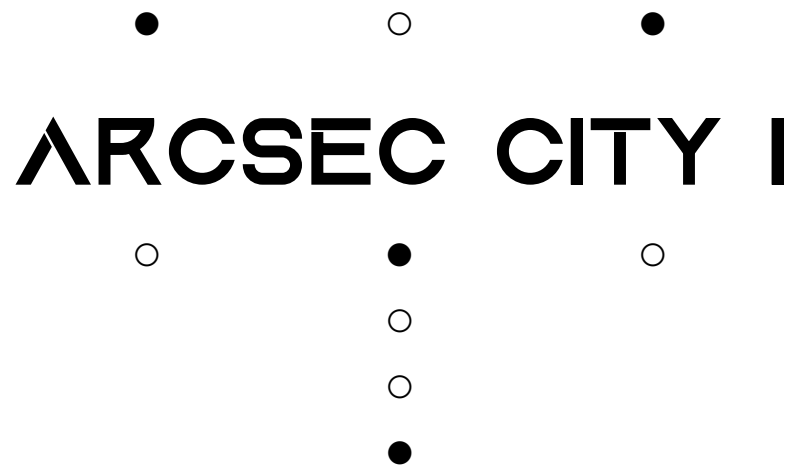


AETHERIUM NEBULA



“Once thought of as immutable snapshots of the past, science is showing just how pliable memories are to re-interpretation, revision, and modification. When it comes to the prospect of brain hacking, it’s not a matter of if, but when.”

- BioH4CKers e-zine vol. 29 | 6515 SRT

Arcaada’s Second City
Kurohi Street North Market [Kizu Lab]
Year 6572 SRT

The first impression when Waking is always the recognition of the depthless black; totality reduced to a speck of consciousness suspended within the primordial emptiness of an infinitely expansive sphere. This is followed by the liminal overlay of a discreet white grid which melts into a flood of syntax as the OS bootstraps. From an arbitrary point, which upon its birth becomes the de facto center of this metaphysical realm, a pink chasm of awareness effervesces as the neural lace untangles and assimilates the machine language of new and updated code. Then sensory erupts, like current sparking the filament inside a light bulb.

The frigidity of coldSleep is etched into her nerves like a river of ice that has begun to shatter; each crack carrying a subtle yet prolonged dose of pain. Miyaśa has been under for nearly three days, body rigid within the Icebox while her mind travelled, sifting through data, extrapolating, interfacing with new code and methodologies. Despite being kept at near freezing temperature, the circuits in her neural lace still burn hot like a ring of white plasma inside her skull.

The Icebox is an immersive neural-computer interface, the bastard hybrid of antique sensory deprivation tank and neural-linked VR simulator. The crude prototypes originally pioneered decades ago by wayward biohackers would be filled with literal ice to offset the heat of overclocking one’s implants (which were unstable as is), hence its colloquial name. But in recent years the design has been adopted by corporations: they now run an efficient liquid cooling system via acrylic tubing with the crown itself acting as a heatsink. But after a couple days it still gets *fucking cold* inside.

The pod linked to Miya’s neural ID is one of four that rest on the floor in the southeastern quadrant of the laboratory; each has an external cluster of rainbow-hued cables which link the hyperplastik sarcophagi to a series of glowing ports distributed amongst the mechanical forest of servers racked up against the south wall.

Despite the edge of the technology, nothing else conceals the true identity of the structure: a shitty basement. The floors are covered with Rorschach stains that have permanently fused onto the concrete, cheap expandable foam insulation is visible through gaping wounds in the walls, and unidentifiable trash sits in piles atop long forgotten food containers. Currently, this basement is the only permanent lab for the Kizu gang. It’s part of a subterranean complex that extends for two levels beneath the North Market Food Court in the Aozora Heights district of ArcSec City.

With a soft mechanical whir, the lid hinges up and back until a delicate click indicates it has opened

completely. Cold air from the tank billows out, forming tendrils of etheric smoke around the box's edges which carry the muted scent of burned wood and rose petals. Miya never goes under without perfume; being immersed in the scent is an integral part of the ritual. She blindly grasps the sides for a handhold and pulls herself into a sitting position.

She feels that certain indescribable violation as the Mainlink cable is removed from her Neural Port and temporarily replaced with a syringe that disperses a cooling vapor into the wetware. Simultaneously, the act of waking generates a command passed to her modified H-Link B5 heart augment which triggers the dispersion of Levoamphetamine and a microdose of α -Methyldopamine. The numbness in her fingers slowly blooms into a burst of familiar tactile sensation. Finally, the boot script running in her neural lace activates her eyes—Xhaomatsu Ocular model m17 (rev 7.1). Stolen, of course.

The Xhaomatus grant her the gift of vision, initially conjured as a swirling pool of liquid mercury obscured by hexadecimal syntax. The signal is routed in parallel to the lateral geniculate nucleus and the superior colliculus before being piped to the visual cortex; as the eyes sync with her brain the world coalesces into a tangible picture.

Only the physical shells were stolen, absent the standard optical software suite. In lieu, they're running on a bootlegged amalgam of warez cracked by **blΔld** which allows for a larger range of iris/pupil color combinations, as well as a multitude of recording modes. A splash screen of the hacking group's logo, a stylized pictogram hovering over the exposed chest of a naked animated character, momentarily takes over her field of vision before dissipating into their catchphrase "we see everything". She wonders if Jivah can edit that out, it's annoying to deal with that shit every time her optics reboot.

