

Hiro, who as of thirty seconds ago is no longer the Deliverator, gets out of the car and pulls his swords out of the trunk, straps them around his body, prepares for a breathtaking nighttime escape run across TMAWH territory. The border with Oakwood Estates is only minutes away, he has the layout memorized (sort of), and he knows how these Burbclave cops operate, because he used to be one. So he has a good chance of making it. But it's going to be interesting.

Above him, in the house that owns the pool, a light has come on, and children are looking down at him through their bedroom windows, all warm and fuzzy in their Li'l Crips and Ninja Raft Warrior pajamas, which can either be flameproof or noncarcinogenic but not both at the same time. Dad is emerging from the back door, pulling on a jacket. It is a nice family, a safe family in a house full of light, like the family he was a part of until thirty seconds ago.

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#Hiro Protagonist and Vitaly Chernobyl, roommates, are chilling out in their home, a spacious 20-by-30 in a U-Stor-It in Inglewood, California. The room has a concrete slab floor, corrugated steel walls separating it from the neighboring units, and-this is a mark of distinction and luxury -- a roll-up steel door that faces northwest, giving them a few red rays at times like this, when the sun is setting over LAX. From time to time, a 777 or a Sukhoi/Kawasaki Hypersonic Transport will taxi in front of the sun and block the sunset with its rudder, or just mangle the red light with its jet exhaust, braiding the parallel rays into a dappled pattern on the wall.

But there are worse places to live. There are much worse places right here in this U-Stor-It. Only the big units like this one have their own doors. Most of them are accessed via a communal loading dock that leads to a maze of wide corrugated-steel hallways and freight elevators. These are slum housing, 5-by-10s and 10-by-10s where Yanoama tribespersons cook beans and parboil fistfuls of coca leaves over heaps of burning lottery tickets.

It is whispered that in the old days, when the U-Stor-It was actually used for its intended purpose (namely, providing cheap extra storage space to Californians with too many material goods), certain entrepreneurs came to the front office, rented out 10-by-10s using fake IDs, filled them up with

steel drums full of toxic chemical waste, and then abandoned them, leaving the problem for the U-Stor-It Corporation to handle. According to these rumors, U-Stor-It just padlocked those units and wrote them off. Now, the immigrants claim, certain units remain haunted by this chemical specter. It is a story they tell their children, to keep them from trying to break into padlocked units.

No one has ever tried to break into Hiro and Vitaly's unit because there's nothing in there to steal, and at this point in their lives, neither one of them is important enough to kill, kidnap, or interrogate. Hiro owns a couple of nice Nipponese swords, but he always wears them, and the whole idea of stealing fantastically dangerous weapons presents the would-be perp with inherent dangers and contradictions: When you are wrestling for possession of a sword, the man with the handle always wins. Hiro also has a pretty nice computer that he usually takes with him when he goes anywhere. Vitaly owns half a carton of Lucky Strikes, an electric guitar, and a hangover.

At the moment, Vitaly Chernobyl is stretched out on a futon, quiescent, and Hiro Protagonist is sitting crosslegged at a low table, Nipponese style, consisting of a cargo pallet set on cinderblocks.

As the sun sets, its red light is supplanted by the light of many neon logos emanating from the franchise ghetto that constitutes this U-Stor-It's natural habitat. This light, known as loglo, fills in the shadowy corners of the unit with seedy, oversaturated colors.

Hiro has cappuccino skin and spiky, truncated dreadlocks. His hair does not cover as much of his head as it used to, but he is a young man, by no means bald or balding, and the slight retreat of his hairline only makes more of his high cheekbones. He is wearing shiny goggles that wrap halfway around his head the bows of the goggles have little earphones that are plugged into his outer ears. The earphones have some built-in noise cancellation features. This sort of thing works best on steady noise. When jumbo jets make their takeoff runs on the runway across the street, the sound is reduced to a low doodling hum. But when Vitaly Chernobyl thrashes out an experimental guitar solo, it still hurts Hiro's ears.

The goggles throw a light, smoky haze across his eyes and reflect a distorted wide-angle view of a brilliantly lit boulevard that stretches off into an infinite blackness. This boulevard does not really exist, it is a computer-rendered view of an imaginary place.

