

Just when it seems that illusion has triumphed and Reality has become irrelevant, Reality throws a curve ball...

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SCROLL DOWN TO READ



deep Freak

CHAPTER 1 Switch and gRazer

November 6, Tuesday afternoon

“NetPolice are following the trace left by a group of technoAnarchists that projected Mickey Mouse ears onto Mount Rushmore. The notorious hackers, BLANK, took credit for the election day incident, declaring it another BLANKprank art happening. Authorities say they anticipate arrests soon”

BLANKprank. Kool. Dano steadied himself and turned away from the public vidScreen as the streetcar came to a halt. He usually didn't pay attention to the brainless mix of infotainment and adverts, but this was juice.

I have to tell Audrey.

He texted her, hit PLAY on his app, and his head filled with last century Rok blasted from a pair of old wireless earpods. He couldn't afford one of those eyeVid computer glasses everyone wore, let alone the latest SIMchip jewelry, but he didn't give a damn. No skin off his back. That SIMchip crap was fucked up anyway. Yeah, so maybe it looked razz on your forehead, but a direct net link to your brain? No fucking way. That stuff messed with your head. Sure, SIM could be intense, as intense as Real, but in the end that shit wasn't real.

* * *

The chip on Audrey's temple came to life with a blue glow. Audrey, fresh from her shower, sat naked and knock-kneed, drying her long iridescent blond hair with a towel. The inbox on the info layer in her mind flashed “Dano” with a cheesy ancient app icon. *gRazers! Whatever.* She read the text and smiled. ‘Juice,’ she responded,

'love it!' She hooked onto her news feed and rode a cascade of reports flashing the story.

“Early exit poles in the North American presidential elections are showing Walt Disney Inc., the Republican candidate, with a solid 62 percent lead. Meanwhile, netPolice eyeTs still haven’t been able to dismantle the hacker program that is projecting the Mickey Mouse ears on to Mount Rushmore. Apparently a protest by BLANK against the Disney Corporation’s bid for the presidency, the holo projection is run by a morphing fractal that . . .”

‘Earth to Audrey . . .’ A sparkling icon burst and glowed red like an ember. This time it was Nina.

‘sorry :) forgot; gimme a sec,’ Audrey texted, threw on some underwear, thoughtClicked a link and found herself on the lake. Their lake.

Audrey and Nina liked meeting here, dangling their legs off this unknown digital dock someplace, somewhere, on an unknown digital lake, wriggling their toes in the spectral water. An unforgiving white light reflected off the waves and over-exposed their faces like some faded bleached-out memory. A first version eyeVid freeware, it was now on some long forgotten and discarded netWorld by-way. Nobody remembered it. No one else came anymore. It was now their private SIMlounge. They’d been hanging here, just the two of them, since they were SIM enraptured kids playing with their very first eyeVids.

* * *

The polite voice suggested he mind his step as Dano alighted into the grey chill of a November afternoon and the Kraut Rok sounds of late Einsturzende. The doors hissed shut, and the driverless streetcar rumbled off behind him. He hunched his lithe athletic frame, zipped up his worn black leather jacket, and stuck his cold

hands into the pockets. The stillness in his clear blue eyes was misleading. A deeper look uncovered a gaze that was soulful yet searing, the lucid eyes of someone who sees truth in the void. He went over to the bus stop and checked the schedule. *Crap, just missed it!* The next 54 was in half an hour. *Might as well walk.*

Dano made his way along a broken sidewalk, past grimy, mid-last century Communist-era concrete-panel high-rises. Public housing. It smelled like piss. People here lived like weeds in the cracks of society, barely surviving on bottomFeeder wages. The sun's wan reflections in shards of shattered beer and vodka bottles confirmed that it too had turned its back on these parts.

He passed a rusting carcass of a car. Just beyond it a couple of vacant-eyed Razr4Kids strung out on zingers were jerking like zombies to the jackhammer beat of some deathZKunt band. This was their turf. He crossed the street.

Dano walked on. FreeGrazing. Yeah, that's what they called it, you know, just taking it all in, chill to the menace, go with the flow. Dano was a gRazer 'cause he wanted it Real. Get it? Just stuff coming at him natural and not have some computer-fed SIMulated chip-reality screwing around in his thoughts like Switch did. Troglodyte, they called him. You bet.

