

Gimlet's Gambit

I.

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Gimlet stared out across the city from his fourth floor apartment. A putrid, red hue hung on the pale, gray sky. He looked off to the distance. The clean glass of the tall skyscrapers in sector four glistened from a far; a vision of purity back-dropping the decadence of his neighborhood. Even from here, the awe of their beauty inspired him. He longed for it. To live uptown, away from this hell which was the rest of TekHL City.

A rising HKR, well known throughout the city, Gimlet was on his way to the top and he knew it. He was a gruff punk. His soul ran about as deep as his machines'. His tall, slender facade was clad in black, denim pants and a plastic-layered, concert shirt that displayed daily uploaded digital images of his favorite band's current tour. He wore black combat boots, his neck adorned with symbolic amulets of his trade, a decorative transparent ROM chip and a processor split perfectly at a ninety-degree angle. Twenty-one or so, his hair was short, almost burr-like, dyed jet black.

Of his implants, the derm patch on his right arm was his favorite bio-implant. Underneath the synthetic skin was a pool of ink that possessed polychromatic shifting capacity, controlled by a small chip. Gimlet used it to create different tattoos on his arm. Designs were purchased as programs. He, however, had illegally purchased an interface needle and a disc that contained over three-hundred designs, all of which had been uploaded to the chip. Today, he decided, the panther dancing with the oriental dragon was appropriate. His only joys in life were technological, his only love, virtual, the Matrix.

A yell in the street drew his attention. He looked across the way. At the entrance of the alley adjacent to his building, he saw a man leaning up against a rusted dumpster. Three hooligans surrounded him, yelling and taunting, cheering themselves on. One lunged at the man. Too tired to struggle, he smashed against the dumpster with a loud thud. Another pulled him to the ground, positioning himself behind the man, grappling him in a manner to restrain movement, while the other extended his arm.

A blade shot out of the third man's wrist. Cupping it in his hand as he approached, the overpowered man put up a futile struggle, screaming in terror, and pleading for his life. The others, attempting to hold the man steady. "Any day now, Leech," yelled the grappler.

The man lunged at his victim, stabbing and slashing at his arm. "Poor guy... limb pirates," Gimlet said to himself. An alarm sounded. Gimlet stood. He ran over to his console. "Shit!" he exclaimed, "ten o'clock. I'm going to be late." Reaching beneath his desk, he grabbed a small black backpack. He tossed some gear in it. Raking his hand across his desk, dumping several discs in the bag, he headed out the door.

The 10:05, if only he could make it. The litter-strewn hallway was dark. A few half-lit pulsing florescent lights lit the way with an occasional flash. He jumped several steps, negotiating the staircase easily. "Time!" he commanded. A flash blurred his vision. A digital clock face appeared up and to the right in his peripheral vision. He looked at it. 10:03:15 PM. He lunged down a flight of stairs while checking the time. Poorly misjudging his leap, he landed quite short of his expectation.

He slipped off the last couple steps, losing his balance and slamming into the graffiti-painted wall. "Dammit!" he exclaimed. "Clear!" The clock disappeared. He burst out the door, running over an old man sitting on the stoop, catching himself as he tumbled down the stairs, then dashed across the street. Noting the presence of the limb pirates still standing over their victim, he reached behind him. Yep, he brought it. He let out a sigh of relief as his hand gently massaged the cold steel of his .44 autmag.

He calmly propped himself up against the bus stop's post, by chance positioned at the entrance to the alley. Occasionally passing a glance at the limb pirates, he listened in as they argued.

Standing in a puddle of blood and hydraulic fluid, the obvious ringleader scolded the thug cleaning his blade. "Fucking idiot! You scrapped the DCI locking interface and cut the ALL to short." He shoved the arm into the lowerling's chest. Inspecting it, he defended, "This ain't that bad, Needle can buff it out." he nodded toward the third guy. "We can get another Animation Link Lead and attach it." Yeah," continued the leader as he paced, "but that cuts the profit by half. We'll be lucky to get five out of it!" He raged as he kicked their victim, who had bled to death.

"Don't point the finger at me," he tossed the arm to the thug identified as Needle, who inspected it thoroughly. "I dug down in there as far as I could. You guys weren't holding him good enough," he defended. He looked up and saw Gimlet. Pointing, "what about him boss?" Gimlet nonchalantly reached back and gripped his pistol. "Already scanned him; Headjack Interface System and a Standard Cranial PC implant with Retinal LCD. He's not even worth the effort." Gimlet relaxed. The bus pulled up. "Needle, you're cutting for the rest of the night," commanded the boss. They continued to argue as Gimlet boarded the bus and the doors closed; the roar of the motor drowning out their dispute.