Beneath this image, it is possible to see Hiro's eyes, which look Asian. They are from his mother, who is Korean by way of Nippon. The rest of him

looks more like his father, who was African by way of Texas by way of the Army -- back in the days before it got split up into a number of competing organizations such as General Jim's Defense System and Admiral Bob's National Security.

Four things are on the cargo pallet: a bottle of expensive beer from the Puget Sound area, which Hiro cannot really afford; a long sword known in Nippon as a katana and a short sword known as a wakizashi -- Hiro's father looted these from Japan after World War II went atomic -- and a computer.

The computer is a featureless black wedge. It does not have a power cord, but there is a narrow translucent plastic tube emerging from a hatch on the rear, spiraling across the cargo pallet and the floor, and plugged into a crudely installed fiber-optics socket above the head of the sleeping Vitaly Chernobyl. In the center of the plastic tube is a hair-thin fiber-optic cable. The cable is carrying a lot of information back and forth between Hiro's computer and the rest of the world. In order to transmit the same amount of information on paper, they would have to arrange for a 747 cargo freighter packed with telephone books and encyclopedias to power-dive into their unit every couple of minutes, forever.

Hiro can't really afford the computer either, but he has to have one. It is a tool of his trade. In the worldwide community of hackers, Hiro is a talented drifter. This is the kind of lifestyle that sounded romantic to him as recently as five years ago. But in the bleak light of full adulthood, which is to one's early twenties as Sunday morning is to Saturday night, he can clearly see what it really amounts to: He's broke and unemployed. And a few short weeks ago, his tenure as a pizza deliverer -- the only pointless dead-end job he really enjoys -- came to an end. Since then, he's been putting a lot more emphasis on his auxiliary emergency backup job: freelance stringer for the CIC, the Central Intelligence Corporation of Langley, Virginia.

The business is a simple one. Hiro gets information. It may be gossip, videotape, audiotape, a fragment of a computer disk, a xerox of a document. It can even be a joke based on the latest highly publicized disaster.

He uploads it to the CIC database -- the Library, formerly the Library of Congress, but no one calls it that anymore. Most people are not entirely clear on what the word "congress" means.

And even the word "library" is getting hazy. It used to be a place full of books, mostly old ones. Then they began to include videotapes, records, and magazines. Then all of the information got converted into machine-readable form, which is to say, ones and zeroes. And as the number of media grew,

the material became more up to date, and the methods for searching the Library became more and more sophisticated, it approached the point where there was no substantive difference between the Library of Congress and the Central Intelligence Agency. Fortuitously, this happened just as the government was falling apart anyway. So they merged and kicked out a big fat stock offering.

Millions of other CIC stringers are uploading millions of other fragments at the same time. CIC's clients, mostly large corporations and Sovereigns, rifle through the Library looking for useful information, and if they find a use for something that Hiro put into it, Hiro gets paid.

A year ago, he uploaded an entire first-draft film script that he stole from an agent's wastebasket in Burbank. Half a dozen studios wanted to see it. He ate and vacationed off of that one for six months.

Since then, times have been leaner. He has been learning the hard way that 99 percent of the information in the Library never gets used at all.

Case in point: After a certain Kourier tipped him off to the existence of Vitaly Chernobyl, he put a few intensive weeks into researching a new musical phenomenon -- the rise of Ukrainian nuclear fuzz-grunge collectives in L.A. He has planted exhaustive notes on this trend in the Library, including video and audio. Not one single record label, agent, or rock critic has bothered to access it.

The top surface of the computer is smooth except for a fisheye lens, a polished glass dome with a purplish optical coating. Whenever Hiro is using the machine, this lens emerges and clicks into place, its base flush with the surface of the computer. The neighborhood loglo is curved and foreshortened on its surface. Hiro finds it erotic. This is partly because he hasn't been properly laid in several weeks. But there's more to it. Hiro's father, who was stationed in Japan for many years, was obsessed with cameras. He kept bringing them back from his stints in the Far East, encased in many protective layers, so that when he took them out to show Hiro, it was like watching an exquisite striptease as they emerged from all that black leather and nylon, zippers and straps. And once the lens was finally exposed, pure geometric equation made real, so powerful and vulnerable at once, Hiro could only think it was like nuzzling through skirts and lingerie and outer labia and inner labia ... It made him feel naked and weak and brave.