* * *

“*Mickey Mouse* ears on Mount Rushmore? I'll bet they get charged with copyright infringement.” Nina's pixie nose and the gap in her front teeth did not make her look like the gawky chipmunk that she imagined. Nevertheless they had the effect of tenderizing her somewhat sarcastic mocking personality into something more along the lines of just plain irreverent.

“If they catch them I'm sure that'll be the least of their problems.”

“Well, yeah. Still, things are sure gonna get weird if a corp gets elected president.”

“You mean, like, in this case, is it satire, or is it copyrighted?”

“Yeah, and who gets the money from the T-shirt sales, the US of NA or Walt Disney Inc.?”

“I still can’t believe it! Do you really think they’re going to pull this off? Elect a *corporation* as President of the North American States!? What a joke!” Audrey shook her head in amazement. “And it *was* a joke!” She threw her hands up in the air. “The whole draft Mickey Mouse for President was a bloody joke, a protest that started in Quebec.”

“I know, it’s so bizarre. Shows you how far things can come along in a year. I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“It just goes to show. When it comes down to it, Real is a lot stranger than SIM. I mean, you can’t make this stuff up.”

“The Canadians must be really happy they joined the US,” Nina quipped. “So who do you think they are?”

“Who? The Canadians that wanted to join?”

“No, BLANK!”

“BLANK? How should I know?”

“Do you think they’re corp eyeT nerds? You know, in their day jobs?”

“Frustrated corp eyeT by day, artPrank hacktivists by night? I dunno, doesn’t seem likely. Corp eyeTs are, you know, corp eyeTs . . . totally nerdy!”

“So what do you think those hackers do for a day job?”

Audrey shrugged. “Download bankCredits? Design SIMgames?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. But I bet you make more money on SIMgames than downloading credits. You know, now that I think of it, *you* should design SIMgames!” Nina rocked her head to make the point. Her bouncy brunette bob trailed her face, offset, the colours garish, in and out of phase.

“What? Me? Why?”

“Duh, *for the money!*”

“Oh, yippee. Just what we need, a gazillion and *one* ways to shoot ‘em up in SIM.”

“They don’t *have* to be about shooting.”

“The ones that *sell* do.”

“So, think of something more interesting.”

“Actually, I have been thinking about it . . .”

“Well?”

“. . . not a game exactly, but a SIM where people can actually touch each other, you know, inside their feelings. It would be a whole new SIM experience.”

“Oh, god help us, Audrey, that’s not a game. Besides, isn’t feelings what Real is for?”

“Nina, in Real you’re only *guessing* how someone else feels.”
Audrey swabbed her hair with the low-res towel.

“It’s not the same.”

“What’s not the same?”

“SIM and Real. SIM is SIM, even when it comes to feelings. Sometimes I think you’re trying to avoid Real.”

“*You* were the one asking me about what kind of game I would design.”

“Yeah, it’s just that . . . you work awfully hard trying to hide from Real.”

“Really? And what exactly is Real, anyway? Can you define it?”

“According to Oxford? Let’s see . . . ‘existence that is absolute, self-sufficient or objective, and not subject to human decisions or conventions.’”

“But what if that’s all wrong, and Real is *completely* subjective? Maybe my consciousness is all there is, and this world is something I dreamt up . . .”

“Oh, help me . . . am I a woman dreaming of a butterfly or am I now a butterfly dreaming I am a woman?” Nina buried her face in her hands.

“I don’t know about the butterfly, but if *I* had dreamt up a world, it would have been way different from this one.”

Nina lifted her head cautiously. “There, see? It’s not you. You’re off the hook!”

“Well, maybe I don’t *know*, maybe I’m dreaming it up, in which case . . . I mean, makes you wonder, who’s ‘I’ anyway?”

“Audrey!”

“What?” Audrey’s washed-out image glared back. “Anyway, I think I’m more of a SIMtreatment kind of grrrl than a SIMgame designer.”

“Yeah, I’ll buy that. So, how’s it working out with Dano?”

“What do you mean?”

“With the SIMtreatments you’re doing for his band. What did you think I meant? Are you . . . ?”

“Of course not!”

“No? You’re acting awfully defensive.”

“There’s nothing going on between us.”

“So you’re not doing the SIMtreatments for his band anymore?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s still going on. But doing SIM for gRazers isn’t exactly easy. Half the time they complain, and the other half they’re not plugged in and have no idea what I’m doing. Maybe they just don’t get it.”

“Or they don’t *want* to get it because they’re gRazers.”

