SLICED BREAD DIGITAL PRESENTS

THE HIROSHIMA REVERB JOB
BY LUCIA LU

PART I
WITH ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE KLAIN
The thief had brute-forced their way across the booby-trapped floor with the elegance of a half-tranqed elephant. Amateur stuff. I sidestepped the shattered kaleidoscope of glitched out tiles on Fuckmeinn&Clitch’s vault floor, and joined the rest of my team.

Tam and Narc were investigating neon-yellow residue left in the deep blue wreckage of the downed IP. It had been cracked open like an egg, its security progs reduced to limp shards around the shell itself. Above us, the rest of F&C’s assets floated serenely, huge blue forms with surfaces gently undulating in strange geometries and blinding fucktons of creds.

“This stinks, Cinn.” Tam bobbed her head mechanically as she conducted the decompl-scan. “It’s too easy.”

“Yeah,” I replied, toeing a fallen blockerbot. It looked like someone had beaten it repeatedly with a goddamn pool noodle. “They could barely handle the basic bots. How the hell did they get in here?”

“Mmm.” Tam fingered her temple to switch off her decompl-vis.

Narc and I hid our smirks. Wet abstraction is easier on the hindbrain, but for simple stuff like switching vis, Tam’s grandmotherly affectation was just archaic. Of course, neither of us said a word. It took a whole day for my tongue to grow back last time, and I need that shit to snark in wet-time.

“Trail goes straight into J-Sector Heaps,” said Tam, which was her way of telling us to move. We moved. A vault door slid open smoothly to accommodate our passage out of Fuckmeinn&Clitch. F&C was sweet enough to add a shimmer effect as we ported out of their priv-servers. The sudden, freezing brain-slam of instantaneous change-over, and we were on Main.

The street surged around us. In front of the F&C port, a blur of feathers and scales roiled, interrupted by a few bi-pedal ‘skins and the occasional dog-skin. Queztcoatl was in vogue this hour.

When humans jacked into net-time, the ‘skins they control are dependent on a brain-to-body mapping. The farther the ‘skins get from a bipedal form, the more you get crowds of people tripping over own feathers and lizard claws and fucking up traffic. Of course, outrageous animal ‘skins are the most fashionable, because people are fucking idiots. Tam, Narc, and I dove into the crowd.
For Narc’s edification, I pointed out two Furs ahead of us, fucking in hedgehog-skin and cat-skin. Furs were humans with a psychological affinity for certain animals, usually dogs or cats. In net-time, they could jack into animal ‘skins and work them fine, sometimes better than human-skins. A circle of spectators had formed around them. Watching a hedgehog go down on a cat was one of the great advancements of net-time technology.

“I could probably do that,” Narc shrugged,shouldering a hole through an intertwined triad of snake gods. “In a cat-skin, at least.”

“Yeah, right.”

As we passed the watching crowd, a young Fur in human-skin got excited and went feral, slipping into an animal hind-brain state. Her legs buckled beneath her as she collapsed, barking. When your most primal instincts suddenly tell you you’re a dog, and your brain is jacked into a ‘skin with forward-facing knees, your motor function goes straight to hell real quick.

We picked our way through the rest of the street, speed and scale and neon, and made it to our ride, Linda. Linda was the baddest, best damn thing to happen to us in years. She was hulking, could collapse into your hand, and was a few notches faster than the average vehicle. If she were a wet-time truck, she could literally pancake a man into the asphalt. We pampered the shit out of her. A complete waste of rendering power, but she fucking gleamed on the streets.

I checked the time as I opened the door to the car.

Shit. I flipped to the news scanner.

“We have to move,” I snapped, throwing myself into Linda’s backseat.

“Oh, damn. Is it on the news already?” Tam slid in beside me and coupled herself to the car.


“Ballsquirt announced a move on F&C.”

“Ohhh. Fuck,” Tam rubbed her eyes. “Fuckmeinn’s pissed.”

