

## THE CURATOR

An Original Story by Stuart Clark

There was something wrong with my access. I knew it the moment I interfaced. Files would not respond to my commands. They seemed to drop away from me as I reached for them, teasing me to follow them deeper into the ether. I felt like I was being toyed with, like a cat plays with a mouse before it delivers the final, killing blow, and it was thinking of that analogy that made me fear the worst. You see, I'm a hacker.

To see me at work you'd think me demented. I wear a helmet that covers almost all of my head, viewing things through the heads up display that flickers an inch away from my eyes, immersing me in the ethereal world. On my hands are black gloves, covered in sensitive pads, and from the cuffs of these gloves run a jumbled collection of colored wires – my physical connection to the interface and the world beyond.

I sit. And I hack. That's what I do.

My hands gesticulate wildly in front of me, bypassing firewalls and gatekeepers with casual flicks – because that stuff is easy. The real challenge lies deeper, in finding what lies at the heart of the Network. I don't know what the truth is, but I know it's a truth that others don't want people like you and I to know, and that, in itself, makes me want to seek it out. I know I'm getting close. And that's why I'm afraid.

Why? Because I knew others. Other hackers. Others who had told me what they had learnt and whose knowledge had brought me to this point. And they are now gone. Every one of them. Terminated.

Over and above all of its internal security measures, the core of the Network is protected – from the outside. I have heard whispers of Guardians, figures of human form who appear in the ether as Pseudos. Who they are, nobody knows. They could be government agents (which I suspect), keeping us from uncovering a truth that might destroy this corrupt, police state – because really, it is only the Network that controls us, that keeps us all in line as dutiful citizens. Honestly though, they could be anyone, or *anything*. They might not even *be* human. In this world, where people are more concerned with the look of their Av'tar than the machinations of government, it's hard to tell what's real any more. The boundaries are blurred. In fact, they should give it a new name, this virtual reality. It's more like virtual surreality, or virtual imaginary, or maybe even virtual insanity. It would be easy for some alien, outside force to have taken control and be pulling the strings and most of this dim-witted population would be none-the-wiser. But I digress...

Let me tell you what I can about the Network. There are two levels of existence (that we know of – in fact we should only know one) Av'tars, where ninety-nine point nine, nine percent of the populace resides; and Pseudos, which the hackers recently discovered and which hailed the arrival of the Guardians. It was a discovery which cost most hackers that dared to go that far, their lives.

To be a Pseudo means being the closest thing to a living, breathing entity you can imagine in the ether, because to exist near the core, you must surrender to the Network – literally, give yourself to the machine. I have been there once. It was an uncomfortable transition, a wrenching, white-hot transformation from human to Pseudo, and something I

was loathe to do again. Not because I feared the process of morphosis, but because I too, encountered a Guardian near the core. I immediately “ran,” if that’s what you can call fleeing through ether. I ran and I threw every firewall and electronic obstacle behind me that I could, but the Guardian was good, better than me, and I only just managed to disengage before he caught up to me.

Because what the Guardians desire is contact. Physical contact – although I guess in the ether there is no such thing – ethereal contact if you like.

When the hacker community began being decimated by a hitherto unknown force, a pattern began to emerge. Those hackers that lived long enough to recount their experience always talked about being touched by Guardians. We have since called it “tagging”

Being tagged by a guardian is certain death. No one knows exactly what the touch confers, but one thing is for certain, once you disengage from the Network and return to the real world, you show up on their radar clearer than a blackhead on an albino. It is then only a matter of time before they find you – and terminate you.

So you see I had reason to be uneasy. There seemed to be intelligence at work here. A force that teased and played with me, dangling information in front of me just to lead me on, always coaxing me deeper into the ether. I felt like I was being led into a trap.

I felt no less uneasy when a rendering of two huge wooden double doors appeared in front of me. They opened at my approach, creaking as they did so and I couldn’t help but smirk at the sound from the aural file. It was a curious touch.

I drifted inside and found myself in a rendering of a large hallway, a cavernous roof high above. In the distance, I could see what looked like rows of bookcases and as I got closer, I realized they were open sided filing cabinets. Thousands of them arranged in rows as far as I could see.

I stopped. Up ahead, on the carpeted path that ran between the rows of cabinets was a figure. A man who glided with unhurried ease towards me.

I wanted to run, but something about the figure rooted me to the spot.

“Stop!” I shouted “You’ve come close enough!” To my surprise, he did as I ordered.

“What is this place?” I asked. “Where have you brought me?”

“What does it look like?” The stranger asked.

I took another look around. We were surrounded by data. Rows and rows of cabinets stacked four high and stretching to the virtual horizon to either side. High above, a large, patterned ceiling rose was rendered, seeming to hang in mid air, for there were no walls that I could see. “A library?” I offered.

“Perhaps,” he said.

“A museum, then,”

“Perhaps that too.” The smile fell from his features. It seemed that he had humored me long enough. “Come,” he said. “I call this place Sanctuary, and there is much to see.” He turned and beckoned me towards him, and for the first time I saw what I had suspected, that he wasn’t just an Av’tar – a 2D image with an ID tag - he was a complete 3D rendering, which could only mean one thing. He was a Pseudo too. I suddenly feared for my life once more.

“Are you one of them?” I blurted, the rising panic clear in my voice.

The smile returned. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to think any more.”

“If I was, do you think you and I would be standing here now, having this conversation?”

“I guess not.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You would have already been tagged, your termination an eventuality.”

“Who are you?” I asked.

“My, my,” he said. “So many questions.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. No need to apologize. It is exactly that inquiring mind that has brought you to this place, that makes you question what is at the heart of the Network. It is your curiosity and ability that made me seek you out.”

“Well then, you won’t mind me asking again. Who are you?”

