

out your body.

I try an emergency abort and get nothing.

My stomach turns inside out. All sense of up and down disappears, replaced by an intense feeling of weightlessness. A few seconds later the sensations vanish all at once, leaving me feeling more or less normal. A flickering light appears above me and I'm surrounded by metal and glass.

Ancient comm tech, called a... phone booth if I remember correctly. No point in staying inside. I've got no one to call. The glass door slides open with a grinding metallic sound. Outside, my eyes take a minute to adjust. I'm on a street from a jillion years ago. Tall skyscrapers everywhere, a sky filled with sharp lines. The cars are huge, with obnoxious sweeping curves. Clunky looking.

The buildings and cars are rendered, but everything is dark and unfinished. The city lies static, frozen in place. Nothing moves, not a person in sight. Creepy as fuck.

At the end of the block, more of the same in every direction. Looks big—really big for a micro-network. Who spends the time and resources on something like this? Building after building as far as you can see, not a single thing active.

Then I notice a faint light up ahead. Pulsating colored letters cycling on and off in turn. E-A-T H-E-R-E. Some kind of fancy food bar.

Figures I try to ditch the netpolies in a dark network. Block after block, nothing's got power except the local eatery. Plenty of

space to run, but nowhere to hide.

Speak of the devil. That grinding metal sound from a moment ago claws its way down the street. Netpolies coming through the phone booth. Not good. Means they realized something is missing—whatever it was Geeves nabbed. They figure I have it, or know who does, which also means they won't stop till they find me. Footsteps coming fast.

Sticking to the shadows isn't difficult as I leapfrog toward the food bar as quietly as I can manage. I pray it's open. A faint buzzing sound grows louder as I near. No wait a second, not static. Music. Jazz, if I remember anything from my music history.

Ground floor. Corner of the building. Lots of glass. A handful of people inside, sitting on stools in front of a counter. Some folks in cushioned booths along the glass walls. A cute waitress serving up coffee.

This micro-net is a trip, like some sort of crazy time warp. But the food bar is active with programs, or possible users. Might be able to throw the netpolies off just long enough to find a way outta here.

An old fashioned bell rings when I open the door. Everybody turns around to look at me. The waitress stops pouring coffee. Nobody says a word.

Shit, netpolies are already running up on the glass outside.

No changing my mind now.

I step in and they all go back to doing what they're doing. Suddenly my avatar's completely changed. I'm wearing blue jeans

cuffed at the bottoms, a white t-shirt, and a black leather jacket. An avatar change without a prompt? Networks aren't suppose to be able to override user settings like that.

Where the hell am I?

“We don't get a lot of visitors here. Why don't you take a load off and relax?”

The voice comes from a steely haired guy in a dark suit and fedora. He's sitting at the counter in front of a half eaten sandwich and sipping a mug of coffee. Looks friendly enough.

“Best apple pie you'll ever taste. I'd bet my reputation on it.”

The guy tips his hat. “Mac, by the way.”

Before I can reply, the waitress drops a slice of pie in front of me. She winks at me and smiles, waiting for me to take a bite.

I oblige her. The apple pie tastes better than any other VR food I've ever eaten.

“Don't suppose you can tell me where I am, huh?”

Mac glances over my shoulder then back to me, looking me straight in the eyes. “You're in the middle of nowhere kid. A place that should'a been—but never was.”

This guy's talking gibberish. Maybe his program has a glitch?

The stool before the counter spins around as I plop down on it. The rest of the hot apple pie goes down easy and fast. Even though you don't get any real nutrients, your brain is tricked into releasing dopamine. Almost as good as the real thing and no weight gain!

DING-DING-DING.

The door goes off again. A handful of netpolies charge in like bulls in a china shop. Their clothes instantly turn into blue wool uniforms with tall black hats and oversized brass buttons. Black handlebar mustaches appear on all their faces. I know *they* didn't just do that—this place is even overriding network security. What a trip.

Shit, I'm so awestruck by this crazy micro-net, I forgot why I'm here in the first place. If I don't disappear I'm gonna get nabbed for sure.

I jump up to ditch out the back, but a hand pins my jacket cuff to the counter. Mr. Fedora looks at the netpolies then back to me and ever-so-slightly shakes his head from side to side.

“Not healthy to eat and run. Stay put.”

The waitress leans over the counter filling up the guy's coffee mug. She turns to me and whispers, mouthing the words more than talking really, “You listen to Mac.”

Well the truth of it is, at this point my options are limited. I duck my head as the netpolies move through the food bar, waving wooden batons alongside the patrons. They look like batons in this crazy place, but disguise or no disguise, they're scanning for identity verifications. I'm screwed.

Before I can come up with any other ideas, a baton rushes alongside my head. The netpolie looks me square in the eye, then moves on to scan Mac.

“Evening officer,” Mac speaks without a care in the world.

The netpolies go through the entire place, even scanning

the cook in the kitchen. They crowd together and mumble to each other, then charge out the way they came in.

Did that really just happen?

“Too close.” The words slip from my mouth involuntarily as my upper body melts across the countertop.

“Well that was the most excitement we’ve seen in here for some time. Everything OK, kid?”

A glance over my shoulder and watch the netpolies, now back in their previous attire, disappear into the darkness. They completely vanish.

That was almost too lucky.

“Yeah. Everything’s cool mister. Just glad they’re gone.”

“You need to make a call, kid? There’s another phone booth two blocks up on fifth, building 303. Transfer port back to the main network.” Mr. Fedora stands up, pats his mouth dry, nods with a grin, and puts out his hand. “I was young and in trouble once or twice myself.”

He knows I’m in trouble. Seems like he genuinely cares though. I wonder if he’s an H.I. Hard to know when you’re dealing with a Human Intelligence permanently downloaded to the network.

Either way, touching a stranger in the City without safeties on and the Turney down to 1:1 can be dangerous. He did help me though. Assuming that exit port two blocks over really does exist.

Something about this guy...

“Thanks for the help. Mac, right?” I move my hand toward