“Fuckmeinn’s so pissed.” We looked at each other.

“Narc!” we called, in unison.

The inertial force hit slower than in wet-time, but Linda’s acceleration still pressed me firmly against my seat. With Narc at the wheel it wouldn’t take us too long to reach the Heaps. She had an intuition for net-time movement, could
ebb-flow in traffic with the best of them.

All things considered, we were making okay time. It took 48 nanosecs for our thief to infiltrate the oldest, most respectable, downright nastiest sex toy/stim/game corp on the net (Fuckmeinn&Clitch). It took another 16 for them to steal the next market-busting vibrator buzz pattern from F&C vaults (the Hiroshima Reverb Prog). It took F&C 2 nanosecs to hire the best human mercs available (us). It took another for Ballsquirt to find out, and 180 for them to assemble a bot army around one of F&C’s Fellat-‘em-poriums. Those are the rules of engagement for big corps with old cred: While the enemy is scrambling to recover data and patch sec holes, fuck up their clientele’s jacked-in jack off time. Then watch the media coverage rise, the stock prices fall, and presumably rub one out yourself.

“Almost there!” chirped Narc in my ear. I scanned outside with my vis.

The trail had lead us straight into the most clichéd-ass abandoned stimstation bloc that’s ever featured an evil corp/spunky crew showdown. The Heaps were filled with places like these. Corps set up cheap, low-res stimstations for Heap netzens: food they’d never eat, places they’d never see. The stations run 24/7; depending on the circumstances, life can be better pissing through a tube in wet-time than being awake for it.

This is also where we found an 8 year old in one of F&C’s “SUCK-YOU-bus Devil Slut” skins doing a nudie show for some drugged out hobos in L-Sector for creds a few years back. Even then, Narc could do things with a ‘skin you wouldn’t believe. Stunning embodied un-cog.

Ironically, it looked like this stimstation bloc was one of Ballsquirt’s abandoned ones. Which stank. Nobody good, and by default rich, enough to get into F&C would resort to a nigh-unguarded, pub-server waste in the Heaps as a hideout.

Narc unzipped us. Linda went open air so we could see without as many sensors.

“See anything interesting, Tam?” Narc spat on the ground. I was surprised she even had saliva prepped for a combat/retrieval mission, but then again, Narc fucking hated the Heaps.

“Well, clearly our target has had time to hire a small army of mercenaries,” said Tam in that clinical way she had when she didn’t want to freak us out. “More than 10. I’m
picking up some impressive legacy fizzlers.” Old, but illegal for a reason. Fizzlers delivered an insidious virus that destroyed wet-time hearing, permanently.

“Is that all?” asked Narc. She expanded one of her katana blades and effortlessly clicked it into the hilt she had strapped to her waist. She was still young enough to get flashy when she was nervous.

“And there appears to be a golem, as well,” said Tam, carefully switching her vis to defaults.

I froze. “A golem? Shit, man. Those are still around?”

“What’s a golem?” asked Narc. She was too young to remember.

“Bad,” Tam said. “Let me transfer the details.”

Tam and I waited silently as Narc parsed the transfer. None of us had ever seen a golem in the flesh, as it were.

“Oh, well fuck,” said Narc, finally. She expanded a larger katana blade, snapped it into place. We looked at Tam. Tam sighed.

“We go in,” she said. “But we’re goddamn bringing Linda.”

Linda crashing through the front doors took out two guys immediately. She was open air, and Tam and I stood in a truck bed while Narc drove. The rest of the mercs dove for cover immediately.

The stimstation was big, littered with defunct fountains and huge grey geometric shapes where tropical trees used to be. Polygonal mesh arced towards the ceiling, the remnants of stripper poles and the like.

“Two behind the grey box on the left! One at our 8!” shouted Tam, decompl-vis on. “16 so far! No sign of the golem!”