Never looking back, he relaxed more. The adrenaline was slowing. Suddenly, he remembered. "Time." He implored. The screen popped-up 10:08:45. The bus was on its way. Two stops later, it headed for the freeway. From the ramp, Gimlet could see sector four. He watched it for as long as it was in view.

"Appointments", he commanded. A screen popped-up displaying several entries. He scrolled down to the next to the last. "Open". The entry detailed information about tonight's meeting. He looked at the directions. The third from last was bus stop 291. He had no idea where it was. Never the less, his directions were precise. They ended at the Nakaturi Enterprises Warehouse. Still no idea where, but he knew could find it.

He knew it was an engineering firm. He had seen their labels on a lot of products. He had not been briefed as to why they required his services. He was a lowly HKR. A good one, but there were plenty in the city that outranked him in experience and talent.

"Clear." He sat back and enjoyed the ride. Hopping another bus, which looked as though it were headed into sector eight, adjacent to sector four, he was overcome by joy at a chance to see his dream world up close.

Reflecting on the run in with the limb pirates, he recalled what the leader had said about his implants not being worth their time. He chuckled. His implants were state of the art. That's why he lived in the slums. His obsession with technology put a great strain on his bank account.

He had had installed an implant that emitted a false, traceable electromagnetic field around his true gear, making it appear as cheap, second rate brands. Currently, nothing could trace the implant, because of its smallness and ability to absorb infrared, UHF, and many other tracing signals.

He had several implants. Among them, a HIS (Headjack Interface System), which allowed him to download data from other machines, a Black Anima non-cerebrum invasive, cranial-mounted micro PC, a special order black market implant, targeted at the HKR community. His favorite implant was the Retinal LCD lens. This model was wireless. Positioned just beneath the surface of the eye's retina, this graphic interface used encrypted radio waves to bring displays up on a screen. Yeah, when in use it hindered sight, but he didn't care.

He was a little paranoid about the use of radio waves to relay to the display. Information was supposedly untraceable at this time, protected by the encryption. He and his friend had hacked the

encryption in less than six hours and were invading one another's display transmissions.

Oh well, the signal was weak. To intercept it, without a police grade signal interceptor, you practically had to be inside the person's head. It was better than most of the garbage out there anyway. At least his eye wasn't hard-wired, or for that fact, bionic. And that new-age bio-tech stuff was absurd. No respectable HKR would ever use those components. Different platform, different interfaces, it wasn't even real technology. It was controlled organic material, nothing more. Gimlet shuttered as advertisements crept into his mind.

An alarm sounded snatching his wandering mind back to reality. A voice in his head announced, "10:30 PM. You have thirty minutes until your appointment." He looked up. The bus had stopped at number 288. Three stops away. A few passengers boarded. The doors shut and it was on its way. He looked out the front.

To his shock and awe, ahead lay a large metal gateway beautifully adorned with neon signs. It must have been fifteen stories high. The streets on the other side were painted and clean. The median was grass and had trees. This was sector four. This was his heaven.

II

Gimlet looked around. Everything was well lit. The police weren't wearing riot gear. It was like stepping into a dream world. Spires jutted into the gray night sky. Giants of clean, shiny glass pierced the decadent night. A structure, hundreds of stories tall basked in the well-lit arena of the rich, glowing was the luminance of blue steel.

He almost missed his stop. Peering out the window at the beautiful lobbies of the vast buildings, he caught the unscathed features of the bus stop. It read 291. The doors to the bus closed. "Wait!" he shouted and darted for the door. Stopping and lunging back, he grabbed his backpack and proceeded to the front. "Take your time sir," allowed the driver. Shocked, gimlet thanked him. On the bottom step he turned, "Nakatari Warehouse?" he implored. "Two blocks down and to your right sir." Nodding in appreciation, Gimlet turned and started walking.

As he turned the first corner and drew the attention of two Guardian-1 police exo-suits. The eight-foot menacing figures were a spectacle of horrific ingenuity. A blue and yellow coloration, a particular configuration he'd never seen. Black was the preferred color in the sectors he frequented, as it was proven to have psychological impacts. The soft colors were almost comforting. The machines, however, were not. They were large exo-skeletons, reminiscent of some demon from an insane techno-junkie's nightmare. They bore four restraining tentacles, a pair of signal receivers that resembled horns, clawed fingers for cutting through barriers, and wings, an odd display of symmetry, used only as protective blast shields, closing around the beasts to encase them when in trouble. A gatling gun was mounted on the right arm, a grenade cannon on the other. The grenade cannon was a fierce piece of technology. Fragmentation, tear gas, neural shock, EMP... whatever the case, a grenade was available.

They shambled toward him slowly. He walked at a quicker pace, noting the audible proximity of hydraulic hisses and metal slamming the pavement. Crossing the street without looking, his attention was diverted to the screeching halt of a car that nearly ran him down. A Uniopil sports car. He rested his hands on the hood. He couldn't believe what he was touching. A sports car the price of the building he lived in.

