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WELCOME BACK

by Patrick W. Benjamin

GETTING EQUIPPED

Jax pulled the MaiFirst™ brand cyberdeck from the red plastic milk crate on the counter and looked at the stickers on front and back box covers. "Warning!" read one bright red sticker on the back. "This product is intended for use with Vid-I/O Entertainment games and productivity software and your local city network. Any other use automatically voids the warranty of this product."

"So where do I pop in the program chips?" Asked Jax feeling a bit like a weefle. Jax may have been out of the game for twenty years, but she knew running the net with stock equipment was an amateur move.

"That's, no longer a thing," said her longtime friend Jinx. Jinx's thumbs were a blur as she typed on a keyboard shorter than the length of her hand. "At least," Jinx continued glancing at her friend, "not like you're thinking."

Jax looked Jinx in the eyes. Her pupils flickered and glowed in ever changing rainbow colors. Jinx must be rolling in Euro bucks if she can afford such high end implants as retinal monitor.

"Take a look," Jinx said as she reach for her own Simian Port-a-Deck™ that rested on the counter. Jinx flipped the deck over, twisted a folding thumb screw a few times, and pulled open the water tight bottom panel.

The circuitry was clean and dotted with black circuit chips.

"Are those soldered with gold?" Jax asked astounded.

"Compu-flex," Jinx said, "Self repairing conductive material."

"See, the chips aren't just memory storage," Jinx said, "they are now micro computers themselves: sub-processors helping to interpret the program's META code to speed things along. Oh, they do have memory chips, but they are super slow and only the suicidal will use them on a NET run."

"So META is as powerful as they say?" Asked Jax.

"Oh, yeah." Jinx perked up. "META is everything. Other languages don't even work any more."

Jax removed her cyberdeck from the plain cardboard box. It is light, she thought as she removed the shrink wrapping and Styrofoam. After a few seconds of looking it over, she flipped it over and opened the bottom cover. The circuit board was practically empty of chips. Several chips were marked "META" and the few remaining were stamped "Mai Corp."

"Here," said Jinx after tossing a sealed baggie onto the counter in front of Jax. Jax picked up the bag and examined what looked like black centipedes. Each had a white label glued to the top with names on them.

"Worm?" said Jax. "Is this black Ice?" She whispered.

Jinx laughed. "No," she said, "These are," Jinx smiled and pointed to a large, unmarked, black chip within her cyberdeck. Just this one chip spanned across multiple chip sockets.

"What's that?" Asked Jax.

"About five hundred Euro at any Night Market," Jinx replied. "Or double that for the latest and greatest version," Jinx added. "Those are 'fresh from the coder', as they say."

"These chips have ionic cooling?" Jax said examining the chips closely. Jinx nodded in the affirmative.

Jax pulled out a small box from the red milk crate. It was in a plain cardboard box with black marked text reading "Insulated Wiring".

"So you don't catch fire," Jinx said hurriedly. "Hey," Jinx interjected, "let's get building."

Lunch passed and the evening came around. The two women sat eating their pizza dinner.

"So even 'Insulated Wiring' uses META?" Wondered Jax. Jinx nodded as she tilted her head back to talk.

"Everything needs META," Jinx said with a full mouth. "The code chip does the work of preventing the incoming attack. The thicker insulation is just in case the program fails."

"Does it fail?" Jax asked worried.

"I've never caught fire," Jinx lied with a telltale double blink.

Jax looked at her newly upgraded cyberdeck. After ditching the Mai Corporation's translocator and tamper proofing chips, the enhancements left her with only three slots for programs. Jax picked up her Rayben™ Virtuality eyeglasses. She coiled up her meter long, spaghetti thin interface cables and placed them in her purse.

"You ready?" Asked Jinx as she tossed her crust into the trash can. Jax exhaled loudly and then nodded.

"Then let's go," Jinx smiled.

McMACS RESTAURANT

A nearly two story fan inflated Pasta Monsta flexed and danced in front of the McMacs.

"It's like being at a car dealership," said Jax. Jinx nodded agreement.

They sat in Jax's leased red JMC iOn two seater in the McMacs parking lot.

McMacs served edible food, but their gimmick was customers ordered using a Virtual Reality, "Old 'Net", style interface. That and the fact McMacs always seemed to have a steady supply of menu items put McMacs top of the list for "Quick Meals at Honest Deals" as their slogan says.