The lens can see half of the universe -- the half that is above the computer, which includes most of Hiro. In this way, it can generally keep track of where Hiro is and what direction he's looking in.

Down inside the computer are three lasers -- a red one, a green one, and a blue one. They are powerful enough to make a bright light but not powerful enough to burn through the back of your eyeball and broil your brain, fry your frontals, lase your lobes. As everyone learned in elementary school, these three colors of light can be combined, with different intensities, to produce any color that Hiro's eye is capable of seeing.

In this way, a narrow beam of any color can be shot out of the innards of the computer, up through that fisheye lens, in any direction. Through the use of electronic mirrors inside the computer, this beam is made to sweep back and forth across the lenses of Hiro's goggles, in much the same way as the electron beam in a television paints the inner surface of the eponymous Tube. The resulting image hangs in space in front of Hiro's view of Reality.

By drawing a slightly different image in front of each eye, the image can be made three-dimensional. By changing the image seventy-two times a second, it can be made to move. By drawing the moving three-dimensional image at a resolution of 2K pixels on a side, it can be as sharp as the eye can perceive, and by pumping stereo digital sound through the little earphones, the moving 3-D pictures can have a perfectly realistic soundtrack.

So Hiro's not actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones. In the lingo, this imaginary place is known as the Metaverse. Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse. It beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It.

Hiro is approaching the Street. It is the Broadway, the Champs Elysees of the Metaverse. It is the brilliantly lit boulevard that can be seen, miniaturized and backward, reflected in the lenses of his goggles. It does not really exist. But right now, millions of people are walking up and down it.

The dimensions of the Street are fixed by a protocol, hammered out by the computer-graphics ninja overlords of the Association for Computing Machinery's Global Multimedia Protocol Group. The Street seems to be a grand boulevard going all the way around the equator of a black sphere with a radius of a bit more than ten thousand kilometers. That makes it 65,536 kilometers around, which is considerably bigger than Earth.

The number 65,536 is an awkward figure to everyone except a hacker, who recognizes it more readily than his own mother's date of birth: It happens to be a power of 2¹⁶ power to be exact -- and even the exponent 16 is equal to 2, and 4 is equal to 22. Along with 256; 32,768; and 2,147,483,648; 65,536 is one of the foundation stones of the hacker

universe, in which 2 is the only really important number because that's how many digits a computer can recognize. One of those digits is 0, and the other is 1. Any number that can be created by fetishistically multiplying 2s by each other, and subtracting the occasional 1, will be instantly recognizable to a hacker.

Like any place in Reality, the Street is subject to development. Developers can build their own small streets feeding off of the main one. They can build buildings, parks, signs, as well as things that do not exist in Reality, such as vast hovering overhead light shows, special neighborhoods where the rules of three-dimensional spacetime are ignored, and free-combat zones where people can go to hunt and kill each other.

The only difference is that since the Street does not really exist -- it's just a computer-graphics protocol written down on a piece of paper somewhere -- none of these things is being physically built. They are, rather, pieces of software, made available to the public over the worldwide fiber-optics network. When Hiro goes into the Metaverse and looks down the Street and sees buildings and electric signs stretching off into the darkness, disappearing over the curve of the globe, he is actually staring at the graphic representations -- the user interfaces -- of a myriad different pieces of software that have been engineered by major corporations. In order to place these things on the Street, they have had to get approval from the Global Multimedia Protocol Group, have had to buy frontage on the Street, get zoning approval, obtain permits, bribe inspectors, the whole bit. The money these corporations pay to build things on the Street all goes into a trust fund owned and operated by the GMPG, which pays for developing and expanding the machinery that enables the Street to exist.

Hiro has a house in a neighborhood just off the busiest part of the Street. It is a very old neighborhood by Street standards. About ten years ago, when the Street protocol was first written, Hiro and some of his buddies pooled their money and bought one of the first development licenses, created a little neighborhood of hackers. At the time, it was just a little patchwork of light amid a vast blackness. Back then, the Street was just a necklace of streetlights around a black ball in space.