He carried on, noting the approaching cops. He could see the next street from where he was. He hurried. "Time" he asked. The screen popped up, 10:47:27. "Clear". The cops' body armors were clean and unscathed. In his neighborhood, every cop's armor was

patchy and shot all to hell. He cleared the second street. The large building on the corner was Nakatari Warehouse.

Pausing only momentarily to familiarize himself with its simplistic façade, the building was simply a ten-story rectangle, nothing special about it, save the oddly angled foyer that jutted asymmetrically toward the pale-red, night sky on the street face corner of the building.

He approached the doors and swiped a card given to him when a delegate from Nakatari Enterprises had first approached him with the job. The door glowed with a green hue, then disappeared. He entered. Looking back, the policemen had halted. A green ripple toward the center of the entry's archway showed the security field had been reactivated. They then turned and left. Gimlet shook his head in disbelief at how naive the cops in this sector were. In his sector, he'd been dead as soon as he touched the car.

His whimsy was short lived. As he exited the foyer into the main lobby, the pair of feet he met startled him. He looked up. His eye met those of a thin oriental man. "10:53, right on time Mr. Gimlet," applauded the man. "I'm very punctual," Gimlet replied. "This way please," invited the man, extending his hand toward the elevator.

When the doors to the elevator opened, a very stocky oriental man stood there. "I am Yoshi Yakamura," introduced the thin man. Pointing to the other, "This Hakeido Tanaka, one of President Nakatari's personal assistants. The man nodded to Gimlet. Gimlet offered his hand, prodding for some indication as to the man's obvious role. "Pleased to meet you," he added. The man shook his hand tightly. Gimlet noted the inhuman grip. A cyborg he assumed. He now understood Tanaka's role as an assistant, making mental note of it.

A sensor went off in Gimlet's head. "Turn it off!" he demanded. "Mr. Gimlet sir, I assure you that the scan is only a security measure for the safety of President Nakatari. It's non-invasive. It doesn't check for implants. However, you will have to relinquish possession of your fire arm."

Gimlet, noting the man's lie, as it had set off a sensor in his head telling him that his implants were being scanned reacted quickly, "You brought me here because of my hacking skills. I'm not an assassin." "Very well sir," replied Yakamura averting his glance from Gimlet to Tanaka, who in return replied with a nod.

The elevator opened on the tenth floor with a wisp. The three filed down a long hallway, Yakamura to Gimlet's side, the cyborg Tanaka in the rear. They approached two large, wooden doors with two men posted outside, one to either side. Yakamura hastened ahead. The men opened the doors. In a language unknown to Gimlet, Yakamura spoke to a man. He returned and led Gimlet into the room.

As Gimlet passed the door he noted it was made of wood. He ran his fingers along it. Real wood, not that fake stuff. This was actually wood.

He entered the room. It was poorly lit. Fixed in the center was a long, wooden table. Six symmetrically placed statues adorned the black walls of the dark room, each more twisted than the next. They appeared to be some form of oriental fetish spirits. Other individuals were scattered about, all dressed in suits, attentively waiting. They were all oriental in appearance, with the exception of one man standing near the front of the room beside Gimlet.

He was a Caucasian, just as Gimlet. His smile, wide, stark white, and painted on his face. He was clean cut and conducted himself in the manner of a businessman or statesman. Gimlet pegged him as some ass-sucking assistant from the get go.

The men straightened themselves as a figure entered the room from a set of doors in the back. The figure donned a long, black kimono and seemed to almost hover as he crossed the room taking a seat in a large throne-like office chair at the head of the table. He was short and slender, however, there seemed to be something unique

about him. What it was, Gimlet could not put his finger on. The guy who entered with him, however, was a dead ringer.

This gentleman was a tall, thin man, even more so than Gimlet. His almost anorexic structure teamed well with his blank eyes, creating a very unnerving image. He was also a Caucasian. The distinguishing feature that pinpointed his position on Nakaturi's staff was the large, stubby, cylindrical fixture that stuck out from his forehead. A psIk Gimlet noted. "Geez," he thought to himself, "they gotta bag full of 'em in here." Nakaturi's strange minion looked up at Gimlet, with an insulted gesture on his face. He remembered why he hated psIks.

In his opinion, they were dangerous freaks, resorting to the use of technology for metaphysical purposes. The Psi-emitter was a powerful piece of gear. It contained an alpha-wave enhancer that absorbed the residual bleed off produced by the electrical stimulation of thought. The residual energy is greatly amplified through emitter and the freak using the gear can do all kinds of twisted things like locking in on other alpha-wave signatures and manipulating them to read other peoples' minds, or distorting electrical and magnetic fields to produce bizarre physical effects.

