

Macabre Moon

I shook the half-empty glass of whiskey once more. I'd only taken a few sips, but its flavor had already bored me. I wasn't quite sure what to do with it, so I just stared at the amber liquid, hoping something would come to mind.

From the discomfort of my barstool, a whole world seemed to exist inside the glass. A spectacle of light and shadow played out within my drink, as if holographic ballerinas and genies had been hired for the show, all tinted a light brown thanks to the excess E150d caramel coloring used in this cheap liquor. Dark figures swayed back and forth, some walking, others dancing, but the clearest and most defined one – my own head – was frozen in place. Occasionally, the deep bass notes from the subwoofers drew transverse waves across the tiny window, distorting the image and warping the mirages into grotesque, unidentifiable shapes.

After an endless preamble, the DJ finally dropped the bass. With the subwoofers roaring at full blast, the little ancient sea grew furious, and all its lights scattered across the tabletop. But one decided to go elsewhere, as a capricious wave had just the right position and angle to reflect one of the lasers straight into my pupil. Lost in thought, I'd almost forgotten this whole scene was happening behind me, and that I was still waiting for Modou.

I checked my wristwatch. 00:32. Well past the agreed-upon time of 00:15. I glanced at the bartender in his black shirt and elegant white diplomatic-striped vest, mixing drinks non-stop. For him and everyone else, the night was just beginning. But for me, it was already over. I was about to get off the stool when a cold, metallic hand landed on my shoulder.

"Lookin' good, girl," said a slightly high-pitched voice, brimming with enthusiasm. "Finally dolled up for moi."

"I always doll up, schaz," I replied with a touch of irony, though deep down he was right. It was one of the rare times I left the house without looking like a madwoman.

"Hey! Less of that with me, kid. I'm the one who gives you your daily SUGAR," the guy joked.

I finally decided to turn my head and look the "disgrace" in the eyes. Indeed, it was Modou, my contact. A Senegalese man in his mid-twenties, tall and thin, with sharp features and thinning hair, always dressed in somewhat flashy outfits. Tonight, he'd opted for a shiny pink suit – missing its right sleeve, strategically cut off to show off his silver bionic arm – with a matching wide-brimmed hat. So, for some reason, he must have wanted to dress more subdued than usual.

"You're late," I informed him, knowing full well my words would fall on deaf ears. "What's this super important job you mentioned?"

"Let's see..." said Modou, sitting on the stool beside me. I could see his smile slowly fading, something that only happened when he was about to discuss very serious matters. He sighed, probably still trying to figure out how to drop the bomb on me.

"It's a lot of money, Spectra. More than you've ever made on any other job."

"How much?"

"Enough for two years of luxury sabbatical," the man murmured. As usual, he spoke the language of parties, the only one he knew.

"Damn, what is it? Melting down a reactor core?"

"No, nothing like that. Hey, you finishing that?" Modou asked, pointing to the whiskey glass.

I waved my hand, giving him the go-ahead. He always did this whenever I left alcohol in my glass, and he always left explanations half-finished, which irritated me immensely. With a fluid motion, the guy grabbed the glass with his chrome cybernetic arm and downed it in one gulp. At least it wouldn't go down the drain.

"Phew, I'll buy you something later, babe," he commented, his voice already hoarse from the strong liquor.

"Don't leave me hanging, idiot."

"Okay, the job... Remember that skinny redheaded friend of yours... the one who sometimes came around here? Dextroy, was it?"

It wasn't hard to remember him. We'd been friends for a while, and some of the network secrets I knew, I owed to him. He was a netmage like no other, highly renowned, and infinitely respected by the rest of the community. His official handle was d3x-tr0y, a name he claimed he coined during his awkward teen years, so he preferred to be called Dex. Unfortunately, I hadn't been in touch with him for several months.

"Oh, yeah... What happened to him? Haven't seen hide nor hair of him in ages."

It took me a moment to react. Almost subconsciously, I covered my mouth with my fingers. Putting the pieces together wasn't hard, but when it came to Dex, that idea was difficult to conceive.

"Don't tell me he..."

Modou cut me off.

"No, Spectra, don't worry. But I doubt you'll be on good terms after this job."