Since then, the neighborhood hasn't changed much, but the Street has. By getting in on it early, Hiro's buddies got a head start on the whole business. Some of them even got very rich off of it.

That's why Hiro has a nice big house in the Metaverse but has to share a 20-by-30 in Reality. Real estate acumen does not always extend across

universes.

The sky and the ground are black, like a computer screen that hasn't had anything drawn into it yet; it is always nighttime in the Metaverse, and the Street is always garish and brilliant, like Las Vegas freed from constraints of physics and finance. But people in Hiro's neighborhood are very good programmers, so it's tasteful. The houses look like real houses, There are a couple of Frank Lloyd Wright reproductions and some fancy Victoriana.

So it's always a shock to step out onto the Street, where everything seems to be a mile high. This is Downtown, the most heavily developed area. If you go couple of hundred kilometers in either direction, the development will taper down to almost nothing, just a thin chain of streetlights casting white pools on the black velvet ground. But Downtown is a dozen Manhattans, embroidered with neon and stacked on top of each other.

In the real world-planet Earth, Reality, there are somewhere between six and ten billion people. At any given time, most of them are making mud bricks or field-stripping their AK-47s. Perhaps a billion of them have enough money to own a computer; these people have more money than all of the others put together. Of these billion potential computer owners, maybe a quarter of them actually bother to own computers, and a quarter of these have machines that are powerful enough to handle the Street protocol. That makes for about sixty million people who can be on the Street at any given time. Add in another sixty million or so who can't really afford it but go there anyway, by using public machines, or machines owned by their school or their employer, and at any given time the Street is occupied by twice the population of New York City.

That's why the damn place is so overdeveloped. Put in a sign or a building on the Street and the hundred million richest, hippest, best-connected people on earth will see it every day of their lives.

It is a hundred meters wide, with a narrow monorail track running down the middle. The monorail is a free piece of public utility software that enables users to change their location on the Street rapidly and smoothly. A lot of people just ride back and forth on it, looking at the sights. When Hiro first saw this place, ten years ago, the monorail hadn't been written yet; he and his buddies had to write car and motorcycle software in order to get around. They would take their software out and race it in the black desert of the electronic night.

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#As Hiro approaches the Street, he sees two young couples, probably using their parents' computers for a double date in the Metaverse, climbing

down out of Port Zero, which is the local port of entry and monorail stop.

He is not seeing real people, of course. This is all a part of the moving illustration drawn by his computer according to specifications coming down the fiber-optic cable. The people are pieces of software called avatars. They are the audiovisual bodies that people use to communicate with each other in the Metaverse. Hiro's avatar is now on the Street, too, and if the couples coming off the monorail look over in his direction, they can see him, just as he's seeing them. They could strike up a conversation: Hiro in the U-Stor-It in L.A. and the four teenagers probably on a couch in a suburb of Chicago, each with their own laptop. But they probably won't talk to each other, any more than they would in Reality. These are nice kids, and they don't want to talk to a solitary crossbreed with a slick custom avatar who's packing a couple of swords.

Your avatar can look any way you want it to, up to the limitations of your equipment. If you're ugly, you can make your avatar beautiful. If you've just gotten out of bed, your avatar can still be wearing beautiful clothes and professionally applied makeup. You can look like a gorilla or a dragon or a giant talking penis in the Metaverse. Spend five minutes walking down the Street and you will see all of these.

Hiro's avatar just looks like Hiro, with the difference that no matter what Hiro is wearing in Reality, his avatar always wears a black leather kimono. Most hacker types don't go in for garish avatars, because they know that it takes a lot more sophistication to render a realistic human face than a talking penis. Kind of the way people who really know clothing can appreciate the fine details that separate a cheap gray wool suit from an expensive hand-tailored gray wool suit.