"You are Gimlet?" the man sitting in the chair asked. "I am The Gimlet," he replied. "What is the meaning of such a name?" Nakaturi asked. "A gimlet is a tool," he replied, "one used to bore holes into things." "Clever," replied Nakaturi. "My sources tell me you are a very reliable hacker. Is this true?" Gimlet smirked, brashly blurting his self-proclaimed motto, "If I can't get it, you sure as hell can't." An overstatement when compared to his actual skill. "We shall see," replied Nakaturi.

Nakaturi sat for a moment in silence, as though gathering his thoughts. "And how far can you delve into the Matrix?" implored Nakaturi. "The deepest layers. I've never failed a mission," proudly stated Gimlet. "You claim you can get whatever I want?" reassured Nakaturi. "That's right," replied Gimlet. "I want an anima."

Gimlet froze in his tracks. Animas were difficult to track. Catching one required delving into the deepest abysses of the Matrix. It required one to journey to Limbo, the street name for the Soul Axis Network.

Fifteen years ago, a revolutionary new technology erupted overnight. During an experiment that traced electrical stimulation from the brain to the power output in (A)nimation (L)ink (L)eads, the wires that control motion in cybernetics, scientists discovered a signature emanating from an unknown origin. Once locked they gained access to peculiar pulses that were eventually recognized as the human soul.

Soon social and technological scientists and philosophers collaborated in creating a new type of computer network, known as the Soul Axis, accessible through the Matrix.

The signature pulses, recognized as the material persona of the human soul are uploaded into databanks. Citizens, for a small monthly fee, are allowed to upload their consciousness and live peacefully there for as long as funds suffice. HKRs call it Limbo. The signatures are referred to as Animas.

"Are you serious?" implored Gimlet "Very," replied Nakaturi. "So you want me to jack into the blackness, enter Limbo, and snatch a soul?" "That's correct," replied Nakaturi. "That's kidnapping. I'm only a HKR." "Nonsense," corrected Nakaturi, "it's merely a non-conventional deportation. A fee of one million credits will be paid to your account upon download, and one million more when the courier is delivered."

"Wait!" demanded Gimlet, "courier? What courier?" The man beside him turned. Facing Gimlet, he smiled and offered his hand, "Pleased to meet you. I am Binary Shadow." Gimlet retorted with a 'who gives a shit' smirk.

Gimlet hated couriers. He had worked with them before. They made the big bucks in TekHL. HKRs like Gimlet had made the

Matrix unsafe for the transfer of private, commercial information. The result was couriers. Couriers would simply take the important information, commonly the only copy, and deliver it to another location in the city. It was a difficult job for such an easy task.

Many couriers were abducted or killed by their clients' competitors before they could even reach the corner. Only those with cunning survival instinct and extensive combat training stood a chance.

Couriers must have a method of transferring their clients' data to the target destination. In such a high-risk field, they are forced to travel light, and unencumbered with easily lost gear, thus the Courier Drive Implant was created. The outfit includes a hard drive that is interfaced with use of a headjack, installed on the undersurface of the cranium. When courier has the goods uploaded, he is on his way.

"He will be delivering the Anima to the secure network," informed Nakaturi. "I hate to rain on your plans here, but you can't upload an anima to a courier's databanks, wrong interface and too little of the wrong kind of memory. You'll fry this guy's frontal lobe," replied Gimlet.

"He's been fitted with an experimental courier outfit. The interface recognizes (A)nima (P)ulse (S)ignatures. The outfit contains Soul Axis compatible RAM, converting the signatures to recorded data," informed Yakamura.

"Of course," added Nakaturi, "there will be a bonus of one million credits, if you successfully deliver the courier to the secure network's location within twenty-four hours."

"Wait, he's the courier. Can't he protect himself?" asked Gimlet. "We need you to release the anima from the courier's databanks," replied Nakaturi. "Three million credits Mr. Gimlet for twenty-four hours of your time."

"Souls converted to binary code. I'll never get over it," Gimlet stated quietly to himself.

"So, how's it work?" questioned one of Nakaturi's assistants to Gimlet, with an almost rehearsed precision, as though prying for proof of Gimlet's talent.

"RTFM," Gimlet replied with disinterest, staring straight ahead.

"RTFM?" questioned the assistant in a joyous tone as though he had discovered something fraudulent about Gimlet. Gimlet turned his head toward him. Supporting his reply with explanation, "Yeah, read the fuckin' manual."

So, who's the target?" asked Gimlet. "A recently departed engineer," replied Yakamura. "One of our former employees."

Gimlet took a seat and tossed his backpack on the table. Several of the men in the room put their hands inside their jackets. Gimlet calmly opened the bag and pulled out a couple of discs and some wires, looking up for their approval. They relaxed.