I fell silent as Modou rummaged inside the pocket of his half-vest and pulled out some papers. I was struggling to understand the situation, and even more to grasp the mess I was about to get into. The guy in the tacky suit unfolded the documents, cleared his throat, and started reading.

"Received September 22, 2078, at 3:28 minutes, sent by..." – Modou stopped reading abruptly – "Nah, that's private. Let's get to the point:

'We need someone in your area who knows a netmage called d3x-tr0y. This netmage possesses some highly valuable files we wish to recover. It is vital these files are extracted before the 26th of this month and delivered before the 27th. Direct transfer of 30,000 BCNC upon completion by month's end. Attached are..."

"30,000 BC!?"

"Well, remember I always take a small commission, but even so, you'll pocket a cool 20k for sure."

"You sure it's not a trap?" I stammered, still unable to make sense of such an absurd situation.

"Nips. It's one of my most reliable Johnsons, and I know he always verifies the jobs he sends me. He's a legit guy, Spectra."

But after the adrenaline rush comes the crash and the sobering return to reality. We were talking about Dex, and there was no way I could survive an intrusion into his system. I was a good netwitch, but not *that* good, and certainly not compared to him. He was famous for explaining one secret while keeping a thousand others hidden.

"I know protocol says I shouldn't tell you this..." Modou whispered, "...but I know you're his pal. Know what I think happened here?"

"No, honestly. Not sure I'm up for thinking right now."

"That kid probably stole some crucial data from an even bigger company. Intel from an EPSD or something, maybe a functional strong AI prototype, or pics of the Gsearch president screwing a pig, who knows. Point is, he got paid a fortune, but for some reason, the hack got leaked, and a third party, with less funds, decided to hire someone cheaper to rob the thief, who probably has less secure systems than an enterprise network."

"Who are you calling cheap?"

"With all due respect, princess, but you know it's true," the man retorted.

He was absolutely right. Netmages like Dex were a handful worldwide. But like me? There were hundreds, maybe thousands.

"So? You taking the job?"

I wasn't entirely confident. On one hand, it was a lot of money, way more than I'd imagined. On the other, it was a suicide mission. But I knew where Dex lived, and that was a huge advantage in my favor. Slowly, analyzing all the variables in the equation, I realized that actually getting those files might not be such a remote possibility. The pieces were starting to fit.

"You'll have those files by the 25th," I declared, flashing a confident, self-satisfied smile.

"That's my girl!" Modou exclaimed, throwing an arm around my neck. "C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

Three more hours of partying later, I decided to head home to prepare for my big heist. I said a quick goodbye to Modou and some guys who'd spent the night eyeing what they could see of

my green bikini through my mesh top, and headed to the bar to settle my tab. One whiskey and two mojitos, 0.84 BC. I pulled out my SPT, typed in my PIN, and held it near the register. A loud *ching* signaled the successful fattening of the bar owner's pockets, and immediately after, I proceeded to leave the noisy venue.

Outside, with the ICEcream Breaker still behind me, the even noisier Plaça d'Eivissa awaited. It had been officially re-inaugurated less than ten years ago. I remembered seeing this same place in ruins when I was just a kid, devastated by the war and forgotten by everyone due to its dangerous proximity to the Turó de la Peira district. But money and rapid-build smart foams worked miracles. Nowadays, it was one of the best spots in all of Barcelona to have a good time, hook up, get plastered, or hire services of dubious legality. In a way, Horta–Guinardó was like a small city within Barcelona, which itself contained a small heart of vice in the form of a city, affectionately called Nocturne City, with its own shadow government and laws.

Though the old-timers say this square used to be a cozy area of bars, small shops, and family entertainment – not too big or flashy – that was before everything turned to rubble. But ultimately, nobody cares about your personal interpretation of what used to stand on the ruins, as long as you pay for the repairs. So, little remained of that relaxed corner in the big city, except for the bars, which now lined the entire perimeter of the 130-meter-diameter square.

Wherever you looked, all you could see was light and color. Holographic ads from the various local venues projected onto pedestrians' heads made Plaça d'Eivissa a worthy tourist attraction, but deep down, everyone knew seeing was only half the fun. Experiencing Nocturne City was what everyone came for, and I couldn't blame them: seven bars, four clubs, two hostess bars, five hotels (two for couples), a nearby mall open most of the night, frequent shows and concerts funded by the businesses in the center of the square, and, of course, all those clandestine services that were hard to quantify.