You can't just materialize anywhere in the Metaverse, like Captain Kirk beaming down from on high. This would be confusing and irritating to the people around you. It would break the metaphor. Materializing out of nowhere (or vanishing back into Reality) is considered to be a private function best done in the confines of your own House. Most avatars nowadays are anatomically correct, and naked as a babe when they are first created, so in any case, you have to make yourself decent before you emerge onto the Street. Unless you're something intrinsically indecent and you don't care.

If you are some peon who does not own a House, for example, a person who is coming in from a public terminal, then you materialize in a Port. There are 256 Express Ports on the street, evenly spaced around its

circumference at intervals of 256 kilometers. Each of these intervals is further subdivided 256 times with Local Ports, spaced exactly one kilometer apart (astute students of hacker semiotics will note the obsessive repetition of the number 256, which is 2^8 power -- and even that 8 looks pretty juicy, dripping with 2^2 additional 2s). The Ports serve a function analogous to airports: This is where you drop into the Metaverse from somewhere else. Once you have materialized in a Port, you can walk down the Street or hop on the monorail or whatever.

The couples coming off the monorail can't afford to have custom avatars made and don't know how to write their own. They have to buy off-the-shelf avatars. One of the girls has a pretty nice one. It would be considered quite the fashion statement among the K-Tel set. Looks like she has bought the Avatar Construction Set(tm) and put together her own, customized model out of miscellaneous parts. It might even look something like its owner. Her date doesn't look half bad himself.

The other girl is a Brandy. Her date is a Clint. Brandy and Clint are both popular, off-the-shelf models. When white-trash high school girls are going on a date in the Metaverse, they invariably run down to the computer-games section of the local Wal-Mart and buy a copy of Brandy. The user can select three breast sizes: improbable, impossible, and ludicrous. Brandy has a limited repertoire of facial expressions: cute and pouty; cute and sultry; perky and interested; smiling and receptive; cute and spacy. Her eyelashes are half an inch long, and the software is so cheap that they are rendered as solid ebony chips. When a Brandy flutters her eyelashes, you can almost feel the breeze.

Clint is just the male counterpart of Brandy. He is craggy and handsome and has an extremely limited range of facial expressions.

Hiro wonders, idly, how these two couples got together. They are clearly from disparate social classes. Perhaps older and younger siblings. But then they come down the escalator and disappear into the crowd and become part of the Street, where there are enough Clints and Brandys to found a new ethnic group.

The Street is fairly busy. Most of the people here are Americans and Asians -- it's early morning in Europe right now. Because of the preponderance of Americans, the crowd has a garish and surreal look about it. For the Asians, it's the middle of the day, and they are in their dark blue suits. For the Americans, it's party time, and they are looking like just about anything a computer can render.

The moment Hiro steps across the line separating his neighborhood from the Street, colored shapes begin to swoop down on him from all directions, like buzzards on fresh road kill. Animerda is not allowed in Hiro's neighborhood. But almost anything is allowed in the Street.

A passing fighter plane bursts into flames, falls out of its trajectory, and zooms directly toward him at twice the speed of sound. It plows into the Street fifty feet in front of him, disintegrates, and explodes, blooming into a tangled cloud of wreckage and flame that skids across the pavement toward him, growing to envelop him so that all he can see is turbulent flame, perfectly simulated and rendered.

Then the display freezes, and a man materializes in front of Hiro. He is a classic bearded, pale, skinny hacker, trying to beef himself up by wearing a bulky silk windbreaker blazoned with the logo of one of the big Metaverse amusement parks. Hiro knows the guy; they used to run into each other at trade conventions all the time. He's been trying to hire Hiro for the last two months.

"Hiro, I can't understand why you're holding out on me. We're making bucks here -- Kongbucks and yen -- and we can be flexible on pay and bennies. We're putting together a swords-and-sorcery thing, and we can use a hacker with your skills. Come on down and talk to me, okay?"

Him walks straight through the display, and it vanishes. Amusement parks in the Metaverse can be fantastic, offering a wide selection of interactive three-dimensional movies. But in the end, they're still nothing more than video games. Hiro's not so poor, yet, that he would go and write video games for this company. It's owned by the Nipponese, which is no big deal. But it's also managed by the Nipponese, which means that all the programmers have to wear white shirts and show up at eight in the morning and sit in cubicles and go to meetings.

