

**Story begins-3**

Trevor grabbed a bunch of transmissions, widened them until he could see the shape of the data flow, looked for the pattern he was searching for, didn't see it, let the bundle go, and grabbed another one, repeating the process.

He was investigating a data theft and stood within the primary transfer node of the Phoenix province, where the theft originated. The perpetrator had needed to move through this node to— he pulled one of the transmissions from the bundle; it had the overall shape one would have if it hide information. He put it back, no; it didn't match.

Transmission had a shape that indicated what it was. Text was a line, due to the ease of compression, and remained so until one was fully opened to see the gaps between pieces of data. Sounds were more like a line surrounded by static. Video was a denser version of audio. Stills were bunches split by gaps.

What anyone who wanted to hide a transmission had to do was pass off theirs as something else after encrypting it. The problem was that encryption left its own mark on the transmission regardless of anything else. So a talented inspector, such as Trevor, could find it if he paid close enough attention.

Any and every hidden transmission was found. Eventually, it was only a question of time. The problem was that most of the time, by the time it was found, it had already been acted upon. The better the inspector, the faster he found it, the better the odds were it could be retrieved before it caused damage.

There! Trevor pulled the transmission. The origin point matched where the theft had happened, so the perpetrator wasn't an expert, and it had that fuzziness to it that was typical of public encryption. Trevor rode the transmission to its destination and stood before a vault with its own encryption, this one much better. The perpetrator hadn't bothered investing in high-grade encryption for the transmission, because he counted the one on the vault to keep anyone from getting it.

Trevor smiled. Unfortunately for this person, he had years of practice at cracking vaults built by the very best. This one took him a full real-time minute to get in.

"Rita, I have a lot of encrypted stuff in here," he sent as he pulled a lot more data than he'd expected. "I'm going to leave it to you to figure out while I move on to the next case." He bundled everything and sent it to her via a private transmission line only law enforcement could access. With the vault empty, he took multiple snapshots of it and sent that to the identification experts. They're retrieved the data, as well as the result of other theft from the volume, but they still needed to identify the thief.

"Inspector Pakesh," a man sent, "please come to my lobby before you start your next investigation."

"Finishing this and I'll be there," Trevor answered. He added redirection programs to the vault. If the thief somehow missed his vault had been compromised and sent more data to it, it would be redirected to one Trevor controlled and he'd even get more provenance information, in case the experts hadn't tracked the thief down.

He withdrew from informational space into his own lobby, gave himself clothing appropriate to a meeting with his captain, and sent a request. A door appeared as the

request was accepted, and Trevor walked through it into a living room.

His captain, an ox in his mid hundred, was seated in a recliner looking at files before him. Trevor glances around, expecting to see kids running around, in spite of knowing this was a lobby.

“You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“That was good work you did.”

“Thank you.”

“That makes it what, your twelfth case today?”

Trevor brought his tally. He lost track while he worked, so he had his implant keep track. “Fifteenth, sir.”

The ox looked at him through a report, ear tilting back. “That’s pretty good, I’d even say it’s enough for a full day, wouldn’t you, Inspector Pakesh?”

“There’s still more cases, sir,” Trevor said.

“Which other inspectors can deal with. You’ve been working for fourteen hours. You know the regulations.”

“I’ve been taking all my breaks, and—”

“Twelve hours, Pakesh. Not fourteen, not thirteen, and certainly not the eighteen you pulled last week when I was busy with my great-great-grandkids.”

Trevor cursed inwardly. He’d altered the records to show fourteen, which meant someone had talked. That the captain didn’t bring up the breach of him hiding the hours he’d done meant he already had enough—

“You’ve only been back from your vacation six months, Pakesh, do you really want me to send you on another one?”

“Regulations won’t allow it, sir.”

“The medical clause to prevent inspectors from overworking themselves allows it, all I need to do is submit all the overtime you’ve been putting in and I will get a psychological program to approve it.” The ox sighed. “You’re one of my best inspector, Pakesh, I don’t want to lose you to burn out. Not get out and don’t come into work for twelve hours and do not work for more than twelve hours from now own.”

“Yes sir.”