That night, DJ Blackbox was spinning records in the middle of the square. He was relatively famous in the underground scene, so the plaza was even more packed than usual. I tried to push through the crowd, already full of drunks on the verge of alcohol poisoning and people who'd overdone it with the drugs. I bumped into an acquaintance who tried to greet me, but I said I was in a hurry. Two impossibly beautiful topless women, enhanced to the eyebrows, accosted me with flyers for the club they worked at. A liquid – I wanted to think it was rum and coke – spilled on my feet as I passed behind a group of friends jumping to the music. Someone shoved me, someone yelled at me, I ran off. I could have gotten angry, but this was daily life in Nocturne City, and I was used to it.

Finally, I managed to escape the uproar through one of the alleys snaking between two bars and started walking home. I activated the player module on my auditory implants, loaded a playlist suited to the warm ambiance of a lonely night, and let myself be carried away by the relaxed melody. Luckily, I lived relatively close.

Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron, number 200. An imposing 35-story skyscraper loomed before me, surrounded by numerous other buildings of similar construction, each taller and more intimidating than the last. The characteristic dark, smooth gray of their facades indicated they were built with first-generation smart materials, which, judging by precedents in countries that adopted new-era construction techniques long before Catalonia, didn't bode well for their future. But they were quick to build, easy to sell, and relatively cheap for the buyer – if they were the kind who could afford a mortgage – so in the end, everyone tried to turn a blind eye to the fact that the roof could cave in on their heads any day.

I was actually lucky to have a place to myself, however small or more bank-owned than mine. Most people I knew lived in a single room, sometimes shared, but others didn't even have that. My friends often teased me by calling me "little bourgeoisie," though I suspect some genuinely thought I was upper class. If only they knew how broke I was...!

As soon as I crossed the threshold, I took off my shiny pink jacket – purely decorative, as it offered no warmth – and left it on a chair, along with my white mesh top. I kicked off my sandals and confirmed it wasn't rum and coke. I immediately threw them near the laundry basket, along with my black elastane skirt and fluorescent green bikini, and took a long shower, trying to focus more on what to do tomorrow and less on whatever that liquid was.

I knew attacking Dex's systems head-on was suicide. He once briefly mentioned how his local network was set up, and I think in my twelve years of experience, I'd never seen anything like it. Specifically, one of the most concerning parts was that he had eight machines – probably more, as he regularly expanded his collection – online acting as netfilters and firewalls, each loaded with a superlative collection of ICE, APSP, SSRA, and other security programs that would fry my brain just by looking at them wrong. Maybe I could bypass the security of one machine, maybe two with luck, but I'd never complete the circuit.

And as if that wasn't enough, besides all these active security measures, he had just as many passive ones, and he told me even less about those. But, to his misfortune, his apartment only had a low-quality electronic lock, which could be broken even without being an expert. Five minutes with my HackBoy should be enough to open the door silently, and then his mainframe would be completely exposed and vulnerable to local attacks. It was just a matter of using a few exploits to gain control of his machine, copy the files to a mass storage device, and disappear without a trace. Dex wouldn't have to know, so Modou was definitely jumping the gun by saying this job would be a blow to our friendship.

I got out of the shower; the clock read 5:19. It was late, but I wasn't sleepy, and I had to make sure I'd be fresh enough tomorrow night – since Dex was one of the few netmages with a relatively normal sleep cycle – not to screw everything up. I slid my fingers under the nape of my neck until I felt the metal end of a small ponytail made of nylon, silicone, and graphane,

and pulled it until the cable was at a comfortable working length. I plugged my NDTP port into my machine and surfed the net for a couple of hours until I got tired.

I disconnected and lay down on the bed, where I mixed four milliliters of water with one of SUGAR – though a lower dose is usually recommended for safety – and loaded it into my vape. I think I finally fell asleep around 7:40 or so, the vape still between my fingers and the dawn sparkling on my inert, porcelain-doll eyes, which had been deactivated for half an hour.

I woke up a bit dizzy. I'd slept a lot, the alarm clock had been beeping for who knows how long. I turned my eyes back on, and a small LCD welcomed me to the real world. It was already 18:23, but I could have kept sleeping.