I heard swearing, grinned. Nobody expects a decompler quite as good as Tam. Decompl-vis reconstitutes everything in sight to a hard code, with some fancy features to help you parse it. Visually, the result is still brain-smashing chaos. It takes years of experience to get it down, especially fast enough in combat for it to mean anything. Tam was one of the best.

From behind various pieces of wreckage, 16 guys surged out from hiding and formed ranks to Linda’s right. They were all in various modded BadMercs, for the most part. BadMerc was a generic combat ‘skin; these guys were the cheapest hires on
the market.

Narc saw the bazooka first. She screamed an angry warning and dove out of Linda. I dropped my harpoon and vaulted the side of the car. The three of us barely managed to duck behind a distorted dodecahedron when the shell explosion vibrated my jawbones.

“THOSE FUCKERS SHOT LINDA,” Narc howled into my ear. I peeked over our cover. Our ride was a steaming wreck in the middle of the expanse between us and the mercs. Tam was already running back out towards the company, her low growl cut short as she shut off her comm. I followed, and watched as she extended her palms. The bazooka-woman’s head exploded, as did the arm of one of the fizzler guys in the front rank. Visual abstraction isn’t necessary if you’re a good enough decompiler. The only person on the field who could see Tam’s weapon was Tam herself.

As Tam drew the mercs’ fire, I ran towards them, activating my arm-scramblers. My skin itched and burned as metal caps grew around my knuckles and elbows. I leapt forward, baring teeth, and punched fizzler Number Two in the neck. The scramblers on my knuckles hissed as the entire contraption of skin and trachea glitched out of existence. My victim gargled and choked behind me as I dipped down and swept my scrambler boot into a soon to be ankle-less merc. Which was a mean move, but hey. Those fuckers did shoot Linda, and Linda was a pretty big deal.

I looked up. Our last fizzler guy lay bisected at Narc’s feet, along with a splattering of random limbs. One of her arms swung uselessly by a few threads at her shoulder, mostly sawn off by a buzzard slash. I ran towards her as two guys circled in, buzzards whirring.

Narc had rashly equipped one of her huge katana blades, practically as long as her body. Her kinesthetics were rough as hell. She swung a painfully lazy arc that the guys easily dodged, but it bought me time to run up and elbow the back of one guy’s skull into nothing. The other one swung at Narc, who brought up her katana blade, pushed – the merc stumbled back a few steps, lunged forward – and Narc cut her head off. We looked at each other. Narc started laughing a deep, joyous laugh.

The rest was easy. The flow was on us, the battletrance and bloodlust. I kicked a guy in the stomach, ducking low as Narc sliced her face open. Tam twisted, dodging the rotating
teeth of a buzzard, and blew the offending merc’s arm off. Narc stabbed a guy three times in the chest, screaming Linda’s name between cackles. I grabbed a merc’s arm, swung her into another body, blinked. Tam’s bullet burned through the both of them. We blurred in blade and elbow and gunshot, laughing like little Shivas, terrible and deadly and gleeful. It’s hard to remember the details.

Suddenly, we were the only people left standing in the stimstation. Well, Narc fell over. I would have been unsalvageable the moment my brain thought my arm was hacked off, myself. The mercs on the ground were all catatonic. The “dead” ones would be out for days, wet-time.

Tam was kneeling at Narc’s head, murmuring. “This body is not-body. This air is not-air. This pain is not-pain…” Embodied un-cog. This is why we were the expensive mercs.

I sifted through the wreck of Linda, rest her soul, and found an acetyl-booster that would hopefully tide Narc over. I walked back over to my crew and patched it to Narc’s good arm. She sat up almost immediately. Pain suppression is a hell of a lot easier when you’re only figuratively bleeding out.

Tam looked around. “All clear for the mercs, at least. I’m also picking up our thief.” She paused, groaned a little. “She’s holed up in a back room.”

I facepalmed. It was always the big bad in the back room. Tam didn’t even need to tell us where.