

BROWSING

Security issues.

BY IAN WHATES

A slow day. Gabriel 'Gabe' Tarvy found himself on the corner of 52nd and 3rd. It was nowhere special — exactly the sort of place he favoured when browsing.

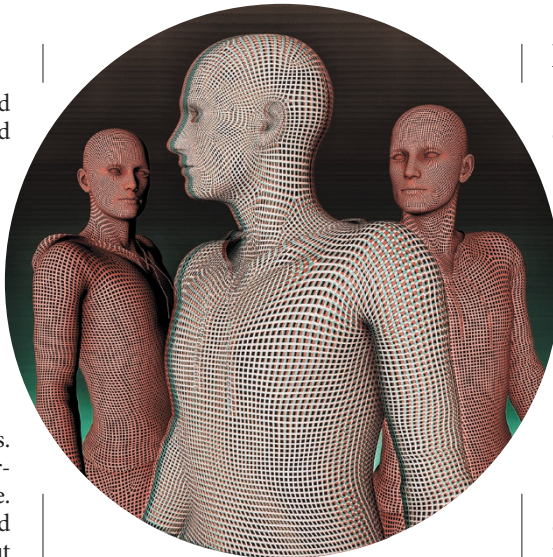
The intersection was busy — not jammed but with more than enough foot traffic to provide cover. Gabe loitered at the corner, allowing his gaze to sweep this way and that as if to get his bearings. In a handful of seconds, twenty-eight people had passed close enough to be registered and identified by his smart lenses. Twenty-five were of no interest — their personal security was too tight, too up-to-date. Gabe felt confident he could have cracked any one of them given time, but not without triggering alarms, not unless he had a *lot* of time...

The other three, though, they were a different matter.

This was how it went, how it always went. He just needed to be patient. Wait long enough and someone who hadn't yet applied the latest security updates was bound to come along. They intended to upload them, no doubt — tonight, or maybe tomorrow — but they hadn't got around to it yet. Sometimes, as today, he didn't have to wait long at all.

Two of the three were exactly what Gabe had been hoping for: low-grade security, outmoded and ineffectual if you knew what you were doing. The first he dismissed. The clothes were shabby, the security so cheap and inadequate that, rather than being late to upgrade, it was clearly all the man could afford. Not worth bothering with. The other, though, was well-dressed and professional-looking; lazy rather than being poor, just begging to be fleeced. Gabe took great delight in doing so, stealing passwords, plundering accounts, all in the two or three seconds it took the mark to stroll past. The funds disappeared via a series of transfers and switches between dummy accounts registered all around the world, before eventually returning to Gabe, scrubbed and untraceable.

The third anomaly was intriguing. A woman, early thirties, professional and sharp, sporting the sort of suit that said she was going places if she hadn't already arrived. Everything about her screamed money, particularly her security, which was better than anything Gabe had encountered



while browsing before. This sort of sophistication he expected to find guarding the core secrets of a major corporation, not an individual strolling along 52nd Street.

He reined everything back, wary in case his system's lightest touch should trigger an alert, and then he followed her. Of course he did. Gabe loved nothing more than a challenge. Once he established where he might find her again he would return with subtler, more sophisticated tools. Then he would have her.

The crowds made tailing her easy. She led him to a smart office block, the sort occupied by numerous companies or by one corporate giant. She entered via large plate-glass doors. After the slightest hesitation, Gabe followed. If he could just see which floor she went to, work out who she worked for... But a security desk stood between him and the elevators. Anyone passing beyond would be noted, scanned and challenged if they didn't belong.

This would be enough. He could come back better prepared and wait for her outside.

As he turned to leave, Gabe was confronted by two burly men. Before he could react the woman was there, penning him in.

"Gabriel Tarvy, come with me, please." The words were clipped, her voice assured.

"What do you...?" He started to protest, but she skewered him with a look that caused the words to wither on his lips.

"Do you really want to do this in public?"

He had no answer. "I didn't think so. This way."

He followed meekly to a side office, the

two goons in suits never more than a step behind. At least they stayed outside.

"What is all this?" Gabe asked, recovering some of his customary confidence.

The office was sparse, bright, antiseptic. There was no desk, just two chairs facing each other. The woman gestured towards the nearest. Gabe sat, reckoning the sooner he did so, the sooner this would be over.

"My name is Laura Dyne," she said, "and I'm here to recruit you."

This was ridiculous. "To do what, exactly?"

"To catch other Browsers."

"You're police, then?"

Her smile was thin. "No, we're private sector, contracted to keep the streets safe from casual thieves like you. Have you any idea how many billions browsing costs the economy every year?"

Gabe did, but saw no reason to admit as much. "Why should I?" he said. "You've got nothing on me."

"The funds you just stole from the man with the low-grade security, they were marked. We can follow their every movement, their every transfer, which will lead us back to..."

Him. But that was impossible. Transfers couldn't be traced... Could they?

"It's up to you, of course," she continued.

"So there is a choice."

"There's always a choice." He didn't like *that* smile, it was unnerving, predatory. "Either you join us or we Black Flag and incarcerate you."

"No!" The denial was out before he knew it. Prison he could handle — the sentence wouldn't be long, not for a first offence — but Black Flagging... It meant being indelibly tagged: nanotech, binding with his very DNA, a stain that could never be excised. He would be marked. Anybody with even the crudest personal security — which meant everyone — would recognize him as dangerous, to be avoided.

It meant becoming a pariah: no work, no friends, no anything.

"You wouldn't," he said. But he saw in her eyes that she would.

What she offered him was no choice at all. ■

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