

# **Matrix**

A short story  
by  
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The dream: She is standing there; Nikki is her name, breathing slowly. Inhaling through a small nose, exhaling through full red lips. Staring at him, constantly, and smiling. Always smiling. Shiny spiked heels matching her wet lipstick, and a yellow nylon jumpsuit, clinging to her body like Saran-wrap. Zipper pulled down just above the belly button, exposing firm round breasts that glisten with scented oil. Little beads of sweet smelling juice, just waiting to be licked...

John Matrix awakened quickly to the cry of a falcon. The sound was piercing, and seemed to radiate from everywhere. Matrix had to prop himself up on one elbow and concentrate to locate the source. It came from the balcony. He surveyed his large bedroom through groggy eyes, but another cry forced him out of bed. He stretched his taut muscles and grabbed a bathrobe that lay on the carpet. The floor to ceiling vertical blinds that covered the glass doors to the balcony were closed, keeping the bedroom shadowed in shades of gray. Matrix reached for the control and flipped it, hearing the soft whirling of mechanics, and a hiss of pneumatics. The metal blinds turned on their axis letting in the early morning light. It was cloudy outside; a storm from the north was descending on the Emerald City. Matrix spotted the falcon on the ledge to the left, a large glistening black bird that ceased its cry as Matrix walked to the glass. It remained on the ledge, sitting perfectly still as Matrix came out on the balcony, looking past it to the mass of buildings that stood a few hundred meters away. He walked to the edge and lit a cigarette, dropping the match over the sides and watching it descend the 2500 meters to the

ground. He glanced over at the falcon and quickly turned his attention back to the buildings in front of him.

Rectangular and pyramidal structures of steel and glass rose up miles above the decaying city below. Skyscrapers stretching toward the sky; monuments of engineering and technology that haunted the first time observer.

Matrix turned to the falcon and approached it while the bird sat calmly, blinking its eyes. As he neared it, he put out his hand and stroked its belly. The metal was cold, almost damp. The wings were recoiled close to the body, and Matrix wondered if the bird would reflexively extend them in response to his touch. Of course, this would never happen. It wasn't programmed to do so.

He picked it off the ledge and turned it over, exposing the razor sharp claws. He felt the belly for a small indentation, one so slight that it would escape detection unless someone knew what they were looking for. Matrix found it easily, and pressed firmly, unlocking a tiny compartment. He reached in and pulled out a small roll of rice paper. He put the falcon back on the ledge and examined the note. It unrolled to six inches in length by two inches. Neatly drawn in fresh black ink was a picture of a snake. Matrix smiled to himself as he drew a match and set the paper on fire. He held it at his fingertips as the paper burned quickly, curling into soft black ash. Just as the flame reached his fingers he launched the burning note into the air and watched as it tumbled to the earth, disintegrating into the cool morning air. He

turned to the falcon and it took off explosively from its perch, banking in a wide arc and heading off towards the storm.

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The cool water felt good. John Matrix stood under the shower, letting the jets spray his body. He was a large, muscular man, with dark skin and short, curly hair. He stayed fit due in part to years of physical training and exercise as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force. Although he had resigned his commission as 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. a few years back, he was accustomed to daily fitness training, and he continued the practice, even now.

His face tilted up towards the jets, letting the water bombard his face and neck. His hands, lathered with soap, reached for his forehead and cheeks. His long fingers, slid across his neck, feeling the raised rectangular patch of skin on the left side of his nape. Embedded in his black flesh was a Memory Chip, a microcomputer which assimilated his thoughts and senses, and recorded them in permanent silicon memory. It was like a multi-track tape recorder, each track recording a different sense, except the Memory Chip had the capacity for storing a lifetime of thoughts, memories, and sensations. Matrix hated the damn thing. He didn't understand why he or anyone else had to carry the blasted thing on their person for life. But, those were the Company rules, and death was the absolute penalty for not complying with the rules.

Not everyone was "equipped" with the chips. Certain high level military and Company people were exempt from having them. The Company had cleverly come up with a security scheme which directed who would go without

the chips. They felt that in certain situations i.e. wartime conflicts, military members might divulge important security information, without their consent, if they had the Memory Chips. To get around this problem, all citizens were issued color coded I.D's which identified their security classification. A red coding was the lowest classification, whereas black was the highest one could obtain. It was equivalent to having a top secret rating, and one benefit was not carrying a Memory Chip. Any company employee, including military members above code blue were not issued Memory Chips. All field grade officers of Lt. colonel rank or higher fell into this category.

Matrix got out of the shower and toweled off. He thought about the colonel. God, it had been a long time. It would be good to see him. The message he had sent had been a cryptic one, but the subject matter was highly classified, and Matrix knew the colonel had a very good reason for sending it in that particular form. He remembered the mission, and the end results. His pulse quickened as his mind brought the images into focus. He began to dress quickly, eager for evening, and the reunion, to come. He slipped into a gray flight suit, and grabbed a pair of black jump boots from the closet. Lastly, he reached for his laser gun, and slipped it into the leather shoulder holster he wore. As he headed for the door, his mind, detached from the body, flew to an alien world, searching for the snake.

Dark blue shades of night descended on the Emerald City. It was about eleven-thirty, and most of the bars and clubs up on J sector had been hopping for hours. *Lifelines* was a small place, situated at the end of a cobblestone

street, across from a run down theater named the Astoria. The bar was set deep into the brick structure and went back almost to the river. It was a gathering place for jarheads, squids, and other military personnel. A few whores were known to frequent the place from time to time, hitting on the young sailors who had just returned home from a long hitch at sea. John Matrix leaned against a black street lamp and lit a cigarette. He inhaled deeply, and went inside. In the dimness, he made out the multi-levels bar, spiraling up to the top floor. Matrix took the stairs to the top and headed for the back where there were fewer patrons. He spotted the colonel immediately, sitting at a darkened booth, sipping a tall drink. He walked over to the table silently, while the colonel watched a blond waitress serve drinks to an adjacent table.

"Sir, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. John Matrix reporting for duty, Sir!" Colonel Rawlings looked up into the eyes of his friend and smiled, while leaping up and embracing him.

"God, look at you. Haven't changed a bit since I last saw you."

"Been a long time, sir," Matrix said grabbing the colonel's shoulders.

Matrix took a seat, as the colonel shook his head, smiling.

"How are things?" Matrix asked.

"Good, I can't complain. Listen, lets get a drink and talk." He stood up, but Matrix waved his hand.

"Let me. What are you having?"

"The usual, if you can still remember."

"Sure, who can forget those white Russians!" They both laughed, and as Matrix headed for the bar, Rawlings grabbed his arm. In a low voice he said, "didn't bring the chips, did you?" Matrix only smiled while shaking his head. "Thought I better find out what this is all about before I pull them off ice." Rawlings smiled. "Good. good."

Matrix walked over to the bar and ordered a round from an attractive young waitress. He was watching her grab the glasses and prepare the drinks, when he caught a sudden movement in the corner of his eye. He turned around to face the row of booths and saw a blur of white light rush past him. He heard a scream and ran towards the colonel. Rawlings lay sprawled against the back of the booth, eyes wide, and a gaping hole in his throat. Dark blood spurted from the wound and splashed onto the table as Matrix reached him, staring in horror at his commanding officer. A six pointed star made of white light lay on the far edge of the table. Known as a light shurkien, it was modeled after an ancient Chinese weapon which was made popular during the short lived Ninja craze. The weapon had come from across the room, arcing towards the center bar and into the colonel's neck. Matrix scanned the room for any sign of the thrower, but no one appeared out of the ordinary. As thick, arterial blood touched the light shuriken, it sizzled and faded into nothing, while Matrix tried in vain to control the bleeding. Rawlings grabbed wildly for his friend's arm, while a crowd of drunks stood around and stared. Rawlings made a gurgling noise and Matrix bent down to try and listen. Rawlings was whispering something.

"Don't..." he managed weakly, "don't... give..." Matrix put his ear to the colonel's lips, giving up on trying to contain the bleeding. Blood was everywhere, dripping down the sides of the table and onto the floor. Rawlings tried another word, but couldn't find the strength to spit it out. His body tensed and his eyes grew wide. He exhaled on final time, and then died.

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John Matrix stood outside the back entrance of his apartment complex. A light rain fell as he took cover under a large tree. He surveyed the scene while contemplating his next move. He knew he had to get into his apartment, but walking in the front door would be a mistake. He felt sure the front was being watched, as was his apartment. But, he needed to get in anyway, and the only way of not being spotted was by using the service lift.