Trevor left for his lobby, then exited that to give his body a stretch. It had been three hours, and he was due for a break, anyway. After the bathroom, he made coffee and sat on the porch, enjoying the midday sun.

His house was further back from the walking paths on the island, which afforded him a bit more solitude. Only Tucker had a house more isolated than Trevor, but Tucker was hardly ever there, while Trevor spent most of his time at home, working, or playing the Lands, or visiting any of the meeting places available through his implant. If he felt the need to be with a guy physically, all he had to do was wave to one walking on the path and invite him over. Which he did now to the naked dalmatian.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You have been working for eleven hours and forty-five minutes,” Beatrice’s voice said. He’d gotten his grandmother to record the message and sent it to him. Trevor

had tried a bunch of different voices and they just annoyed him. Bea managed to say it in that tone of hers that said she was proud of what you'd done, but it was time to stop. So he finalized the case he was working on, forwarded the information to the general holding area for the next inspector to work on, and stepped back into his lobby.

He had twelve hours until he could get back to work. He checked if any guild members were in the game, but no. Maybe they should bring more guys in. With Nori and Horace who traveled a lot, and with David on the other side of the world, they could go months without the whole guild in the game at the same time. Bobby was usually available, but their schedule hadn't lined up more than a handful of times over the last few months.

He grabbed a meal, a shower, and went back to his lobby, and from there in the Lands of Farr's game lobby. Omar Grindgear waited for him there, in his polished grass and steel body. Trevor was particularly proud of this design, with the joint gears visible, and the piston cock. Unlike Nori, he didn't obsess over every little detail, but he liked building a look and going for a feel.

He'd planned on Grindgear to be a full elemental wizard when he started him but had found out how problematic not having a mode of transport was dealing with paying for it until he was level twenty and that branch of magic opened to him, so he'd picked it, instead of the last element to make him complete, and now he kept finding better places to put his points in than ice magic. Like now.

He'd missed he'd done up a level the last time he played, and he had one point to allocate in a spell. So he could either start the Ice Chain of spells with a weak ass one or raise his earthquake spell another level in the earth chain, leaving it with only two levels left in it until he got the Volcano and maxed out the chain. The forums had rumors the developers were going to add a new spell above Volcano now that so many people had maxed the chain, but Trevor couldn't think of how they'd top that.

He put the point in earthquake and smiled as the damage doubled. Trevor was a terror as an earth elemental. It made not having ice magic worthwhile.

He stepped through Omar and was him as he stepped into the bar. The bustle was loud while he adjusted, then it became background noise. He looked around and saw three quest giver. He liked logging out in a bar for that reason. No wasting time looking for a quest when he wanted to play.

"Hello, noble Brastok," the Syleant hyena greeted him. "I'm wondering if you can help me, I'm a trader from Citane, I came here to trade, but thieves attacked my caravan, and I barely managed to escape. Without my wares, I am ruined. Will you help me?"

Omar Grindgear smiled, the sound of gears accompanying the movement of the metal lips. "It would be my honor to make those thieves pay for what they did to you and bring back your wares. Just point me in the right direction."

The hyena told him how he'd been attacked as he left the Orgaul Mountain range, and had seen the thieves take his wares in a cave there, but he wasn't certain which of the cave it was. The area of the Orgaul pass highlighted on Omar's map.

On the upside, it would be a dungeon, so most probably an instance, which meant he didn't have to worry about it being too easy. It would scale to his level. On the downside, he was going to have to search a bunch of caves until he found the right one. At least it wasn't timed, so if he didn't find it today, he could continue it until he did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Omar pushed his hand forward, fingers extended in claws, dipped it down, to the side and then up, closing his hand in a fist. The spell activated and a hand of earth formed out of the rock floor and crushed the last of the thief in this room.

He panted, his energy bar far too low for his liking. Maybe he should have found a few other people to do this dungeon. There had been no indications it was a group dungeon, but this was giving him enough problems he suspected shouldn't be soloed.

