

Carlos didn't like where he was. He always said he kept his bad luck where he could see it. If you asked him to locate it on a map, this would be the spot. So he was keeping a low profile, sticking to the alleys. Taking a shortcut Geno would say. He paused opposite a dented rusty door behind a bar, the front side of which any half-boosted local in Low-Sea knew well enough to avoid.

The Short Fuze was an essential feature of lowtown culture. The kind of place you go to get boost-jacked in a waste stall. Every beanstalk port had its version of the dive. The exchange merchants and stalk workers of Low-Sea provided a steady demand for the particular brand of self-abuse purveyed in the Fuse. By the standards of the stalkfront it was a high class establishment. One of the only places in lowtown where you could trade a colonial credit for a sealed jackstem.

Most of the cargo skimmed from stalkflow was redirected and sold in an orderly process managed by the unionized hacker guilds. More a tax than piracy, the guilds held regular negotiations with the stalk engineers and gateway auditors. The result was an equilibrium of mutual benefit. Transacted and transported the same as legitimate commerce, the hackers take was priced into the market. Shanty villages and black market traders grew like electrochemical corrosion around planetary-exchange conduits. The locals called them beanstalks. Massive columns, five miles wide, pushing teratons of commodities up their length. All packaged in varying sized conduit containers, magnetically driven packages, some as small as a train car, others larger than a colonial cruiser. From the ground it looked like a solid wall composed of thousands of glass straws sucking oblong bubbles into the night sky. Carlos gazed up into the obsidian haze obscuring the beanstalks launch tubes. Flashes illuminated the churning clouds of exhaust from within. The rumbled bass of sucking thunder followed, neatly bisecting the horizon, as if to unzip the soiled sky. But rather than fall away like a worn garment, the murky night burbled yet more steam, lit by more flashes. A light fall of fine ash settled in the foreground making the skyline look almost peaceful.

Carlos shifted his view down from the beanstalks. Back down to the bent back door. All things of value go up to the orbitals, and the rest fall down to low town. You couldn't get any lower than the dives along 2nd Ave in Helltown. That is unless you were in the alley behind those shitholes, and that's exactly where he was.

He stood motionless in the sludge, silently counting off the seconds, shrouded in noxious geobrine steam billowing off the LowSea beanstalk. It would take ten seconds for Aubrey to clear the security scan at the door of the Short Fuze. Thirty seconds to shoulder through the fluid router crew who comprised most of the Fuze's patronage. They would be two hours deep in their week break... fluid routers were a surly lot, but he estimated a low probability of violent confrontation for at least another hour. Another twenty seconds for Aub to signal a drink order at the window of the back bar. Twenty more to calmly walk to position at the fourth booth along the east wall. As he counted, Carlos positioned his back about a half meter in front of the brick wall directly aligned with the back door of the Fuze. He angled his left foot forward and triggered the locking mechanism in his boots, fixing them to the carbon-ceramic weave of the alley surface with a mild tension, enough bond to keep his feet in place, with minor difficulty to break from the surface if needed.

From the dual holster at the small of his back he drew a pair of ITech Python Versa blasters. These were the real deal, they could level a city block. Mil-spec hardware like these cost more than he would make in ten lifetimes. But these guns were special, or defective, or maybe suicide, depending on how you framed it. A failed military experiment, the blasters were an oddity, originally recalled and discontinued when it was discovered that they failed to properly interface with their host's limbic system. As a high phase metacog, he was probably one of the only humans in existence who could form a neural link with the weapons. According to the antique collector he had... acquired them from, these two were the only pair left in existence. Three of a kind, he dead panned to himself.

Bracing himself for linking with the highly illegal enhancement tech, Carlos mentally reached out to tentatively feel for the bond interface. The Pythons bucked back and locked in the link before he could react. Clicks and lights played a brief ack/response exchange punctuated by the unmistakable hollow ping of a universal combat engagement signal. The guns were armed and live, actively announcing their physical presence to his arms with a compelling itch deep in the shaft of each of the humming, energy cannons extending from his hands. His senses rippled with the simple lustful need to blast, to rend fast holes. The brimming charge pent up in the supercapacitors demanded that their energy load be savagely and completely released.