Matrix pressed his key card to the lock and opened the back door. He quickly went inside shaking the water from his hair. A long hallway led in front of him to the main elevators. A short corridor off to his left took him to the service lift. It was a small one, designed primarily for the robots that serviced the heating and air conditioning units on each floor. A special code was required to gain entrance, but Matrix had taken care to obtain it a long time ago. One never knew when that code might come in handy.

He punched the code on the digit pad and waited. For a second nothing happened. Then the tumblers whirled and he heard the click. With a sigh of relief, Matrix pulled the two doors apart and crawled into the lift. He sat down

in the corner, pulling his knees up to his chest to fit. He pushed 501, his floor, and sat back as the lift started its ascent.

Thinking about the night's event only sickened him. The colonel was gone. The whole affair was about to blow up in his face, and he didn't even know why. Matrix reached for his laser gun and checked it. The battery was fully charged, and he had put a fresh clip in that morning. He swung the infrared sight into place and checked the beam by sighting on the wall. He was ready.

The lift ground to a halt at his floor and Matrix cocked his head to the side to catch any sounds. There were none. The stillness inside the lift chilled him. He opened the doors to the lift cautiously and peered out at the tunnel in front. It stretched out for ten meters and then banked sharply to the left and right. Two circular ducts ran from the main heating and air conditioning systems to each individual apartment. They lay on top of one another, and ran parallel in either direction. Each duct was a meter in diameter, large enough for the robots but uncomfortable for a human.

Matrix crawled from the lift into the tunnel and headed for the ducts. A round hatch on each duct sealed the air inside from escaping into the tunnel. Matrix touched the switch and heard the hiss of escaping air as the bottom hatch opened. The gust of cool air felt good as he climbed into the air duct on his stomach and pressed the switch to close the hatch. Darkness enveloped him as he began inching forward slowly, passing the first apartment vent. He stopped to peer through the vent and down into the room. It was a dining

room, and a child of perhaps twelve was sitting with her back to the vent doing her homework. He slid past quickly, not making any sound. His apartment was towards the edge of the building, so he had to crawl past a dozen before reaching his. Each apartment had at the most four vents, and most of them opened onto darkened rooms, the occupants probably asleep. He passed one which opened onto a dimly lit bedroom. A woman stood in front of a full length mirror wearing a red teddy. Matrix paused and inhaled a sharp breath as a man walked into the room towards the woman. He stopped behind her and reached for her breasts. She moaned softly as he pulled the strings of the teddy down revealing her hardening nipples. Matrix shifted uneasily in the duct, thinking of Nikki. He shook his head trying to rid himself of the thought. The woman standing by the mirror was not any help.

Matrix managed to pull himself away from the vent as the man led the woman to the carpet and mounted her. He had to keep his mind in focus, for his survival depended upon it. He crawled on.

The end of the duct loomed several meters in front. The shaft bent at a 90-degree turn and fed to the air conditioning units. The low humming from the machines had steadily increased and now the sound was a dull throb in Matrix's head. He knew the next few vents would be his, providing cool air to his living room, bedroom, and kitchen. He crept slowly towards the first one, trying to decipher any sounds emanating from it. With the A/C rushing past him, it was a difficult task.

Pulling out his laser gun and flipping up the sight, he slid over to the first vent and peered through the metal grating. The living room lights were extinguished, just as he had left them, but the balcony blinds were opened, and the light from the nighttime sky was sufficient enough to light up the interior. He spotted the floaters immediately. Two of them, their rectangular bodies were suspended a meter off the carpet as if by magic. One was stationary, its mechanical eyes trained on the balcony and the pod. The other was slowly moving around the room in a wide arc scanning the area for the person it had been programmed to find.

Floaters were a special breed of robots programmed for surveillance. They had small rectangular bodies that were roughly a half meter in length, and half of that in width. At the front were the mechanical eyes that scanned for the target, in this case, Matrix. Just below the vision system was the small hole for a helium-argon laser weapon which was capable of incapacitating a person. The underside or "belly" housed the miniature drives that propelled the floater and kept it suspended above the ground. Two had been sent tonight to wait for Matrix, and he knew as he stared through the grate at them, he would not be left alive, if they spotted him.

Matrix backed away from the grate and used his thumb to flick on the infrared sighting beam. He pointed the gun behind him and looked through the little lens which showed the beam as a pinpoint on the wall. Without the infrared sight, the beam would be invisible to the human eye. Some of the floaters though were equipped with infrared senses that detected the beams.

Matrix didn't know whether these two carried the sophisticated equipment on them or not.

Quietly, he returned to the grate and looked through the vent at the floaters. The situation had not changed. One floater was idle, while the other was presently moving around the large white leather couch that stood off to the side of the room. Matrix carefully placed the laser gun through one of the metal squares in the grate and using the sight placed the beam on the front section of the stationary floater. He took in a breath and exhaled slowly as he squeezed the trigger. The floater instantly exploded, sending pieces of metal and silicon flying all over the room. The second floater sensed the disturbance immediately and went into a quick scan, taking in the remnants of its cohort. Before it had time to contemplate its next move, Matrix had it in his sights and fired off another shot. The beam caught the floater just past the mid section where the drives are situated. It leaned heavily to one side and then flipped over, crashing into a large glass coffee table. The table shattered as flames erupted from the floaters belly. In seconds the entire floater was engulfed in the blaze, and just before it exploded, Matrix caught a glimpse of its dead-like eyes staring at him with ice-cold hatred.

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John Matrix stood in the center of his living room, smoking a cigarette. The remains of the floaters lay at his feet, smoldering mounds of twisted metal and melting silicon chips. The smell made him turn away in disgust. He was

tired, but this was not the place to rest. He knew that others would be sent for him, so he had to get his stuff and leave, fast.

Matrix went into his bedroom closet and pulled out a khaki backpack. He had used this one on countless missions, and now he would use it again. Perhaps, this would be his last one. He didn't know. There were too many variables now to speculate. He would just have to wait and see.

His ammo was kept on the top rear of the closet. He grabbed a few batteries and stuffed them into the pack, while placing three clips in the leg pockets of his flight suit. He walked back into the living room for a moment and noticed the red light of his answering machine flashing. He stood over the screen and pushed the replay button. The screen came to life: a plain looking female, probably android, wearing a gray uniform stood in front of an equally plain gray wall. She introduced her self as an employee of The Company. She informed Lt. Matrix that he was to report to Company Headquarters for a routine physical. Matrix almost laughed. Routine physical? There was no such thing. He didn't know for sure, but rumors were floating around that when The Company called you in for a routine physical they meant to examine your Memory Chip. Matrix would have no part of that. His thoughts were his, private, and not to be put on display for all interested to see. Of course, this was The Company's way, and they always won out in the end. The message ended with the female reminding him that he was to report as soon as possible, or face disciplinary action. Matrix noted that the message had been left almost six hours ago. As he turned away from the console the screen lit up and

another message began to play itself back. This time, an elderly man in a grey uniform wanted to know why The Company had not heard from Lt. Matrix. Perhaps, he felt the situation was not to be taken seriously. Well it was, the old man, explained. The Company was ordering Matrix in for a physical, routine of course, immediately. Any delay would be detrimental to his health.

Matrix turned the console off, almost knocking the machine to the ground. He went back into his bedroom and bent down into the corner. He pulled the edge of the carpet towards him, revealing the hardwood floor underneath. A steel vault was sunk into the wood. Matrix pushed the digit pad rapidly, punching in the code. The click of the vault door opening resonated throughout the room. He reached in and pulled out a black box. Opening it, he grabbed a dozen miniature glass vials and placed them in the breast pocket of his flight suit. Replacing the box, his hand reached for a small plastic box which contained two Memory Chips sunk into a square of styrofoam. He opened the box and removed the chips, discarding the box into the trash. He then got a large hammer from a closet and went back into the living room. Matrix placed the chips side by side on the dining room table and held the hammer above them. The hammer came down whistling, smashing both chips into fine powder. Matrix looked at the dust and shrugging, blew it off the table onto the floor. He quickly gathered the rest of his things and headed for the pod. A full moon was out tonight, sending haunting shadows onto the balcony and the pod. He approached it with the bag flung over his shoulders and looked through the translucent plastic at the aircar. His

thoughts went to the missions he had flown, worlds he had witnessed in birth and death. This would be a different kind of mission, though. The object was to stay alive.

Matrix got into the aircar and flipped a row of switches. The drives began to whine and the soft red interior lights came on. He scanned the screen in front of him for traffic. Because of how late it was, traffic was light. He checked his fuel reserves and noting them to be full, took off. He rose vertically above the balcony and clearing the pod, headed out away from the building. Visibility was excellent tonight as he could see the warning lights atop of the monuments and to the south the magnificent Skyline Hyatt. As he cleared the 600th floor, he guided the aircar up to Flight Level 4 and vectored for the 14th Street Corridor. He would be safe there, as no one would think to look for him among the drug pushers and prostitutes. He would find a place to hide out until things could be sorted out.

