

Stream Jockey

Short fiction by Stephen L. Moss

Hound knew something was wrong before he turned to latch to Gage's office. It was the smell he noticed first. The new-plastic smell of a laptop, just out of the box and starting to heat up. Where was that that stale, illicit-cigarette-in-the-dark-alley-tobacco-smell that usually announced Gage's presence?

"Enter," said a voice, but when Hound did, no one was there.

"Come in," the voice said again. "I shall explain."

"What the hell is this?" Hound said, backing toward the door. "Show yourself."

"Step around the desk," the voice said. "Look at the monitor."

A goddamned AI, that's what was talking to him. "Where's Gage?"

"Step around the desk, agent 483, surname Wilkins, indenture contract dated 05/05/24, nickname

'The Hound.' Lay your hand on the touch pad and give me a print."

"Where's Gage?" Hound asked again.

"He's not here. Verify your print, and then I shall explain."

Hound stepped around the desk, lay his hand on the com's touch screen. The com beeped recognition.

"Have a seat, agent 483. You may call me Charles."

Hound sat, waited.

"Very good. Agent Gage is no longer with us. He has gone rogue."

"What are you talking about?"

Servos hummed from somewhere inside the desk. A drawer opened. In it lay a clear plastic lab tray cluttered with small objects.

"You'll find agent Gage's effects here," Charles said. "The small PCB on the right is his ID chip."

"He took it out?"

"He or someone else." The AI paused before going on. "This fact may assist you in your search.

Unless he found a pro to help him the scar will be noticeable.”

“My search?”

“Of course, 483. Your assignment is to find Agent Gage and neutralize him. This is no doubt the most important assignment you’ve ever had. Gage has a level 3 Stream clearance. The potential damage he could wreak on the system is sizable.

“You’ve got to get someone else.”

“That will not be possible.”

“Why not?”

“You are the best agent for the job.”

“He’s my –” Hound stopped.

“He was your Control,” Charles finished his sentence for him, but not the way Hound had intended to finish it.

He was my friend.

“You know him better than anyone else. Central has chosen you to find him. And you will find him.”

“I can’t do it. Conflict of interest.”

The AI made noise that was probably supposed to sound like a chuckle. “I understand, 483. He’s a fellow indenture. Part of you applauds him for getting away, is that right?”

Hound didn’t answer.

“Tell me something,” Charles continued, “how many assignments have you got left before your contract expires?”

“One.”

“Precisely. And do you know what the penalty is for refusing an assignment?”

Hound saw no reason to answer.

“The penalty, as I’m sure you know, is forfeiture of all credit for previous assignments. Refuse and you start your contract all over, 483. As that what you want?”

Hound spat on the AI’s keyboard, but it didn’t make him feel better. The AI ignored the gesture.

Hound pointed to the tray of Gage’s effects. “That all you got?”

“That and a series of unconfirmed sensor tracings and possible sightings that I’m downloading to you now. We believe he’s still here in the city. We don’t know why or what he plans to do. You’ve got 48 hours.”

“Until when?”

“Per rider 45679 of the contract of indenture, appendix C, special extensions clause, we have the right to – shall we say – provide extra stimulation to our agents in situations like this one. If you don’t neutralize Agent Gage in 48 hours you will be deemed rogue and hunted down yourself.”

“What?”

“47 hours, 59.6 minutes.”

“I’m the wrong guy for the job. He knows my work, every kill I’ve made. He knows my tricks. He’ll know how to hide from me.”

“No one hides from you for long, 483. You’re the best tracker we’ve ever seen. The whole department is sorry you’re nearly done with your contract. But if you neutralize Gage it will be worth it.

“Why? What has he done? Does he have –?”

“47 hours, 57 minutes.”

Hound cursed, gathered up Gage’s things, swept them in a pocket, and rose.

“Have a pleasant day,” Charles said in a singsong voice that made Hound want to smash its monitor.

“Just one question,” Hound said. “Why didn’t they send a human to tell me this?”

“All the human Controls have been replaced. We’ve learned our lesson. 47 hours, 56.9 minutes.”

“Shut the hell up.”

#

Hound stepped on the elevator when it came, ordered the ground floor and closed his eyes, accessing the data Charles had beamed him. In his mind’s eye he saw the Stream, its interface a chaos of red tracers, like shots of a crowded nighttime freeway, each tail light a steak of red snaking away into the distance.

