

Paparazzi

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When John got off the bus outside the Hippodrome Claire was nowhere to be seen. Instead she'd dropped a PostIt for him; a translucent slice of virtual A4 spinning slowly in the air at head height. He sighed and blinked at it, the note stopping its spin instantly to face him and just one word appearing on its surface: Starbucks. "Great" he muttered to himself, "but which fucking one?"

He blinked at the Google Earth logo on the note's bottom right corner and a football sized coffee bean materialised in the air next to it, followed by another identical one 3 metres away, and then half a second later another, and then another and another, so that within a few seconds a trail of them hung in the air, disappearing into the crowd of afternoon shoppers and snaking up the hill along Park Street. High in the sunny Bristol sky he could see a 10 metre high Latte hanging like a hot air balloon, the huge green arrow suspended from its underside pointing down at the store's location.

This was starting to turn into an Easter egg hunt. He'd never met Claire in the flesh before, but the contact he'd had with the girl so far had left him with little reason to suspect this was some kind of griefer prank. He logged into *WhereImAt*, blinking through menus to pull up his Friends List, but she was still showing her location as private. Absentmindedly he scanned the other names on the list; Alice and Stefen were back at home, most of the day jobbers were at work, but Dave was in The White Hart just around the corner, having his customary afternoon pint.

John pushed his Samsung spex up onto his forehead, the menus and coffee beans vanishing from his view, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The White Hart was a lot closer than the trek up Park Street, and right now beer seemed more appropriate than a caffeine hit. He hadn't been outside for maybe a week, he wasn't entirely sure, and the noise and chaos of Bristol city centre was making him tense and

self conscious. A dark, quiet pub would certainly be preferable, but one drink with Dave would lead to a second, and that was something his current financial status wouldn't really permit if he didn't want to live on microwave Dahl for the next fortnight. And even if Claire's promise of an actual paid job turned out to be bullshit, he was sure she'd mentioned she'd pay for the coffee. He slipped the spex back down over his eyes, and reluctantly started to follow the trail of beans.

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"I'm sorry for all the messing around," Claire said, peering at him through her sleek Apple spex. "For all the...secret agent nonsense. But what I need to discuss with you is extremely sensitive. It was to be heard by the wrong ears it could have grave ramifications not only for the two of us, but also for several of my Guild's top ranking officials".

John stifled a laugh, successfully managing to avoid snorting hot espresso down through his nose. It wasn't just the pomposity of how she talked about Guild business that amused him - he'd sadly become all too accustomed to how self-important gamers spoke about their characters and clans - it was more what she seemed to be suggesting.

"Sorry, you're telling me this Starbucks is more secure than us just discussing this in 3rd Person?"

"It is right now, yes." She sipped her Latte. "I have friends making sure it is. But they couldn't give me a venue until the very last second, hence the running around. Again, I'm sorry, but I kind of had no choice."

Impressive, John thought, if true. Again he had all too much experience of clan kiddies unquestioningly spouting Guild doctrine, naively believing their leaders' claims to be real life elite hackers, industry insiders, glamour models or returning messiahs. But Claire didn't really fit that stereotype; she was older for a start, and seemed more experienced, less gullible with it. Apart from the trendy Apple spex, the rest of her rig suggested functionality over style, her apparently hand

knitted voice-free choker and fingerless data gloves in matching purple wool clearly old and starting to fray in places. He guessed she wore them partly out of comfort and familiarity and partly out of pride; the DIY aesthetic they implied considered to be a badge of status amongst members of her Crafter class. He imagined her sitting in her college room late into the night, knitting the gloves; carefully incorporating the Bluetooth transmitters, fibre optic sensors and RFID tags into their design. Jesus, the calibration alone must have taken her hours. As someone who had never used anything except Indian or Chinese made off-the-shelf components, he had to admit he was impressed.

“Even though I've been assured this place is secure from external taps, I still don't want to risk us being over heard.”

John glanced round the empty coffee shop. “It's dead. There's no one here.”

“Still, we can't be too careful. You do have a choker on you, right?”