“Yeah . . . I think they’re only going along with it because Dano wants it. I feel a little weird about it, but it’s fun . . . okay, sometimes.”

“At least they know enough to listen to Dano!” Nina gazed off into the technicolour dreamscape. “I’ve only seen you guys a couple of times . . .”

“That’s ‘cause we’ve only played a couple of times.”

“Your stuff is really good, and Dano, he’s . . . well, he’s fucking amaazing . . . the best damned guitarist I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh, I’m ‘good’ and he’s ‘fucking amaazing’?”

“Come on Audrey, eXitTrip *are* awesome.” Nina looked into Audrey’s sapphire video eyes. “You guys have something there. You really do. But, even given all that, do you think a gRazer band can make it these days?”

“That’s where I come in. Right? I give them Switch cred. So far they’re going along with it. But, when it comes to success and making it, well, there aren’t any guarantees, are there?” Audrey dropped the towel and it pixilated and vanished. “I mean, I can’t help thinking, what if we don’t make it? Or what if they want to go back to doing gRazer gigs? No SIM and I’m out?”

“Then you gave it your best shot and you try something else.”

“But what if a fourth crash comes? I don’t want to be a disEmployed fortyPercenter.”

“Oh, Audrey, why do you always have to be so melodramatic? Come on, you have family money. You’ll never be a disEmployed.”

Audrey scowled. “Well, what if this time even *we* loose all our money?”

“Audrey, hello! Your family haven’t lost their money since the Great Depression.”

“So? Shit can always happen.”

“Yeah, it can, but this isn’t about money, is it? This is about validating yourself. Look, you’re not just an artist, you’re a cyber whiz, you’re an über Switch fucking electroWizard! If you feel you need career cred then major in something like information technology.”

“Sell my soul ‘cause the whole world is going corpFascist anyway?”

“Dum dada . . .” Nina assumed her documentary over voice. “*There is no longer any distinction between governments and corporation . . .*” She sighed. “Audrey, what’s that got to do with

anything? Haven't we had this conversation like about a hundred times?"

"Well, maybe that's because you're still not getting it." Audrey stood up and went to her dresser. In SIM she was hovering, in bra and panties, casting discordant reflections out over the rasterized water. "I mean, look at the North American States! First their Supreme Court ruled that corporations have the same rights as individuals . . ." She walked on digital water, a series of freeze-framed steps, back to the dock, with an armful of clothes.

"Yes, and now they're about to elect Walt Disney Inc."

Audrey pulled a sweater over her head.

"Power to the people." Nina shrugged. "I bet Wall Street wasn't backing Mickey Mouse." She looked to Audrey for some sign of levity.

Audrey's head popped out of the sweater. "Or were they?" She slipped into a pair of tights and wriggled them up to her waist. "*Somebody* paid for all those votes."

Nina rolled her eyes. "We're not the North American States, Audrey."

"Only because there are too many factions in the European Union to buy *every one* of them." She stepped into a skirt, zipped it up, and plunked herself back down.

"We still have due process."

"Yeah, sure, if you can afford it. Everybody's been bought and paid for."

"Not *everybody*, Audrey."

"Excuse me, yes, the moral handful? How many of them are there? Good luck with that!" Audrey cast her eyes over the ripples in the water, absently anticipating the recurring glitch in the repeat. That it was such an outmoded SIM program only added to the nostalgic sentimentality of the place.

"Oh, Audrey!"

"Maybe I'm just paranoid."

“Ya think?” Nina furrowed her brow. This was going nowhere.

* * *

Dano, lost in his sounds, out there and zoning on the music, absentmindedly kicked a Kofola can. Black Sabbath followed Einsturzende as he rounded the corner, the one across from the BillaHypermarket. Layers of graffiti on stained concrete framed the faded adverts in the windows. He noticed the ClosedCircuit TV tracking him to “Paranoid” blasting in his ear pods. Kool. Reality soundtrack. Invisible drones and CCTV pods transmitting millions of images a second to algorithms crunching petabytes inside LibertyCorp computers. Non-stop surveillance. Facial recognition. Gait analysis. Security is freedom. Got nothing to hide, got nothing to fear, so the adverts said. Mind your own business, and the red lights don’t go off. What was deviant was classified but changed all the time anyway. Flash deviant and the nanoDrones were all over you in seconds. Yeah, paranoia was Real.