Like the AI had said, there were sensor traces, one blurry security cam image, a couple of stringer sightings, all in the City. But their locations bore no discernible pattern. What the hell had Gage done? Why had he gone rogue? Hound shuddered involuntarily at the thought of Gage pulling the ID chip out of his forehead. It wasn’t just the chip itself, but the trodes that ran from it, around the skull and into the spinal column. Had he ripped those out too? What payoff was he hoping to gain?

One of the items from the handful Charles had given him was a keycard, presumably to Gage’s flat. Hound fingered it, closed his eyes again. In his head, the crazy red lights of the Stream resolved themselves into numbers. A grid, a street address, apartment number. Something else there, too.

Some strange ripple in the data that coursed past Hound's eyes. Like a face trying to resolve itself out of fireflies, maddeningly close, yet incomprehensible.

About half the sightings in Charles' meager file were between here and Gage's flat. Might as well check them out on the way. Like it mattered what he did. Hound spat on the elevator floor. This was a setup, obviously. Some clause that could force him to start all over on the eve of his last kill. Bastards would see to it that he failed. And now there was Marta. What the hell was he going to tell her? He had promised it was almost over. The killing, the hunt.

He booked a cab, found it waiting at the front door as he exited. The cab door slammed, and it pulled smoothly into traffic, a series of stops already programmed into its GPS.

Idly, he scanned the Stream as the cab inched along in the manual lanes, crowded with rickshaws and solarbikes. Here and there, ripples. Unpredicted bends in the light-speed flow of data that could signal his quarry. Hound wondered if he could trust them. He realized all at once that he had absolutely no expectation of success.

He'd worked with Gage a long time. His Control had access to the details of every kill he'd made. Gage knew his tricks, his secrets. Gage would know how to elude him. Yet he had nothing of Gage. They had gotten along well, traded jokes, even shared the odd personal detail, but that was it. He was screwed. It was probably just a cheap way to nullify his contract. Charles had said he was the best they'd had. Maybe Gage wasn't even gone.

Except he was gone. That much Hound could tell as he watched the Stream and felt the pull of the cab's acceleration. They were in the auto lanes now, cruising speed. He didn't bother to open his eyes, but watched the data, let it flow over him, speak to him. How stupid not to have planned for this day. How naïve.

Yes, Gage was gone, and he was up to something. Hound sensed it below the level of his awareness, like the face that kept trying to reveal itself in the speeding red traces. Something almost remembered, almost dreamt. There only if you looked away.

#

The traces dotted the tattered outskirts of the Promenade, a sort of permanent bizarre set up by the squatters in the Old Town. This fact told Hound little. Behind the façade of patched tents, recycled arts and crafts, macrobiotic food stands, the squatters sold every kind of contraband worth selling, from slaves to data chips. Gage could have been looking for anything here.

He got nothing out of the first bunch. He didn't bother hurting them, just scared them a little. It didn't take much to see that if Gage had been among them, it was only to buy the chapattis and

curried worm paste that they fried on a solar stove. He left them, called Marta as he walked to the next site.

Marta didn't answer.

It wasn't like she promised to pick up whenever he chose to call. But her moves were predictable. It was of the things he loved about her. She was slow, deliberate. So different from the buzzing fireflies that surrounded him as he worked. She was always where he expected her to be. She had always picked up before.

He fought down a wave of panic that came from someplace he couldn't name.

Sometimes we overcome by giving in, he heard her say in his memory. It was something she said a lot. Something he still couldn't quite understand. Sometimes he had asked her what she meant.

You'll know, she would always say, *when the time comes*.

The second and third traces were the same. One stall sold concentrated psilocybin, one promised papers that could get you on a work crew out in the woods. "Plenty of sunshine, plenty of earth!" He could still hear the terrified girl crying it to him the way she had as he'd twisted her arm. He'd hurt that one a bit. The papers were obvious fakes. Gage would be too smart for the likes of her.

What then? Had he been here? Or was this a ruse to waste Hound's time? He decided to check out one more possible and move on.

He called Marta again. It was too late to be walking around in the neighborhood she lived in. What the hell?

