

Perchance to dream

Out of sight, out of mind.

Robert A. Metzger

There is a place to trade, on the third level, antique hardware in exchange for real food. But first I must walk this stretch of the seventh level in order to reach the Up-Tube. The haze is thick, inquiry motes swirling about me. I let them ask their questions but, as if in response, I inform them that they sample nothing but air. I study everything from long wavelength radio to short ultraviolet spikes, sniffing the pheromone bouquet and sampling the organic debris. I do not transmit, do not even reflect. I am operating in full stealth, invisible to the Dreamers about me, those inhabiting virtual worlds. Shops adorned with wrought iron and blossoming wisteria line the street, screaming with a full spectrum onslaught, begging me to enter and sample their virtual goods. Above hangs a golden sun. The street is undoubtedly thick with people, but I choose not to experience them, my stealth suit not only rendering me invisible, but also guiding me around people without the need of conscious intervention.

I am not a Dreamer. I am awake, safe in my stealth suit, isolated from the fantasy that has consumed the world.

"You in full stealth again, Grandpa?"

I focus, narrowing input to the merely visible, nulling the informational torrent, blossoming wisteria and wrought iron fading away as I drop the suit's human filter. In front of me stands a boy, naked, dirty, brown hair hanging in tangles. His eyes sparkle like diamonds, the Ocs wedged behind his corneas both spewing and gulping data — his gateway to Dream-generated worlds. He stands before me on the narrow sidewalk, naked people shuffling by us like water flowing around two rocks in a stream. The shops along this stretch of tunnel are choked with bodies, and nothing else — the only goods available on this level virtual — photons being the most cost-effective consumer objects. I look up. There is no sun, just a warren of steel strut and old plumbing hanging from cracked concrete. Flickering fluorescents cast everything in harsh light. We are seven levels below the surface,

in the lowest rungs of a Dreaming World, where the resource-challenged can only afford photon-based goods.

"Stealth suits are 20 years extinct, Grandpa," he says, waving a hand at me. "Isolation, anonymity, individualism, all such sad Dreams."

My suit might be 20 years old, but it gets the job done. I run a diagnostic. I am emitting nothing but a blast of infrared through my rear radiator fins, my ultraviolet ionizers at exhaust ports shedding any leaking DNA, and biometric compensators continually randomizing my movements. The motes of inquiring dust that choke this tunnel, transmitting torrents of data between them, nibble at my suit, questioning, probing, but my suit informs them that there is nothing there.

I am not like this boy, like any others on the seventh level. I am not a consumer of photons and Dreams. I am the last from a world now gone. I am flesh and blood, and I am invisible.

And yet this boy can somehow see me. How?

My suit accesses the boy, allowing me to see through his Ocs. There is no such thing as privacy in the Dreaming World — privacy inhibits the flow of commerce and Dreams. Perspective slips as I enter into the boy, his hands are now mine, adorned with jewels, gold rings, skin plastered with morphing displays, sleeves of silk covering my arms. This is the world he experiences. About me swirls frenzied motion and colours, bustling bodies loaded down with packages, bright sun above, shops adorned with wrought iron beckoning, and everywhere blossoming wisteria.

In front of me stands an old man — nearly naked, cloth tied around his waist, a white beard, aged yellow, hanging midway down his chest, his skin wrinkled, nearly translucent, thick blue veins visible across his bald head.

"I'm in full stealth," says the old man standing in front of me. "I'm not a part of your Dreaming World. I'm hidden and safe." He grins. He has no teeth. His eyes sparkle like diamonds, the Ocs wedged behind his corneas glistening. He is Dreaming of stealth suits. I reach for the old man, taking one of his gnarled hands. "You shouldn't be out here, all alone Grandpa," I hear myself say.

Then I blink and am back in my own skull, the boy holding my hand. "My stealth suit?" I ask, not understanding how it could be gone, as I look down at my nearly naked body. "I was going to make a trade on the third level for food," I say.

"There is no third level, Grandpa," he says, and sweeps a hand in front of me. "Only here. Everything else is a Dream."

I remember, knowing what he says is true, the confusion lifting a bit.

"Time to get you home, Grandpa," he says.

I nod, hoping that I will find my stealth suit there. We walk down the street, the warm sun shining down on us, the shops beckoning, full of wonderful Dreams for sale. The wisteria is in full bloom. ■

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