He put the aircar into a coordinated glide and then set the autopilot to take over. He estimated he would reach 14th street in six minutes at present speed. As he dimmed the interiors and fell asleep Matrix was unaware that he was being tracked.

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That night, Matrix dreamt of snakes. Not of pythons, cobras, or anacondas, but of a species unknown on Earth or anywhere else in the explored universe.

He remembered it actually, more than dreaming it, although he was quite asleep when these thoughts surfaced to his subconscious. He remembered that day at the outpost. Col. Rawlings had passed him in the hanger as Matrix stood underneath his fighter talking with his crew chief. The Col. had stood behind the technician in silence watching Matrix give orders for repairing a faulty nav system board. As the tech walked away to start the job, Rawlings had come up to Matrix and stood by him, admiring the bird.

"Got something that's right up your alley," the Col. had said softly, and when Matrix looked at him to go on, Rawlings had said simply, "you got first dibs on it." He cocked his head to the side in a gesture that meant: "in my office", and walked away. Matrix had followed quickly, and once in the office with the door closed, the Col. had produced a map from his desk drawer and handed it to his Lt. It showed a small moon highlighted in yellow in orbit around two planets. It was a binary star system, one Matrix had never heard of, but not too far from their base, judging from the coordinates on the map. Rawlings had explained that he was looking for a volunteer to accompany him on a mission. It would be a simple gig, strictly surveillance. A couple of flybys around the moon for scientific monitoring and that would be all. Their birds would be equipped with the gear. All they would have to do is navigate the fighter. Nothing to it.

"Besides," Rawlings told him, "you've been working far too hard. This will be like a mini vacation for you."

Matrix had taken a few minutes to decide. He took the colonel's advise and went on the mission.

Matrix remembered with amazing clarity preparing for the mission. The birds were loaded with sophisticated electronic gear and scientific equipment. Being that Matrix had majored in Philosophy at Columbia, he was unfamiliar with things such as spectrometers, galvanometers, and remote infrared sensing machines. He had watched with a detached sort of interest as the techs installed them. To him, it was just a mission, nothing more.

He and Colonel Rawlings had taken their ships piggyback on a liner at three-tenths light speed to the drop zone. From there, they had flown the rest of the way themselves, using the two days travel that it took to reach the star system for practicing flight maneuvers. They went over rolls and glides, combat formations and emergency procedures. Matrix had been truly glad to go along with the Col. He got an opportunity to see Rawlings in a way he wasn't used to.

The actual mission had been a piece of cake. They were to do a bunch of low flybys, at an altitude of 1000 meters. The terrain was a mixture of medium to low mountains interspersed with desert. Matrix flew wingman and enjoyed the scenery as the scientific equipment collected its data.

The last pass had commenced from the south on a cool dry morning. The twin stars were bright fireballs in the sky as the two birds followed the contours of a large expanse of desert. The flying had been easy. Both men had used their terrain following radar to key the autopilot. Matrix had been doing

controlled breathing exercise. Rawlings, was humming a tune. Suddenly, Rawling's screen lit up, as if awakening from deep sleep. It beeped once to signal the pilot's attention, and then a word flashed onto the screen. Written in boldface amber was the word: **LIFESIGN**.

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Colonel Rawlings put the bird into an immediate power dive and headed for the desert floor. Matrix was shocked into awareness and quickly took control of his ship, anticipating an emergency. He yelled through the mike at Rawlings who was plummeting to the moon's surface.

"Follow my lead, John," Rawlings said slowly to calm him down. "We've got a Lifesign."

"Holy Shit!" Matrix exclaimed and pulled in tight behind Rawlings. The colonel was steadily punching buttons, searching the screens in his cockpit for information. All of the life detection equipment was coordinated through a single Central Processing Unit which took in various data and made a Lifesign determination based on predetermined thresholds. In this case, the computer program had assimilated data comprised of amino acid byproduct levels, carbon levels, respiration byproducts levels, surface activity, i.e. movement, and infrared heat sensing. The program had keyed in on a bunch of these, but the threshold had been reached when a quick lateral movement had been detected on the surface. Rawlings keyed the console to display the movement data. The screen showed a three dimensional map of the desert surface with a red bulls eye off to the left of center screen.

"Engage video and infrared scans," Rawlings told Matrix as the digital altimeter onboard clicked towards zero. Several warning systems activated as they flew dangerously close to the ground. Rawlings watched the bullseye grow larger as his speed increased while nearing the desert floor. At fifty meters, he banked thirty degrees to the left and leveled out. A row of dunes loomed straight ahead. A lone pile of boulders sat on the windward face of the farthest one. Matrix was on his tail, using his ship's scanners to locate the source of the Lifesign. Rawlings signaled a decrease throttle and they glided over the dunes ten meters off of the sand. His screen was flashing and high frequency tones emanated from concealed speakers indicating the Lifesign was directly below the ship. As the birds came to a halt, hovering over the dunes, Matrix spotted a shift in the sand to the left.

"Got something," he yelled and banked sharply to get a closer look. The video cameras zoomed in, taking commands from a joystick Matrix held in his left. Then it appeared.

A snake, unlike any he had ever seen, erupted from the sand. It was huge, approximately four meters in length, and a third of a meter in width. It climbed over the rocks rapidly, using dozens of small appendages that hung in rows from the sides of its body. There appeared to be tiny fingers at the ends of each appendage, which grappled sand as it went scrambling to the dune top.

"Holy Fuck!" was Matrix's only response as he sent the video camera panning to keep the beast in view. Rawlings was speechless, using his onboard optics to catch the creature from a different angle. In seconds, it had

reached the top, and then it was gone, scrambling down the far side, into a hole. Rawlings brought his ship forward, using his cameras to peer down the side, but he never saw the snake again. It had gone back the way it came, tunneling into a labyrinth of sandy holes that was its home.

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The stars were pinholes in a velvet blanket called night. Matrix stirred as the autopilot sounded an alert. He awoke, flexing his muscles in the slightly cramped quarters of the aircar. The AP had put the BMW into a glideslope approach, and as he stared out the windshield, Matrix saw the landing lights of the Capital Hilton dead ahead. He took control and placed the aircar on the tarmac smoothly, as a bellman ran to the car, swinging open the door. Matrix stretched while the bellman stood patiently, waiting for his orders.

"I need to leave this in a safe place for a few hours." Matrix said gesturing to his BMW.

"Are you a guest, sir?" the bellman asked, taking in the flight suit and laser gun hanging from the shoulder holster.

"No," Matrix answered, "but, I'll make it worth your while to let me keep the car here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a Gold Bill, while the bellman stared at his crotch.

"Promises, promises," the bellman added, and took the fifty, stuffing it into his breast pocket. He handed Matrix a ticket and whistled for one of his boys to move the car. Matrix grabbed his bag and walked towards a line of aircabs. The air was cool, almost refreshing, as he hopped into the back seat

of one, and when the driver turned around to ask him where he wished to go, Matrix only extended his arm, and made a thumbs down.

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DOWN UNDER and SIN CITY were two nicknames for the place Matrix was heading to. The 14th Street Corridor was a large area, as 14th Street itself, ran from the river practically all the way into Maryland. The Corridor was a multi-leveled conglomeration of businesses, hotels, and restaurants. The top most levels catered to the rich and famous of Emerald City. It was at this level that all the classy hotels, such as the one Matrix parked his aircar, were located at. As one descended the levels, it became darker and dirtier, until one reached the bottom and found themselves in Sin City. Walking down 14th Street on Level one (the top most level), one noticed the buildings on either side of the street, soaring to the clouds. Most establishments on this level contained, on the average, 500 floors. As one looked across the street from the sidewalk, they would immediately notice the void where the street should have been. This was open space, an area where aircars and aircabs roamed free, able to move from one level to the next as easily as pointing your aircar in the proper direction. Waist high walls lined the sidewalks and invisible barriers kept out would-be suicide victims, who dared to fly into the void.

The taxi took off from the Hilton, banking wide to avoid another cab. The driver, shaking his fist and screaming in Arabic, plummeted down into the void. The levels flew by, one after another as Matrix suddenly realized that he was famished. Matrix shifted uneasily in his seat, hungry, and not particularly

happy with this cabby's driving skills. Level Nine came and went in a flash and then the cab was leveling out as the slick pavement of the bottom, Level Ten, rushed out and met them. The cab came to an abrupt halt, and Matrix had to grab the sides of the seat to keep from being thrown into the front. The cabby only smiled.