I sat up immediately. There were things to do, and I still had the whole night ahead. I rummaged through the sheets for a synthetic silk blue robe I usually slept in and put it on. Then I headed to the kitchen, opened the pantry, and shoved the first thing I found into my mouth. With the weakness from fasting solved, I began preparing my gear for the night. Even though it wasn't strictly necessary for this kind of job – I was going for my retirement fund, not against an entity that could cry to the forensic police without it backfiring – I usually followed my own rules to the letter. My field protocol dictated the mandatory use of leather gloves, a wool hat or similar head-covering, analog obfuscation lenses (also known as "sunglasses"), and a braid or double ponytails if I felt particularly flirty that day. It was crucial to choose an outfit that wasn't too flashy, but not too dull either, to avoid the opposite effect. I didn't want anyone to remember me, neither for being too eye-catching nor too boring.

In the end, I opted for dark grey sweatpants that were a bit baggy, a white crop top (no cleavage, to cover my light-up tattoo), a sky-blue and white baseball cap with "Miami Disco" written in big purple neon letters on the front, a sky-blue sports bag to carry all my electronics, and white sneakers with green details (whose English name, "sneakers," already indicated their suitability for this kind of work). If I'd looked in the mirror, I'd have seen a typical teenage girl, but luckily for my dignity, I didn't.

I loaded a few programs and icebreakers I thought I might need into my portable deck's memory and put it in the bag as soon as I finished, along with the HackBoy, the alarm inhibitor, the flash drive, and a small toolbox. For how little I was carrying, it weighed a ton.

I left home a little after midnight and headed for the Vall d'Hebron metro stop. Based on the times he usually logged on and off before disappearing from the net without a trace, I calculated he'd probably been asleep for about half an hour. That gave me a small window to reach his place just as he was in delta sleep, when not even an atomic bomb could wake him.

The train stopped perfectly aligned with the platform doors. With the sound of uncoiled servos, both sets of doors slid open in unison, letting out a small gaggle of slightly drunk guys, probably looking for a transfer towards the party mecca. One of them whistled at me as

we **Macabre Moon** passed at the entrance to the carriage, I guess because he thought I was his age, even though I was probably two decades older. On one hand, the disguise made me look different, but on the other, maybe it ended up being too flashy.

The trip on Line 17 to Sant Pau passed without any notable incident. It was a relief, because despite meditating for the previous hours, I still hadn't completely calmed my nerves. This always happened before a big job, but this time it was more than just jitters.

The walk to his building entrance felt endless. There were few people on the street at that hour, as it wasn't a party area and was generally inhabited by old folks whose fleeting era of youthful madness was long gone. Those streets were concrete tombs, their silence only broken by the occasional rumble of a passing motorcycle or the sound of an insomniac's TV.

I rang the intercom. Dex always talked about the "characters" in Apartment 8-2 who ordered pizza for dinner late at night. According to him, they were always high on opioids, which would explain getting hungry at such exotic hours. I waited a while for someone to answer the intercom – a hard task when you're a few grams from overdose – but finally, a cacophony sounded through the speaker. Your pizza, sir. Oh, I forgot, he replied, dragging out every syllable. Bingo.

I approached the elevator door. "Out of Service," read the sign. "Lucky Dex 'only' lived on the seventh floor," I thought.

The upside of being forced to use the stairs was that I had a chance to burn off some adrenaline before going into action. I also discovered I might not be in as good shape as I thought, but that didn't worry me at the moment. I remembered Dex's door was the last one on the right. As soon as I reached it, I dropped my bag to the floor for easier access.

Before me was a TT-438a security panel by Misco. It was my first time facing one of these, but it didn't matter. Most old, low-end panels worked similarly, so figuring out how to crack this one shouldn't be excessively difficult, even knowing relatively little about electronic security, as was my case. Most had minimal security beyond beeping like crazy if you entered the wrong PIN a few times, so stimulating ports to find a debug mode or cause a short circuit was one of the best ways in, whatever happened first. Luckily, I had a program on my HackBoy that could automate this process, significantly reducing the wait time.