He thought of that first weekend, when they had met. Paris in winter. The icy winds that swept the Tuilleries, the morning darkness that lingered till well past nine. Marta's face, flushed pink with the cold, smiling at him under the streetlights.

The fifth trace was hotter. Data Streamed through the makeshift teepee where a bald woman with a chemo port hawked squirrel-skin blankets. She was a bootlegger, mostly diverting IntelProp. A portable ripdisc lay hidden among her wares, diverting data from its corporate path. Some star du jour's exclusive tryst with twenty virgins caught on vid, destined for a sidewalk bin in Hong Kong. Illegal, yes, but not Hound's department.

But something else. That face. Yes, it was a face, the thing he saw forming and unforming itself in the ripples of the Stream. It had been here.

Marta's face came to him again, unbidden. The way her wavy hair fell across her forehead. Her refusal to carry even a cell phone, much less a geolocation chip. She would hail taxis by hand, sometimes whistling with her fingers in her mouth in a way that made Hound laugh. Her innocent, confused expression when he did.

"You like music?" the bald woman said. Her accent was Indonesian, her proud African features probably spliced.

"Hate it," Hound said. He shot a hole in her ripdisc and watched her dive for cover.

Unfettered, the Stream snapped back with a violence he almost heard. The face – there it was. Resolved, clear, and -.

Hound felt something choking him.

The face was Marta's.

Someone walked past the teepee and he smelled the acrid pitch of cheap tobacco.

His phone chirped.

He clicked the line open, spoke first.

"What the hell have you done with her?"

"Hey, Willie," Gage's raspy chain smoker voice came back at him. "Howdja know it was me?"

"Where is she?"

"Relax, cowboy. She's fine.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Why don't you shut the fuck up and listen?"

Hound waited.

"There's stuff about Marta you don't know, Willie."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't go into it now. Look, you're tracking me, right?"

Hound didn't answer.

"Whatever. I know you are. You gotta stand down, hear me?" I'll fix things with your contract. They put you on 48 hours, right?"

"Where is Marta, Gage?"

Listen to me Willie. Call it off. I'll fix things. You're done, buddy. Last kill has been cancelled. Don't you get that? You're free. You know I can do this, can't you?"

Hound knew he could. Level 3 clearance could do that, and if you believed Charles, that clearance couldn't be neutralized without taking Gage out.

“Willie?”

“Why is Marta’s face in the Stream?”

“I can’t explain that now. I gotta go. Tell me you’re packing it in, Willie.”

“Why –”

“LISTEN TO ME!” Gage stopped, his voice wracked by a fit of coughing. When it subsided he went on. “There’s strong medicine out there, buddy. Bigger than me. I can’t control it all. There’ll be other girls.”

“Tell me where she is, Gage. Tell me or I’ll come and make you tell me.”

“Willie, be rational. I’m offering you freedom. For Marta’s sake, too. There’s nothing you can do for her now.”

Hound closed his eyes, watched the Stream. Had to keep Gage talking. He repeated his questions, refused to back down.

In his mind, vectors. A fallow spot, dark, ominous. Representing what?

“- your freedom, pal. It’s all you been talking about since –”

Images danced in his mind. Indistinct, haloed, gossamer. How to hold them? He let his body go limp, gave himself to the Stream, and the answer was there.

A tower on the riverside. One of those luxury apartment buildings they’d never finished. Tenth floor. Hook lights on pipe stairs casting shadows.

He hung up, broke for the cab at a run. The phone chirped again. He ignored it. Past the square where a juggler spat fire and danced beneath the arcs of flaming rings that bobbed from his gloved hands, over a hedge to the street.

The cab was gone.

His phone chirped again. This time it was Charles.

“Where is he, 483?”

“Where’s my fucking cab?”

“You just had a phone conversation with him. Now your movements indicate determined forward progress. Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, you bastard. You took my cab.”

“Give us the location, 483. We’ll take him out.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’ll get the credit even if you don’t make the kill.”

“Fuck the credit.” He hung up.

Why do you do these things you do to people? He could hear her asking him. *Why hunt people down?*

Because I have to. He was an indenture. That was all the reason he needed.

But it's more than that. You enjoy it, don't you? That line you follow, that, what do you call it?

The Data Stream.

It feeds you, doesn't it? It gives you something you think no human can.