Another block and he was in the edgeZone. He avoided the shantytown and instead took a shortcut through a bleak and windswept soccer field. Dormant crabgrass and dandelions struggled in the toxic mud. Cold gusts stirred up litter and crappy plastic shopping bags and whisked dust about Dano’s long brown mop. He passed forlorn bleachers, decayed and corroded, and headed for the faded Orangina advert on the fence at the far end. When he got there, he pulled aside the ragged plastiply board, squeezed through the rusted wire-mesh fence and crossed the railroad tracks.

Dano was still zoned, still cruising to his sounds, when suddenly, a disheveled man stumbled out of a two-bit Rolex holo glowing faintly in front of the EZ Money PawnKing and almost plowed into him.

Without thinking, Dano made a quick sidestep and avoided the collision.

The man stopped and swayed precariously as he assessed Dano. “You shouldn’t be out here, you know.” He shoved an index finger into Dano’s chest. “Word is,” alcohol-fueled breath whispered, “today’s a bad day to be out. Come on,” he pulled Dano’s jacket toward the ghostly martini glass promoting the dive bar halfway down the block. “I’ll buy you a drink. I just got some fold.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled wad of bills. Paper money was supposedly extinct and illegal, but it was currency amongst fortyPercenters in places like Redcent. “I still had a good watch, you know.” He waved at the kitschy Rolex holo and shoved the bills into Dano’s face. “This’ll keep me going another week, at least.”

“Listen, thanks man, but it’s too early for me,” replied Dano. If it weren’t for his appointment with Tommy Gunn he might have accepted. That was what freeGrazing was all about. “But take care, man.” Dano patted the wino on the shoulder and walked on with his easy rhythmic gait.

He was in Redcent, a combatZone, crime-infested and offGrid, populated by the trash society had spit out. Redcent had once been an industrial district. But that was then. Now it was a rathole of dive bars, hardCore clubs, decaying cars, and abandoned buildings occupied by squatters. Got a connection? Got fold? You got a deal. Useless crap, illegal shit, didn’t matter: pirated name-brands, printed guns, shabu, zingers, serial numbers, hot-rodded software, Chinese killaChips, buyer beware. People would sell their sister. Or daughter, if the price were right. But Dano wasn’t into any of that. He was looking for deMode, you know, things, archaic things that were hard to get. Tommy Gunn had scored some rare amplifier tubes. Kool. Maybe that old Marshall would finally work.

Unfortunately it wasn’t until he got to Zip’s Chow’nStuff, his usual place, that Dano noticed. *Where the hell is everyone?* It

suddenly hit him that he hadn't seen anyone since the wino. He tried the door to Chow'nStuff. *Why the fuck is it locked?* Above him the Nescafé holoVert steamed, the cup filled, emptied, steamed, and filled again. The lights inside were out, but he peered in and noticed some of the regulars in the shadows. *What the hell is going on?* Franta, a cigarette hanging over his sandpaper chin, came to the door and frantically waved like a madman. *What? Shit!* Dano saw the reflection, there on the glass door. He spun around. *This isn't fucking Real! This is crazy deepFreak!* Right there in front of him seethed a swarm of insect-sized nanoDrones. Adrenaline kicked in and his amped-up heart beat with the bass in his earpods. Had he slipped into a deathZKunt SIM run by some asshole Switch? But when had the slip happened? When he zoned out? This *had* to be SIM. His soundtrack kicked into "Die! Die! Die!" Way juice if he was doing SIM, way not otherwise.

"Freeze, citizen!"

What the—? The barked command was a bolt from the blue. SIM or Real? Input overload. *Fuck it, I'm losing juice! There's no one there!* Then Dano noticed the oddly undulating refracting air, like a mirage on a really hot day. *Shit! Cloaking!* Before he could deal they materialized. Three black-clad LibertyCorp operatives flashed in and pointed assault rifles straight at his head.

"On your knees, NOW!" The voice, *shit man, that sound!* "Hands behind the head, elbows out!" Authority amplified, vPrint altered, and broadcast directly into his app. It cut right through "Die! Die! Die!" and burst inside his brain. Dano didn't argue. Trembling, scared shitless, he did exactly as he was told.

"We have a positive drone scan here. 62% on the TPF." Terrorist Profile Matrix.

"Affirmative. ID and TPF logged in. Van ETA thirty-six seconds."