She blinks twice. A symbol appears briefly at the edge of her visual field indicating ocular systems are fully active. The bone gray of the iris' burst into twin galaxies of pink fog swirling across a cluster of blue-white stars.

She reaches up and grips the chilled, sleek metal of the Sleeper's Crown; as she pulls it off, the nest of cranial monitoring trodes break connection and slide away like snakes retreating into a subterranean burrow; the Mainlink cable recedes more slowly, like the matriarch who lingers to make sure her young escape to safety. Her motor skills sufficiently returned, she stands and steps out.

Much of her hair has been razored to the scalp save for the long bangs, an inseparable alloy of deep red and black with matching strands at her temples. She uses her right hand to brush a matted clump away from her face before sliding it back, running her fingers over the tender skin around the seal of the port at her nape. A hardline is required for the i/o transfer rates necessary for her neural lace to interface effectively with the VR environment. It's sealed with a flesh-colored cap, but the protrusion annoys her. She vaguely recalls a rogue memory of watching a video where a scientist was expressing, dramatically and with absolute certainty, that removal of a neural port would *scramble* the user's brain. Though that description was certainly hyperbolic, it still seemed like a bad idea. Not that she had any choice in the matter.

The frozen grip of coldSleep has made her skin almost as white as the easterners of the megacity Dhuna-Rhim. As she rubs her arm, relishing the physicality of living flesh; the paleness slowly dissipates like a slab of marble sinking into quicksand.

There are two others in the immediate room: the Kizu tech-whisperer Jivah, a heavily augmented middle-aged man in a gungy off-white smock whose imperial rule encompasses exactly the volume of

the laboratory and not one nm³ more (this being one of the main sources of his eternal agony); and Armu, a juiced Enforcer in scuffed combat boots and a worn yellow bomber jacket whose existence embodies the pejorative term *street trash*.

At the edge of the lab is a molded composite archway, beyond which are other nether regions of the subbasement where unseen gang members shuffle about noisily. She quickly slips back into the clothes she had discarded days earlier with the desperate hope of warming her naked skin.

There is a small medical table set adjacent to the Icebox, hazy orbs reflected from the overhead fluorescents pulse lethargically along the length of its metallic surface. Resting upon it are her tonfa.

The rods are ceremonial sculptures: gray steel-polymer wrapped around a core of reshaped, inert alien machinery. They have glass veins running through them; the incomprehensible fog of Aetherium nanotech is sealed inside, pulsating gently with an ethereal blue glow. The mist undulates like an array of recursive fractals unfolding infinitely; the loop of an embryonic galaxy erupting and subsequently dissolving into ether. They were the last gift from her father.

Irregardless of their supposed *ceremonial* denomination, they're her preferred weapon – she has a profound respect for the artistry of physical combat. She tends to consider guns to be a mockery of that art and fully absent of beauty and finesse. She makes an impetuous face as the thought slithers through her mind, which is interpreted by the others merely as some unresolved kink from coldSleep working itself out.

She looks at the men silently; words are unnecessary. She is a tool, and there is a job to be done that requires the use of that tool. Jiivah is absently paging through something on his tablet.

“The files have been uploaded for you” he says without looking up.

She opens the folder for Work in her Memorybank, the file system contained within her neural lace. Inside are pictures and short video clips. She issues a mental command, and her field of vision is overlaid with a HUD; she pulls up the stack of pictures in one frame while letting the video play in an adjacent one. She studies the face: memorizing the topology, the boundaries and intersections of features, the aura exuded by the eyes, everything that can be represented as data and the emotion behind it. They are sending her to kill this man.

She shuts down the HUD. The focus of her eyes returns to Jiivah.

She no longer needs to ask the routine line of questions, as the good doctor has learned to anticipate:

“Guy was doing gene editing for GeneCodex, some upstart basement lab over in Aarihms Heights; something to do with the encoding of 11β-hydroxylase. On the cusp of a breakthrough, apparently. But before it materializes, he disappears, poof.” He closes and opens a hand in a mock explosion.

“Turns out he got a better offer from the fucking MedS. Big league contract. You know the deal with these small timers: *can't let our talent get away*. Petty fuckers. Oh well, prime contract; big corpo hit means high cost means big payday...” His lips begin to curl slightly at the edges. “For us.”

He's grinning like a conjured demon who just received an offering.

“He's holed up in one of their labs; good news for you is that it's off-grid. Meaning hidden, small-ish, quiet. Security should only be some local boys who can blend in; big guns would be too conspicuous. Probably just some fuckin' YSG street trash.” He laughs, dryly.

"They've got some space in a 'historic' hotel downtown, the Aila Alshia."

He flips through something on his tablet, the screen's motion painted in hues of blue and green light reflects faintly in the dark pools of his eyes.

"Anyway, what you got is a few months old, but GeneCodex don't think he would have had time for a serious makeover since then, so it should be accurate enough." He shrugs flippantly, waves a hand vaguely in the direction of the man to his left and concludes, "Straight-forward job, ought to be anyway. Armu will take you when you're ready. Transferring the rest of the supplemental data to you now."

