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Opening Extract from...

Waking Hell

Written by Al Robertson

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WAKING HELL

Al Robertson

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For my parents, Ian and Penny

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Chapter 1

Leila's brother Dieter was dying. Lying in his cheap hospital bed, metastasised technologies writhing beneath his skin, he'd joked that at least she'd have their flat to herself for a few months.

'The pizza delivery guy's heartbroken. Doesn't know what to do with himself,' Leila replied, determined to put a brave face on it all. She went to rest her hand on his. Her virtual fingers passed through his flesh ones, her defences protecting her by refusing to simulate any physical contact between them. Two nights ago, an ancient wooden cube had buried itself in Dieter's chest and started to devour his body. She imagined its ghost tendrils touching her and flinched back, catching his eye as she did so. His sadness and guilt pierced her.

'I'm so sorry,' he began. 'So careless…'

She shushed him. 'We'll get you fixed up. And even if you do kick the bucket – well, six months and you'll be back again. Good as new. A fetch, just like me.'

'But we'll lose the flat. You'll have to go back to the Coffin Drives.'

A deep, instinctive fear lanced through her. She did her best to suppress it. 'If it comes to that, I'll cope. But it won't. I'll talk to Junky Fi, work out exactly what she sent you.' She forced confidence into her voice. 'She'll know how to kill that box. And if she can't help, Ambrose will.'

Dieter saw straight through her. 'They haven't returned your calls.'

'It's only been a day or so. Maybe Fi hasn't checked her messages. All this is down to her, she has to get in touch. And Ambrose is probably out on a binge. Or sleeping one off. It's an emergency, he has to help us.' A pause. 'One of them will.'

'Yeah,' replied Dieter, sinking back into the bed. The wires wrapped round the inside of his throat gave his voice a soft, buzzing quality. He didn't sound convinced.

Looking to distract her brother, Leila set him talking about the past. He perked up as he tossed out favourite anecdotes from Station's seven-hundred-year history, Leila laughing along with him. They almost managed to forget where they were. But at last visiting time ended and she had to leave.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' she said. 'After work.' Under the rules of the isolation room, only family could visit him – and she was the only family he had. 'Your antivirals have slowed the infection right down. Maybe the doctors will come up with something. And we'll hear from Ambrose or Fi.'

'Yes,' replied Dieter. 'We will.' He was being brave for her, wearing a mask that mirrored her own.

'You saved me after the Blood and Flesh plague,' she told him. 'No one thought you'd be able to, but you did. You'll get out of this.'

In the corridor she let the sadness take her, one more powerless relative wishing for a remade world. Then home, sleep, and another day to get through before she could see Dieter again.

The hours crawled by. The day's last appointment took her out of the office. She had to show a middle-aged couple around a small block of flats in the newly fashionable Prayer Heights district of Docklands. They were looking for a good investment. She called up the building's management systems, confirmed her visit, and then set out across town on foot.

For a few moments, her home distracted her. Docklands arced up to her left and right, a city of tens of thousands clinging to the inside surface of a kilometres-long cylinder. Ahead of her the cylinder ended in the vast round wall of the Wart, the hollowed-out asteroid that bound Docklands to its more prosperous twin, Homelands. And behind her there was a flat disc of darkness, where Docklands opened on to the void of space, pierced by the Spine and the docking pylons that ran off it. The abandoned Earth drifted lost somewhere beneath them, shaken by endless, unstoppable storms of post-human brutality. It had died long ago and – unlike Leila – it would never be reborn.

In fact, Leila had been resurrected twice. Six months after her

death she was reborn as a fetch, an entirely virtual entity constructed from the digital memories she'd amassed while alive. Her avatar simulated her living self, aging slowly as post-mortem time passed. At first she'd been happy to live in the Coffin Drives, the home of the Fetch Communion, but then the Blood and Flesh plague broke her memory and all but destroyed her. After Dieter helped her through her second rebirth, she'd moved back to share their old flat in Docklands. The casual fetch hatred she'd run into had depressed her so much she'd asked him to make her fetch identity tags invisible. Passing acquaintances usually assumed she was one of the living. Now Dieter was probably approaching a rebirth of his own.