Lining the sidewalks on either side were the prostitutes. There were hundreds of them, yelling to prospective customers who sat in their aircars. The street itself was packed with aircars and taxis, while traffic was reduced to a trickle. Not that anyone seemed to mind. Business was being conducted out in the open, for the prostitutes didn't have to worry about the law. Police did not venture DOWN UNDER.

Matrix was looking for a place to eat. Large neon signs advertising massage parlors and live nudes lit up the street for miles in either direction. Go-go bars and smoke houses accounted for the rest of the establishments.

"You know of any place where I can get a bite to eat?" he asked the cabby. The Arab turned around to stare at him dumbfoundly.

"Are you shitting me?" he said, "look around you!" The prostitutes were plentiful in miniskirts, and skintight jumpsuits. Some had on sequined jackets, and nothing else. A few wore flesh colored body paint with heels and strutted down the sidewalk as the men looked on in sheer ecstasy.

Matrix told the cabby to drop him off at the next corner. The cabby grinned widely, and clamped down on the throttles, making the cab rise off the ground, and shoot for the corner. The passengers in the aircars underneath

didn't mind the cab jumping ahead. They were too busy watching the sights to notice.

The cab reached the corner and made a right on to S Street. He pulled to the curb and let the cab down. Matrix reached in his pocket for a Gold Bill and just as he was handing the cabby the money, a stretch limo came flying around the same corner and came to a halt a few car lengths from the cab. Matrix became distracted for a moment and stared at the black limo. The passenger door opened and a tall, bronze skinned woman appeared. Her long jet-black hair flowed freely down her back almost to her waist. Matrix thought she looked like a mixture of Indian and Japanese. She turned to the limo and bent down speaking a few words to the occupant within. Then she stood up, turning towards the cab, and Matrix made out the unmistakable green eyes set above high cheekbones. She was beautiful, wearing a white miniskirt with a side slit that reached all the way to her thigh. White laced nylons adorned her legs along with spiked red heels. She wore a silk red top with spaghetti strings and a plunging neckline showing just a hint of full, round breasts. For a second, Matrix sat in awe, watching her, thinking about the countless dreams he had had, and how she was a character right out of those dreams. Then the thought vanished as quickly as it had come, and Matrix sat staring at the most beautiful prostitute he had ever seen.

"Hold on for a sec, " Matrix whispered to the cabby who seemed content to wait there forever. The meter ticked away.

He got out of the cab and walked towards the woman who was standing on the curb as the limo took off for the void. She turned back towards the corner and spotted Matrix walking towards her. She gave him a warm smile and turned on her heels as he approached her.

"Hey, wait a minute," Matrix said and jogged up to her, reaching for her hand. She pulled away quickly, looking at him, while frowning.

"Do I know you, sailor?" she said with just a hint of a northern accent.

"Air force, and no, but I'd like us to get acquainted. Can we go somewhere and talk."

The prostitute looked Matrix, and for the first time saw the gun that hung from his shoulder.

"You always carry a piece when you're looking for a piece of ass?" she remarked and began laughing at her own joke. Matrix stood there patiently, glancing back at the waiting cab. She noticed that Matrix wasn't laughing so she stopped and looked up at him.

"What are you looking for, seriously, cause I can't just stand here and chit chat. Girl's got to make a living you know." Matrix smiled, while reaching into his pocket, and pulled out a wad of Gold Bills. The prostitute stared at the money, the GB's, and gave Matrix a grin.

"G-bills! Well that a different story. I'll suck your daddy's dick for a G-bill." And with that said, she took Matrix by the arm and led him to the waiting taxi. As they climbed in and took off, Matrix leaned back into the cushions and

asked her name. While the cabby steered the aircab into the void, she put her ruby lips to Matrix's ear and whispered: Nikki.

\*\*\*

John Matrix had always wanted to stay at the Capital Hilton. Now he was about to get his chance.

The aircab was shooting to Level One as Nikki sat in the back with her arms around Matrix. She was whispering in his ears the sweet things on her agenda for the night ahead. It was obvious from the budge in his flight suit that Matrix was excited about the evening's turn of events. He reached over, taking her face in his hands, and kissed her gently. She responded by slipping her tongue deep into his mouth and tasting him, while rubbing the insides of his thighs. He squirmed on the seat as the taxi came out of the void onto Level One. The moonlight reflected off the windows as the cabby brought the taxi to a halt at the front entrance to the hotel. Nikki squeezed his groin, and sat up to fix her hair. Matrix composed himself while reaching for the fare.

"Bring us around to the back please, I want to drop of f my bag in the car."

The cabby complied by turning the aircab in the air and flying off for the rear entrance. They reached it shortly and Matrix gave the cabby a bunch of Gold Bills, along with a smile.

"Thanks for the ride, pal. And stay out of trouble."

"You too, cowboy," the Arab said, tucking the bills into the hidden folds of his shirt. Matrix got out of the cab and came around to the passenger side

where Nikki was patiently waiting for the door to be opened. As Matrix reached for the handle, a beam of red light settled on his shoulder, and with a flash, he was falling to the ground. Blood spilled from a gaping wound in his shoulder, the flight suit torn away like rice paper. He screamed in pain while Nikki looked on in horror. Matrix reached for his gun, wincing in pain as his muscles flexed. He looked over at the cabby who was staring in the direction of the laser firing.

"Get her the fuck out of here!" Matrix yelled while turning onto his back and placing the gun between his legs. He fired off several shots, sighting blindly in the direction of the laser fire. The taxi's drives begin to whine and suddenly it was airborne heading away from Matrix, towards the void. Nikki watched from the window as a burst of laser light erupted from matrix's weapon. He got into a crouching position and ran for his BMW. He reached it barely, as another round of firing bombarded his car, shattering the rear windshield, and one taillight. This seemed to piss Matrix off more than being shot at, for he stood up and began firing haphazardly into the dark parking lot. His laser sprayed a wide arc of deadly light for a good thirty seconds before he realized that his fire wasn't being returned. He crouched back down by the car and waited for a moment. He stared into the darkness, yet he didn't see any movement. His eyes were beginning to adjust to the light and he thought he saw a body laying on the asphalt among a row of cars.

Cautiously, Matrix walked over, his gun aimed in front, ready to fire at the first movement. He reached the row of cars, and smirked as he glanced

around at the shattered glass that lay on the ground. He estimated that he must have hit ten cars, breaking the windshields and burning holes in the molded metal. He found the body, crumpled and quite dead, smelling of burnt meat. It lay near an old Ford, a large man in his thirties, balding and bespectacled. A laser pistol lay near his feet and as Matrix went to pick it off the ground, he heard the whining of sirens and sprinted for his car. The ache in his shoulder was a stinging pain that shot up and down his body as he ran. He reached the car and using his key card, opened the door swiftly. A bellman came running as he flicked on the drives, and the lights. The bellman was talking wildly, but Matrix wasn't listening. He put the BMW in gear and took off from the lot, heading straight up and away from the hotel. His mind raced, first with thoughts of Nikki and then, to the situation at hand. He needed medical attention fast, but more importantly, he needed answers. Immediately a name came to mind, and he repeated it over and over as he guided the aircar towards a moonlit southeast. The name was Jawbreaker.

\*\*\*

William McKinnley was the best goddamn Telecom specialist the Air Force had ever had. He was a "natural" having a knack for electronics and computers, and being able to explain theories with the same ease as a professor instructing a class. McKinnley would get drunk after a long duty day on the flight line, and sit at the bar for hours, explaining to some poor soul P and N junctions, reverse biasing, and the hole theory. In fact, it was on one of these nights that he came to earn his nickname.

The fight originated (where else?) but in the O club. It had been a long week. Inspections had kept the squadron working around the clock for a week. Friday night had finally come, and all hands had piled into the club for a night of drinking and women chasing. McKinnley had become drunk rather quickly as the Molson Golden on tap was going for 25 cents a glass. He had over indulged as usual, and then started explaining electronics theory to a Captain, who had the misfortune to be sitting next to him. McKinnley was preaching the usual shit: P and N junctions, different classes of transistors, and the hole theory. A slightly sauced Major, finally not being able to stand the Lt's boring recital, spoke out.

"Would you kindly shut the fuck up! I've had to sit and listen to your shit for an hour, and I'm tired of it." McKinnley eyed the Major as the entire house got quiet.

"Excuse me, Major," he said, "but, some people are interested in the highly technical field of which I am a world renowned expert. Anyway," he stopped to take a sip of the Molsons in front of him, "some people just don't know about these things. Your wife, for instance, told me you know nothing of the hole theory, so I had to fill her in!"