"Nervous?" asked the younger Jinx. Jax nodded affirmatively. "We'll be fine," Jinx said placing her cyberdeck on her lap. "It's tradition to do a McMacs as your first run," Jinx added looking over at Jax. Once again, Jinx's eyes were a light show. Jinx then pressed her interface plugs into her inner wrist.

"O.K.," said Jax with an uncertain tone. "How do we do this again?"

"Like this," said Jinx as she popped open the switch's safety cover and activated the red toggle.

Instantly, seemingly random code flashed before her eyes as the computer woke up Jinx's mind.

After only a few seconds, the cyberdeck's menu options hovered before Jinx field of view. With a thought, Jinx ran the "Scanner" option.

Within an instant, the cyberdeck transmitted a generic META message attempting to connect. The air waves responded by populating Jinx's field of view with a cloud of connectable nodes. New nodes flickered into view as old ones dropped completely from sight as the access points' adjusted for amplitude.

Jinx knew the closest node should shine brightest. That would be McMacs she concluded.

Without warning, Jax suddenly popped into Jinx's view. Although system networks reset for each instance of a "visitor", Jinx had synchronized the two decks tricking the NET architecture into allowing the two women to share the experience.

THIS ISN'T McMACS

Jax opened her eyes. She was still sitting behind the wheel looking out of the front window at a brick building. "Nothing happened," Jax said with disappointment, but then she noticed the menu options in a hexagon pattern in the upper corner of her vision. A

"We're in," Jinx reassured her. "Run Pathfinder from the menu," Jinx said.

After a second's worth of realization that she and Jinx were in fact sharing a menu, Jax activated the Pathfinder option.

An instant later, Jax and Jinx both watched their Virtuality glasses go dark. Then, it was as if someone had dropped a rock into a pond. The ripples radiated out from their position leaving white lines to define the dimensions of a space surrounding each of them. The square was barely larger than their car's passenger compartment.

They could only see from their own perspective, but both continued to watch as the ripples began to penetrate downwards leaving behind a glowing lattice work of fine glowing blue lines.

"Pathfinder gives you a map of the NET Architecture," Jinx said as she looked at the emerging Architecture.

Jinx twisted in the car's passenger seat to look at Jax. "This isn't McMac's," Jinx said.

Jax looked away from the two story wire structure and at Jinx. "Should we jack out?" Jax asked.

"No, wait!" Jinx said driven by curiosity. "This is good practice," she said, "Let's find out where we are." Jinx looked back at the Architecture.

"O.K.," said Jinx getting down to business, "As you can see, the stack of rooms looks like an elevator which is why they are called 'floors'. But," she continued, "unlike an elevator, we stay where we are and the floors move up and down."

"Ready?" Jinx asked. Without waiting for a reply, the first floor which was below their feet suddenly rose to envelop them. The room was Transparent and void of everything except a yellow file cabinet. "Jax looked at Jinx with her head cocked as it to say, "Ready?"

"Most times META interprets files as cabinets or folders on a table. One time, META used a nail file. I was doing a run of a nail salon." Jinx explained.

Jinx looked at the cabinet and an instant later a cloud of overlapping words and phrases hovered in the air. "Eye-Dee utility," Jinx said, "the larger and brighter the phrase, the more prominently featured or repeated in the document."

"A guest list," Jinx said. "Looks like we are in the Crowded House Disco?" Jinx questioned.

"I didn't see any disco around here?" said Jax. Suddenly, Jax's vision blurred for an instant as the second floor rose to replace the first.

The room was well lit, but the walls and floor were completely black. A large padlock sat on a corner table.

Without hesitation, Jinx activated her own Pathfinder utility. Suddenly, the floor beneath Jax began to glow as Jinx activated her own Pathfinder utility. This time, Jax watched the world beneath her begin to glow blue.

Sitting in a car while running the Net was awkward at best, Jax realized as she looked at her lap.

Focusing beyond her lap in the foreground, Jax could see more floors shine into existence. She could only see a few floors down, the floors beyond were visibly obscured. She will just have to go down further before she could see them.

Jinx picked up the padlock, studied the front and back, and returned it to the table. After a moment of running the Backdoor decryption utility, the lock simply popped open and the walls went transparent. Again, all went blurry as Jinx transported them down to the third floor.

"You're killing me with the moving," Jax said regaining her vision.

The third floor would also have been clear walled except for the computer monitors covering the walls.

"Run the Control utility," Jinx told Jax. A moment passed and nothing happened. "I am worthless," said Jax deflated.

"No, just new to the game is all," Jinx said as she ran the cyberdeck utility and instantly half of the monitors began showing scenes from inside a night club. "The Crowded House Disco I presume," said Jinx.