“Sure” John replied, reluctantly. He fished around in the side pocket of his cargo pants, and fished out a cheap Logitech branded voice-free choker. He always carried it on him, but hated wearing the bloody thing as it made the skin on his neck itch, especially on hot days like this one. He wrapped it tightly around his throat, fastening the two velcro ends together behind his neck. A small, red, ring-like icon appeared in the top corner of his field of view, quickly flicking to green as his spex established a connection with the choker and confirmed it was already eavesdropping on the weak electrical impulses being sent to his larynx.

A private space invitation from Claire instantly appeared in the air a foot in front of his face, and vanished just as quickly as he blinked his acceptance. Claire spoke again, without moving her lips, and her voice came not from her mouth but from behind his ears. The cheap noise-canceling micro speakers at the end of both of his spex's arms made her avatar-voice seem tinny, but at the same time cleaner, more confident, reminding John that he was listening to nothing more than Claire's spex running a virt-model of her larynx, probably built from a high street CAT scan and undoubtedly tweaked with cosmetic software.

“You hear me?”

“Sure” he replied silently.

She cleared a space on the table between them, moving their drinks and discarded sweetener packets to one side, and then traced a lime green, dotted line on the flat surface with one finger. The line became a rectangle as her finger returned to its starting point, and became a two dimensional opaque slab floating a few millimeters off the table. Then suddenly it was a web browser window, filling with images of brightly coloured cartoon samurai and warrior monks, animations of stylistic monsters and burning villages, and what John guessed was Korean text. Game stuff. Claire reached over and lightly touched the largest image, a head-shot of a handsome but heavily stylized Asian male, his long, dark hair pulled back in the traditional samurai style, his eyes narrowed into a cold, aggressive steely gaze. John couldn't work out if it was a heavily tweaked photo, a render or a mixture of the two. Either way it looked slightly absurd to him, camp even. He wanted to laugh, but he resisted it again.

“You know who this is, right?” Claire said.

John shrugged. “No idea.”

“Really?” she replied, the avatar-voice model doing the best it could to convey her disbelief. “Don't you ever watch the news? That's Leo Kim, one of the highest ranking *A Wind of Blades* players this side of the Great Firewall. He was voted Sakura Guild's most valued player three years-”

“Look,” John interrupted, still trying not to laugh. “believe it or not, I don't know him. I don't play *Blades* and I don't really go in for celebrity watching.”

“Fair enough” Claire sighed. “But if you take this job, you're gonna have to start doing both.”

John felt his cheeks flush hot with embarrassment and then, just as quickly, anger. Partly towards Claire for wasting his time, but overwhelmingly towards himself for not seeing this coming.

He pushed one hand down firmly on the table as if to push himself up and leave, and whipped his spex off his head with the other. “I think there's been a misunderstanding, and we're both wasting our time. What ever it is you think I do, I'm not Paparazzi-”

“No,” Claire interrupted. “You're a machimina documentary director. Arguably one of the best. I know, I've experienced *Ghosts of Fallujah* three times. From all the main POVs. It's a masterpiece.”

John realised for the first time that Claire's hand was on his – an attempt to calm him and stop him from leaving – and it was working. He hadn't had any physical contact that intimate, that simple, for a long time, and it was making the hairs on the back of his neck start to stand upright. Embarrassed, he tried to shake the sensation.

“Then if you've seen *Ghosts* you know my work goes way beyond doorstepping celebrities.”

“Oh, of course. And as beautifully caught and edited as *Ghosts* was, it's not actually those skills we're primarily interested in.” She removed her hand from his, and pointed towards the Spex hanging limply from his right hand. “Please, hear me out.”

Reluctantly he relaxed, returning the spex to his face. Her avatar voice returned, now sounding clinical and cold, especially without the touch of her skin on his.

“How long did you spend in that game, John?”

“It wasn't a game.” he corrected her, annoyed. “It was a US military construct; a training sim. Stolen and cracked by a group of teenage Syrian hackers. It had a level of gritty realism you won't even have got a hint of from watching *Ghosts*. All in all I spent about 18 months in there.”

“18 months, while they constantly fought and re-fought the Second Battle of Fallujah, 22 years after it really ended, until they got the result they had always wanted. And they never suspected a thing.”

“Sorry?”

“About you. They never suspected once you were an outsider, right? They always just assumed you were one of them.”