As she walked, she checked her messages again. Nothing from Ambrose or Junky Fi. She could understand Ambrose's silence – but Fi's was starting to annoy her. She left another message for her, letting her irritation show. 'You owe him,' she ended it. 'You owe us both. Fucking call me. NOW.'

Then there was nothing to distract her. Memories of the night of Dieter's infection forced themselves on her. He'd been so excited. A courier had bought a piece of the deep past, an artefact of uncertain provenance and function. It looked to Leila like an old, square, wooden box.

Perched on the sofa, Dieter peered at it through various digital and physical aids. 'Chi branding!' he enthused, weave screens and keyboards drifting in the air around him. 'She was one of the twelve original Pantheon gods. The first to be taken over.' He shifted, reaching for a magnifying glass. 'She fell just like Kingdom did. Because she was corrupt. I wonder if he remembered her when he was dying.' He knocked a pizza box off the sofa. A couple of slices spilled out on to the floor. He didn't notice. 'If this is something she built – gods, it's as old as Station. Older. From precursor times, maybe! It might even get Ambrose's attention. He's the only one that'd appreciate this, now Cormac's gone.'

'Seven hundred years old,' she said. 'Incompatible with anything the five gods we've got left will ever produce.' She bent over and took a closer look. 'I'm sure it'll thrill him.'

'Philistine.' There was a smile in his voice too. 'Anyway, it's not

just about the history. Junky Fi put a note in with it. She wants me to take it to pieces, check it out for her. She says there's good money in it.' He revolved it in his right hand. 'Ouch! Fuck.'

'Are you OK?'

'Bloody splinter.'

Dieter put the dead god's artefact down on the coffee table and peered at his hand. Leila was able to get her first proper look at the box. It was about the size of a large coffee mug. Each of its six sides was criss-crossed with raised strips of wood and dusted with light golden patterns. Scuffed weave sigils repeated themselves across each one. Leila didn't recognise any of them. One side of the box was cracked open. Thickets of wires clumped with a soft, organic-looking red gel oozed through jagged cracks.

'She's paying you to assess that?'

Dieter nodded.

'Wow.'

He reached for the box again, held it up to eye level and gazed at it.

'Beautiful…' he breathed.

Leila thought she saw the wires and gel shift faintly. 'It's secure?' she asked. 'I don't want to have my memory eaten. And you're not spending the rest of time ghosting out like Cormac did.'

Dieter sighed, the past shivering through him. 'Amen to that. And yes. Fi says she's checked it out, she's always pretty reliable. But I'll give it a once over before I dive in properly.'

The box's spilled guts were definitely moving, pulsing softly in time with his voice. Leila wondered what invasive bonds it had already formed with him. 'It looks like you're already in pretty deep.'

Dieter chuckled. 'Superficial stuff. Maybe I should call Ambrose. Just to see what he thinks.' He turned to her, his face alive with enthusiasm. 'He always loved this sort of thing.'

'No, Dieter.'

Ambrose was her boss' lawyer. He'd found her job for her. She chatted with him a couple of times a week. These days, she knew him far better than her brother did. 'He won't want to hear,' she warned Dieter. He looked crestfallen. 'Look, if you really have to – well, just don't go rushing in. And don't expect too much.'

'I really could use his help on this. It's a pearl.' He smiled wolfishly. 'A rent-paying pearl…'

Leila's response was instant. 'You don't need to worry about that.'

Dieter looked away from her. His income was at best variable. Without Leila's job, he'd have been evicted from the apartment long ago. At the moment, his funds were scarce, something he felt as a deep humiliation. 'Without you, we couldn't keep this flat,' Leila told him. Fetches weren't allowed to rent or own property. Had she been alone, she'd have been back in the Coffin Drives, living in the place where her second, final death had so nearly overwhelmed her, where the fact of that agony still made her feel so completely insecure. 'And I still owe you for helping me rebuild myself.'

Dieter grunted. Leila hoped that she'd reassured him. His attention was back on the artefact. He turned it over and over in his hands, lost in it.