Mounted on the table before him was a virtual sensor pad, adequate for gaining access to the Matrix. Gimlet preferred to rely on himself however. He gently rubbed his thumbs along the sides of his index fingers. His fingertips began to glow. He placed one end of his "jack cord," a hot sync interface line used to transfer information between terminals, in this case, between the terminal and Gimlet's Black Anima implant.

He swiped his hand across the sensor pad booting it up. "Welcome to the Nakaturi Enterprises Mainframe," it sang indicating its readiness. Gimlet clapped his fingers together, lining up the glowing tips. "Deck," he commanded spreading them wide. A virtual keyboard and various other pre-loaded guidance programs sprang into his vision.

He fumbled around the table, feeling for his jack cord, his vision blocked by the deck and guiding graphics interfaces. Finding it, he clasped between his thumb and middle finger and guided it to the Black Anima interface jack, on the side of his head, using his index and fore finger.

He plugged it in. A slight jolt distorted the graphics interfaces he had booted. They quickly adjusted. "Yakamura and the courier will accompany you," commanded Nakaturi. "Trans-mode," Gimlet commanded. The graphics interface faded allowing him to stare straight on at Nakaturi. Leaning forward, "I don't baby-sit." "You do now, Mr. Gimlet. I refuse to allow you to run amok through our mainframe without accompaniment," demanded Nakaturi. "I usually work alone. I'm quicker that way," defended Gimlet. "Unacceptable," replied Nakaturi. "Resume," Gimlet said frustrated sitting back in his chair, the graphics interface fading back in.

Yakamura and the courier sat down at the table booting their virtual sensor pads and putting headgear on. "Binary Shadow, go ahead and jack your cord," Gimlet commanded. He did so. "Are we ready gentlemen?" Gimlet inquired. "Yes," the others replied. "Very well," said Nakaturi. "You will be presented with passwords to access..." "Thanks, but I've already got one," interrupted Gimlet. Nakaturi glared at one of his henchmen standing to the side, who dropped his head in return. "Very well," replied Nakaturi fighting back his disappointment in his network administrator.

Three assistants plugged secondary cords in each station then ran them to a monitoring system. The system converted the code of the Matrix to graphic readout so Nakaturi could monitor his investment as they traversed the Matrix.

"OK," commanded Gimlet, "everyone active agent one another and go into share mode so we can exchange programs if needed." On-line details of the others appeared on each individual's screen. "Use this program to dead jack into the mainframe's construct, then we'll be untraceable when we jump into the core," he continued.

They executed the program and logged into the mainframe's construct. A swirling wormhole of flashing colors and various phonetic symbols pulled them into a marble lobby adorned with the same symbols as the wormhole floating about, then fading. On the back, hovering in the air between two pillars was the name Nakaturi Enterprises.

"Deck," commanded Gimlet, "isometric slant." The deck sloped down and back, stretching toward the horizon and clearing Gimlet's vision. The other guiding tools moving to his peripheral. Gimlet checked to make sure his DVP had loaded properly. He appeared as a gray, translucent, ghostly figure. Waves of disseminating energy flowed from the pores of his persona making it difficult for others to view a corporeal form. His DVP wore the smiling drama mask of comedy. It had loaded fine.

The Matrix is a virtual network, complete with sensory interface. When people log onto the Matrix, a DVP, Digital Virtual Persona, is automatically loaded. It may appear however the individual desires, its only limitations being the graphics program used to create it and the individual's imagination.

Gimlet looked around. His gaze met Binary Shadow, who appeared as a black, winged demon, adorned with vertically scanning green ones and zeroes, binary code. He looked to Yakamura, who stood there waiting command. He appeared as a samurai wearing golden armor, soaked and bronzed with blood. "Yakamura," teased Gimlet, "I had no idea your DVP would be so creative. I'm impressed."

"Use this connect protocol to get into the Core," commanded Gimlet. They did so. With a tug and swirl that filled them with a mild euphoria, they erupted into the Core. Yakamura grabbed the table to steady himself. Gimlet threw his hands up in the air shouting, "Whew! Yeah, Baby! This is better than sex! I love Coaster Jerking!"

The Core lay before them, a tiered network of paths, buildings, tombs, and ruins of all manners of description stretched for eternity, centralized at a large, hovering orb. Other personas danced about, data screens cluttered the landscape. This was the central navigation point for surfing the Matrix.

"Where to now?" implored Yakamura. "Well," contemplated Gimlet, "first we load this program. It will reroute our true path so if anyone managed to trace us jacking in, they'll be thrown off our course." They loaded the program. "Now," he continued, here is the Tek-Proto for the Soul Axis mainframe. It's for the Main Gate Interface. We'll basically use a masking program to get in, then enter the main gate. The program is called Axis Mask. Load it now. Enter the Tek-Proto, then execute."