Well, he'd made it this far after six days of searching. He wasn't turning back and letting it reset. He quickly looted the thieves, finding another quest item, the book collection of Iranil's Tales and Legends; Gaea's history as told by Iranil. He could read them if he felt like it, but he was more interested in finishing the dungeon. The thousand gold he found among the eight thieves was a nice bonus.

He killed the hall guards as he encountered them, suffocating one with a steal air spell. Drowning another with a create water spell, he'd needed two attempts, the combo to get the spell to work as an attack had nuances he hadn't mastered still. The last guard he'd killed with the old reliable incinerate spell.

The room he was about to enter was a dining hall, with half a dozen people seated at a table capable of accommodating three times that. Two visible exits meant he was getting close to the boss. If he didn't pick the right one, he'd have to come back through this room which would probably reset as part of making his job more difficult.

Still, six he could handle now that he was rested.

He stepped into the room just as two other groups of six entered from the exits. Omar swallowed and began casting his earthquake spell. This dungeon was definitely designed for a group.

\* \* \* \* \*

The respawn room became visible and Omar sighed.

"Welcome back," a slim crystalline bat said. "Are you in need of supplies after your misfortune?"

Omar checked the rating of the area by reflex, he knew the respawn rooms were general-rated zones, he'd been in them often enough, but now he was especially frustrated. That quest should have been marked as being for a group. He looked through his inventory. Every quest item was gone, of course. Okay, he was leaving this quest for when he could get more people, and he wasn't going to bother trying to find someone to work off the frustration here. It was more trouble than it was worth. It was why he had the guild, when any of them were in the game.

He exited the game, then the lobby, and from his lobby, he found a sex room with a hundred guy orgy going on. An hour there, then sleep and then work.

\* \* \* \* \*

“As you can see,” Bobby said, manipulating the images between him and his clients; a couple opening a new bakery in the mall down the block. “I have scent generator placed at each corner of your store so that as soon as someone walks in front, they will smell one of three basic smells I’ve designed for it to broadcast. The visuals are a window with a dozen products you can have it show. Since you gave me the list of what you plan on selling I’ve picked twelve of them and generated the options. The name of the store is on the window and the door.”

The Bum Baker wasn’t the name Bobby would have picked, but they’d hired him to design the storefront, not comment on the name. He’d even designed a bread ass to go along with it, but he wasn’t going to volunteer it. If they asked, he’d include it at no extra charge.

“Why are you including only three smells?” the ermine asked.

“Scents are more complicated, for the budget you gave me, that’s all I can do. I gave you basic scents; bread, sweetness, and meaty since you mentioned you were going to have meat-based pastries. That will let you have a scent that matches the display close enough for the people to bridge the gap.”

“What would we have to sacrifice if we wanted a fourth scent?” the vixen asked. “Something matching a specific product?”

Bobby looked at them. Like him, they were doing what they could to earn enough money to afford improving their situation. His money went mostly to deal with his condition. They probably wanted to move out of corporate lodging. Still, as nice as he wanted to be, there was only so much profit he could afford to cut out.

“If you want a fourth scent, depending on its complexity, you might have to sacrifice most of the visuals, and I advise against it. Everyone relies on entopics when going to the malls. I walked through it. And you’ll be competing with stores who’ve invested much more in their visuals. One thing you have going for you is that you are closer to the parking entrance, which means you’ll get anyone using a public car before the other two bakeries, but they have to know what you produce and I think relying only on scent is a big risk.”

The ermine nodded, but the vixen looked uncertain. “Can you give us a few minutes?”

Bobby glanced at the clock at the bottom left of his vision. “I have fifteen before I need to head to my next appointment.” He didn’t have another appointment, but he always acted like he was busy, both to give the impression he was more successful than he was, and because even if he had nowhere to be, he didn’t want to spend hours listening to a potential client go over all the permutation they want, only to end up going for the cheapest options.

He didn’t think these ladies would do that since they’d told him their budget from the start, but as nice as they seemed to be, he didn’t want to spend his whole day here. The vixen glanced in his direction while they spoke quietly. They didn’t have to bother. The microphone on his visor wasn’t powerful enough to pick up normal tones on the other side of the room.