Laughter erupted all around the Major while McKinnley, obviously proud of himself, took another sip of his beer. The Major, stood there, listening to the laughter and cackling, and finally cracked. He threw his beer into McKinnley's face, then stood his ground, confidently waiting for the drunk to make his move. McKinnley did, but ever so slowly. He slid off his stool and faced the

Major. He then went into an ancient martial arts stance as everyone applauded the effort. In strobe-like slow motion, his fist clenched and swung across his body, instantly connecting with the Major's mouth. Teeth went flying, and the Major hit the floor, unconscious.

For that heroic and obviously stupid move (hitting a superior officer was a big time no no), William "Jawbreaker" McKinnley was busted from 1st Lt. to buck Sergeant. He was almost kicked out of the service, but Colonel Rawlings came to his aid and convinced the court martial board to allow him to finish up his hitch. He was a good tech, regardless of how he behaved.

Jawbreaker heard the buzzer sound again, and opened his eyes, looking at the LED on the nightstand. Four fucking thirty, A.M. who in the fuck could that be? He put on a robe, and took the stairs slowly, his head aching from a long night of beer and wrestling on the tube. He reached the bottom landing and almost tripping, headed for the door. The light from a predawn sky was enough for him to see Matrix hunched against the door, eyes shut, blood matted down the front of the flight suit. Jawbreaker pulled the door open and grabbed Matrix inside.

"Jesus, what the hell happened to you," he said while eyeing the open wound at the shoulder. Matrix attempted a slight smile, then collapsed to the floor.

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He awoke, three hours later. McKinnley stood over him, holding rolls of gauze and a pair of scissors. Matrix turned to his shoulder and saw the bandages. He smiled weakly at his friend, while reaching out for his hand.

"Thanks pal. I guess this means I owe you."

"Shit, all those times you've bailed me out. Forget it, Lt." Matrix sat up and stared around the small room. It was sparsely decorated with little more than the small bed he lay on, and a dresser off to the right. A narrow window opposite the door let in rectangular shafts of early morning light.

McKinnley sat back in a wooden chair which he had pulled up alongside the bed.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"A little. How long have I been here?"

"A couple of hours. Crashed as soon as I hauled your ass through the door." Matrix smiled at McKinnley. He was a large man, once a very lean and muscular fellow. But, years and beer had a way of taking its toll. A roll of fat hung off his front where taut stomach muscles used to reside.

Jawbreaker popped open a beer. "Want one?" he gestured to Matrix and laughed.

"No thanks, but I'm hungry as hell. Whatcha got to eat around here?"

They ate Chinese food, leftovers from a few days ago that McKinnley promptly warmed in the microwave. Matrix filled him in on the nights events, starting with the colonel's death.

"How'd he die?" Jawbreaker asked quietly.

"Light shuriken. Ripped open his throat as I got up to fetch us some drinks." They sat in silence for a while, but Matrix soon continued telling him about the floater, the messages, and ending with Nikki.

"And you should see my car. Blasted the fucking windshield right out." Jawbreaker stood up and excused himself. He returned in a few minutes holding a rectangular black box, with a thin aluminum antenna attached to one end.

"Found this attached to your fuel tank, Lt." he said, grinning through yellow teeth.

"What is it, a bomb?"

"Naw," Jawbreaker said waving his hand while tossing the box onto the bed. Tracking device. Standard Motorola type. That's how they knew where to find you. You're getting rusty, John. You should have known you were not dealing with a bunch of fucking kids. This is the Company." Matrix examined the device then threw it back down.

"Why? That's what I want to know. Why, all of a sudden did they want the colonel and me?"

"Your guess' as good as mine. Got something to do with your mission. Can you tell me about it?" Jawbreaker had sensitive eyes. Matrix thought about all they had been through together as he stared at his friend's eyes. A light rain had started, causing Matrix to shiver.

"The mission," Matrix began, "was suppose to be a routine gig. No funnies, just two birds, the colonel and I. Light stuff," he waved his hand, "low

flybys using this sophisticated shit. " Jawbreaker listened to him quietly, occasionally nodding.

"The funny thing was," Matrix said, "it was a secret mission. Only the two of us were suppose to know. Rawlings had been briefed by Headquarters. The data was to be used in establishing a top secret airbase for one of the Tactical Fighter Wings. I didn't see why we had to keep our mouth shut, but orders are orders. Anyway, everything changed when we saw the snake.

"You've got to understand, man," he explained, "hundreds of thousand square kilometers of planet and moon surface had been explored by our boys, but never, never had life been detected, until then." He paused, seeing vivid images of the snake crawling up the dune come and go. "We had discovered life! Life as foreign as anything we could imagine. The first viable proof of a living organism, extraterrestrial life, on a planet other than Earth. Well, you can imagine, we flew home thinking we were heroes, but before announcing it to the world, Rawlings felt he better clear it with Langley. Shit, they told him to sit on it. Not say a word. Lay low.

"Each bird had a Memory Chip which assimilated all the scientific data and video and stored it for future playback. Rawlings told me to keep the Chips, just in case the Company ever changed its mind."

"I guess they finally did," Jawbreaker said breaking his silence.

"I don't know. The colonel obeyed Headquarters' orders not to speak, but it was something he resented for the rest of his life. He once told me that if things ever did change and the news could be brought to light, he'd send me a

message. The message arrived yesterday, but I never got a chance to find out what he was up to. They killed him, before he was able to tell me." Matrix wiped away a tear, breathing deeply. "That's it. Nothing more to tell really. Except they're after me now. I've destroyed the Chips, but there is one left. Mine. All the things that I saw and felt at that instant when the snake emerged from the sand is permanently etched in my Memory Chip. And the Company wants it."

"Sure looks that way," Jawbreaker said handing him a beer. It was Coors, made from that polluted Rocky Mountain Spring water. Matrix took it and put the bottle to his lips, feeling the cool liquid go down his throat, grateful for the drink, and his friend's hospitality.

"On top of all that, I find and lose a beautiful woman in the space of a few hours." Matrix pressed the bottle against his face.

"As I see it," Jawbreaker said while sitting up, "you don't have many choices. If the Company wants that Chip, they will stop at nothing to get it. And, knowing the way the Company operates, you've got to watch your ass, because anybody you meet or deal with in the next few days could be Company." He paused to take a swig of beer before continuing. "I'm gonna tell you something. And I don't want you to freak out over it, because this is just a thought. You say this Nikki that you met is like a woman out of your dreams. Well, I have heard, and I'm not saying this is the case, but it is possible, that the Company is monitoring your Chip."

"What!" Matrix's eyes lit up, not understanding.

"Inside each Memory Chip is a clock circuit which syncs the timing of all the microscopic flip-flops. It is this clock that is the master timer for the CPU. Without the clock, data cannot be shifted and stored. The clock circuit has a minute crystal, which resonates at a particular frequency. Since no two crystals are exactly alike, each Memory Chip oscillates at slightly different frequencies. They might be nano or pico seconds off, but no two are the same. It is a rather simple matter of tuning into the specific frequency and uncoding the data stream which is being sent to the Chip's circuits. What this all means," he said, seeing that Matrix wasn't following, "is that the Company may be monitoring your mind. If they are close enough to you, it is possible for them to tune in and read your every thought." Matrix sat in stunned silence. He thought of the implications, shaking his head in disbelief. Is it possible? His shoulder began to ache.

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"Are you saying that Nikki is an agent?"

Jawbreaker stood at the narrow window, watching the rain as it fell on the panes, making pattering noises as it hit. It was a little past noon, and the sun was nowhere in sight.

"Could be," Jawbreaker said turning from the window to stare at Matrix. "Could be an android, modeled after your own thoughts. Sent to seduce you and recover the Chip." He threw his hands into the air. "It's possible. Anything's possible in Emerald City."

"What if she is an android? How would you tell, I mean, robot technology is so sophisticated nowadays." The anguish in his voice was extremely audible. He sat up in bed, grabbing another Coors. Jawbreaker thought for a second, feeling for a beard that was not there.

"There are ways," he said. "Electronic gear which measures the presence of nonliving matter such as metal and plastic; also x-ray machines etc. etc. But the simplest and by far the easiest way I know is to blow into their eyes."

"Blow into their eyes?" Matrix asked puzzled.

"Yeah. A human, you see, will automatically blink. It's an innate reflex. Androids on the other hand, will stare at you as if nothing happened. Unless they are equipped with sensors in their vision to detect a breath of air, which I strongly doubt, the test is infallible." Matrix got up, stretched his legs, and walked to the window. He placed his hands on the panes of glass and looked out at the wet street. Matrix shook his head slowly. Please don't be a robot, he thought, please Nikki.