Damn, this was some serious Switch SIM he was in. Kneeling, shaking, Dano, despite himself, despite his best efforts to stay kool,

was terrified. Kool was not happening. Not juice. Rough hands brutally twisted his arms and cuffed his wrists behind his back. Dano grimaced in pain. *Fuck, that hurts!* A black LibertyCorp van pulled up. Like an irritated wasp, a nanoDrone buzzed out of the swarm and stung his neck, injecting a potent tranquilizer. The world immediately melted away and Dano drifted off to another nightmare, maybe another SIM, where an insane electroWizard danced on naked neurons slowly oozing out of his brain.

* * *

“Ow!” Audrey rubbed the back of her neck. “I just got this weird pain.”

“Probably stress from all your crazy paranoia. Look, not to change the subject or anything,” Nina cocked her head, “but are you joining us at the Ophidian Thursday night? Anton put you on the list. It’s a SIM feature for the *Le Monde* Sunday Supplement, you know, French fashion ideas for the holidays or something.”

“I don’t know, I have to study. It’s exam time.”

“C’mon, you have to! It’s *Paris*. Besides Anton and his friends are going. That really handsome French architect might be there. I think he likes you.”

“Yeah, handsome in SIM. He’s probably some disgusting eighty-year-old perv in Real.”

“No way! He’s a friend of Anton’s. Besides, an eighty-year-old perv would select an off-the-shelf classic handsome. Your French admirer has that carved weathered masculine look.”

“You don’t think he’s . . .” Audrey uploaded a selection of hunky avatars from the Avatopia website, and chose “. . . Rugged Individualist Avatar version 3.2?” The life-like hunk expanded to quarter scale, its cutting-edge high-res features contrasting sharply with the antiquated low-res generated by the eyeVid freeware.

“Nah . . . this avatar’s not, I dunno, individual enough? You know, it has no *real* character. Besides, your admirer’s not so beefy . . .”

“Okay, how about . . .” Audrey switched the Avatopia software to custom mode. With a flick of her hand she slimmed the avatar down, raised the cheekbones, and sculpted the jaw.

“Uh-uh. See the eyes? They’re, like, dead. Lifeless. His are kind and intelligent. You can’t fake those.”

“Not even if I . . .” Audrey shadowed the eyes and put a little sparkly highlight on the iris.

“No! See? Not so easy.”

“Well, you can create an algorithm from scans of a real life person and . . .”

“Audrey, that would be really expensive. He couldn’t afford it.”

“How do you know? Besides, if you’re so interested, why don’t you make a play for him?”

“I would if he was taller.”

“Taller? He’s as tall as you. What am I saying? He’s an avatar. You have no idea how tall he really is.”

“Yeah, well, men never opt for shorter. Only taller.”

“Men? But *you* might shave a couple of centimeters off your avatar?”

“Not really. I don’t want to be a shocking, towering surprise when we actually meet in Real. I want a man who makes me feel petite.”

“Petite?” Audrey asked dubiously. “You’re over 1.85 meters tall and you want to feel *petite*? Good luck with that. Do you realize that you’re ruling out ninety nine point nine nine nine percent of the male population?”

“So what if I am? And what are *you* holding out for?”

“I guess someone I can trust.”

“Why don’t you think you can trust Anton’s friend? Just because he’s French?”

“Well, yeah . . .”

“Come on, you don’t even know him. Why not give him a chance?”

“Because he’s got a cleft chin. Okay, his avatar does, like this.” Audrey modeled a cleft onto hunk avatar 3.2’s chin. “And you know what they say, ‘never trust an avatar with a cleft chin.’”

“Oh, right. Are you sure it’s not ‘Never trust an avatar with unruly sandy brown hair?’” Nina asked.

“Yeah, damned right it is,” Audrey giggled, “that, and a sexy smile.” She curved 3.2’s lips.

“Or a perfect body?”

“Mmm . . .” she spun the avatar around, “with a tight little ass.”

“So you’re coming?”

“I’m not coming just to fevR at a really hot avatar . . . and if I really wanted to, I could create my own.”

“Audrey, you’re sick. That’s not the same thing. C’mon! It would be good for you. You’re getting way too serious.”

“Oh, all right. Look, I should get going. I have to dump a SIMfile into Dano’s *app*.” Audrey’s voice flattened sarcastically when she said the word “app.” “That is, if it fits. *gRazers!* What time Thursday?”

“Eight.”

“Okay. Send me the link. Bye.”

The dock and the lake and the technicolour landscape slowly dissolved. Audrey opened her eyes and once again found herself on her sofa. She was dressed. Her hair was dry.