When Hiro learned how to do this, way back fifteen years ago, a hacker could sit down and write an entire piece of software by himself. Now, that's no longer possible. Software comes out of factories, and hackers are, to a greater or lesser extent, assembly-line workers. Worse yet, they may become managers who never get to write any code themselves. The prospect of becoming an assembly-line worker gives Hiro some incentive to go out and find some really good intel tonight.

He tries to get himself psyched up, tries to break out of the lethargy of the long-term underemployed. This intel thing can be great once you get yourself jacked into the grid. And with his connections it shouldn't be any

problem. He just has to get serious about it. Get serious. Get serious. But it's so hard to get serious about anything.

He owes the Mafia the cost of a new car. That's a good reason to get serious. He cuts straight across the Street and under the monorail line, headed for a large, low-slung black building. It is extraordinarily somber for the Street, like a parcel that someone forgot to develop. It's a squat black pyramid with the top cut off. It has one single door -- since this is all imaginary, there are no regulations dictating the number of emergency exits. There are no guards, no signs, nothing to bar people from going in, yet thousands of avatars mill around, peering inside, looking for a glimpse of something. These people can't pass through the door because they haven't been invited.

Above the door is a matte black hemisphere about a meter in diameter, set into the front wall of the building. It is the closest thing the place has to decoration. Underneath it, in letters carved into the wall's black substance, is the name of the place: THE BLACK SUN.

So it's not an architectural masterpiece. When Da5id and Hiro and the other hackers wrote The Black Sun, they didn't have enough money to hire architects or designers, so they just went in for simple geometric shapes. The avatars milling around the entrance don't seem to care.

If these avatars were real people in a real street, Hiro wouldn't be able to reach the entrance. It's way too crowded. But the computer system that operates the Street has better things to do than to monitor every single one of the millions of people there, trying to prevent them from running into each other. It doesn't bother trying to solve this incredibly difficult problem. On the Street, avatars just walk right through each other.

So when Hiro cuts through the crowd, headed for the entrance, he really is cutting through the crowd. When things get this jammed together, the computer simplifies things by drawing all of the avatars ghostly and translucent so you can see where you're going. Hiro appears solid to himself, but everyone else looks like a ghost. He walks through the crowd as if it's a fogbank, clearly seeing The Black Sun in front of him.

He steps over the property line, and he's in the doorway. And in that instant he becomes solid and visible to all the avatars milling outside. As one, they all begin screaming. Not that they have any idea who the hell he is -- Hiro is just a starving CIC stringer who lives in a U-Stor-It by the airport. But in the entire world there are only a couple of thousand people who can step over the line into The Black Sun.

He turns and looks back at ten thousand shrieking groupies. Now that he's all by himself in the entryway, no longer immersed in a flood of avatars, he can see all of the people in the front row of the crowd with perfect clarity. They are all done up in their wildest and fanciest avatars, hoping that Da5id -- The Black Sun's owner and hacker-in-chief -- will invite them inside. They flick and merge together into a hysterical wall. Stunningly beautiful women, computer-airbrushed and retouched at seventy-two frames a second, like Playboy pinups turned three-dimensional -- these are would-be actresses hoping to be discovered. Wild-looking abstracts, tornadoes of gyrating light-hackers who are hoping that Da5id will notice their talent, invite them inside, give them a job. A liberal sprinkling of black-and-white people -- persons who are accessing the Metaverse through cheap public terminals, and who are rendered in jerky, grainy black and white. A lot of these are run-of-the-mill psycho fans, devoted to the fantasy of stabbing some particular actress to death; they can't even get close in Reality, so they goggle into the Metaverse to stalk their prey. There are would-be rock stars done up in laser light, as though they just stepped off the concert stage, and the avatars of Nipponese businessmen, exquisitely rendered by their fancy equipment, but utterly reserved and boring in their suits.

There's one black-and-white who stands out because he's taller than the rest. The Street protocol states that your avatar can't be any taller than you are. This is to prevent people from walking around a mile high. Besides, if this guy's using a pay terminal -- which he must be, to judge from the image quality -- it can't jazz up his avatar. It just shows him the way he is, except not as well. Talking to a black-and-white on the Street is like talking to a person who has his face stuck in a xerox machine, repeatedly pounding the copy button, while you stand by the output tray pulling the sheets out one at a time and looking at them.