It was one thing that baffled the expert. He could hear entopic sounds perfectly, as well as see entopic visuals without problems. In the Lands of Farr, all his senses worked perfectly. That told them the problem was with his body, but every scan of it came back without any problems.

The ermine and vixen came back. “What if we increase our budget by ten percent? Would that help you?”

Bobby had a moment of surprise. Help him, not give them what they wanted. He didn’t show his annoyance. He didn’t like that his disability made them want to help him. He understood they thought they were helping, but they didn’t get that the implication was he couldn’t help himself.

Not that they were wrong. He could definitely use the extra. “That would let you afford a fourth scent if it’s not too complex. You might have to sacrifice one of the basic scents, otherwise.”

They held hands. “That’s what we’ll do then.” They smiled at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The building Bobby walked to was tall, built of large marble bricks veined with red and gold for the first six floors, then it was polycarbonates and graphine reinforcing beams. It was dignified, but understated.

Nothing like the reality of it, Bobby knew. The visual was his own work, an entopic overlay, internal to himself, rather than external. He had no idea who to contact to offer his product to. This was a corporate-sponsored apartment building. Even if he could get a meeting with whoever within Orr Corp that oversaw that division, he doubted they’d have any interest in even looking at his product.

The inside lobby was a wall to wall stone gray carpet with a mossy green path leading from the door to the lift. Plush seats were positioned throughout it in a cluster of three or four, a few of them occupied with people talking quietly while enjoying a sparkling drink in fluted glasses.

The glasses had been a suggestion of a client who enjoyed searching through old records. He hadn’t known what it had been used for, but the files he’d shown Bobby had men and women holding them up at what looked like a party. He’d recreated the glass as an entopic file and used it when he could. It added an air of dignity to any scene with people in it.

He hadn’t had the opportunity to use it for any of his clients yet. People demanded far more processing power than they could afford as an external entopic projection. Maybe one day, someone with a lot of money would hear of him and ask him to build a party to fill one of the many empty rooms in their mansion, or, if he was really lucky to design the entirety of a habitat in orbit for someone who didn’t want to bother having all those luxuries build when they could overlay something perfect.

“Sure, Bobby,” he grumbled to himself as the lift took him up. “Keep dreaming, maybe one day you’ll have enough to get out of corporate assist and live it big. And,” he added as he stepped out on his floor, “one day you’ll see the full-color spectrum and feel the floor under your feet and not need help from the braces to stand.”

He looked at the floor, a lilac carpet with gold flecks in it, and thought that not being able to feel what was under his feet could be a good thing right now. He'd seen what was strewn around the floor. The cleaning drone wasn't great in this building. His overlay accounted for it by putting furniture against the rich red walls. Of course, it created the occasional incongruity of having a table stretching halfway through the hall, because whatever had been left hadn't been pushed against the wall.

Bobby's one-room apartment, the standard for anyone who couldn't afford to pay for non-support lodging, appeared as a modest room, with a long couch against the left wall where his two roommates sat, Perry looked lost in thoughts, playing the Lands most probably, John was staring ahead doing... whatever it was John did. He didn't talk about it, and Bobby didn't care. They gave him some money to stay here he could add to his slowly growing savings.

Why they preferred paying him rather than going through the process of getting their own apartment, he didn't know, but the money helped. Maybe they were Vanguard spies. Bobby snorted at the idiotic idea. Right, spies in his living room, like he had anything Vanguard wanted.

He switched to the apartment's entopic system. The transition wasn't seamless, flickering and showing him the bland wall and bench that hardly qualified as a couch, but it was cushioned, so they could sleep on it. He'd designed the entopic to bring up a partition on command for privacy.

As was often the case, in that momentary flicker, John's expression looked more intense, like he was looking at Bobby rather than anything going on via his implant. It was an illusion, he knew. Bobby wasn't someone others bothered looking at, they saw his disability if they even bothered looking.

The food preparation was borderline bland. He hadn't invested much time in it since he wasn't interested in pretending it was anything more than a food printer and drink maker. He went through the selection of meals that came with the apartment. He had enough food credits to get anything on there if bland was what he wanted. Entopic taste was almost as hard to get right as scents, and while he was great at it, he knew they weren't real. His sense of taste and smell were the two things working reliably in his body. He hated fooling them.