A crimson blip shimmers at the edge of her vision, indicating an interneural transfer. A block of unallocated space is abruptly reconfigured into a vessel for the incoming data packets. Miya skims the data dump, taking a few seconds to parse through the links for each object. Her voice is the white void in coldSleep, a ghost hovering outside the spectrum of emotion, "Seems dangerous."

Jiivah doesn't look up from his tablet. "Yeah, they're all fuckin' dangerous"



They're in the van heading towards Lake's Rim and the Aila Alshia. The decal on the side door indicates that it delivers Jimmie Yin's Famous Noodles, but she's certain that it has never once been use for that purpose. Jimmie Yin's occupies a dumpy stall upstairs from the lab and is only famous if you consider a place smelling like dead fish and being shit at cooking noodles artisanal skills.

Something in the door is making a steady thumping noise. *Thunk*. Like water torture. *Thunk*.

She can never understand the ubiquity of traffic. As regulated by city-wide edict, the public are supposed to use public transit exclusively; only corporations and their subsidiaries are allowed to own vehicles. If a local company wants to have access to, hyperbolically speaking, *anything*, they have to get corporate sponsorship whereby they can label themselves a subsidiary of that company—which, among many other things, entitles them to slap a corpo permit on their company vehicles and unlock the "privilege" to actually use them. It also unlocks the privilege of being under oppressive surveillance and scrutiny from the parent corp.

The permit on the Noodle van is forged. All these other fuckers are probably using forged permits too and that's why every road, everywhere, is perpetually choked with automobiles like a plaque-clogged artery.

Armu is airing grievances about the quality of the Cyclone X4 sneakers he got from a drop on some illicit server in FreeZ. Miya sighs and taps an abstract rhythm on the window with her nails. There is a chip in the paint of the nail on her index finger and she has spent an inordinate amount of time lamenting it. She decides that being transported is the second worst part of the job.

Her neural lace has autonomously skimmed the localNet for relevant local information and is currently playing an entry on the hotel; she's not actively listening, but lets it play because the sound drowns out the primitive cadence of Armu's voice.

Construction on the hotel, in its first iteration, was completed on... >>ffwd>> ...in 6550SRT, the structure was purchased by Valmistus, a subsidiary of Aluria Corporation [C] whereupon it was revitalized and renamed to The Aila Alshia, once again making it a sought-after tourist destination. It is nestled in the main shopping thoroughfare of Lake's Rim... >>ffwd>> ...the brutalist façade was designed by the highly

influential architect Marczew Sarvoux-Kielic and has been largely unchanged for a hundred years, dating back...

Miya cuts off the feed.

She massages her face with her fingertips, moving from cheek down to the sharp line of her jaw, briefly savoring the smoothness of her skin. She has been testing out a new hydrating cream that boasts a scent profile of blackberry, “ancient forests”, and petrichor. She decides the cream has done its job satisfactorily; she mentally pulls up a note file labelled “skin care routine” and amends it to reflect as such.

The van emits a hideous mechanical screeching as it parks; she imagines a black fog of demon’s breath simultaneously pouring from the exhaust pipe. She can smell its foul aroma seeping through the window frame and suppresses the rising desire to gag. The locks on the doors release with the strained clunk of age. *Thunk.*

Time to go to work.

They’ve parked in a garage off North Chiheisen designated for corporate-subsiary maintenance vehicles. The entrance gates are marked with a bold orange and white checkered pattern which matches the one on the permit.

Armū digs into some inner pocket hidden within his faded bomber jacket and pulls out a scuffed rectangular box made of black plastic. He clicks it open and slides her the counterfeit keycard. It’s the plain stock white, no one had bothered to forge a label. Whatever, so long as no hotel staff sees it.

“Ping me when you’re leaving, I’ll gas the van up and bring it down to the street”. His breath is terrible. She’s not sure if she actually smelled it just now or is divining that conclusion based on the amalgamated, overlapping web of memory linking the engrams of all her past jobs.

She nods, vacuously. “Yep.”

Miya slides out of the van with the easy fluidity of a stream flowing over a time-smoothed rock. She visualizes what she spent long hours practicing in simulation: movements that flow with the grace of a ceremonial dance intertwined with the concealed intent of a martial art. In her mind she dances in the sands of the Yukharib desert alongside the six-armed deity Shāiv, sage of charred temple.

She weaves silently through throngs of people, nimble as if her body was perpetually phasing into a gaseous state. The crowd is comprised entirely of tourists and salarymen-- the antithesis of where she woke up that morning (or any morning).

She’s wearing a Mechafabrik crop jacket, with the big robot head logo adorning the back, over a black diamond-weave compression shirt. Both are advertised as being knife resistant. A twin pair of scuffs on the shirt confirm this resistance, but she doubts the jacket would hold up under duress; it’s more for fashion anyhow.

Her tonfas are set onto clips on the back of the jacket and partially obscured by flaps to make the visible portions look merely decorative. Her dexterity and V3rtex Kage tabi-style boots make her footfalls soundless as a wraith unencumbered by the density of the physical realm. Aesthetically she prefers the M4 platform version with the straps, but they’re terrible to fight in. And she likes being a wraith.



There seems to be a direct correlation between the emptiness of the lobby and the uninspiring nature of the décor. Carrying a name from the region's ancestral language, she expected the Aila Alshia to be filled with the intricate carvings and lavish murals which had ornamented the desert temples of antiquity. Instead, the interior is a languid wash of dull blues and greys pulled from indistinguishable block swatches with ironically romantic names like "shimmering fantasy". They still burn incense at least, and the smell of fragrant citrus emboldens the otherwise passive interior.