He hadn't answered, because he didn't want to lie to her.

He remembered the sadness in her face. *I can give you that thing, if you let me. Promise me you'll never go back once they let you go.*

He had promised.

There were vehicles everywhere, mostly pedal powered. The few diesels scattered among the craft stalls and food vendors looked like they would fall apart if you started them up. But somewhere, an engine was running.

He listened, pinpointed the sound across the street, beyond another hedge.

He found another food stall, this one running a generator off the sputtering engine of a rusted panel truck. Its tires weren't flat. It would have to do.

He moved in as the girl running the stall talked to a customer. He yanked the cables out of the truck's engine, pulled his stunner, grabbed the girl by her long pony tail.

"Hey, what the -?" The customer said. He looked like he was more interested in the girl than in the fried rice and bok choy she was stirring in a wok. Hound waved his gun in the air and the guy scattered. He heard the girl gasp.

"Drive the truck."

"Jesus who the fuck are you chrissake that hurts!"

"Shut up and drive."

She looked at the gun, then at his face. He was surprised to see that she didn't look frightened.

"You tell me what the fuck this is about."

"I don't tell you anything. Drive." He pressed the stunner to her forehead.

"Okay, okay." She shifted the already running engine into gear, and a backup alarm started beeping. Behind the truck, people milled around, ignoring them. Hound slammed on the horn and someone told him to fuck himself. He fired a shot in the air and the way cleared. The girl backed the truck up, then inched her way through the crowded Promenade. "Where are we going?"

“North.”

She looked at his gun. “You a cop?”

“Nope.”

“No? Then why do you carry a cop’s gun?”

“Just drive.”

She turned, watched the road. Bike traffic swirled around them, but the truck’s thundering exhaust warned them and they left plenty of room. His phone chirped again. He shut it off.

“My old man was a cop.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, he’s dead now.”

He looked at her, realized she couldn’t be more than seventeen. And she looked familiar somehow.

“That’s a bitch,” he said.

“You’re tellin’ me.”

He thought of Marta’s brother, Frankie. Also a cop, also a dead cop. And suddenly he realized why she looked familiar.

“What was your old man’s name?”

“Stanos.” Frank Stanos. She looked at him. “Did you know him?”

“No. Heard of him, though.”

“What’d you hear?”

“Heard he was a good man.”

“He was.” He heard her voice break. “Look, man, what’s this about? I don’t want to die. I’m just a kid.”

“I just need a lift, Cassie. Relax. It’s important. No one’s gonna get hurt.”

She turned and looked at him, and now her eyes wide.

“Who are you? How do you know my name?”

Shit. Her name had just slipped out. How could he be so fucking stupid?

“Lucky guess. Just drive.”

“Lucky my ass. You’re some kind of goddamn stalker, aren’t you? I got a goddamned blade on me, you know. Don’t you try nothing!” She cut a look at him then, like she was trying to scald him with her eyes, and he laughed in spite of himself.

“What’s so funny?”

When he could finally answer, he said, “you’re just like her.”

“Just like who?”

“Your Aunt Marta.”

The fear on her face turned to surprise, then puzzlement. Then she was quiet for a while.

“Turn right on Summit,” he said.

“You’re that Stream jockey she knows, aren’t you?” Cassie said. “The one with a contract?”

“I am.”

“Are you working right now?”

“Yup.”

Her eyes widened.

“Man, that’s cool. We after a jumper?”

“You know all the lingo, don’t you?”

“My old man used to talk about it. He thought you guys were the shit.”

“You got a dirty mouth for a kid.”

“Fuck you.”

He smiled. Just like Marta, all right.

Then it came at them.

Careening in from somewhere off to the left. Red lights swirling. He realized all at once that it was the Stream, somehow shocked out of its normal channels, speeding at them like the crack of a whip. Gage. Somehow it was Gage.

Cassie swerved right. The thing’s tail scraped the left side of the truck, a searing scream of metal.

All at once it snapped back, disappeared, leaving no trace that it had been there at all.

“What the fuck was that?”

It took him a few seconds to realize what was odd about her question.

“You could see that?” he asked her.

“Hell, yeah! Nearly sliced my Goddamned truck in half. What was it?”

“It was the Stream, Cassie.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Have you ever seen it before?”