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"Can it be done?"

John Matrix lay in bed, staring up at the face of William "Jawbreaker" McKinnley. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a vial. Tipping his head back, he ingested the drug with one snort, then shook his head in disgust. The drug burned first, then cooled. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, suddenly aware he could feel his blood pulsing. His eyes closed.

"Dunno. It's possible, I guess. Dangerous though, really dangerous from what I understand. But this is one question I can't give a definite answer to." Jawbreaker reached for a vial while Matrix lay there smiling.

"Good shit," he remarked while wiping away bubbles of spit which had formed on his lips.

"There is a person who would know for sure. Got all the answers, this one. Chinaman they call the Glass Tiger. That's all I know. Sorry can't be more of a help." His vision began to fade and the room started humming, as he sat down. Matrix fell asleep, thinking about what Jawbreaker had said. He would pay this Glass Tiger a visit. That was for damn sure.

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The dream: It is night. Perhaps two in the morning. He is sleeping soundly and peacefully. A light breeze from the window flows past him, keeping him cool. He is dreaming. Not concentrating on one theme, but many. Waves of thoughts are flowing over him. And then, he is awake. He sits up, disoriented and suddenly cold. He gets up and goes to the window, and stares out. She is there, Nikki, standing against a black streetlamp and staring up at him.

Beckoning him to come to her. She is leaning against the lamp, wearing a one-piece yellow jumpsuit. Red spiked heels adorn her feet, and her long black hair is pulled to one side, covering her left breast. The right one is visible, as she is pulling the fabric to one side, letting him see. With her other hand she reaches for her breast and squeezes it, while staring at him. She suddenly smiles, then laughs.

"Don't you want it?" she asks softly, speaking only above whisper, yet he can hear her. God yes, he hears her.

He tries to tell her, even scream it, how much he wants her right now, but she doesn't hear him. He shifts against the window hard, trying to cool the fire that is hissing in his groin. But, it does not help. She waits. He screams. Then, not hearing him, she zips up her jumpsuit and begins to walk away. In a moment she is gone, only a shiny spiked heel remains, against the black streetlamp where she teased him.

\*\*\*

An enormous skylight atop a vaulted ceiling let in shades of purple and gray. It was sunset, and shadows from an adjacent skyscraper moved across the teak deck towards Matrix. He stood in the center of the room, watching the abstract designs being created on the floor. He wore a slick grey suit of Italian silk, crisp white shirt, no tie, and soft, black leather shoes. Jawbreaker had gotten the clothes for him while he slept and regained his strength. He loved the suit. Besides, his flight suit was getting old, and soiled.

He held a tall glass in his hand. A cool refreshing drink had been brought to him by a quiet oriental in an oversized dark suit. He had bowed to Matrix and promptly left the room, leaving him alone, to wait for the Glass Tiger.

A door at the end of the room opened several minutes later, and the oriental reappeared, as a dark cloud passed overhead, dimming the interior for a brief moment. He stared at Matrix and gestured with his hand for him to

follow. Matrix finished his drink with a quick gulp, and walked to the door. A wrought iron staircase spiraled up several stories. He took the stairs slowly, glancing up at a narrow window made up of colored glass. The oriental paused at a landing above him, waiting for Matrix to catch up. As he reached the top step the oriental spoke to him in a low voice while standing across from a narrow oak door.

"Mr. Osaka will see you now." He opened the door and stood aside. Matrix walked in.

He found himself in a glass enclosed room. A wide tub, perhaps three meters in diameter was sunken into the marbled floor. The glass ceiling curved away from the walls, reminding Matrix of a planetarium. Exotic plants and shrubs lined the walls. Thick, humid air hung motionlessly. A small, Japanese man wearing oval spectacles sat in the tub on the far edge, a champagne glass within arm's reach. He watched Matrix silently from the tub for a moment, then stood up, water dripping from his squat, yet strong body, as he held out his hand.

"I am Mr. Osaka, the Glass Tiger. I understand we have business, you and I." Matrix took the hand and felt the power of his grip. He waved Matrix over to a leather recliner while toweling off. Matrix didn't have a whole lot of time. He decided to get right to it.

"My name is Matrix, and I am in need of information." Matrix sat back in the chair, enjoying the feel of the cool soft leather.

"Mr. Matrix," Osaka said pulling up chair, "information is a commodity. Just like wheat, barley or cocaine. It follows certain laws of supply and demand." He paused, using a single sheet of thin lens tissue to wipe away water, which had dripped onto his glasses. "There are very few of us who deal in reliable information nowadays. So I hope you will understand that I will charge accordingly for the information which you seek." Matrix watched him grab a thick bathrobe and don it. "Follow me," the Japanese said.

A narrow door in the rear of the room was shrouded with green vines. Matrix followed the man as he walked through it and into a large florescently lit workroom. A wall of twenty-five monitors stood perpendicular to the door. A gleaming black console with various terminals and electronic gear sat off to the left. Directly in front was an IBM mainframe and two racks of telecom modems. Cool air circulated from grated tiles beneath their feet. There were no windows and a bunch of security cameras hung from the ceiling, pointing in various directions around the room. A young Asian woman with long jet-black hair sat behind the console staring into a color screen. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, while a row of printers buzzed behind her.

"This," the Tiger said, "is one of our control centers. As you can see, we are tied into a variety of main and mini frames, as well as virtually all of the wire services. He paused to smile, waiting for Matrix's reaction. "We are also tapped into a large number of satellites providing video and voice data transmission all over the world. Each screen lit up with information, some scrolling so fast Matrix could barely read the contents.

"Nice," Matrix said trying to seem impatient.

"O.K. Why don't you tell me what you came here for?"

"Two pieces of information. One is on a woman. I want to find out if she has any ties to The Company. Like, is she on their payroll?" Osaka stood silently, nodding his head to show he understood.

"Second, and this is the most important, I need to find a doctor who can remove my Chip, no questions asked." Matrix turned to stare into the Asian's eyes. They stared back at him, studying him, contemplating if he was for real. The Tiger's blank stare turned into a warm smile as he reached up, patting Matrix on the shoulder.

"Ah," he said shaking his head, still smiling. "This is most out of the ordinary. What you ask is of course illegal, and most dangerous."

"Look, I came here because my contact said you could handle my problem. If it's going to be a big deal for you, I'll just take my business elsewhere." He turned in the direction of the door and started to go. Osaka grabbed his arm.

"Wait. No problem for me, but perhaps problem for you." The smile disappeared and was replaced with a serious stare. "Such information must be handled with much care. It will take time and it..."

"No time," Matrix interrupted him. "Quickly, tonight the latest. Oh, and I want the doctor brought here."

"Out of the question. But," he said looking at his wristwatch, "I think we can arrange something." Matrix sighed.

"There is the question of compensation," Mr. Osaka said. "Information of this nature will cost a pretty penny, and frankly Mr. Matrix, I don't think you can handle this one."

"You just get me a doctor and find out the details about the girl and I'll make sure you get your compensation."

"Unfortunately," Osaka said, taking off his glasses, "an operation like this must be conducted with the utmost care. And payment must be made in advance. Can you accommodate this?" Matrix sighed again and reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a small glass vial containing what appeared to be a black liquid. It was thick and tar like. Matrix held it up to the light and then to Osaka.

"I trust you are familiar with Midnight's Gold," he said. Osaka began to laugh.

"Do you know how many people come into my office each day claiming to have a sample of Midnight's Gold. Hundreds, perhaps thousands if I count the number of persons I deal with outside my office." He continued to chuckle.

"Well then. It appears you are familiar with the drug. You will undoubtedly know how to test a sample for purity." He walked to the door and placed his hand on the light switch while holding the vial in front of him. He flipped the switch, plunging the room into darkness. For a moment the room remained black. Then, all of a sudden, a redish glow began to emanate from his fingers. It grew in intensity until his face could be seen, warm shadows of multicolored light dancing off his skin. He shook the vial and the glow

intensified, held it still and it dimmed. He could see the face of Osaka in the dimness of the glow, staring in awe at the vial Matrix held. The glow began to fade into blackness as he held it still, and as the last of the light vanished, he turned on the lights.

"It comes from the planet Galieo in the constellation Uron. Picked it up during one of my missions to the planet surface. Geologists are still trying to figure out what it is, but someone long ago discovered its ability to fuck your head up. The most sought after drug on this planet. Midnight's Gold." He held the vial up. "The real thing!"

Osaka's eyes flicked back and forth between the glass vial and Matrix. He seemed to be concentrating hard, kneading an idea over and over in his head. Presently, he spoke.