'Well, I'm not going to watch you playing with that thing all night. Everyone's meeting up at Ushi's.'

Dieter grunted again. Leila let the weave rise up fully around her, curious about the wooden box's virtual presence. An adsprite drifted up from the pizza box, a mozzarella-coloured little man with curly hair and a big moustache singing jauntily about pepperoni. The flat's spam filters snapped him out of existence.

Seen through the weave, the artefact looked a little less broken, a little more solid. Its edges glowed light gold. As she peered more closely at it, querying its deeper self-presentation systems, she felt code made alien by the passage of time thrust back at her. A warning pulsed in her mind – 'UNREADABLE'.

It was much more legible to Dieter. His weaveware made shining talons of his fingers. As he played with the artefact they bit into it then snapped back, probing and reprobing for safe passage into its secrets. He looked so sure of himself. As the moment played out again, she wished she could step back and shake him out of it. Instead, that younger her, who now seemed so unreachably far away, just said: 'At least make sure it doesn't bring InSec down on us.'

'Oh, they'll never spot this,' Dieter replied, not even looking up. 'The flat's far too well defended.'

Later, when she returned home from the bar, there was an

ambulance waiting outside the block's front door. A man in an InSec-branded containment suit stopped her from going in. 'I'm sorry,' he told her when she identified herself. 'There's very little we can do.'

They wheeled Dieter out on a gurney that sparkled with cage-ware. 'Stupid bastard,' one of them grunted, as they lifted him over the front door step. A few neighbours peered out of doors and windows. When they saw Dieter, they turned away. The artefact had burrowed into the hollow at the base of his sternum, sinking into it like a boat half-lost in water. Part of his T-shirt was eaten away. He looked thinner. His grey skin implied exhaustion. Leila let all weave overlay drop away for a moment. The changes remained.

'Leila,' he called out, his voice cracking, then: 'I'm so sorry.' Those few words exhausted him and his eyes closed.

'We're taking him to the Arigato charity hospital,' one of the containment workers told her.

'But he has medical cover – it's basic, but it's all up to date.'

'Illegal tech. It's not covered.'

'Oh no.'

'I'm sorry. But at least it hasn't reached his weaveself. There won't be any problems with his fetch. And we've swept the apartment, it's clean. The box is a one-shot mechanism. Now it's in him it's not going to hurt anyone else.'

The containment workers' visors were mirrored. As they left with Dieter, Leila realised that she'd seen nothing at all of their faces.

She reached the block she was meant to be showing, and snapped herself out of the past. Its reasonably freshly painted exterior loomed over her. For most of the last decade it had been a burnt-out ruin, a void site projecting images of the terror-killed dead out into Station. Then, it had served as a reminder of why the Soft War against the rebellious AIs of the Totality was so necessary. With the discovery that Kingdom himself had been behind the terror attacks, blaming them on the Totality so as to ignite and expand a vastly profitable war, it had become an embarrassment. When he'd fallen, the block had passed into his conquerors' hands. The Totality had rebuilt it and – having let it out as living units for a couple of years – were now putting it up for sale.

The potential buyers were already there. They'd travelled over from Homelands for the viewing. 'You have to see property in person,' the wife had said. 'It's the only way.' Now they stood in a Docklands backstreet beneath dimming spinelights. The husband looked a little nervous. As Leila approached them, she heard him say something about their personal security systems.

'Well, for the amount we pay the Rose every month I'd expect a little collateral damage,' his wife replied. 'Not that I've seen anyone who'd have the balls to attack us.'

They were certainly very happy about displaying their wealth. The weave overlaid them with a dense tapestry of up-to-the-minute fashions, chosen to show off as many different designers as possible rather than create any sort of satisfying, coherent look. Together, they blared out a visual dissonance that was almost avant-garde.

They followed Leila into the three-storey building. Its systems recognised her, opening and closing doors as she moved through them, summoning the lift when it looked like she'd need it. All three flats were empty. Late afternoon spinelight shone into pristine emptinesses of bare walls and cream carpets. The smell of fresh paint hung in the air. The tour viewing ended in the top flat.