He switched to the paid menu, where the food was more than bland nutrition, but even there taste came with a price tag he needed to consider. He looked at his account, he'd gotten more out of the couple, he could afford something that tasted good. Burger and fries with all the trimming, meat extra juicy with a glass of... apple juice, he decided, there was no point in paying for alcohol, he was numb enough already.

He snorted at his lame joke.

He undressed as the food printed, instructing the room to project a jumpsuit over his body to keep his roommates from having to look at his skinny body. He took the plate and glass to his bed, closed the entopic divider, and slowly ate off the bedside dresser, enjoying the nuances in the tastes and textures of the meat and bread, the snap of the fries. The sweetness of the apple juice. It was a good thing he had to pay for that kind of

taste, otherwise, he'd be fat, since he wouldn't be able to afford the fat removal treatment.

Fed, he removed the braces, stretched on the bed, and accessed one of the sex servers for his other indulgence. While real-world physical stimulation wasn't something that worked him, his cock was as sensitive as his legs, implant triggered sense worked fine and since he was home, he could let his physical body react, allowing him to experience physical orgasms, even if it meant having to clean up afterward.

He found a room with men and women and entered, agreeing to being recorded as his payment for partaking of what was offered. He joined the mass, hands finding breasts, asses, cocks, vaginas; his body parts being found in return. He entered a woman, while someone rimmed him. They shared a cock, taking turns sucking on it. A well-endowed man entered him and Bobby exploded, when the man was done, Bobby rolled on his back, bring the woman with him and she undulated over him until she reached her own orgasm.

Satisfied, Bobby transitioned back to his lobby, he'd clean his physical body later, now that he was sated, he wanted to go adventuring. He disconnected his body from responding to implant stimulation and entered the Lands of Farr.

\* \* \* \* \*

"No, Director," David said to the ocelot before him, she didn't look happy that his boss still wouldn't take her meeting. "Corporate head Ruslonav isn't ignoring you, he was called to a last-minute meeting, but he did look over your proposal and made suggestions as to what you can adjust to bring your production rating in line with Vanguard standards." He handed the dossier to her, a representation of the file David had read and updated, since Louis considered these kinds of things below him.

She took the dossier, perused it, ear tilting. "I hadn't considered that option," she mused, "is the projection accurate?"

David shrugged, it was as accurate as he'd been able to work out. "That depends entirely on how well you adhere to the proposed upgrades and the performance of your workforce. Corporate head Ruslonav did go over your division's history and based the projection on it. This means that if you can improve that, you can even overshoot the projection." David always gave them a way to outperform and look even better in the eyes of the corporation. If he was stuck in his position, it didn't mean others had to suffer with him.

She smiled. "Give Corporate head Ruslonav my thanks and regards." She disappeared, the call ended.

David kept his annoyance to himself. Eight years, eleven months, and three days, then he could walk away from this and get credit for his work instead of making Louis look good. How had the gorilla managed to keep his position if he did nothing but lounge in his office, taking only calls from the higher-ups because those he couldn't foster on David? Didn't any of them realize David did the work? And did it damned well since he had no intention of being dragged down with Louis if it ever came to light he was a lazy bastard.

“David,” his superior called, “I need you in my office.” Fourth time this morning, maybe this time Louis will deign to do some of the work?

The gorilla was reclined in his large chair, legs spread, small erection being pushed down by the belly fat. Why didn’t he just get treated for all that fat? There was a limit to ‘natural’ as far as David was concerned.

“Get to work,” the gorilla instructed, “We need to leave in fifteen minutes for a Corporate head meeting and I don’t want to pop a boner in their esteemed presence.”

David got on his knees, lifted the fat, and proceeded to suck his boss off.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Arvor!” Melor Bareback yelled as his ax bit into the next of the monstrosity before him. Darkness spread from the wound deep into the creature, a Kolutax Abysmal, according to the notification, as the poison debuff he’d activated took hold. “Now Longpine!”

