people you fucking stole and put in there? *Fox*?" "I" shaking, "don't know. Don't know what you're--" His head snaps forty degrees left over a rapid pool of blood. "I'm in the Prototype Room, David. Let's go. They're all dead. Trade guns? You haven't done much shooting...I could need more, uh..." David shivers as they swap rifles. With her arm around his shoulder, nudging him into line, they approach the door to the Prototype Room. He mouths a meagre "What?" as she pulls a pocketed key to open it. "Aren't I beautiful, David?"

My creation floats in a faux Dreamstate tank. Perfect porcelain skin, silken black hair suspended in tied strands like the petals of a flower in the water. Naked, like no one ever sees her until the end, with nipples so pink they're almost red and a patch of pubic hair so neat you could set a gravestone behind it. Realdoll Fox's black camera eyes fix on David, who is snapping out of his adrenaline sickness; this must be the place, he thinks, and this disturbance must be what one feels at the peak of a mountain. He has done it. He has her, the love of his whole life before him naked in a box. He wants weeks and months and years to remember this, or even just to process the unbelievable events of the day -- is he dreaming? No. This is the absolute moment and he must act quickly. "Go. Unplug me. Drain me. Wake me up!" The water drains away, leaving her body in the fetal position on the floor of the tank. Its glass walls recede into the floor. "Resuscitate me from the console before you take the wires off my head or you'll kill me." I time it just-so, so just as he presses the big blue button on the cardboard console, Realdoll Fox collapses and Real Fox twitches and murmurs awake. He removes her wire tiara and pulls her half-conscious into his arms, with much of the same impotent fumbling he delivered to his downed wife in Pioneer, and

like sexual excitement. I have cast myself into her fully and feel his desperate grabbing. A bot of this kind is the pinnacle of engineering, indistinguishable from flesh, from within or without. Though as a morbidly obese old man I cannot be certain, I'm sure this is exactly how it feels to be a beautiful 21-year-old girl in the grips of a plausible virgin. "Wait," I whisper, "This is my first time." Realdoll Fox rises silently behind him.

"It's mine too, Fox." This is perfect. Hell:

"This is perfect, David." And out comes his penis, hard as math, hard as robotics as it slips past the spit-slick labia, hard as physics as it pushes through the artificial hymen, hard as code as it pumps, as surveillance as it presses as deep as it can and as business as it slumps. As I press my fingernails into his bare back, his dick is as hard as good government, or a plan to promote the ban of Oculus by means of staged attacks, as hard as telling the press that, as the victim of the latest, Orange will be leading the charge in crafting this new law. Hard as law, hard as telling just what the hell is going on in the news these days. As we lock eyes and mine well up with tears of calm joy, it's as hard as forcing people into vats, as hard as neuroscience and distributed computing. In the moment he ejaculates and loses his mind to a .223, it's as hard as banning physical reality.

I de-Fox the Realdoll and stow it in the right cabinet. I strap Oculus on David and load up a shooting game. I do not dress but lay clothes by the prototype Dreamstate tank I was working on when I first heard gunshots from outside. I morph ever so slightly. I emerge, raped, from the Prototype Room. I am Julia, engineer at Orange, and I saw what happened. As an engineer in that room that day, I not only know just how safe Dreamstate is, but just how dangerous Oculus can be. But I want to say, and I know this might sound crazy -- it's not just Oculus. Excuse me if I am biased, but every moment we spend *outside of Dreamstate*, in any capacity, is dangerous, and ridding ourselves of Oculus is just the beginning. Ridding ourselves of guns is just the beginning. People will stab and beat and, and rape, simply because of the information they are exposed to, and we can't stop it! Information cannot be stopped. Get rid of Oculus and we receive it through our phones and computers, and are we to leave all of that behind? We have advanced as a species when we have made our dreams into reality through these media. We have encountered untold joys through them. But they don't outweigh the terror we have always been exposed to here, outside, with each other in this dangerous place. Call me crazy, again, but it is our bodies that damn us, and the freedom of this space. A jungle barely restrained from total animalistic chaos. I can kill you right now! I have brought with me a gun, legally purchased, to demonstrate this. But I can't hurt you in your dreams, nor in mine, nor in dreams we share together. It is there we must all flee, flee tragedy permanently. Its author is forever looming over this world, casting his bolts. He could flood this speech with more killers, for the comedy of it -- you see, tragedy is comedy to him. But we have created a new world without him. I know it because I helped build it. It is better than this world. One day, we will all call it -- sorry, my clicker; next slide -- *Home*.