I used one of the screwdrivers from my toolbox to pry off the panel's bezel. It came off without much resistance, revealing the control box housing the printed circuit board controlling everything. I opened the back cover of my HackBoy and pulled out a few thin wires of different colors, attaching their ends to a series of strategic points on the board. I started the terminal and selected `lockforensics.sh` from the executable list. Seven minutes of button-pushing and wire-swapping to the rhythm of distant pizza-related questions, and the box coughed up the little secret Dex had entrusted to it.

Five, three, zero, two, two, seven. The lock signaled its willingness to let me pass with a soft buzz. I activated the alarm inhibitor and entered the apartment, trying to make as little noise as possible.

The first thing that caught my attention was several cardboard boxes stacked near the entryway. I could have sworn I saw something written in permanent marker on one side before I shut the last sliver of light sneaking through the barely open door, but now it was too dark to read. I activated the night vision module on my ocular prosthetics and took off my sunglasses to avoid straining the nightshot too much. I considered activating the infraflashbang module in case he had cameras, but then I remembered Dex hated surveillance devices with a passion. My entire field of vision suddenly lit up – and took on a bluer tone – and I was able to read the Choro-Mesopotamian runes Dex had written on the packages. I think I could make out "discs" on one, and I'd swear another said "books & comics." It looked like he was all set to move out any minute.

I took off my sneakers to be quieter. I navigated past clutter and other debris until I reached a door on the left. If memory served, it was the only room that had been locked the time Dex invited us over. This time, he wasn't expecting visitors, so the door was wide open. I slipped into the room and carefully closed the door behind me.

I almost gasped at what I saw. Blade server cabinets lined every wall of the room, all running at full tilt, judging by the frantic blinking of their activity lights. Cables were everywhere – some on the floor, others hanging from the ceiling – all connected to the largest switch I'd ever seen. In the middle of the room, beside an ergonomic armchair that looked like it cost a fortune, a Subalpine gray desk supporting three expensive-looking screens and what seemed like the deck Dex used as a gateway to his monstrous network, sat a prohibitively expensive planetary 3D holographic projector. Just the electronics in this room were worth more than I'd earned in my entire career.

I sat in the armchair. It was very comfortable, but I'd never felt so uncomfortable in my life. Curled up in the chair, I had a broader perspective of the room. I'd never felt so small. I had doubts about what I was about to do, but there was no turning back now. I pulled my deck from the backpack and connected it to Dex's. I pulled the NDTP cable from inside my neck and plugged it into my machine. I chose asynchronous mode with augmented reality device projection, in case someone showed up at the door, and booted the operating system.

A frameless virtual screen projected onto my synthetic retinas. A few insignificant informational messages printed onto a black background, disappearing seconds later. The screen background changed to a lighter gray, and in the center appeared a cartoonish little witch avatar – big-headed, with overly long bangs and a hat too big for her – waving with an ear-to-ear smile. After a few seconds, she opened a hole behind her, jumped through it, and vanished

completely from the image. Back to the previous black screen, this time with many more printed messages and a progress bar at the bottom indicating 23%.

I used the loading time to snoop around the desk. Besides the screens, the most eye-catching thing was a small figurine of a wizard, robed in white to his feet, with a centuries-old beard and a wooden staff topped with a small jewel. The poor sorcerer seemed to be using his arcane spells to act as a paperweight for some dense technical documents about a possible vulnerability in certain optical processors. Scattered across the desk were some office tools – a stapler, or another button-shaped thing I didn't even know the purpose of. There were other papers lying around, covered in scribbles or brief notes that, out of context, meant nothing. The leftmost drawer seemed full of storage devices of all sizes and colors, each with a label indicating its contents. What struck me most was that a handful had labels written in much more legible handwriting than the boxes at the entrance, allowing me to understand them. Some were marked "backups," "images," or "vacations," followed by a numeric code that seemed to denote year and month of recording. I opened the middle drawer. More papers like those on the desk, which I couldn't make head or tail of. I closed the middle drawer. I looked at the screen; the bar had advanced to 83%. I opened the right drawer.

I sank deeper into the chair. There was a pistol and some boxes of ammunition. I stared at it for a long while, even after the progress bar had hit 100%, both fascinated and horrified. If I'd walked into the room with Dex still in it, one of those bullets could have entered my head.

Fuck.

I closed the drawer and tried to forget about the gun. After all, I hadn't come here to snoop, and those files weren't going to steal themselves.