Gimlet hated sharing his programs. He'd hustled every corner of the Matrix building his database, stealing, swindling, and trading. He had coded for countless hours writing new programs. His stock was his livelihood. What was loaded into his Black Anima was his life, and here he was giving it to amateurs. The thought sickened him. He'd recently sold a copy of Axis Mask to a man in sector six for five grand, then squandered the money on cheap whores, take-out food, and a couple of high-grade invasive military programs, h-gimps, their common street name.

"Are you sure it works?" implored Binary Shadow. "It better," replied Gimlet, biting his tongue from the irony, "I wrote it." They followed his instructions. With another jerk, they were launched into infinity. Everything around them stretched and bulged. Overlapping, whispered greetings blasted past them incomprehensible as they jetted through an unknown number of domains, skipping to and from, their personas being tossed about. They stopped suddenly before a large gate, glowing with a starry, blue hue. "Isn't there an easier way?" begged Yakamura, nauseated by the leap. "Yeah, but its not as fun," replied Gimlet, the smile on his mask widening.

"OK, everyone should be masked. Let's go in," Gimlet said, full of confidence. Not so confident, Binary Shadow closed his eyes and stepped through. They felt a cool breeze as they emerged on the other side. Another orb, green and large, stood looming, shimmering before them showering the foggy, white landscape with a green, sparkling hue. Huddled around it, flying in a counterclockwise direction, where small globes of bright light.

Several erupted, some in groups, to seemingly random locations, each taking on a persona. Others rejoined the orb. There was talking amongst the clicks. In the nearest, three ladies carried on a conversation. One spoke of her personal construct and invited others to join her. Agreeing, they morphed back into their globe form and shot into the orb.

An old man stared at Gimlet and the others. He approached them cautiously, staring at them in wonderment. Gimlet figured them for fingered, but decided to play it off without panicking. He wore a long coat and a suit. His hat looked tattered and weatherworn. "Greetings, newcomers?" implored the old man. "Yes," replied Gimlet, "just arrived. We were all killed in a bus accident. Say, we're looking for a friend who departed recently. And now that we are too, we'd like to visit his construct."

"I'm not sure," said the old man. "Was your friend notified on your recent, untimely departure?" Gimlet was sure that the old man was security. He brought up the information file on the engineer. Executing another masking program, one that masked the fact that he was now typing, he started searching the Soul Axis Network databanks for the engineer's anima. "I'm not sure," he carried on the conversation, futilely attempting to concentrate on what the man was saying. "Well, I hope you find him," replied the old man as he turned and walked away, fading into the fog.

"Got him," Gimlet said gleeful. They headed into the orb, taking advantage of the masking program that allowed them access, using it to become globes of light. They twisted through another wormhole and landed on a grassy knoll where a man sat fishing. "Run your program." "Load program, Fuser," said Binary Shadow. The man turned into an orb, moved from the floor of the construct, and began to merge with the courier. "We should have told him what was going on," scolded Yakamura. "We're not here on a social visit," defended

Gimlet. "We collect him and get the hell out. Do you know where you're standing?" He asked. Yakamura stood silently.

In the office Binary Shadow tightened his grip on the armchair of his seat. Biting back the pain, his mind flailing with immolation. He bit deep into his lip, sending a stream of blood down his chin. One of Nakaturi's assistants stood over him wiping his face and checking the read out of the courier's on-line status. "He's downloading the anima, sir. He's got forty-two point eight percent thus far, Three hundred gigabits." "Good," replied Nakaturi.

In the construct, as the engineer's anima merged with the courier, blue arches of electricity shot everywhere around them. The demonic figure of the courier convulsed. The face of the engineer appeared over his then faded. He dropped to the ground, his wings folding in around him.

"Seven hundred gigabytes, download complete. We got him, sir," stated the assistant smiling. "Good," Nakaturi was pleased.

He sat there for a moment, on his hands and knees, shuttering. Gimlet raced over and pulled him to his feet. "Get up, we got to get out of here." "Can't we just, what's the term, fast jack out of the Matrix?" he questioned, suddenly loosing the calmness he had found in the Soul Axis construct.

"Because of the different interface, you can't fast jack out of here. We were lucky to get in. We do, however, have to find another way out. Still through the gate, but jumping to a different protocol interface. That's the only way out. Anything else, and they got us," Gimlet explained. The other two stood there stunned.

They emerged from the orb taking on their personas. They headed toward the gate. As it faded in, masked from the fog, they saw the old man standing there. They stopped in their tracks. Gimlet knew they'd been traced. The other two looked to him, waiting for any instructions. Instead, he replied with a sign of failure.