He snorted in amusement at my persistence. “Here, my text identifier is ‘Cur8tor,’ but in another life, you may have known me as Damien.”

Damien? Damien was the greatest hacker to have ever lived, the reluctant spearhead of our cyber-resistance. But Damien had been terminated months, maybe even a year ago. “But Damien’s dead!” I said.

He chuckled. “So that piece of mis-information is still circulating. That’s good to know. It means the Guardians won’t be looking for me. I can assure you, I am very much alive.”

“But where have you been? Your loss was a devastating blow to the hacker community.”

He hung his head. “I know. I did not want to leave my brothers in such a fashion, but it was necessary if I was to remain safe here. I needed the Guardians to believe I had gone.”

“Why?”

“So I could remain here. So I could continue my work on the inside of the Network.”

“But how is that possible? How do the Guardians not find you?”

He spread his arms wide and looked at the cabinets that towered either side of him. “There is a reason this place is called Sanctuary.” He beckoned me forward again. “Come. I am keen to show you its secrets.” He turned to walk away, and this time I followed.

After a short distance we stopped and he turned to face me. “Look,” he said, making a sweeping gesture with his arms. I turned to see the entire collection of cabinets re-arranging around me, their movements swift and smooth and silent. When everything was once again still, Damien and I stood in the centre of a circle, the cabinets radiating away from us in walls as far as was visible. I stared at him in wonder.

He pointed to one of the rows. “Go, he said. “See for yourself the resource I have found here.”

I walked towards the cabinets, passing between two of the walls and staring at the contents either side of me. They were crammed so full of digital files that it was impossible to distinguish a single one, the result being a shimmering wall of black like midnight water.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Look” he said again.

I raised my hands, then looked at him questioningly. “Do the laws still apply in here?”

“Everything should work as you are accustomed to.”

I returned my attention to the cabinet, and then with gentle, teasing, gestures, pulled a file from the shimmering mass. I turned to look at it as it hovered next to me at head height.

It was some kind of identification file. On the semi-translucent page I could see a 2D pic image somewhat reminiscent of an Av’tar, and then a text identifier – “Stryker77.” I didn’t recognize the face in the pic image.

“Who is he, this Stryker77?”

Damien shrugged. “I have no idea, but he is one of millions.”

I looked back at the cabinets disappearing into the distance. “You mean...?”

Damien nodded. “Full of them. And this row over here...” He gestured to another set of cabinets behind him. “...full of emails.”

“Emails?”

“Electronic mail,” he qualified.

“People wrote messages to each other on computers?” I was dumbfounded.

“Yes.”

“Why? I mean, that’s absurd.”

“It was they way things used to work.”

“Used to work? Like when? What do you mean?”

He smiled again. That knowing smile. “I assume you are familiar with the term ‘Internet’”

“That was nothing but a myth,” I protested. “A utopian dream.”

“No,” he said sternly. “It existed once.”

“No.” I shook my head, not wanting to believe. “You lie.”

Damien spread his hands wide. “You think so? Tell me, where do you think all this came from?”

I couldn’t explain it, this much data existing in the ether, unknown to me before now. “What happened?” I asked.

“The Internet was a people’s Network. Created by the people. Used by the people. Ultimately deemed too dangerous to remain with the people. Information became too readily available and too easily disseminated that they shut it down.”

“Who did? The Guardians?”

He nodded.

“Are they government?”

“I believe so.”

“Why?”

“For the reasons I just gave you. The populace was becoming too well informed. Government could no longer hide behind invisible walls. The Internet had to be crushed to prevent a civil uprising.”

“And they replaced it with the Network. Their own bastardized, sanitized version of it.”

“Yes. They control the information now, and after brainwashing generations with what they feed us, most of this idiot populace is happy just to play among the fringe.” He paused, as if admitting to this state of affairs troubled him. “But...” he continued, “...When

they pulled the plug on the Internet, they failed to shut it down. The Network was designed to crush the Internet, like a boot crushes glass underfoot, and literally, that's what happened. The Internet was destroyed, but it fragmented, sending billions of splinters into the ether." He gestured to the cabinets around us again. "As you can see, I have become a splinter collector. So to answer your original questions - is it a library? Yes. Is it a museum? Yes. It could be considered that also."

"But I don't understand. If these splinters exist..." I looked around at the amassed cabinets, "...And in such great numbers, how come I have never seen them."

"Because you are not looking for them. Seeking them out is like asking you to see dust motes in the air you breathe. It's virtually impossible, but that's only because you don't know what you are looking for. I came across them totally by accident, but once I had found one, I began to see them all - and I was astounded by the number of them."

I must have looked upset at my inability to see what had been floating in front of my face all this time. "Don't worry," Damien said. "I will teach you how to find them."

Suddenly I began to have an idea as to why he had brought me to this place.

"I needed some time to collect enough of them, so that I would be safe to operate here. Now I think I have enough, and I can bring more brothers into Sanctuary." He pointed to another row of cabinets. "Here, we have subscriptions. Over here, registrations." He turned and continued to point, a whirling dervish at the center of the data. "Licenses! Social Security Numbers! Identification Cards! ePassports! Biometrics!"

I looked once more at the cabinets, astounded by the sheer mass. "There must be millions of them, these files," I said.

"There are," Damien said behind me. "Millions of identities."

"It would take a lifetime to go through them all."

"Many lifetimes, actually. Which is why I can now recruit more of our brethren. I was hoping you would be the first."

I turned to face him again. Now a middle-aged woman stood in Damien's place. She smiled, and there was a trace of him still in her upturned lips and bright eyes. "I'm Cindy\_219," she said. "Here, my text identifier is Cur8tor, but you can call me Damien."

And I realized that we, Damien and I and those that followed, were going to destroy the Network - from the inside.