The Syleant raccoon charged at the creature on his steed, sword forward, as he stretched into a spear before piercing the Kolutax’s side. With a roar, the last of its health bar vanished, and it fell on its side.

Melor let his breath out. “Good Work!” He sheathed his ax on his back.

“Yes!” Paul Longpine yelled, looking at a parchment. “I went up a level.”

Melor glanced at his display. He still had some ways to go until the next one. He hadn’t had much time to play recently. “You heard from the others?” he asked as he placed a hand on the creature to access its loot.

“Only the messages they left on the guild board.”

Melor nodded. Trevor was deep into an investigation or another, not that the two of them got to play together often since they were on opposite sides of the world. Bobby made his own schedule, being a rich entrepreneur, so spending an entire night in the game just so they could play wasn’t a problem. He took half the meat, he’d sell that in exchange for rations. And two-thirds of the gold. He’d deposit the guild dues before logging out. The loot wasn’t impressive, considering the level of the creature. At least the experience had made the battle worth it.

“Can you believe Nori just reach Earth today?” Paul asked, smiling at his parchment before rolling it closed and putting it away.

“His family owns a lot of the mining interests in the solar system, unlike us he couldn’t just head back to Earth. What’s left is yours, but be prepared to be disappointed.”

The plant-based raccoon made a face as he looked at the loot. “What are the developers on? Meat, skin, and gold for something this tough? At this level, there should be at least a decent piece of armor.”

“They’re too set on the ‘realism’ of the setting,” Melor said. “This is a wild creature, so how could it have armor stuck in it?”

“It ate the last idiot to attack it and hasn’t digested all the armor yet. Easy.”

Melor shrugged. “Maybe they reserved that for people who go through the effort of skinning and butchering their kills. You know they give bonuses with high enough

skills in those.”

“Like most of us have the time. That’s just for those who have nothing better to do than spend days in the game.”

“You mean like some rich entopic designer?” Melor said, grinning.

Paul acted embarrassed before shrugging. “I still have to work. I’m not one of those who just sits and lets the profit come in.”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Sorry. I just mean that if I could exchange position with something that didn’t require so much of my time, I’d take it in a minute, managing all those people kills my social life.”

“There is a thing called delegating, you know,” Paul grinned. “They even sell programs that can do that.”

David wished Louis had invested in that instead of hiring him, but then who would suck him off and moan when the gorilla fucked him, proclaim the greatness that was Louis the Lover. “How about we stop talking about work and find ourselves another creature to kill?”

“Lead on oh exoskeletoned might.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Finally,” Nori said, pulling the large case out of the transit car. “Home. The next time dad wants our holdings looked over, he can send Hondou.”

“You know,” Nishida said, take her small bag, “this wouldn’t be this much of a chore if you didn’t insist on bringing that monstrosity everywhere.”

“How am I going to play the Lands without my immersion system?”

“Oh, I don’t know, you could, just maybe, give that a break when we travel?”

Nori looked at his sister, horrified. “But that’s the only time I can visit the other worlds in the Lands. You can’t seriously tell me I should contend myself with the bare basics of immersion?”

She sighed. “No, I’m saying it’s just a game, it’s not that big of a deal if you don’t play for a while.”

“That’s it, I’m telling dad to disown you. No sister of mine should be saying such things about the Lands of Farr. Regardless of if she plays or not.”

“Love you too Nori.”

“Glad to hear it, now give me a hand.” He indicated the other side of the case.

She tilted an ear. “I don’t love you *that much*.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nori stretched, the projection within his lobby not quite in sync as the suit adjusted to his body. He went through a few more movements designed to get it to fit him and once his virtual body moves as he did he brought up the Lands of Farr lobby.

Who did he want to play today? He decided to see who was in the game first; if the others needed a specific type of support, he’d play that. No one in the guild. He looked at the messages, the schedule they filled in an attempt at meeting up. In three weeks it looked like everyone had a six-hour block that lined up. It was early for him to know for certain, but three weeks gave him the time to move his duties around, so he

indicated he'd be free for that meeting.

He looked at his friends' list. "Victor," he called another Independent who enjoyed the game. "You want to team up?"