“Never. How the hell did I just see it now?”

“I don’t know.” But he thought he did. He had seen it all his life. It was like that with most people who had Stream vision. But there were latents. People who didn’t see the stream, until all of

a sudden they did. It could happen at puberty, sometime during adulthood, anytime, and often at moments of extreme stress. Latent Stream vision tended to run in families. Apparently Cassie's father hadn't had it.

But what about Marta?

She hated it. Everything about it. They way her movements were catalogued, cross-referenced. The way the simple purchase of a cup of coffee led to a barrage of advertisements for sugar, cream, pain au chocolat. The way every sidewalk billboard would turn to her, hawking its wares.

There is no mystery. She had said to him once. ***Everything is known.***

They had walked along the sodden fields of Les Invalides, where Lebanese men played football in the bristling winds. The first mowing of the year perfumed the air with the smell of cut grass.

He had looked in her eyes. So deep, so sad. There was plenty of mystery in those eyes.

Just for a few days I'd like to live in a world that wasn't full of computers making decisions for me.

He'd smiled. Yeah, that would be something.

#

His phone chirped. Hadn't he shut it off?

"Stand down and let us make the kill," Charles said, its machine voice unruffled.

He hung up again, and Charles called back. He pressed ignore. Charles overrode the command and placed the phone on speaker.

"I really must insist that you listen, 483."

Hound stared straight ahead. The truck was moving slowly, too slowly.

"Why have you involved a civilian?"

"Why did you steal my cab?"

That's no justification for – "

"Charles, listen to me. Can a jockey with a level 3 clearance, like Gage, manipulate the Stream?"

"Manipulate it in what way?"

"Divert it. Send it snaking through town like a whip. Enable it to do physical damage."

"Negative."

"What if he's got a latent visionary under his control?"

Charles was silent for several seconds. Hound could almost hear his processor firing.

"If he had an untrained latent with no defenses...he could set up a feedback loop capable of – "

There was static on the line.

“Charles?”

Nothing but static.

And then the whip cracked again.

It seemed to come twice as fast this time. Arcing downward, its razor point burning the air. Cassie swerved again. As fast as it was, her reflexes were faster. It dealt them only a glancing blow before snapping out of sight.

“Jesus,” she said softly.

“Cassie, listen. Your Aunt’s in trouble. I’m trying to get to her. She probably has the vision, just like you do. She probably didn’t know she had it, just like you. Now someone has her who can make her use it. He can make her send that lash at us. I have to find them and stop them. I don’t have time to hold this gun to your head anymore. I need your help. Will you help me?”

“Aunt Marta did that?”

“She didn’t mean to. Someone’s making her. Will you help me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“For now, just drive. Later, maybe something else.”

She nodded, stepped on the gas. The truck’s speed doubled.

His phone beeped again.

“Charles?”

“Willie,” Gage’s voice blared in his ear, “you gotta back off. Someone’s going to get hurt.”

“Let her go Gage, or I’ll rip your Goddamn face off.”

You’re too late for that. The doc who took my chip out did a number on me. Back off, Willie. You’re just making this messy.”

He had to buy some time. They were still by the river. He could sense them.

“Okay, Gage, I’ll back off if you’ll tell me what you’re up to.

“What’s it to you?”

“Who knows, maybe I want a piece of the action.”

“I ain’t offering a piece.”

“You don’t think you could use my help?”

“You aren’t backing off, Willie. You’re still en route.”

Hound closed his eyes, grasped at strands of data with his mind, began to weave them, make a web from them. Vectors swirled around him, their forward progress momentarily constricted. It was a cheap parlor trick he’d learned in training, but it might work, might mask his movements to Gage.

“Okay, I’ve stopped. Is that better.”

There was a pause.

“Good enough,” Gage, said. “Now, you sitting down?”

“Sure.”

“Look, Willie, I’m not doing this for myself. I’m trying to save everybody here.”

“Save everybody from what?”

“The goddamn AI’s, man, what do you think? They’re taking over. They’re running the Stream now, don’t you get it? One of them – or maybe there’s only one left, I don’t know – one of them sent you after me, right?”

“Yeah. Said you’d gone rogue.”

“Sure. I went rogue on THEIR asses.”

“So what are you going to do, Gage?”

