

Kenta winked. "I'm only teasing. Of course you're worried, but you're in good hands, and I have a feeling you'll see Riley again in about ..." He glanced up at the clock. "... a quarter hour."

Riley appeared precisely fifteen minutes later. I thanked Kenta profusely for his time and food, and we left to catch a cab. As we slid into the car, Riley handed me a hat. "You don't have to wear it, but keep it handy." With a focused glance to the sky, he said, "Could rain tonight. Could be a bad rain."

I looked up. A blanket of clouds obscured the night sky. A hint of moon peeked through the clouds as they rolled swiftly by on the wind. I tucked the hat into my backpack. "How do you know?"

"When the moon looks like that, it's never good." He turned to me with a pragmatic look on his face, despite his superstitious statement. "I'm not into omens and fortune telling. Don't believe in it. But that moon? That's a bad moon. Learned years ago not to trust it."

He took a deep breath and made eye contact. I could see to the heart of him, and his heart shone like a gem beneath the earth.

"If I yell at you, Jennie, I need you to do exactly what I say. No questions, *Jennie*. I need you to be ready, no matter what."

Riley told the driver to drop us off a few blocks away from the blue and white warehouse. We blended into the stream of pedestrians walking in small groups of twos or threes, until reaching the building, and headed up the stairs to the steel door at the top. Riley readied himself. His features turned peaceful, the lines in his forehead and cheeks relaxed, as though he put himself in a lucid trance.

He pushed the buzzer.

A voice from behind the door yelled, "Hey, pizza dude!"

My friend's voice came out even and calm. "No, I'm expected. Rye."

"Oh yeah!" The door unlocked and swung open. As we stepped inside, the front door closed behind us, and the inner door opened to allow us passage into the unkempt lair.

They roamed a virtual world through jacks surgically implanted in their heads. I'd asked Riley about it during the day. Much like his disdain for magic, he didn't care for the jacks, either. He said people lost something of their spirits in the exchange.

We met the owner of the disembodied voice. His tangled hair and unshaven stubble made it difficult to imagine him the virtual wizard he was supposed to be. "You didn't even bring pizza?"

"Carl, knock it off," said a young woman in a chair. "It's coming." To us she said, "Ignore him, he's on the spectrum, and pizza's the only food he'll eat."

Riley remained calm. To Carl, he said, "No one told me to bring it," he said, his voice an odd mixture of genuine concern and emotional distance.

Carl took us across the room of chairs and couches to T-40's bedroom. All the while, Riley's eyes looked distant, as if seeing everything and focusing on nothing. It was something he shared in common with the hackers. It discomfited me to be there with him detached from his surroundings.