The key to victory in most situations is simply to act like you're *supposed* to be there. In this spirit, she confidently strides across the lobby and swings into the hallway directly to the left of the check-in desk-- which she hopes is the correct route to the elevators. Her instinct proves accurate.

She slides in, imaging herself a ghost breaching the membrane of the netherworld, presses the button for 34, and immediately slams a gaunt finger on the Door Close button to prevent unwanted company.

Nothing happens. *Shit*.

There's a thin layer of grime coating the panel. The whole compartment is infested by a peculiarly pungent odor, like a low-resolution digitized approximation of "orange". Upon further inspection she realizes that it's a special floor which requires a keycard.

She brandishes the unmarked white rectangle and presses it to the scanner. She can feel the seconds ticking. Any second some interloper will cross over the border between the real world and the elevator compartment and add an unnecessary layer of complexity to the mission. Tick. Tick. She realizes she's holding her breath.

Ping. The doors close. She breathes.

Upon stepping off the elevator, experiential knowledge immediately tells her that something is amiss. The hallway projects a *wrongness* on a nearly imperceptible level. It's evident in the rug and the walls, but especially in the hallway air conditioning unit. They're too *hygienic*, not nearly as worn or filthy as would be expected from a high traffic, aging location.

The air carries a faint chemical scent that doesn't align with the usual repulsive artificial smell of commercial cleaning supplies. She briefly wonders about security measures on the floor and pans her head in a wide arc looking for cameras before stopping to silently scold herself. She knows security is outside of her role and banishes the seed of doubt.

Her function is specific and exact: go to where she is told to go, neutralize the target, leave. It's pointless to commit energy to additional lines of thought/action.

She makes an immediate left from the elevator and then cuts right, down a corridor made indistinguishable and featureless by its all-consuming grey hue. The scent profile continues to blossom as she proceeds closer to the target room; it's heady and confusing, like mislabeled incense.

She arrives at room 3417. The outer appearance betrays nothing of its inner contents, nefarious or otherwise. She pauses briefly outside the door and focuses her breathing. She visualizes a white hot sun drifting in her core. With each breath the sun releases tendrils of energy which unfurl in five directions – toward head and appendages. After a few concentrated breaths all the tendrils are pulsating in tandem, and she feels the uniformity of the energy spreading throughout her body.

She has a virtual Alcor brand Battler V chip slotted in her neural lace; she issues a mental command to

engage a melee combat algorithm which disseminates through her musculature and circulatory system. The algorithm prompts the generation and precise regulation of specific amounts of catecholamines and cortisol to increase blood flow, bolster reflexes, and boost confidence while dampening the impending stress of combat.

Miya holds the counterfeit key delicately between her fingers, a faceless white talisman betwixt twin pillars of sandstone, and in a single graceful motion unlocks and opens the door.

As her body crosses the threshold, she deploys another daemon from within the Battler V which reorganizes a set of specific neural processes to allow for temporarily enhanced perception/recognition. This effect is brief, but it will give her the ability to observe and partially memorize the layout and topography of the room in that initial split-second before she must commit to action. Her neural lace makes a full recording of the environment as sensed through the Xhaomatsu input feed. Her Memorybank reconfigures to provide additional space and enhanced recall in short term memory while shutting down neural pathways to other memetic nodes to prevent signal interference.

What she assumed to be a single room is actually a conglomerate of three adjacent rooms whose joining walls have been removed. There are rows of rectangular surfaces upon which reside an accretion of laboratory equipment, computers, and perilously stacked columns of paper. The hotel carpet ends at the door; the floor beyond is a bare gray concrete.

Despite the size of the space, it's largely absent of bodies. As such, her target is easily recognizable. He is standing alone at a table containing some sort of liquid refining apparatus.

Her neural lace is running a routine comparing her visual input to the pictures in the datastore within her Memorybank: there are enough matches in the facial topography to conclude a match with >85% certainty. It marks him using a visual overlay. There are two other humans with similar diminutive builds. They get marked as **NONTARGET**, subfield **SCIENTIST**, and classified as low-risk threats.

Security is lighter than anticipated: only 3 enforcer types — perceptibly enhanced muscle mass, but no obvious body armor. Too clean for YSG thugs, but maybe some other local mercs. No guns either, which means the chemicals being worked with are volatile. Noted. Hand-to-hand or localized weapons only. Her forte. If she had the reflexes to form a grin in the microsecond between thoughts she would.

The enforcers get marked in vivid red and flagged for >2m proximity alert. She triggers a command to begin a combat recording, tagged for review next time she enters coldSleep.

As soon as her body is fully inside the room, she grabs the nearest breakable object, a teardrop shaped glass beaker, and tosses it across to the opposite end of the room with enough force to shatter on impact. As this distraction is unfolding, she pumps her legs with all the force as she can muster-- twin pistons slamming against a combustion chamber.

She leaps onto a table and uses it as a springboard to push her body across another two desks, directly toward the light blue primary target marker. She cocks her right arm and extends it through her rapid descent, driving the blunt end of the tonfa, which carries the full inertia of her moving body, directly into the forehead of the target. The force crushes his skull on impact. She feels the shock of detonation as the bones collapse. Blood weeps like volcanic effusion from the devastated eye sockets.