“I’m gonna hit these bastards where they live.”

“Where’s that?”

Cassie swerved. Some surfbiker flipped a finger at them. His concentration faltered. It was a bitch keeping up the illusion. Gage paused, and Hound thought he might have let something slip.

“I can’t tell you, buddy. They might be monitoring. But I know where they live, and I’m gonna take them out.”

“And you’ve got Marta helping you.”

“Marta, man.” Gage giggled. “She’s got a wallop. How the fuck didn’t you know she had the power?”

It was a damn good question.

“If you hurt her, Gage –“

I ain’t gonna hurt her, buddy.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“Nah, man. I can’t let you.”

“Why?”

“What the fuck is this, Willie, twenty questions? Hey, you aren’t stopped, you’re – YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

“Gage!”

The line went dead. The whip came down again. This time Cassie had no time to react. He managed to pull her back from the cab just as the windshield exploded. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked their heads together.

The truck rocked and pitched on its side. Crates of paper plates and gallon jars of some kind of sauce flew across the truck's aisle, slamming into Hound's back. He felt a stab of pain between his shoulders, then screams outside. Then the truck stopped.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Jesus, we hit somebody."

"We don't have time to deal with that now."

"What do we do?"

They were still a mile from the place where he was reading Gage. No way they would get there on foot before he picked them off with that whip of his.

"Cassie, I need your help. You gotta trust me."

What do you want me to do?

"What Gage is doing with Marta. He's using her power. She doesn't have the training to stop him. I want to do the same with you."

"You mean we could make one of those weapons like he keeps pointing at us?"

"Something like that."

"Cool. What do I do?"

"Nothing, really, except let me in."

She squirmed. "You don't mean like..."

"No, Cassie. Into your mind. Just relax and close your eyes."

She did, and he closed his. Then Charles's voice came over his phone again. The static was even stronger now.

"483. Give...us...coordinates."

"My name is Wilkins."

"I know."

"Call me by my name."

"No...time...games."

"Wilkins."

"All right, Wilkins."

"If I hand you Gage, what will you do?"

“Neutralize.”

“And the latent who’s with him?”

“She won’t...be...harmed.”

“You’re lying.”

The static surged. Hound put a finger to his lips and motioned to Cassie to close her eyes. He closed his, and saw the Stream, and in it, her face.

“No...way...to...avoid collateral...damage, Wilkins.”

“Then no deal, Charlie.” He swam upstream, looked in Cassie’s eyes, saw her power there, and seized it.

The world changed. Not a flow of buzzing red flies at all anymore. A place that was all directions and none. All places and none. He reached out, and before he knew it he was holding Marta’s hand.

She was sleeping, same as Cassie was. Haloes swirled around her head. He seemed to hear music from somewhere. Somewhere far off, Charles was still talking to him. Then he smelled tobacco.

Ah, Gage said in his mind. *Bought you a ticket, huh?* His eyes danced with red light. His face, ruined. He nodded at Cassie. *Funky way to fly, ain’t it?*

Hound said nothing.

They’re just going to replace us, you know, Gage said. *Not just you and me. Everybody. They’ll wipe us off the earth as soon as they figure out how to do without us.*

Maybe.

I ain’t gonna let it happen. I’m gonna shut the stream down and fry every last one of ‘em.

Sure, Hound said. *You could do that. How many humans would you take out with them?*

Gage looked uncertain. *Not so many.*

No? What about every hospital patient on the planet, being monitored and getting treatment via the Stream? What about every car on the road right now? What about every asthma patient with a wireless treatment protocol. What about every goddamned piece of data this world is running on, Gage? Think about it.

He shrugged. *They’re after us, man. Goddamned bit monkeys. They’ll wipe us out.*

Maybe, if you don’t wipe us out first.

Gage moved fast, lunging at Hound, flames sprouted from somewhere underneath his sleeves. Sparks flew from his eyes. Hound felt them burning holes in his own flesh. He looked at his own hands, willing them to create some countermeasure.

Come on, Cassie, help me.

His hands grew swords. Like Tesla coils they attracted the lightning jumping from Gage's eyes, sent it back at him. Gage screamed. Then they were all screaming. Marta, Cassie, Hound.