"Oh maaaaan", Carlos groaned in shock. Taking a deep breath, he carefully focused his will, calming the quivethe guns, left and then right, at the back door of the Fuse.

Up to the moment he pulled the triggers of the Pythons, Carlos Caldwell didn't know what a supercapacitor was. He didn't know how the energy cannons in his hands went about producing the searing, concussive, electromagnetic mayhem which was the result of their intended application. His relationship with blasters was such that he mainly concerned himself with their accurate targeting, or the rough estimate of the damage expected as a result. It was a simple yet effective relationshiping guns which pulsed and yearned in ready need.

Then the fucking guns started talking. At least he assumed it was the guns. A soft voice, barely audible, but deadly real whispered a series of hissing, hypnotic commands somewhere deep in the center of his skull.

"Open the gatessss, release meeee"

"No", he whispered in stern reply. "Not yet."

"Oh, but yesssss." the whisper came.

"Not yet...", he counted down the last few seconds, swallowed hard, and leveled p which contributed to years spent applying such weapons for personal gain. He wasn't especially skilled in their use. Aside from the metacog mutation, which had provided his brain with an additional layer of ancillary brain cells, Carlos was nothing more than an elite con man possessing a questionable inner judge of character and the consistent ability to get himself in progressively deeper trouble.

The moment he pulled the triggers of the Pythons, all of that changed. In that moment he was altered in a profound way. Though he was not aware of the fact, at that moment he ceased to be. In that moment the process began which, before it was complete, would eradicate everything human in him.

Time stopped as he felt his center of conscious perception flow down his arms in a vivid stereoscopic rush. Flowing through his hands into the core of the two devices, where his awareness was accepted and amplified by the neural cores which drove them. He suddenly understood not just the guns, but himself and his relationship to the guns, and their collective relationship to all things.

His mind erupted out in an ever expanding wave that enveloped all of reality. The guns, the alley, the back door of the Short Fuze, Helltown, LowSea, the beanstalk. Continuing out in a curtain which engulfed the orbitals arrayed above the thin veil of atmosphere bound to the rocky planet, his mind consumed it all. It flowed along the gravity well of the nearby star to surf along in a spiral path to its countless stellar peers, arranged in globs and eddies. It walked the permutations of stop motion time slices, forward and backward, along the phantom conjecture of each waveform. All of the fractally self similar irrelevancies that danced and flirted in amongst each successive dimensional axis at every dilation of time, and space, and scale were instantly swallowed up into an infinitely compressed point at his core. And then, he focused his attention on the guns.

He had meant, at the moment he pulled the triggers, to blow the back door of the Fuze off its hinges. He clearly remembered the reason for this intended act, but he could not remember why he had considered that reason as a valid cause to pursue such an end. He suddenly felt sick for having found himself on such a course, as if awakening from sleepwalking to find himself pissing in an occupied baby stroller. In that frozen moment of time he saw the irreversibility of the events he had set in motion. Yes there was that, but there was also something else. There was that voice again. A whispered beckoning hiss.

“Look here at thissssss”, it said.

He allowed his attention to flow along the path laid open by that hypnotic call, into the complex geometries of components comprising the business end of the blasters. The design and function of the intricate tech was instantly obvious to him now. There in the web of nanites encasing the supercapacitors he found the seed of an idea. The Python blaster tech was based on a novel engineering principle. The supercapacitors were capable of charging up, drawing power from an inductive field. The hard upper bound for destructive power output of the weapons was the charge held by the supercapacitors. The voice had shown him that he could align the tandem nano lensing grids of the Pythons to form a virtual plasma hypercapacitor that would resonate with the LowSea grid field, thus amplifying the power draw and the destructive power output of the blasters by several orders of magnitude. He promptly did so. He briefly pondered the question of why the sinister sounding entity with the snake voice would trigger a weapon of mass destruction. And then the lights went out.