She lands gracefully as his body crumples to the floor in supplication. Like all bastardized Aetherium tech, her tonfas begin to bleed a translucent mucous which evaporates into an alabaster haze, giving

them a preternatural aura. She stifles a smile at the masterful execution; the elegance of her form flowing into the perfect headshot. Easy.

She returns to an upright stance and prepares for conflict, dropping her main leg back and raising her arms into a blocking stance. Typical street mercs are overly focused on aesthetics and overload themselves with unnecessary grafted muscle at the cost of actual performance. This, along with a usually nebulous assortment of homebrewed biohacks, renders them slow and unthreatening in a real melee fight. They probably have steel-capped knuckles and at least one concealed knife amongst them, but her speed and precision should allow her to best them without severe strain.

The nearest one descends upon her rapidly, lunging in with a straight right punch aimed at the center of her face. She spins out her left tonfa and easily catches him in the armpit, stifling the blow, then rotates her body- her torso flowing like a river, right arm emerging like a waterfall solidifying into a block of ice as it collides into the side of his head.

He falls through the adjacent table which splinters and collapses, emitting an inhuman groan, like thunder churning within a tempest. Displaced labware crashes to the ground. The surrounding floor is covered in a mandala of broken glass, abstractly hued by the weird chemicals.

She spins to face her next assailant and feigns a straight kick to create distance. She pulls back into her stance, still and focused-- waiting for the enforcer to throw a predictably wild move which she will counter easily. As anticipated, he throws a wide, unskilled punch which requires almost no movement to dodge and then she steps in and delivers a left-handed blow to the sternum before another spinning hook directly into the guy's exposed jaw.

Two down; she's almost appalled at how easy this is going. These gangs will apparently hire *anyone* for "security" these days.

Last guy has finally made his way over. She's ready to finish up and get out; job well done, let's get some hot rice noodles and all that. The combat attunement algorithm excises distracted thought patterns of premature celebration and forces her to remain focused.

The third enforcer steps in and feigns a jab. She exhales, ready to make her counter and deliver a quick, killing blow, but the enforcer stops; he steps back and hesitates. She notices a movement in his eyes, which abruptly seem to shift opacity like a nictating membrane flicking into existence. The sign that some component slotted into the neural lace just booted up. The dull optical implants have bloomed into a shimmering blood red. His mouth peels back into a confident grin.

The enforcer steps forward again and throws a series of calculated jabs; she blocks and tries to sweep kick his leg, but he deftly slides out of reach—his movements have become swift and practiced. He throws more punches to compel her to react, while simultaneously forcing her backwards. Before she can retake the offensive, he performs a bizarre movement with his hand, a flicking of the wrist that seems purposeful yet produces nothing. He angles his upper body forward, like a bull preparing to charge.

She needs to create distance, so she moves her dominate leg back—she had been acutely aware of her surroundings and the layout of the room, but somehow the back of her ankle catches on something unexpected. Shock engulfs her countenance, twisting it into unnatural proportions.

Balance lost, she falls backward, finding herself lying prone before the enforcer. A strand of

monofilament wire extends across the ground where she previously stood. During the fall, the tonfas had detached from her grip; a faint clatter interrupts the silence as they rebound off the concrete.

He mimics the earlier wrist movement, and the monofilament retracts into some hidden compartment, buzzing faintly as it respools.

He comes in to straddle her and gain control. She attempts to trigger the Battler V perception enhancing daemon again and immediately feels a spear of pain shoot through her head, like the crack of a burning whip, as the neural circuitry heats and fights itself for resources.

A defensive plan forcefully manifests within this sea of pain; as he closes in, she extends her legs, grappling to lock him into place. A swift right hand makes to grab his neck to control the head, but he's surprisingly agile and slips the maneuver. She pushes her torso upwards to close the distance between them, but she is still forced to endure a pummeling of intimate blows. He seems to realize the futility of grappling, and pushes off, returning to his feet.

He takes a second to adjust, and simultaneously she propels herself back into an upright stance as well. A curtain of fatigue descends; her sides are throbbing and the burning sensation in her head has worsened—she was foolish to annex extra processing power into the Battler V.

As she strains to gather herself, she notices a particular gleam in his eyes – his augmented neurology is triggering additional enhancement protocols. He grins again, flexes, and starts rocking casually on the balls of his feet. She is projecting weakness; he will seize the opportunity to go for the killing blow.

He leans in and freely telegraphs the devastating straight punch. She struggles to bring her arms up to shield her face, and the block is imperfect. Even with the added resistance of the tonfas, the punch is able to split the gap in her arms and strike her squarely in the face with the force of a steel bar carried by the inertia of a heavy-cargo truck. She can hear the harmonious scrape of knuckles over the cracking of bone as her left eye socket is pummeled. The enormous impact sends a shockwave that disrupts the i/o of her neural lace and its slotted augments. Severe red letters of error messages flash urgently at the corner of her embattled periphery.

Her left eye is badly damaged; the depth perception sensor is a splintered hive of glitches. Bursts of static corruption occur at irregular intervals. She blinks rapidly, imploring the feed from the other eye to compensate. The totality of her vision flickers like breath caressing a candle's flame. She's confused; the pieces of *wrongness* regarding the scenario begin to interconnect to form the geometry of realization.