"Four vials and I'll get you a doctor in two hours." His tongue seemed to flicker along thin, pink lips.

"Fuck you!" Matrix exclaimed. "This is good shit. I've got people banging down my apartment walls trying to get a goddamn lick of the stuff. I'll give you two."

"Three and it's a deal." He seemed to be holding his breath. Matrix looked around the room, seemingly deep in thought. He returned his stare to Osaka and gave him a wide grin.

"Deal, Tiger. But you've got to move your ass. Time is of the essence."

"Of course, Mr. Matrix," Osaka said, sending a stream of commands in Japanese to his assistant. "Of course."

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The sleek, black helicopter whisked Matrix off to Georgetown like he was a V.I.P. He sat in the back, staring out at the twinkling skyline, while Mr. Osaka and his assistant sat up in front, conferring with one another and the pilot. Their destination was the office of a well-known plastic surgeon who dabbled from time to time in certain naughties, some of which had come to the attention of Osaka and his ever present mainframe. A simple arrangement had been worked out between the Glass Tiger and the good doctor. He would perform the operation and Osaka would refrain from sending his wife a full length video of the doctor's latest charade.

The copter set down on the roof of the townhouse shortly after eight. Matrix and Osaka went down the wide steps to the third floor, where the doctor stood, expecting them. He was a tall man with large hands. Matrix thought he looked vaguely familiar, but he did not spend too much time dwelling on it. The doctor led them into a large office, decorated with creamy leather sofas and soft track lighting. Soothing music radiating from tiny speakers strategically placed along the ceiling. Matrix found the music annoying.

"This is Dr. Reese. This," Osaka said pointing to Matrix, "is your patient. Are you ready?" Both men nodded in agreement.

"Well then, let's get on with it, shall we," the doctor said, leading them through a glass door into a bright operating room. Various medical equipment hung from the ceiling and walls. A large aluminum table stood in the center of the room with a powerful circular lamp directly above it. The doctor gestured

for Matrix to sit on the table, while he prepare for the operation. Osaka's assistant came into the room, holding a manila folder. She handed it to Osaka and then promptly left the room. He glanced at the contents while Matrix looked on in silence.

"Here is the information you requested," he said and handed the folder over to Matrix. "As you can see, the woman in question does not now or never has had any ties to the Company. She is employed as a prostitute. Her address has changed six times in the last twelve months. It is for this reason that we are unable to furnish you with her present residence. However, if you desire this information badly, I can send someone out into the field and we should have her address in about eight hours or so." Matrix shook his head.

"That's all right. As long as you are sure that she doesn't work for the Company."

"Absolutely."

The doctor approached Matrix wearing green scrubs and platex gloves.

"I hope you are aware of the dangers of this operation," he said. "For openers, it is illegal and anyone caught without their Memory Chip is subjected to the death penalty. Secondly, it is an extremely dangerous operation. The Chip is encased in a type of nylon bag, if you will. Leading away from the body of the Chip is a thin ribbon wire, which is attached deep within the brain stem. Surrounding the end or connector are microscopic sacks filled with curare. I'm sure you are familiar with curare, the nerve poison." Matrix nodded silently.

“Good. Any disturbance to the area of the connector or brain stem and pop, the sacks rupture and goodbye Charlie. Understand?”

“No, I don’t understand. You’re the doctor. You’ve done this operation before. You just make sure you don’t rupture the bags when you cut into me!”

“I just want to warn you of the possible consequences, that’s all.” The doctor looked down, fidgeting with his plastic gloves.

“For your sake, I hope you know what you’re doing. Because if you screw up, I’ll take my laser gun and perform a bit of reconstructive surgery on you!” He pulled his shirt off and lay flat on the table as Osaka looked on.

“One more thing,” Matrix said. “I don’t want to be under for the job only local anesthetic. I need to make sure that there’s no funny stuff with my Chip while I’m under. No offense.” He smiled to the doctor while catching the

“And when the Chip is removed, I plan on destroying it right here before I leave this room. Understood?”

“Okay, tough guy,” the doctor said holding the laser scalpel in front of his face. He looked up at the Glass Tiger. “Why don’t you leave the room, Mr.

bably hate to see a grown man cry.” Matrix only smiled. But in seconds, his screams radiated throughout the building, and even the Tiger’s assistant hear them as she stood on the roof, stroking the sides of the gleaming, black craft.

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"I'm looking for Nikki."

"Honey, for fifty bucks, I'll be Nikki, Barbie, Donna, or Sue!" A bunch of prostitutes stood on a dim street corner down on Level Ten. It was a little after ten P.M., and a crowd of aircars and aircabs had begun to congregate as it began to drizzle. Matrix stood on the corner, hands in his jacket, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. His neck felt a little sore, and the on-off throb in his shoulder was still there. He spoke to a young blond wearing a pair of skimpy cutoffs and heels. A wad of chewing gum filled her mouth. She looked about sixteen.

"Seriously, I need to find Nikki, It's real important," he said. The prostitute shrugged her shoulders while bumming a joint from her friend. A cloud of smoke drifted upwards, mingling with drops of rain.

"How important?" the blond's friend asked, blowing smoke in his direction. Matrix reached in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He peeled off two tens and held them between his fingers.

"Yeah, Nikki. I know her," the blond began while snatching the bills into her hand. "Nice kid, real pro." She paused to chomp on her wad of gum.

"Haven't seen her tonight, though. Usually's out here with the rest of us by nine." She took a long drag while holding the joint between long fingers.

"Look, I don't have time for playing games. Now I need to find her. Do any of you know where she lives?"

"Even if we did know," a black girl with purple dreadlocks remarked, "why should we tell you?" Matrix, feeling near panic, had the sudden urge to slap the bitch. He drew deeply on his cigarette, and dropped it on the curb,

watching the raindrops extinguish the burning tobacco with a faint hissing sound. He turned to the one whom he first spoke to.

"How much do you charge?" he asked, bringing the roll of bills up to eye level.

"Fifty for a straight; seventy-five for half and half, and I do give one hell of a good blow job!" She winked and ran her tongue around full red lips. Matrix unfolded the roll and pulled out four bills. He held them in front of the woman's face.

"Here's two hundred. All I want is her address." He stood patiently, seeing her eyes dart back and forth. She hesitated, then biting her lip, reaching for the money. Matrix pulled back, out of reach. "Address," he said.

"Lenny would kill me if he found out." She looked around at the bunch of girls, and then fixed her stare on Matrix.

"Alright. Go two blocks down to T Street and turn left. Third building on your left, second floor. She glanced around once more, then snatched the money from Matrix's hand. She stuffed the bills into the waistband of her skintight pants. She turned on her heels to walk away, but Matrix grabbed her shoulder, spinning her around. He pulled his jacket open, bringing the laser gun into view. His grip tightened while speaking in a low voice.

"You better not be fucking with me because if you are," he said, slipping the gun partway out of its holder, "I'll find you, and mess up that pretty little face of yours." He relaxed his grip, while closing his jacket.

"Oh, hurt me!" one of them cackled, as he walked off towards T street.

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Matrix reached the earth colored brownstone ten minutes later. He glanced up at the second floor and saw that the lights were extinguished. He entered the building, finding himself in a dimly lit hallway. He located the stairway and climbed it slowly, listening to the creaking noises as his shoes pressed against antique wood. The second floor landing was illuminated by a single naked bulb which cast yellow light and deep shadows down a narrow hallway. At the end was a door, with a small brass number 12 hanging from a rusty nail. Matrix approached the door while fumbling for a cigarette. He knocked lightly while cocking his head to one side, trying to decipher any sounds coming from the apartment. He knocked again, a little louder this time, staring at the brass knob, waiting for it to turn. Thirty seconds passed, nothing. Looking down the hallway, he reached for the knob and turned it. It rotated and he heard the click as the door opened.

"Nikki?" he asked softly. He pushed his shoe against the door forcing it open a half meter. It was dark inside. Again, he spoke, "Nikki?" a little louder this time. Not getting any response, he felt for a light switch and flipped it. Matrix went inside, closing the door behind him. He found himself in a small hallway, leading to the kitchen on one side, and a living room on the other. Matrix walked into the large room, and stood behind a large sofa. "Nikki?" he called, glancing around the warmly furnished room. No response. A narrow hallway led off to the right. He went towards it, while placing his hand on the butt of the laser gun. The hallway ended with a single wooden door which was

slightly ajar. A single blade of red light leaked out from the room, painting strange angles on the cold parkay floor. He pressed his back against the wall and carefully peered into the room. His shoe slid in and pushed the door fully open. His gun was at waist level, pointing ahead. He went in.