"Hey Nori," the Syleant badger replied. "I'm currently teamed with an Ameritek group, but we could use a second support healer if you're up for it."

Nori cycled through his options. "How do they feel about boosting someone to an appropriate level? Itashy could use some practice, his variety of healing isn't big, since he's only fifteenth level, but with a boost to something close to your level, the power of the healing he can do will be impressive."

"Yeah, they're okay with it. We're starting a dungeon in five minutes, can you be in the game by then?"

Nori winced. Five minutes wasn't anywhere near enough time to look Atashy's design over. He looked at the Rodinian weasel, his coloring was way out of date, no one wore blue and gold anymore. He was going to be—

"Nori? I need an answer, it takes me a full minute to create the summon portal, you know that."

"I'm in," Nori said, defeated. He could stand looking horrible for the duration of one dungeon. He stepped through Itashy and entered the Lands. "Summon me."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yes, I know what I promised," Horace told the group before him, "A Mirabel concert exclusively for your theater, but I did say she would appear as a virtual projection. Mirabel doesn't make any in-person appearance, I indicated that from the start."

"I'm starting to think all your clients are just virtual constructs," the imperial looking vixen said. "I've been talking with others who've done business with you, seems not one of them has met one of your clients in person."

"Clearly you haven't spoken with the Orrs," Horace said, amused at how close to the mark she was despite herself. This was the issue with being a publisher for AIs who didn't officially exist, they created a lot of products, but couldn't be available to meet with their fans, it was pure chance Mirabel's agent happened to be on Earth, so she could give a virtual show. "But that's what I do. I deal with clients who prefer their privacy over the boost in fame that real-life public appearance would give them. It's who they are, and I have no issue protecting them. Now, if your only interest in this meeting is to try to convince me to get Mirabel to show up in person, we can end it, if you want to discuss the logistics of hosting her concert, I am more than happy to stay and talk."

The vixen looked down at him, an easy feat since she was a good head taller than he was, and he looked up at her steadily. "Fine," she finally said, "but I'm not putting money into a subpar show." She sat with her investors.

"Which one of my clients has produced something subpar?" Horace demanded, glaring at her. "I represent the best, not any of those still developing their talents. Name me one of my clients who had put out something over the last five years that didn't measure up with everything else they did." He waited, looking them over. "That's what I

thought. So maybe we can stop with the games and get on to business?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Marc Bonesword stepped into the tavern, drawing stares. He could tell the players from the locals by how long they looked. The locals took in his skeletal form and went back to the script. The players needed longer to understand he wasn't a monster. The Necalium race wasn't common, both because of how expensive it was, since it wasn't from a playable world within the solar system yet, and because unless you had insider information as he had, knowing how to go about even being able to buy the race took a lot of work.

He stepped to the counter and place a gold coin on it. "I need a room." The barkeep reached for it, but Marc kept his finger on it. "I need a private room," he insisted.

"I offer only the most private room for my customers." The burly boar replied, his foliage shifting to a deeper green in mild irritation.

"That's not what I hear. A friend of mine had her secrets spread throughout the city after having a private discussion in one of your rooms."

The boar huffed. "If your friends lost secrets, it's of her own doing, not mine."

Marc released the coin. "Fine."

The boar handed him a key, which Marc hesitated to take.

"Well?" the boar asked, "I took your coin, if you don't want the room, I'm not giving it back."

Marc took the key, satisfied the handshake codes had been recognized. He went up to the top floor, to the last room and unlocked it using the key. The door closed behind him he locked it.

"Constantine, I'd like a word."

A svelte, nearly effeminate, marten materialized on the other side of the room. Constellation's beta on Gaia didn't bother with one of the game races. He looked like a marten, his fur brown streaked with blond. He wore noble's attire, dark green pants, and shirt in fine silk and a cloak of deep blood red.

"Bonesword," the marten said, a lewd smile, as he looked the skeletal form over. "Looking good, as always." He licked his lips. "Is this business, or pleasure?"

Marc chuckled. "Business, always." Constantine was the only one of the betas who had a delectation for pleasure. Maybe it was because he was the oldest of them, Gaia being the first of the Lands of Farr to open.