She's partially boxed in by tables, but she slinks back toward the far wall. The enforcer knows he outshines her and basks in it. He pursues languidly, watching her limp away to nowhere, enjoying the chase.

She realizes that although she saw the situation as it played out, she failed to truly *perceive* it; with this discernment, the depth of the geometry reveals itself in its entirety. The enforcer's muscles are smooth and even, as if crafted by the hand of a master sculptor. The eyes are deep wells of circuitry and perception, expensive. The hair, close cropped with precision. The lack of tattoos. These aren't bangers or even mercs, they're too manicured and efficient. They're some flavor of Datsva-- corporate security. The upper echelon of hired guns.

Her neural lace crunches the complex flowchart of possibility and consequence into a serviceable thought, like a maelstrom funneled into a single droplet of water.

Fucking GeneCodex. Wanted whoever took the hit to die in the process, leaving no connection back to them.

The droplet splits in etheric mitosis, spawning a second droplet:

How much did Jivah know? Did he send me into this...intentionally?

She looks around and now truly *sees* the lab. She knows drugs and the manufacture thereof. She has done many collections for the Kizu. This equipment is big, sleek, expensive. The back wall is lined with giant consoles controlling centrifuges and large monitors running software to manipulate atomic models. The substances are also *wrong*.

The stuff in the beakers resembles a syrup of paint and circuitry – a swirling brew of iridescent reds and purples. The hues border on the mystical, and she is fairly sure that's not just an artifact of her optics glitching.

Her heart pounds and her thoughts are nearly palpable:

Hidden corpo manufacturing operation, black site, Datsva, lots of money. This is bad. They're definitely going to kill me.

She summons her remaining strength and steels herself, all she has to do is escape. She is faster than any hulking testosterone-blasted Datsva.

But then to her great dismay, the other two rise from their slumped positions on the floor like ghosts resurrected through arcane ritual. All three of them are unhurt and seemingly unblemished. And all now share iris' the color of fresh blood. The echo of their laughter tunnels into her brain like a viral meme. She is outnumbered and outgunned.

This is the worst part of the job.

They converge on her, a triumvirate harbinger of extinction. She attempts to strike first, but is outmaneuvered, and met by a bludgeoning riposte. As she staggers from the blow, she feels the shattering crack as an unseen, but hideously dense, object is driven against her back. She stumbles and takes another blow to the head. Her body is wracked with a pain that breaks through the levy imposed by the neural blockade and comes crashing out in a furious torrent. She's cornered like a wounded animal. She closes her eyes and diverts all faculties inward.

Inside her Memorybank is what she thinks of as the Red Box, where she keeps her anger. It's a hidden encrypted partition that holds her old memories; these are the only bits that she knows for certain will remain a part of her no matter how many times she goes under and gets reconfigured.

The Kizu surgeons don't know it exists, it can only be found using a deep trawl and even then, it will appear tagged as piece of the critical OS file system and is innocuous enough not to warrant further investigation.

The memory of how it was first created was overwritten long ago, but she remembers how to access it. The activation files are distributed across the file system, hidden as code tacked on to existing undeletable files. There is the .key file which unlocks the partition; itself split and distributed among 3 archives, and the macro to assemble and run the key. The catalog of memories is a barebones virtual brain simulation running a condensed neural map-- a web loosely binding a litany of engrams, most of

them shards of pain created during her youth.

When she needs to cultivate that fire which can only be conjured by raw emotion, she can peek into the box and remove something to stimulate the necessary biological response. Her work demands passion and a strong will to overcome adversity. So, she keeps the volatile shards of anger and pain lined up like bullets.

She primes the chamber for the payload.

All she needs is a glimpse, like seeing a red dagger amidst a collection of pallid wreckage. Inside the box the virtual brain spins awake; the cerebellum initiates the retrieval of the specific memory trace while the hippocampus subconsciously fills in the related contextual memory to achieve full depth of meaning...

Nebulous burning fingers caress her cheeks as the hot wind blows across a barren landscape. She is waiting outside the house; her father is returning. He has been digging for alien machines in the sands of the Yukharib. He will bring his treasures to the workshop where he fashions the desert's refuse into sculptures and trinkets. She remembers the scents of smelt metal and musty tarps. He makes her jewelry and boring things she can't play with. He makes weapons too, displayed in the big glass cases, but he doesn't let her touch them.

Today there is a man waiting at the shop. His back is turned, and she never sees his face. He smells like the swamp. As her father approaches, the man pulls out a gun that's elongated and strangely textured, like a dragon's head. They speak in raised voices like the howling of twin tempests, but she can never make out the words.

The eyes of the dragon light up. There is a pattern of raised hexagons along the dragon's back which spew mist and leak fluid like the maw of the q'si dogs she saw in the monster book. Then the dragon breathes a mystical orange light, and her father is on the ground; the remnants of his quest lie scattered around him in the reddened sand.

She is kneeling beside him, hands grasping in futility at the viscous red substance pouring from what seems like everywhere. He tries to speak but emits only a weak gurgle through a throat choked with blood; she watches helplessly as the light fade from his eyes.

She feels the serpent of anger slither, its wake becoming a surge of passion like injecting nitrous oxide into a combustion engine. She wants to stop there, snip the feed, and close the box. She sends the command to stop playback, but the damage to the circuits is severe; the code prompt crashes and the river of memory splits, revealing fragments of other memory hidden within, yet it keeps flowing...