“Well, not exactly. They never thought I was Syrian. But I did manage to convince them I was a disenfranchised Muslim teenager from Bradford, yeah. There was quit a few European kids in there. They never suspected anything beyond that. I'm not going to pretend it wasn't hard work though.”

“Of course. But you did it.” She paused to sip her latte. “Look John, I can get any one of a thousand *Blades* wannabees I know to do this run for me, get them tooled up with illegal recording and capture warez, get them to grab a couple of hours of Kim doing his thing in game. But they wouldn't last 10 minutes in there without him or one of his lackey's spotting them for being who they really are. They'd be too sloppy, not cover their tracks properly. Anyone that enters a game-instance with a player at his level is going to be scrutinized to fuck, their bio and social profiles are going to have to be tight. You've already proved you can do that. If you can get past a bunch of jittery Jihadists, then some Korean cyber-athletes are going to be a piece of cake.”

The flattery was working. John knew it was a cheap tactic, and he was falling for it. To be honest, it had been nearly two years since he'd discussed *Ghosts* with anyone, and even longer since anyone had heaped praise on it.

“You never followed *Ghosts* up though?” she asked him. “Did you make much from it?”

He chuckled quietly. “Nah, not really. There was a bit of interest in the first few months, but no one would touch it. None of the big ad networks, not Google, not the big providers...no-one. I ended up broke basically.” He stared down into his coffee mug. “Look, I know where you're going. Yes, I'm skint. Well spotted. So put me out of my misery, what exactly would I get out of this run?”

“My Guild, Sentra-li, is prepared to cover all your initial set up expenses. On top of that, you get whatever you can sell the footage you capture for.”

John paused to take in what she'd said, it didn't make sense. "Sorry have I missed something? I get all the money for the footage? Not just a percentage? I don't-"

"This isn't about financial gain John, at least not for my people. This is very, very personal."

She pointed down at the browser window suspended above the table, at the stylised image of Leo Kim's avatar. "This run isn't just an average dungeon-crawl. It's part of the beta test for *Blades'* new content release."

John stared back at her blankly. "And?"

She sighed. "*A Wind of Blades*...it's obsessed...it's players, it's Guilds, the game itself...they're all *obsessed* with status. Kim markets himself, his persona, everything, around an image of being an elite player, with ties to no one except his in-game Guild and his real-world sponsors. Hence my people became so interested when they found out he was working as a tester for the games dev team. The great Leo Kim running around still unfinished code and filing bug reports? Apparently he still has some very firm ties with the developers. Imagine how damaging that would be for the brand he has built for himself if it got public."

John laughed. "So this...all this cloak and dagger stuff...it's just so you can embarrass someone?"

Claire fixed him with a stare that made it perfectly clear that she felt nothing of what she had said was in the slightest bit amusing. "Leo Kim isn't just a good *Blades* player, but one of their most revered generals. Mainly due to the profile he has built for himself. He could say the word and a thousand Sakura members would fall on their own swords. Last season, during an unscheduled and unprovoked land-grab, he successfully led 800 troops into Sentra-li territory and surrounded one of our outermost fortresses. The siege was ultimately successful, but not until 3 weeks had passed and hundreds of my people had to coldly stare perma-death in the face."

John again stifled a laugh at her pompous language. Of course he comprehended the emotional and financial attachment career gamers like Claire built up with well developed characters over years of

investing in and role playing them, but he always found the quasi religious fixation with perma-death – the mortal wounding of an avatar in a way or location that didn't permit any resuscitation - somewhat laughable. Perhaps it was because he'd watched dozens of Muslim teenagers use their own beloved, lovingly self-crafted alter egos as sacrificial weapons, apparently without ever a second of hesitation, their own personal beliefs transgressing concerns of finance or game ranking. It had certainly shifted his perspective on a few things.

“So this is mainly about revenge and political instability then? Nothing changes, I guess.” He looked her firmly in the eyes. “So what if I was actually interested? What happens then?”

Claire smiled back at him, a hint of playful glee in her eye. “ Then I'd suggest you get into training pretty quickly. The run is scheduled for just over two weeks time. You're a *Blades* virgin. You've a lot to learn.”

"But what about a character? Where the hell do I get one?"

"Oh, don't worry." She smiled wryly and sipped her latte again. "Leave that to us."