With the deck operational, I prepared to enter Dex's system. I selected abstract NDTP mode and opened port number one. I began to feel the tingling of nanomachines stimulating my central nervous system, and within seconds, I was in.

The surreal world of Dex's deck was something to behold. Projected on my screen was an abstract night sky, where skyscrapers were stars and the moon had been replaced by a monstrous giant head straight out of an H.R. Giger illustration. Instinctively, I deduced the skyscrapers represented each of the servers and their virtual machines in the room, but I couldn't hold my gaze on that terrifying celestial body long enough to understand what it symbolized. Beneath my feet, in the midst of the infinite blue, rested a small planet that seemed populated by abandoned factories. I assumed this sphere was the icon for the deck itself, so I descended to take a look. After all, as prodigious as Dex was, I didn't think he'd risk forgetting which of the hundreds of skyscrapers held that valuable data.

As soon as I landed, I felt a warm sensation on my skin, like an African breeze eager to play with me. The scorching gravel dug painfully into the soles of my feet, as if I were truly there.

Somehow, Dex had managed to exploit the experimental sensory configuration of the NDTP and recreate an entire universe in lavish detail within his machine. So to speak, even though I was seeing this reality through a screen, I was so immersed in that world that I began to forget my real body.

I thought about the movements I wanted to make, and my avatar interpreted them within the digital world. I thought about picking up a small stone, and my avatar picked up a small stone. I thought about bringing it closer to my eyes to examine it, and my avatar did so, but as soon as it was a handspan from my face, it exploded into a thousand pieces, leaving behind a cloud of smoke that seemed to sketch a sheet of paper covered in nonsensical text chains. I paled. It was a file, just like all the other pebbles scattered on the ground. It was going to be a very long night.

I wandered the desert for hours, visiting countless ruins in search of *the* pebble. For the first time in my life, I regretted giving my avatar this attire, though I had no way of knowing something like this would happen. The heat gradually became more suffocating, accumulating between the various layers of fabric forming my virtual shawls, to the point where I'd started sweating in real life. Every file I stepped on tortured me, as if piercing flesh already mutilated by the long walk on nails. The gravity function disabled my flying broomstick's levitation, making escape impossible.

I knew for certain that the physical properties of the stones represented different aspects of the file's metadata. For example, the file size was reflected in the definition of the mineral's texture – both visual and tactile – and the last access date was represented by the rock's degree of erosion. The larger it was, the more defined it was, and the more recent the access, the rounder it was. The dust clinging to the rock and its temperature also seemed to indicate the object's creation date, just as the color was related to the file type. Scattered on the ground were also polished crystals, a bit less common, which vanished without a trace once lifted above knee height. I didn't know what they were for or what they represented.

Considering the above, and with the scant information Modou's Johnson gave me, I deduced I was looking for a highly defined, almost spherical stone, very cold to the touch, near some landmark to make it easy to find. But there was no way. There were millions, maybe billions of stones like that. Searching by hand was getting me nowhere.

I collapsed onto the ground. The tiny spikes pierced my whole body, but it was better than walking. It was impossible. Dex's peculiar encryption system had exhausted the best of me. Time was running out, ideas were drying up, and the horrifying, pale face in the sky kept watching me with a malicious little smile, as if proud to see the despair its eccentric puzzle was causing me.

I started playing with the pebbles with my fingers. I could already identify the file type I'd picked up without even looking, just by the feel of the stone. This one was a photo taken by a

high-end camera, that one was a fragment of a database, that other one was one of those enigmatic pieces of glass... I grabbed the glass, smooth to the touch, and took the chance to examine it more closely now that I was lying down.

I saw an eye reflected in it, but it wasn't mine. It was staring directly at me, through the screen, when suddenly my heart skipped a beat. I could feel something new, like a sixth sense, informing me where the data I was seeking was located.

The glass pieces were search algorithms.

I scrambled to my feet as fast as I could and ran towards nothingness, chasing the epicenter of that strange sensation. The pain no longer mattered. I just wanted that file in my hands, and I was close to getting it.

It was right there, in the middle of that force field. I could feel it. I could feel the file pulsing beneath my feet. I dug frantically through the rubble, scraping my knuckles, but finally, I had it. The stone pulsed in my hand, ready to be transferred.