As she moves through the remains of her father's workshop, the crunch of accumulated debris crackles like faulty electronics. Arid winds lash into the structure through the hole where the outer door had been removed, carrying the scent of burnt meat and the sweetness of flowering cactus. Inside is simply a ruin whose prior grandeur has been reduced to mere dust and scrap.

The floor is στᾶδῆς ὑαλοῦ ἀλατῶνιτι λῆ ἀρᾶλοσ // // // The floor is stained with dirt between piles of canvas and plastic sheets in the vague shape of dilapidated stupas.

The furniture was ██████████ // // // The furniture had been torn out save for the last row of cabinets along the far wall, their polished glass facades now worn opaque and callously scuffed. Even the sacral

imagery carved into their wooden frames felt emaciated.

The **???**ERROR side of her face down through her forearm is an ecosystem of interwoven welts and bruises. Suffering has become routine.

The face of the aggressor is **μῆαῖ παύουδ ἀγῖ ἡγῖμ ὕω ἀγῖ** //// The face of the aggressor is lost in the nebulous haze of dream, but the memory denotes the identity as her mother. Always forbidding her to come into the workshop, //// **ἀνεοῖσσεδωοῶ σῆεμλε** //// always violent with her.

It's been **?UNKNOWN_VARIABLE?** years, but her father's death still stings her heart deeply; in here she still feels traces of the bond they shared.

Lately there's been another man who has come to the house; his face is **██████████** sand-colored **██████████** //// she can't remember his face but he's a scientist and has made her an impressive offer. Says there is something of significant value hidden in the workshop and he needs it for a project. The scope of the project is immense, but it lingers outside the threshold of the memory. He can help her get away if she gets...**?MISSING_NODE?**...for him.

She slides open the cabinet door, feeling the flow of its natural weight and inertia against her fingers, and pulls out the set of tonfas. Cradled in her hands she watches the swirling azure luminescence of what her father called "alien nanotech", transfixed. Like the universe melting into itself.

There is something else behind...inside...this memory instance but she can't grasp it.

The bruises on her arm throb, she can still feel **σιγ** //// her mother's fist pounding against her skin. She grips one of the tonfas in her right hand and feels its body against her forearm. She tries to picture her mother's face in her mind, fails, but the abstract form of her is enough. **?MISSING_NODE?** **██████████**

ἀγ She is standing over the body of her mother, tonfas in hand, bleeding ethereal mist. The scientist man is **ἄροα ἀγῖ ἄλο βυῖρμῆς** //// standing behind her, hand **██████████**. Praising her resilience **██████████** willpower. He takes the tonfa from her **██████████**. Says he has a very important project that she can help him with. She's grinning **██████████** blood **██████████** teeth. She is filled with anger **██████████** hate **██████████** vengeance and satisfaction.

NODE LINK ERROR

The box is open now, like a physical container that fell off a shelf with the lid torn clean off. The anger flows through her limbic system like a river of gore weeping from a torn scab. Her combat algorithm assimilates what it can, creating a synergistic helix of cold discipline and burning willpower. She loses herself in this new state. The flood of emotion drowns out the sensation of pain; it wanes into a distant, muffled voice lost in the fog.

She pushes her left foot hard into the ground and springs sideways, sliding between two of the men and across a table through assembled glassware. Her movements are erratic and unpredictable. As she lands, she spins, using the torque of her body, into a roundhouse kick. It's blocked, but the force is enough to put her attacker off balance.

The anger lets her push her body too far, breaching normal parameters of restraint. She lets loose a barrage of punches, pointed spears exploding forward at velocity as if propelled by gunpowder. The muscles and ligaments protest but their complaints are nullified inside motor neurons before their

message can penetrate into the brain.

She breaks through the enforcer's guard enough to create an opening and a straight kick to the stomach knocks him to the ground. She spins right as a second enforcer is upon her; her fist extends like a fusion-powered rocket and slams into him with reckless abandon. Her fingers are likely shattered, but she succeeds in driving him back momentarily.

The thrill of untethered battle lust boils within her, ignited by a coil of pain and cortisol. Her grin is a bleeding knife pulled from an open wound. Her hands are a pair of tarnished butcher's cleavers thirsting for a neck to split. The Battler V senses this distraction and runs a daemon to neutralize this blood haze obscuring rational thought.

She turns toward the exit door and makes to sprint, but a pair of arms grabs her in a pincher attack. Her synapses discharge frantically, sending their electric messages in bursts of lightning. Her upper body is immobilized but she is able to put her lead foot against a table and use it as a foundation to push off from. The force sends their conjoined form plunging backwards, the perfumed air is split by the crash of flesh and metal as bodies collide with table. Something explodes into a cloud of liquid-stained glass. The mixture erupts in a cloying, dense smoke; each molecule of the haze feels like an atomic-scale dagger against her face spilling down into the chasmic depths of her throat.

They're both gagging. Arms flail blindly against the seemingly weaponized mist. In the struggle she breaks free, sand flowing out of a broken hourglass. The room is quickly enveloped in a veil of the strange smoke. Her mechanical eyes fight the haze for visibility.