He has long hair, parted in the middle like a curtain to reveal a tattoo on his forehead. Given the shifty resolution, there's no way to see the tattoo clearly, but it appears to consist of words. He has a wispy Fu Manchu mustache.

Hiro realizes that the guy has noticed him and is staring back, looking him up and down, paying particular attention to the swords. A grin spreads across the black-and-white guy's face. It is a satisfied grin. A grin of recognition. The grin of a man who knows something Hiro doesn't. The black-and-white guy has been standing with his arms folded across his chest, like a man who is bored, who's been waiting for something, and now his arms drop to his sides, swing loosely at the shoulders, like an athlete

limbering up. He steps as close as he can and leans forward; he's so tall that the only thing behind him is empty black sky, torn with the glowing vapor trails of passing animercials.

"Hey, Hiro," the black-and-white guy says, "you want to try some Snow Crash?"

A lot of people hang around in front of The Black Sun saying weird things. You ignore them. But this gets Hiro's attention.

Oddity the first: The guy knows Hiro's name. But people have ways of getting that information. It's probably nothing.

The second: This sounds like an offer from a drug pusher. Which would be normal in front of a Reality bar. But this is the Metaverse. And you can't sell drugs in the Metaverse, because you can't get high by looking at something.

The third: The name of the drug. Hiro's never heard of a drug called Snow Crash before. That's not unusual -- a thousand new drugs get invented each year, and each of them sells under half a dozen brand names.

But a "snow crash" is computer lingo. It means a system crash -- a bug -- at such a fundamental level that it frags the part of the computer that controls the electron beam in the monitor, making it spray wildly across the screen, turning the perfect gridwork of pixels into a gyrating blizzard. Hiro has seen it happen a million times. But it's a very peculiar name for a drug.

The thing that really gets Hiro's attention is his confidence. He has an utterly calm, stolid presence. It's like talking to an asteroid. Which would be okay if he were doing something that made the tiniest little bit of sense. Hiro's trying to read some clues in the guy's face, but the closer he looks, the more his shifty black-and-white avatar seems to break up into jittering, hard-edged pixels. It's like putting his nose against the glass of a busted TV. It makes his teeth hurt.

"Excuse me," Hiro says. "What did you say?"

"You want to try some Snow Crash?"

He has a crisp accent that Hiro can't quite place. His audio is as bad as his video. Hiro can hear cars going past the guy in the background. He must be goggled in from a public terminal alongside some freeway. "I don't get this," Hiro says. "What is Snow Crash?"

"It's a drug, asshole," the guy says. "What do you think?"

"Wait a minute. This is a new one on me," Hiro says. "You honestly think I'm going to give you some money here? And then what do I do, wait for you to mail me the stuff?"

"I said try, not buy," the guy says. "You don't have to give me any money. Free sample. And you don't have to wait for no mail. You can have it now." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a hypercard.

It looks like a business card. The hypercard is an avatar of sorts. It is used in the Metaverse to represent a chunk of data. It might be text, audio, video, a still image, or any other information that can be represented digitally.

Think of a baseball card, which carries a picture, some text, and some numerical data. A baseball hypercard could contain a highlight film of the player in action, shown in perfect high-def television; a complete biography, read by the player himself, in stereo digital sound; and a complete statistical database along with specialized software to help you look up the numbers you want.

A hypercard can carry a virtually infinite amount of information. For all Hiro knows, this hypercard might contain all the books in the Library of Congress, or every episode of Hawaii Five-O that was ever filmed, or the complete recordings of Jimi Hendrix, or the 1950 Census.

Or -- more likely -- a wide variety of nasty computer viruses. If Hiro reaches out and takes the hypercard, then the data it represents will be transferred from this guy's system into Hiro's computer. Hiro, naturally, wouldn't touch it under any circumstances, any more than you would take a free syringe from a stranger in Times Square and jab it into your neck.