Quickly, I shoved the object into one of my robe pockets and watched with satisfaction as a progress bar appeared in the bottom right corner of the screen. It was all over now; I just had to wait for the download to complete.

But something went wrong. It wasn't the ICE, it wasn't the firewalls. Dex realized someone was in his office, and he didn't like it one bit. I could hear his hurried footsteps thundering down the hallway towards me. My first thought was that I was already dead, but then I had an idea. A horrible idea. I'd never held one before, but I'd seen enough about them to know how to use it. I opened the right drawer and, with trembling hands, grabbed the gun as best I could. I checked the safety; it was off. I cocked the pistol, summoning all the strength I didn't have, and a bullet ejected from the chamber – it was already loaded. Dex had left it there ready to fire. He wasn't messing around. I stood up from the chair and aimed towards the door. Even using both hands, the pistol wobbled. My hand shook too much; I was sure I'd miss.

The door burst open. Dex stormed into the room with such force he had to grab the doorknob to keep his momentum from carrying him forward. He had a wrench in his hand, ready to be used as a weapon, but he just froze. His eyes landed on the pistol, then on me. Only on me. He couldn't believe it.

No words were spoken. Our gazes said more than any words could. I was scared. Confused. I couldn't believe what I was about to do, and neither could Dex. He was hurt. He felt betrayed. He was frustrated, disappointed, but not furious; no, he was sad.

I was still connected to the deck. With the movement, my avatar had been left staring at the macabre moon, arms outstretched towards it as if trying to touch it. It just smiled. It knew this would happen and was reveling in it. I looked back at Dex, who seemed to be shaking his head pleadingly for mercy. I closed my eyes.

Dex fell to the floor.

The pistol slipped from my hands. It clattered onto the desk with a tremendous racket, but I didn't hear it. I hadn't realized until that moment, but I was hyperventilating. My head was spinning; I didn't know what to hold onto.

I knelt beside the guy. The cable connecting me to the deck came loose, but I didn't care. His glassy eyes were fixed on mine. The bullet had hit his chest, dangerously close to his heart. He was bleeding heavily. He struggled to move but still had some independence. He was tapping the back of my hand with his fingers, as if trying to tell me something, but I pulled my hand away, frightened.

It wasn't the first time I'd killed someone, but it was the first time I'd seen someone die. Usually, in cyberspace, you don't think of other netmages as people, but as characters in a video game. Kicking them out of the game forever was easy. But this wasn't the net. This was real. It was a friend dying in my arms. I realized I'd sold out a real friend for a handful of BC, and I disgusted myself.

Dex was already gone, but I kept vigil over him until dawn.

I'm not quite sure how, but I managed to get home. By the time I realized it, I was lying on my bed, the flash drive in my hand. I ran my hand through my hair and noticed I'd already taken out the ponytails. I wasn't very sure what was real and what wasn't, but an incoming message on my phone brought me back. "00:30 at the bar." It was Modou. I didn't know if I should go. I just wanted to sleep, but I couldn't.

I arrived at the ICEcream Breaker a little later than agreed. I'd managed to get some sleep in the end, but not much. I knew Modou was waiting for me, but I was afraid to go in.

The grimy, half-broken sign of the place guarded the entrance. It was a three-scoop ice cream cone salvaged from the rubble before the building was constructed, probably from some old business destroyed during the war. It had been modified so each ice cream scoop had a different smiley face drawn on it. It stared down at me from the top of the metal arch, judgmental, as if it knew what I'd done.

"Hey, my girl!" Modou said, raising his arms wide. "You alright, baby? You're later than me, and that ain't normal."

The atmosphere in the place was tense. The music played just as loud as ever, but people weren't dancing or shouting anymore. The bad news had spread fast and had left no one indifferent.

"Hey. Tell me, you got the data?" Modou whispered, seemingly oblivious to all this.

I rummaged in my pocket and extended my hand to give him the device, avoiding eye contact the whole time. He grabbed me by the nape and patted my left cheek.

"Woah-oh-oh, girl!" he exclaimed, brimming with enthusiasm. "We're rich, buddy! Rich!"

But even Modou could smell something was wrong. With each pat, I flinched, as if afraid the next one would really hurt. It wasn't normal, and Modou knew it immediately. The sparkle left his eyes, and his smile gave way to a much more severe expression.