She takes a fraction of a second to call an architectural CAD routine in her neural lace which generates a three-dimensional map of the room based on its stored recording and uses a generative AI script to make a probable estimate of anything not explicitly recorded. A HUD overlays her vision and displays the simulated environment, sans fog and people. She gropes the ground blindly for her fallen tonfas, whose presence the recreated AI script can't account for, finds them, scoops them haphazardly into a cradle formed by broken limbs, then invests every remaining bodily resource into escape.

In another moment she crashes through the door frame, transmuting it into a storm of splinters, and runs. The staircase is a blur. Her neural lace has overheated, the burned circuitry introducing severe glitches in sensory and perception. The world is punctuated by pixelated decay; optics shift into a lysergic phantasmagoria as colors transmute and dilate into the uncanny.

Running and jumping and grasping and pushing become abstract concepts, like performing a triathlon through a surrealist landscape. Somewhere there is door into an alley, followed by another, different alley, and then another; the collection of passageways melts into a recursive kaleidoscope. She can't trust her senses; the framework of the city is detangling into a sea of abstract data, so she just runs.



Somehow, she has arrived at a great sloping hill covered with trees whose many overlapping arms of pink and lavender foliage arc gently like one of the ancient desert deities. A detached, noncontextualized memory sprouts briefly:

...as the demon's fire burned the temple to ash, Shāiv kept his hands clasped in meditation, listening to the faint harmony of the leaves spiraling against the wind.

It smells like distant memories of fruit and the sea. The Kizu van is an aberration of gray filth marring the picturesque canvas of the hill. *Why is it here, where is...here?* Armu and his yellow jacket are standing next to it, arms crossed and an unrelenting scowl on his face.

The exhaustion hits her. She tries to lift her right hand to cradle her broken eye socket only to realize the muscles in her forearm were torn in the altercation. She closes the box and sends an END command to the combat algorithm. Her sensorium is a grid of tiny, intermingling fires; every individual nerve throughout her arms, legs, and face feels like its struggling for a gasp of air while submerged in a vat of ultradense acid.

She makes it to the van, barely. Armu grabs her with the forceful hands of an enemy combatant. "What the fuck are you..." the last part is either "doing" or "doing *here*". The words are armed grenades.

He tosses her into the back, slams the door, curses profusely.

No windows. It's dark, like the transitional moment at the end of conscious thought before you cross into the realm of sleep. She needs medical attention, but...too much brain function is compromised. Wisps of thought taper off and die. She welcomes the gateway to the kingdom of slumber. Her neural lace hits a threshold and shuts itself down. Her eyes power off and she shrinks into the blank white void of nonperception.



She's under again, but the VR environment never loads. She's disembodied, floating in a partition of endless white space and pixel noise. Then a crackle ripples through the emptiness, a knife tearing the seams of reality, and the world opens into the depthless black. Time progresses.

She doesn't quiet *wake up*, but she has awareness, and she feels herself being removed from the Icebox. She's being carried somewhere. She can hear voices, faintly, on the other side of the digital veil. She's dropped somewhere, the metal floor is hard and cold. She doesn't *feel* it, but just sort of *knows*.

The sensation seems familiar but when trying to grasp for associated memories, her neural lace returns nothing. She spreads her search further out into her Memorybank, but it's all empty. The 'bank used to contain a brilliant artistry of digital architecture; data methodically shaped into the fortress of self. But it has been reduced to destitution, save for the obligatory Operating System file structure.

Her surroundings are moving. Vibrations and accompanying inertia.

Miya runs a couple of mental queries, but they just tick on and on through the barren file system, finding nothing. Somewhere in the colorless expanse of empty desert is an absence, like someone boxed up a complete sector of memory and removed it from existence entirely. One of the queries finds another anomaly. In one of the system folders is a file named *forget.key*, flagged as being an unknown file type. It's set to link to something else, but the parameter is blank. She runs a set of digital fingers over the file, trying to feel its shape, surmise its purpose. It evokes a feeling inside her that she can't place; somehow inherently she knows it's important, but she feels it fall from her grasp as she passes out of consciousness.

////////

After some time, the van stops. Weathered hands pull the body from the rear compartment, sling it limply over a thick, jacketed shoulder. They take her body to an unnamed alley, nested deep within part

of the forgotten infrastructure of the city.

Hovels stripped down to bone-colored concrete skulk below a skyline of burnt-out office buildings whose principal tenants for the preceding three decades have been vagrants. The toxic slurry of melted plastic and narcotic smoke hangs heavily in the air, coupling with fumes emanating from ancient trash that's been left rotting in the sun.

They dump her inert form against a wall, a section of the brick exterior has collapsed to expose the foam insulation; the pallid material is as desolate and empty as her memory. The two Kizu members look at the discarded body, shuffling uncomfortably. A fleet of roaches emerges from under one of the nearby garbage piles to inspect the flesh of this new edifice that has been added to their kingdom.

As the first speaks, his voice carries an undercurrent of regret: "Damn, bro. It feels kinda wrong to just...throw her out. Is she really unsalvageable?" He puffs a cartridge of Interstellar Cherry and watches the horde of antennae and mandibles as they probe for information.

"Fuckin' bugs, man", he spits indignantly.

The bugs are indifferent to the bubbled pink pool of saliva.

The other shrugs, his eyes are glazed with a general sort of uncaring.

"Don't worry about it, shits not our business. She was already fuckin' dead anyway"

"Yeah, but...damn. Seems like a waste"

"It don't matter. They've got other girls"

...to be continued