

Found

The first step out is always the most difficult. Raise your eyes and look ahead of you and you won't see a stretch of ground or facade of building that isn't covered by some pulsing light or pixel-perfect projection of a person. Always rotating, swirling into something else after it's gazed into you and made sure you paid enough attention for it to register. "It" being the silicon-and-data-powered *nebulii*. That something that people used to call the metaverse but that had since become something more omniscient. Had broken through the confines of the Internet of Things and algorithms and bled itself into reality.

You could feel that complex raise the hairs on the back of your neck. Feel it drink you in and break you down and spit some latent part of you back out in front of you. Some part you weren't conscious of before it shook its ass in the form of a dollgirl in a passing doorway. Or waved and smiled before sinking its teeth into a burger on the digitized glass of a skyscraper. The things that quickened your pulse or set your mouth to watering. Feeling this feeling, knowing when you were being poked and prodded in one direction or another, was hard enough to do without maintaining a certain presence of mind. But the routine he had developed helped.

Walking along the streets of Haight-Ashbury, he focused on the concrete blocks in front of him, muttering "*heel, toe... heel, toe...*" under his breath. Letting the flow of the foot traffic guide him, hands in the pockets and the curve of his chin buried in the upturned lapels of his denim jacket, mirrored sunglasses reflecting the only bit of data within immediate view—evenly spaced blocks of white light acting as a background for black sans serif lettering.

This was the most elegant implementation of the *nebulii*. Nothing shifting or morphing into your subconscious desires, trying to sell you something or grab your attention. The markers were mandated by the former United States government and kept in place by the Sino-Russo Federation, as a guiding line for building and address visibility. Especially if your *digId* (portmanteau combining "digital" and "identification" but also, more subtly, the *id* of the psyche) reflected back to the million-eyed monster that you held a job in something like logistics or transportation. Then, the markers oscillated with the next stop in your delivery chain, or raised high above milling crowds to show the closest approximation to whoever pinged you for a ride.

To Van, they were focal points. A space to breathe in the cacophony of the San Francisco metroplex with its unrelenting crowds and boundless vista of eye candy. And breathe he did. In. Out. Deep enough to hit the vagus nerve, send acetylcholine streaking down his spine and calming his nerves. The feeling in the head approximate to a slight buzz in the forehead, not strong enough to hit like nicotine used to but enough to bat back the *other*

parts of the nebulae. The ones and zeros and twisting helices flitting around at the edge of his vision like gnats, waiting for a glance to light upon and draw his eye in.

He was getting closer. And he knew by the inward curve of the visibility markers and concrete of the walking paths, where the ground narrowed and the buildings cramped closer together, turning his stride into an ever-so-slightly inward gait as the walkways thinned.

Turning off of Ashbury and onto Haight, he stopped at the Haight Ashbury building, 1500 Haight, and finally looked up.

In, towards the heart of the city. Where the demons sitting at the edges of his vision clawed their way into his conscience. Cartwheeled by, bounding off of the buildings and into the streets in fluid motions. Neon and data dissolving and reappearing in sweet tricks, wherever he focused his gaze: showing callouts for buildings and historical sights of interest; the endless array of visibility markers that stretched off into the darkness of Haight as the black-coated crowds walked through and around them; active cabbies with giant green arrows floating above their heads; food stalls and street vendors with wares flickering by at neat intervals; red diffuse neon that wrapped the projections of naked girls who danced and cavorted about and come-hithered with their fingers and blew smoke from heavy-lidded eyes.

The lights danced off his lenses as the panoply brought the phrase to mind, as it always did when it flowed into him through his digid, and he said laughingly, almost hysterically to the night and the milling crowd around him, "*fluid neon origami trick.*"

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and the uptwitched corner of his lip slowly fell from a snarl. The calm he had felt a moment earlier had been replaced by a cold tense feeling that slowly seeped into his fingers. The voice that answered him was Chinese, heavily accented:

"Neuromancer."

He turned slowly toward the sound of the voice and found himself staring into a heavily pixelated image pulsing in the dark glass of the Haight Ashbury building: dark glasses crowned a narrow, pale face framed by a dark goatee. A bead of red briefly glowed as the digitized figure inhaled on the cigarette in his mouth. The smoke curled in a strange zig zag, the pattern disjointed from the flickering of the image.

"I have been watching you, Van." He took another drag off the cigarette and Van could see the faint outline of a smile. "We need to have a talk."