The wife nodded approvingly. 'We'll do it up a bit. Flashy but cheap. They like that over here.' She turned to Leila. 'Many viewings?' It was the first time she'd directly addressed her.

Leila nodded. 'There's a lot of demand for properties like this.'

'I think we might be interested. But we need to see it off-weave.'

'Are you sure, dear?' The husband blanched.

'Don't be so spineless, Gerald. We both know how much these people,' gesturing towards Leila, 'can hide when they're trying to sell something.'

'The surveyor can handle that.'

The wife ignored him. 'Miss… whatever your name is, take us off-weave.'

Leila blanched.

'Well, go on then.' The wife peered at her, her tightly-styled, blue-rinsed hair a curt halo around her sharp face. 'What are you waiting for? Something to hide, dearie?'

'Just meshing with the block's weave server,' Leila replied. She'd

try and bluff them. She wasn't in the mood for a confrontation.

'I'm sure.' The wife turned to her husband. 'We'll smell damp. Or there'll be rot.'

Leila called up the weave server. It hummed with vast, underused power. As a void site core system, it had had to serve thousands, maybe even tens of thousands, of viewers simultaneously. It was the most highly specced block weave system she'd ever seen. She told it to shut down all weave content except for fetch manifestations. A moment passed, then the room changed.

The previous tenants had left the sink full of dirty washing and the wastebin full of scraps. There was a sour reek of rotted food. An open cupboard was full of tins. The wallpaper was torn and dirty. Stains rippled across the scruffy carpet. Leila swore to herself. It wasn't the first time her boss had done this to her.

'I told you so, Gerald,' crowed the wife. Now that the weave was down, her high-fashion costume had disappeared. She wore a white jumpsuit scattered across with designer weave sigils.

Gerald wore dark trousers and a t-shirt. He looked very pale. 'We've seen what we need to see, dear.' Sweat beaded his forehead.

'And who knows what else you're hiding,' the wife told Leila. 'Really, did you think you could get away with this?'

'Can we bring the weave back up, dear?' Gerald was leaning against the wall. He looked ready to slump to the floor. 'You know how much I hate this.'

'Wait,' his wife said. 'We're not fully offweave yet.' Gerald groaned. 'There's still something.' She rounded on Leila. 'What are you trying to hide from us?' Then she paused, eyes flicking backwards and forwards as she read a virtual display. 'Oh,' she said slowly. 'You're a fetch.'

Leila sighed to herself. 'Yes,' she replied.

'Well, no wonder we're getting lied to. You don't know what truth is because you aren't even real. I'll be complaining about you, you shouldn't be doing a job like this.'

Leila felt fury rise up. *Be professional*, she reminded herself. Then she spoke. 'Under the terms of the post-rebirth settlement, I'm as human as you are. I have every right to earn a living.'

The woman snorted. 'Nonsense. Gods!' She turned to her

husband, who now had fallen all the way to the floor. He was panting with stress. 'Why am I even arguing with a piece of software? Oh, and do stop being so pathetic.' She turned back to Leila and snapped: 'Bring the weave back up.'

Leila did so, ripostes burning through her. She imagined how each would play out. They all ended in complaints to her boss, perhaps in dismissal. She was better off just ignoring it all.

She said nothing else as she led the buyers out of the building. She imagined setting up a fictional counter-buyer to bid against them. 'Tell your manager we'll call with an offer tomorrow,' the woman said. 'And a complaint.'

Leila barely heard her. There was a message, but it wasn't from Ambrose or Fi. The hospital had called. 'You'd better get over here as soon as you can,' a nurse said, her voice taut with stress. 'Your brother's insurance pay-out has come through…'

What insurance? Leila wondered.

'…but he's totally lost it,' continued the nurse. 'He's turned all his antivirals off and is refusing any medical help. The infection's eating him alive.'

In the background, Dieter's voice rose in a strange, croaking howl: 'DON'T ANY OF YOU TOUCH ME! I'M A FUCKING LOADED NOW, THAT MEANS I GET MY FUCKING WAY. I HAVE TO DIE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND NONE OF YOU WILL STOP ME!'