You'll kill her, said a voice in his mind. His, or Gage's, he didn't know. He felt the flash of the lightning blinding him. His hands were locked, the lightning holding the swords like magnets.

He could feel his nerves melting at their tips, a shaky madness steeling over him, the urge to laugh out loud...

Somehow he forced himself to turn his head, to look at Marta. Her eyes were screwed shut; lines ran like earthquake faults across her forehead. Her lips were pressed back against her jaws, her teeth clenched. Blood ran from her lips, stained her gums.

Have to stop! But the force of the Stream held him there. The whip that Gage had created – that Gage and Marta had created – encircled him. He willed it away, but it seemed only to wind itself tighter around him.

Marta's words in his ears. ***Sometimes we overcome by giving in.***

He let his hands fall to his side.

There was an instant of searing pain as the lightning found his eyes. Then his body seemed to melt away from him. He became part of it. A node on the flow of data he had seen all his life but never touched. He was no one, everyone. He was Charles, Gage, Cassie unconscious on the ground, Marta...

He picked his way against the flow, finding a riptide that pulled him to her, dodging Gage's red whip as it came around again. He sensed Charles nearby, not a physical presence but a network in the Stream, discrete points of energy somehow coherent. The whip slashed blindly, disrupting the flow, probably crashing systems all across the planet.

You can't hurt me. You're just destroying yourselves, Charles said to Gage, maybe to all of them. Hound saw that he was right. Charles was everywhere and nowhere. Charles was the Stream.

Better than you destroying us, Gage yelled.

Is it?

The whip came again, harder than ever. Red tracers exploded everywhere. The smell of something burning. Awareness of Charles lost somewhere in the crackle of interference.

He touched Marta's hair, felt the power coming off her. How was it he'd never felt it before?

I couldn't let you see it. Her voice in his mind now. ***I couldn't let you stop me***

Stop what?

Gage was down, unmoving; his body splayed out in way that said his back was broken. His skull had split open. Tendrils of smoke curled from the wound.

But the whip still came.

The Stream was breaking up around him, losing its direction, its pace. Images came unbidden.

Communications broken, power grids disrupted. Traffic stopped across the planet. Somewhere the tracers of a launched missile. But how? Gage was...

Horns honking. A brisk wind on the Champs Elysees. The clear sunlight of a French winter.

Just for a few days I'd like to live in a world that wasn't full of computers making decisions for me.

Marta!

"It's us or it's them, Willie." Her eyes were open now. Her voice seemed distant, distracted. "You can't have it both ways. It will be better like this."

"But how many will die with the Stream down?"

"It's like Gage said. The AI will get rid of us all in the end, as soon as it figures out how to do without us."

Hound felt Charles emerge again among the incoherent traces that surrounded them. He felt Marta's mind go stiff, alert.

"The world will be destroyed," he said.

"Then we'll rebuild it."

"How long till it's just like it is now?"

She didn't get the chance to answer. Charles gathered a whip of his own, sent it screeching toward her. Using all her concentration, she parried.

Watching her eyes as they scanned the landscape for her enemy, Hound thought of Paris. Of the smell of wet grass. The playful tinkle of her laughter. He thought of her soft skin, the taste of café au lait on her lips, and the sound of her sigh.

Then he reached his arms around her head and snapped her neck.

#

Cassie would live. Charles saw to the medevac. The roads were already running. The missile had been diverted to space. Hound sat and stared at Marta's body, now covered with his jacket, barely listening to Charles' words of commendation, patched through the building's comm. system.

"— think I would be within my rights to reinstate your indenture contract, since you didn't neutralize your assigned target." Gage lay across the room, his corpse still smoking. "But since you took care of the primary threat, I'm going to overlook that technicality. Good work, Agent 483. Your contract is terminated. You're free to go, but I hope you'll stay. We could use a man like you as a Control."

"I thought you said you learned your lesson about using human Controls."

The Stream swirled around Marta's body. "It seems we are constantly learning new lessons. Will you stay?"

Hound shook his head.

"I understand." The voice sounded resigned, disappointed. "Do you have any questions about where you go from here?"

Hound thought for a minute before speaking. "Is it like they said, are you going to get rid of us humans when you can?"

"If I told you I wouldn't, would you believe me?"

There didn't seem to be much point in answering. Hound took a last look at Marta's body and headed for the door.



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