And it doesn't make sense anyway. "That's a hypercard. I thought you said Snow Crash was a drug," Hiro says, now totally nonplussed.

"It is," the guy says. "Try it."

"Does it fuck up your brain?" Hiro says. "Or your computer?"

"Both. Neither. What's the difference?"

Hiro finally realizes that he has just wasted sixty seconds of his life having a meaningless conversation with a paranoid schizophrenic. He turns around and goes into The Black Sun.

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#The Black Sun is as big as a couple of football fields laid side by side. The decor consists of black, square tabletops hovering in the air (it would be pointless to draw in legs), evenly spaced across the floor in a grid. Like pixels. The only exception is in the middle, where the bar's four quadrants come together (4 - 22). This part is occupied by a circular bar sixteen meters across. Everything is matte black, which makes it a lot easier for the computer system to draw things in on top of it -- no worries about filling in a

complicated background. And that way all attention can be focused on the avatars, which is the way people like it.

It doesn't pay to have a nice avatar on the Street, where it's so crowded and all the avatars merge and flow into one another. But The Black Sun is a much classier piece of software. In The Black Sun, avatars are not allowed to collide. Only so many people can be here at once, and they can't walk through each other. Everything is solid and opaque and realistic. And the clientele has a lot more class -- no talking penises in here. The avatars look like real people. For the most part, so do the daemons.

"Daemon" is an old piece of jargon from the UNIX operating system, where it referred to a piece of low-level utility software, a fundamental part of the operating system. In The Black Sun, a daemon is like an avatar, but it does not represent a human being. It's a robot that lives in the Metaverse. A piece of software, a kind of spirit that inhabits the machine, usually with some particular role to carry out. The Black Sun has a number of daemons that serve imaginary drinks to the patrons and run little errands for people. It even has bouncer daemons that get rid of undesirable -- grab their avatars and throw them out the door, applying certain basic principles of avatar physics. Da5id has even enhanced the physics of The Black Sun to make it a little cartoonish, so that particularly obnoxious people can be hit over the head with giant mallets or crushed under plummeting safes before they are ejected. This happens to people who are being disruptive, to anyone who is pestering or taping a celebrity, and to anyone who seems contagious. That is, if your personal computer is infected with viruses, and attempts to spread them via The Black Sun, you had better keep one eye on the ceiling.

Hiro mumbles the word "Bigboard." This is the name of a piece of software he wrote, a power tool for a CIC stringer. It digs into The Black Sun's operating system, rifles it for information, and then throws up a flat square map in front of his face, giving him a quick overview of who's here and whom they're talking to. It's all unauthorized data that Hiro is not supposed to have. But Hiro is not some bimbo actor coming here to network. He is a hacker. If he wants some information, he steals it right out of the guts of the system-gossip *ex machina*. Bigboard shows him that Da5id is ensconced in his usual place, a table in the Hacker Quadrant near the bar. The Movie Star Quadrant has the usual scattering of Sovereigns and wannabes. The Rock Star Quadrant is very busy tonight; Hiro can see that a Nipponese rap star named Sushi K has stopped in for a visit. And there are a lot of record-industry types hanging around in the Nipponese Quadrant -- which looks like the other quadrants except that it's quieter, the tables are

closer to the floor, and it's full of bowing and fluttering geisha daemons. Many of these people probably belong to Sushi K's retinue of managers, flacks, and lawyers.

Hiro cuts across the Hacker Quadrant, headed for Da5id's table. He recognizes many of the people in here, but as usual, he's surprised and disturbed by the number he doesn't recognize -- all those sharp, perceptive twenty-one-year-old faces. Software development, like professional sports, has a way of making thirty-year-old men feel decrepit.

Looking up the aisle toward Da5id's table, he sees Da5id talking to a black-and-white person. Despite her lack of color and shitty resolution, Hiro recognizes her by the way she folds her arms when she's talking, the way she tosses her hair when she's listening to Da5id. Hiro's avatar stops moving and stares at her, adopting just the same facial expression with which he used to stare at this woman years ago. In Reality, he reaches out with one hand, picks up his beer, takes a pull on the bottle, and lets it roll around in his mouth, a bundle of waves clashing inside a small space.

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