"Do you think you can make it to the gate before I get you?" asked the old man. "Let's negotiate here," insisted Gimlet. "What's your annual pay? We can triple it." "You seem mislead," replied the old man smiling sinisterly, "I don't work for the Soul Axis Network." Gimlet and his companions shared a look of confusion. "These are my hunting grounds. Perfect, because intruders can't fast jack out."

The old man's flesh burst off revealing mangled, slimy muscle tissue. A dozen or so agony-twisted faces emerged, one and two at a time, then faded back into the persona, repeating their tortured dance. Straight, razor-like claws, a foot long, jutted from his fingertips. Chains adorned with meat hooks shot out of his body and arms. His face grew demonic, elongated, and twisted. He stared at them, psychotically. His glare was full of evil and eroticism.

"Oh, no," Gimlet said, his voice breaking with sheer terror, the smiling drama mask frowning its expression, "he's a dragon." "A what?" implored Binary Shadow demanding an immediate reply. "A serial killer that stalks his victims on the Matrix," he replied never taking his eyes off the beast that stood before them. "You mean he can harm us?" asked Yakamura. "He's got programs that can kill us. Back in the office, we'll simply die of an aneurysm, out here, we die his way," Gimlet replied.

The sound of lambs being slaughtered at a market, crying in terror from the imminent next-in-line peril, filled the air as the dragon played a looped sound file, basking in a psychotic ambience. A chain fired suddenly from the beast, at deft speed, its meat hook digging deep into Yakamura, who let out a horrible scream of pain. The chain hoisted him high in the air.

Back in the office, Yakamura let out a horrible scream, mildly convulsing in his chair. The others stared at the monitor's readout paralyzed. "Load program, Shroud," commanded the beast. The monitors went black. An assistant hurried to Yakamura's side.

"Load program, Rip!" He shouted. Yakamura's armor shattered in a poof of binary code exposing his true form. A meat hook deep in his chest, the beast flailed him about as he screamed in agony.

"Load program," shouted Gimlet in desperation, "Gat!" "Program not found," the computer's voice sent shocks of hopelessness coursing through him. If only he could reach his bag. It had to be in there. A futile thought, he reminded himself, fully realizing that he was still trapped in the Soul Axis Network's protocol.

The beast lowered Yakamura to eye level. It shuddered in child-like delight as the blades slowly began stripping Yakamura's flesh. In the office Yakamura screamed in agony, tearing at his chest. "Sir," the assistant looked over at Nakaturi with an expression of worry that was met with the same, "his heartbeat rising fast. His brainwave activity has doubled in the past fifteen seconds." "Disconnect him, now!" commanded Nakaturi. As the assistant reached for the jack wire plug, he froze. A look of terrorized confusion spread across his face, trembling mildly, he collapsed unconscious.

"Sorry," apologized the PsIk in a very deliberate tone. Nakaturi turned his head to face the PsIk standing behind him, his right hand still arranged in a bizarre, somatic stance on his forehead. "If you'd disconnected him, you'd popped his brain. He'll have to ride out the storm on his own," it justified in a bleak, prophetic voice, small waves of blue energy still pulsing from the implant that bore out of his head.

"List partitions," Gimlet demanded. The computer started naming partitions on the Black Anima's five hundred terabyte drive, "Anima Trackers, Black Anima Specialized OS for Hackers, Black Jacking Tools, Defenses..." "Access, Defenses," he interrupted, praying for the program he sought. "Load program, Gat," he pleaded desperately. A black .44 automag appeared in his hand, pulsing into existence in a flash of binary code.

He sent the program to Binary Shadow. Although it was six hundred megabytes, the upload was instantaneous, no match for the five terabit transfer rate of the Matrix. Binary Shadow, staring in awe at Yakamura's misfortune, neglected to notice the flashing light in the lower left-hand corner of his GUI, signaling an incoming file. "Take the program!" shouted Gimlet, leveling his weapon on the beast.

"This program is in direct violation of the Matrix Violence Control Act of '32. Do you wish to wish to install it anyway?" chimed Binary Shadow's gear, muffled by the sound of Gimlet's gun blasting. The computer continued to spill a legal disclaimer as it installed. An option menu came up on the screen, gun skin preferences and neural feedback controls.

"What are you doing?" pleaded Gimlet in a desperate scream. "Selecting preferences," replied Binary Shadow, moving his finger along highlighting the riot shotgun option. "Dammit, c'mon!" exclaimed Gimlet. The screen disappeared revealing a chunk of the beast flying off into the foggy space, dissipating into raw binary code.

Gimlet jumped as a shotgun blasted. He caught Binary Shadow in his peripheral vision pounding away at the beast, bolts of energy streaming from his gun. The beast deflected a volley of blasts with its meat hook wielding chains. One of them snapped, disappearing in the fog. The fog flashed a green hue where the chain had fallen, indicating its shift from graphic substance to nothingness.