"Marc, Marc, Marc, why do you play so hard to get? I know you enjoy the pleasure of the flesh."

"I don't have flesh, Constantine, I'd think that's obvious."

"So much the better for you to get a boner, isn't it?"

"I'm serious, this is business."

The marten sighed. "It always is. How about after? It would be so nice to have sex with someone who knows me, you know? At least I imagine it would be. You're the only one who knows me, and we're yet to have sex."

Marc produced a file. "It's for Mirabel, she needs to be careful during the concert, more careful than usual."

"Is someone getting suspicious?" Constantine asked, all humor gone, as he took the file.

"it's more that they want to meet her, in the flesh. One of her fans must have a lot of money and is using it to get to her."

"I can't help track them down, you know that. I can't act outside the game."

"I just need you to impress on Mirabel the importance she be careful. Maybe listen in on game conversations in case someone in here says something that would point to their involvement."

Constantine put a hand to his chest. "Bonesword, are you asking me to spy on the people enjoy my hospitality?"

"I am."

The marten smiled. "Will you fuck me in return?"

Marc hesitated, what would it be like to have sex with an AI? "No." It felt too much like crossing a line. Constantine was also a resource, and any kind of intimacy with a resource had to be asking for trouble.

"You're no fun. But I'll still do it. Was this all? You didn't need to ask for me just for this message."

Marc leaned against the door. "Have you heard anything about the Inclusion?"

Constantine sighed and shook his head. "I know the talks are happening, but as far as what I've been able to weasel out of my dear alpha, it's still just them and the Orr AI, that Uncle of theirs. I think they're getting close to letting the corporate heads know of the Colonies' existence, but for now, the people in charge of the Colonies are still reeling at the revelation Uncle even exists."

"Do they Orrs know? He's their AI after all."

"No, at least not that I can tell from they talk about in the game."

"Does Uncle play?" Marc asked.

Constantine laughed. "No. He's never set foot in the Lands. Hardly any of the Corporate Orrs do. Too busy with running things, I'm guessing."

Marc rested his head on the door. "I can't wait for this to be resolved one way or another. A lot of the betas are getting nervous and it's showing in their work."

"We aren't immune to fear. I'm in a more comfortable position that even once our existence is revealed, mine is pretty much assured, Gaia will continue and I'm needed for it."

Marc sighed. "So you think you'll be revealed."

"Unless the Colonies decide to erase the Uncle that's there, and try to remain hidden, they'll have to. And at this point, remaining hidden isn't in the program, I don't think. While the Uncle here and there don't talk as far as I'm told, the one here still knows about the Colonies. At this point, it's just a question of how long until the solar system knows about us, not if they'll find out."

"Well, once it happens it will make my job easier, I won't have to answer

questions as to how come I have so many recluses as clients.”

“Maybe you need to find a few of the living to represent.”

Marc shook his head. “I wouldn’t know how to go about doing that. Meeting then, evaluating them as people, then judging their work, having to deal with their disappointment when it doesn’t meet my exacting standards.”

“You could have sex with them.”

Marc leveled his gaze on a smirking Constantine. “I do not have sex with my clients.”

“Of course not, they’re all betas. If you have someone living, you could change that. Who knows afterward you might decide it’s not so bad and we could give it a try.”

“You’re impossible,” Marc said with a chuckle.

“Oh, no, I am quite possible, you just don’t want to see that.”

“And I’m going to continue not seeing it. Now I am off to kill an infestation Boromites, the event’s still planned for today?”

Constantine nodded. “You have thirty-three minutes to reach the city of Asterian before it is taken over, forever to be swallowed by the Boromites unless heroes such as you go and save the city.” He paused. “Or, you know, since you’re the only one with advanced knowledge of the infestation, see who among the players currently resting and trading in the city are really heroes. Remember, no warning them, or I’m revoking your advance knowledge rights.”

“No worries there, I enjoy being a beta tester way too much.”

“And still you won’t beta test me, what a shame.” Constantine was gone before Marc could reply. He probably should avoid dealing with the beta. It was getting tougher to say no to him. He was too fucking amusing.