Nikki lay on a large white bed. She was on her stomach, arms curled around her hair as if asleep. She was nude, her tan, firm body contrasting against crisp white sheets tinted by red light. Matrix approached her slowly, nervously, feeling an erection growing. Her ass was so round and perfect. It seemed to call him, beckoning him to come and taste that sweetness. He stroked her hair, pushing it out of her face. She seemed so peaceful, resting like that, he didn't want to wake her. But, she didn't stir when he called her again. Matrix rolled her over and instantly gagged. A neat hole in her forehead was rimmed with a black ring of burnt flesh. He sank to his knees, tears welling up in his eyes. Her face was still warm. "Nikki," he whispered, but she didn't hear him. He brought his lips to hers and kissed her for the last time, thinking only of the dream that ended before it ever began.

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Matrix felt incredibly sick. He stood outside a bar, holding a glass vial. He tipped his head back, but the vial slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground. It exploded on impact, sending glass and black liquid splashing against his legs.

"Fuck it," he whispered to no one in particular. He went into the bar, not paying attention to the patrons within. It was a scuzzy place. A favorite

hangout among the low life degenerates of Emerald City. He headed for the bar, but then thought better of it. He passed a black phone booth while walking down a cherry hallway. Music, a hybrid of funk and new wave pounded his eardrums. The phone rang. He stopped, swaying to keep his balance. No one around. He picked up the receiver.

"Hiya Lt. Guess who?"

He slammed the phone down, recognizing Nikki's voice. Disgusted, he headed for the men's room. Matrix found an empty stall and locked the door, staring at the toilet. He suddenly vomited, retching in pain as his lungs fought for air. He went down on one knee, grabbing the sides of the toilet seat for support. His eyes were tearing, as he wiped his mouth with rough paper. The toilet flushed, and he put the seat down and sat on it. Matrix closed his eyes, and breathed deeply, trying to rid himself of the image of Nikki's lifeless body.

The stall door blew open with the force of a shotgun blast, the shiny brass handle missing his cheek by a few millimeters. A sturdy black leather boot had kicked it open so hard that the top hinge had come loose. The door leaned in midair, hanging by a single brass hinge. Matrix saw the leather boot as it pressed firmly into the floor tile, stamping out a cigarette butt. He looked up, observing the yellow jumpsuit, the long black hair, and emerald eyes. Nikki stood over him, defiantly, hands on her hips, smiling.

"Hiya lover," she said, licking her ruby lips with that sensuous tongue.

"You don't look so well, feeling under the weather?" she asked. Matrix only stared back, searching for a sign, something.

"That's all right, cause Nikki's gonna take good care of you." She reached out and touched his hair, long fingernails matching her wet lipstick, feeling his tight curls.

"You killed her," Matrix said looking straight into those emerald green eyes. It was more statement than question.

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. The little cunt was getting in the way of business. Speaking of business... " She ran her fingers over her breasts making her nipples hard.

"So, Jawbreaker was right," he whispered, shaking his head.

"Your pal Jawbreaker's pretty smart. Guy definitely knows his shit. If I ever need a tune up, I'll look him up!" She tilted her head back and laughed, staring up at the tiled ceiling. Matrix kicked her hard in the stomach, sending her flying into a row of white porcelain sinks. She stumbled for a moment, as Matrix, seizing the opportunity, sprinted for the door.

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Nikki caught up with Matrix. She had been on his heels for the past few minutes as she chased him in the pouring rain through the 14th Street Corridor. As they approached the dead end of an alley way she had put on a burst of speed and reached him, putting out her leg. Their legs intertwined and Matrix, losing his balance, went to the ground. He grabbed out wildly, and connected, pulling her down with him. They hit the wet pavement hard sending him skidding into the side of an aluminum garbage can. He shook the

rain from his face and stared at her. She was on top of him, smiling victoriously.

"Thought you could get away, did you?" she teased while pulling her black hair out of her eyes. She leaned close to him, wiping the water from his eyes and kissed him. He closed his eyes as her lips pressed down on his and his hands went out to her breasts that were poking through the yellow nylon jumpsuit she wore. She moaned softly and smiled, sitting up and pulling the zipper down to her waist, exposing her firm breasts. She shook her hair back, letting the rain fall on her nipples making them hard. Matrix rubbed them slowly and kissed her hard. He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and took out a small vial. Tipping his head back, he put the vial to his nose and inhaled. A wave of sensation rushed through him and forced him to shiver. His senses were primed and alive. His head went to the pavement while the drug worked itself into his brain. He thought about the dreams, all of them, and how they never ended. Matrix laughed out loud. This one was going to end soon, he knew that. He wondered how.

Nikki pulled him back to reality. She was bent over him staring into his eyes wondering what he was thinking. Her eyes were a dazzling green, and yet so clear, and perfect. They were like unblemished emeralds he had seen in museums as a kid. Perfect, almost too perfect. He cupped her head in his hands and brought her down to him. With another kiss, he stared into those emerald eyes and brought his lips to her eyelids. He kissed her there and then,

as she opened them, blew into her eyes. She didn't even blink. Then he understood.

She saw the understanding in his eyes, and rolled off him. As she stood up, he followed and leaned against the wall of the alley. She had her hand on her waist and was looking around. Her gaze went back to him.

"It's time, Matrix. No more fucking around. You know what I want, so give it to me and stop this foolishness." She smiled warmly, and for a moment she was the girl of his dreams, a beautiful goddess, and not the cold android they had sent to destroy him.

Matrix could only smile. He was slipping in and out of reality now, the drug working wonders as only it could. He put up his hands, and shrugged. The game was over. She moved towards him and he could see the lust in her eyes. She was good, very good.

Nikki pressed her body against Matrix and ground her hips into his groin. Her arms went around his neck and stroked his nape.

"You're a good boy, and Nikki's gonna give you something for being such a good boy. His arms went around her and held her tight.

"Oh yes!" she was moaning, and she nibbled on his ear lobe while stroking his nape, "such a good boy."

Matrix thought about the dreams as her nails dug into the left side of his neck. She sucked at his earlobe while pulling back his flesh. Matrix screamed and tried to shift away, but she had cornered him in, and her grinding thighs kept him from slipping away. Her fingers ground into the flesh searching for

the Chip. Nikki became violent soon after, so she twisted his head down into her chest to see if she could see it. After a moment, his chuckling told her she would not find it there.

She was screaming at him, but he was not listening. He leaned against the wall, as blood flowed from the wound. Nikki glared at him for a moment and then began to approach him. With his right hand, he reached for his laser gun, but Nikki anticipated his move. In a blur, her hand had knocked the gun from his. He flinched as the metal hit the pavement and out of his reach. She turned to him and smiled, as he stared at the gun. The smile disappeared and she lunged at him, knocking him into the garbage can. Matrix fell easily, his head hitting the pavement with a sickening thud. Blood streaked the ground beside him, but he could only laugh at her. He stared to nod off, but Nikki connected with a right to his face and he went spinning into the wall. With ever last ounce of strength he could muster, he extended his leg hard into her hip. The blow knocked her off balance, and she fell backwards. As she lay, sprawled on the ground Matrix crawled to where she lay and straddled her thighs. Thick dark blood was matting down the side of his neck and he could barely keep his head up. He found the last vial in his pocket and snorted the contents as Nikki lay underneath. She looked up at him and found him smiling. He fell on her and reached around to hug her. She pivoted on the slick pavement and rolled out from under him. He landed on his back yet he held on. Matrix's grip tightened as she fought him to let her go. Her breasts giggled on his chest as she wriggled around on top. Matrix whispered her

name as he grabbed her face in his hands and kissed her. As he slipped into unconsciousness, he wondered how the dream would end. If only he could stay awake long enough to find out.

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### Epilogue

News traveled fast in the Emerald City. A day after John Matrix had been killed the news had spread like wildfire across town and into the adjoining sectors. The reaction to his death had been mixed. Most felt he had been stupid to go up against The Company, but privately, everyone expressed sadness at the news. Here was someone who had stood up for what he had believed in, even up to his death.

Things would change. They always did. In time, there would be no such thing as devices which recorded your thoughts. People had Matrix to thank for that.

A light rain fell on the city in the morning after the death. A man named William "Jawbreaker" McKinnley stood in the morning rain holding a black rose and a bottle of Coors. No temples would be erected for him, he thought. Maybe a few prayers, but life went on. He lay the rose down at the place where Matrix died and knelt for a few moments. Nasty beer, he thought mournfully, as he poured the liquid over the dark petals. Then, clutching the empty bottle, he flung it against the brick wall. It shattered on impact, sending hundreds of glass fragments ricocheting off one another. He stood for a moment more, then turned and walked away, as the rain mixed with his shedding tears...

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