"What's wrong, daughter? Did everything go okay?"

Apparently, Modou hadn't heard yet, and it fell to me to tell him.

"It went wrong."

I didn't need to say anything else. He'd already understood.

"Oh, sweetheart..." murmured the Senegalese man, wiping away the tears that had started streaming down my cheeks with his thumb. "No, sweetheart, you couldn't have done anything else. It was self-defense."

"No, Modou. He... I stayed with him while he bled out. He tried to take my hand, but I didn't let him."

The man fell silent. He didn't know what to say. There was nothing to say. He turned, grabbed a glass of whiskey from the bar, and handed it to me. He said it would do me good.

I took the glass with trembling hands and stared at it for a few seconds, stunned. I saw myself reflected in the amber liquid. I had some mascara running down my cheeks, chapped lips, and pronounced dark circles. I was a wreck, and it scared me.

"Don't worry, princess. I'll handle it," Modou said, bending down at the same time to pick up the glass shards from the broken tumbler.

It was then that I fully grasped the situation. Not everyone had reacted the same way to Dex's death. Some had faced their own mortality today – if someone like Dex could die, so could they. Others, his closest friends, were furious. They'd sworn to deliver justice as soon as they found the culprit. But one, one was crying. Sitting at a table, surrounded by friends trying to console her, a young girl sobbed, having just received the news. It was Dex's girlfriend. I felt sick.

"Look, let's do this," Modou whispered to me, but I didn't have the courage to look back at him.

"Now, we'll go home, you'll get to bed, rest a while, and tomorrow we'll look for some place you'd like to go for a well-deserved vacation. Sound good, girl?"

Modou put his arm around my shoulders and helped me out of the place. As I left, I couldn't tear my gaze away from that poor widow. I'd just destroyed her life, but how many others had I destroyed without realizing it?

The walk out of Praça d'Eivissa felt endless, and I suppose for Modou too. He had to carry dead weight through a crowd of agitated people. I think he had to throw a punch or two for us to push through; I don't know. All I know is I vomited near the exit alley.

That night was cold. I was shivering, and Modou had to drape his gold trench coat over me. The surrounding streets were deserted, as everyone was still partying. The night was still young, but I no longer was.

We passed in front of a relatively small apartment block. One window was open, and through it escaped the inconsolable sobbing of a woman. I immediately thought of Vane, Dex's elderly mother. I knew she didn't live on this street, but I couldn't help thinking of her. At 63, she was one of the longest-lived and most respected women in the area, having experienced firsthand one of humanity's most terrible eras. She survived the war, the famines, the bombings. She lost much of her family and was miserable for many years, but today she was happy to have her son.

That broke me completely. I was a piece of shit, always had been, and always would be, and only now did I realize it. I pushed Modou away and started running in some direction, I don't know which. It took me a bit longer than usual, but I managed to reach my apartment.

I felt around the sheets, over and over, until I found my vape. It had been a day since I'd last taken SUGAR, and maybe that was what was affecting me so much. I wanted to think it was that, but deep down I knew SUGAR wasn't addictive. But in my mind it made sense, so I took the refill tube for the e-cigarette and proceeded to fill it. I drew one milliliter of SUGAR from the bottle with an insulin syringe and slowly poured it into the plastic cylinder. My hand was shaking badly, so I think I added a bit too much, but I fixed it by adding a little more water at the end. When I finished, the tube was leaking from the sides, but it didn't matter because that meant it was well-loaded, which was good. I shook the vape, as the SUGAR usually settled at the bottom and didn't mix well with the water, and turned it on.

I took a drag and felt my lungs open up again. I didn't need to hyperventilate anymore; it was a relief. I sat on the edge of the bed and took off my slippers so I could put my feet up on the blanket.

But I was still agitated. I took a couple more drags, and the trembling stopped. I felt a bit sleepy, so I lay down on top of the sheets, but I still couldn't sleep. I wasn't as nervous anymore, but I still felt awful, really awful.

I took a fourth drag, very deep, and forgot what I was even thinking about. I closed my eyelids to sleep for the first time in a long while and felt comfortable. I grabbed the pillow and hugged it like someone hugging an old friend they hadn't seen in ages. I was finally going to be able to rest, truly rest.

I had to tell Modou I knew where I wanted to go on vacation.