A chain fired at Binary Shadow who dodged it with such deft prowess that it looked as though it merely hung there. He blasted it. It dissipated. Angered, the beast opened a gaping maw filled with pointed, razor sharp teeth. It screamed furiously. Slamming another chain into Yakamura's half-skinned, convulsing body, it ripped him in half, slinging them in either direction, showering itself with gore; Yakamura dissipated into raw code, then nothingness.

In the office, Yakamura let out a faint, final whine of torture, then rested. Blood gushed from his nose in pulses, his eyes trickling with streams of crimson; his mouth shuddered a reflexive yawn of death, his vital statistics flat-lined. Nakaturi gazed speechless as two assistants disconnected Yakamura, another cleaning up the blood. He propped his elbow on the table turning away. Staring into nothingness, he braced his forehead against his palm, slowly running

his fingers through his hair. Lost inasmuch awe as confusion, he contemplated what went wrong and the loose of his devoted employee. Only silence and grief filled the room.

"Geez," contemplated Binary Shadow, "that thing really can kill." Gimlet paused between blasts, shot a glance and continued firing. A chain shot toward him. "I got you now," cackled the beast. "Load program, Dodge!" Gimlet shouted. Suddenly he seemed to lose control of his movement. His left arm lifted, his body tugged to the right as the chain shot passed. "You ain't got shit," he retorted.

With a sudden move like lightning, Binary Shadow scrambled toward the beast. With a lunge, he rolled. Coming up at its side, with a sweep he knocked it off balance, sending it crashing to the ground. He leveled out his shotgun with the beast's face. Dropping the chains to the ground in surrender, the beast lay motionless. "I can see through your persona," it claimed with assured dementia in its voice. "Your eyes show the truth. You're a killer, just like me. You and I, we are one in the same." "No," replied the demonic persona of Binary Shadow, its decorative numbers pulsing with anger, "there's a difference." "What's that?" inquired the beast. "I'm going to have corn flakes for breakfast." The echo of the shotgun rang throughout the Soul Axis Network, the blast spreading gore across the proximity. It dissipated into binary code. "He dead?" asked Binary Shadow. Gimlet joining him replied, "What'd you have the feedback set on?" "The highest setting," he replied. "Yeah, his brain's leaking out his ass right now," Gimlet assured him.

They stepped through the gate. Within a few minutes, they were back in the boardroom. The deafening silence was broken by the hums of their machines shutting down as they logged off the Matrix. The courier sat back, relaxing, and sighed. Removing his visor, he stretched his arms overhead, ignoring the silence of the room.

Gimlet removed his jack cord, stood up, and started packing his gear, silent and solemn. Nakaturi gazed beyond him in shock, still just beyond the barriers of reality. "Where's the drop point?" asked Gimlet, staring over at Yakamura's empty seat. The console positioned where he had sat was bloodstained. He noted Binary Shadow, now standing, piddling with two automatic pistols, making last minute preparations. "You got a gun?" he asked Gimlet. Gimlet nodded. "I've seen you in your domain, now you'll see me in mine," he smiled the fake smile, nudging Gimlet as he passed, heading toward the door.

"Where's the drop point?" Gimlet asked again. This time staring straight at Nakaturi. "Sector twelve," Nakaturi lifted his eyes, "the Camhart Building." Gimlet headed toward the door. He stopped and looked back, "I told you I work faster alone. It's safer that way. I did what I could to save him. He's your bad." Nakaturi replied with a dishonored gaze into infinity. Gimlet left.

III.

Gimlet caught up with Binary Shadow who was waiting for him at the elevator. "What was that all about?" asked Gimlet. "Guess they're upset about they're loose," he replied, eyes fixed on the overhead digital readout of the elevator as it steadily reached the tenth floor, opening in a wisp. They entered. "No, I mean the 'thanks for dinner and letting me fuck your daughter' attitude back there. Up and out," reiterated Gimlet. "I'm on the job. I don't give two shits about a peon's death," the courier replied bluntly.

In the six years Gimlet had been a HKR, he'd cheated a lot of people on the fly, but never contacts. There was a 'thieves' honor' among those with whom he'd worked.

"That guy was a contact."

"A corporate casualty. Who gives a fuck? What's he to us? The only people important to me right now is the guy with the

paycheck," he pointed upstairs, "and the guy who can get this out of my head and back into the end product," he pointed at Gimlet.

'A true businessman statesman', Gimlet thought to himself as the elevator door wisp open on the bottom floor.

... end of teaser...

The journey will continue shortly. What's next?

- Gimlet and the courier face off against a NeKro-tech.
- The two discover something is wrong with prototype courier outfit.
- The discovery of Nakaturi Enterprises true desire for the engineer's anima.
- Gimlet has to make a decision that will change the course of his life drastically.