"Play all monitors," Jinx ordered and the remaining monitors brightened to life. Each of the new monitors said, "Recorded" while the other said "Live". Jinx watched the recordings. Some bordered on pornographic. Also, she recognized many of the faces featured.

"Who are these people?" Jax asked.

"Mostly politicians and minor celebrities," Jinx said. "Blackmail videos," Jinx said. Both women looked at each other.

Jinx perked up. "Oh, wow," she said, "my media contacts would go crazy over this sort of thing."

"We should get out of here," Jax said. As a bodyguard, Jax new danger when she seen it. "This is a world of hurt looking to fall on us," Jax said.

"If we can get to the Root of the Architecture," Jinx said in a frenzy of thought, "then I could leave way in for me next time." Jinx looked at Jax who said nothing and a long second passed before Jinx spoke again. "There's a black ice program down there." Jinx said looking at Jax, "I need your help."

Jax closed her eyes. Jinx was always like a little sister and Jax promised herself long ago she would protect Jinx to the end.

"Alright," Jax said with reluctance.

"Good," said Jinx. Before Jax had time to continue, Jinx dropped the pair to the fourth floor. An identical padlock to the previous password protected floor rested on a corner table and again the walls were tinted glass, but a clear floor allowing them to see below to the next floor.

"Why does the floor move?" Jax wondered aloud.

"Black Ice," Jinx said. "Snakes." Jax snapped a look at Jinx. "It's all in your mind sister." Jinx's Backdoor program took two seconds to crack the password. They are hiding something down here, Jinx thought to herself.

"Don't worry, Jax," Jinx said, "we can slip past this black ice." Jinx put on a positive face, but truth was Jax was brand new to Interfacing and META could be unpredictable at times. Still, positive thoughts, Jinx told herself.

Jax activated her cyberdeck's Slide utility. Instantly the tropical jungle floor below her passed he eyes as a green blur. Her Virtuality glasses cleared and she shared the room with only a door knob on a corner table. Jax gave the knob a twist, but it did not turn.

"Control Node," Jinx said the instant she too slide past the obvious Asp program. "Leave it," Jinx said as she looked down through the clear bottom to the floor below. The root floor, Jinx thought to herself.

The Root floor flickered shown bright with licking yellow and red flames. No demon programs are operating the control nodes so it isn't them, she thought. That leaves. . .

"It's a Hellhound program," Jinx said. Jax glanced at her.

"That'll be the bad news I was expecting," said Jax.

"We can not beat the speed of the computer," Jinx said, "so the black ice will attack the instant we land."

"Whoa," Jax said in protest, "we're still doing this?"

"I have to be on the Root floor to write the virus," Jinx explained.

"How long will that take?" Asked Jax.

"Less than a minute," Jinx said, "After we derez the Hellhound." Jax looked at Jinx a long moment before cracking.

"Damn you, Jinx," Jax smiled, "you're going to get me killed." Jinx smiled back.

"Ready?" Asked Jinx. Jax nodded and suddenly the two dropped into the flaming pit below.

"Damn it," Jax yelled as the Hellhound spared no time in attacking the intruders from behind. She felt no bite or burn except for a sudden shock in her head which caused her eye to twitch.

Jinx looked at Jax with great concern. What was I thinking? Jinx thought. A new runner against a Hellhoubnd? Jinx spun the room around with a swipe of her fingers.

The Hellhound was tall, but bone-thin as if the unfelt heat melted the flesh and baked muscle to bone. Its eyes burned intensely white with an unholy flame.

"Jax," Jinx said, "We're done here. Jack out."

"You are too, right?" Jax asked concerned.

"I'm right behind you," Jinx lied.

In the time of a thought, Jax's Virtuality glasses went clear of all but the car in which she sat. Jax waited a few seconds before realizing Jinx's plan.

"Jinx," Jax said sternly, "get out of there now. In the time time Jax spent talking, Jinx had turned the tides against the Hellhound.

Just a few more attacks and I have it, Jinx thought.

Suddenly, Jax's facial expression changed and she swore. "A netrunner," Jinx said, "we've been made."

THE GET AWAY

Jax immediately unplugged her interface cables from her wrist.

Jax looked in every direction. The metal door on the building behind her burst open. Three burly men wearing cheap blue suits rushed through the door and looked around.

Jax realized she only had a compact pistol in her waistband and a Tac-9 smg under her seat. One of the mooks pulled out his own submachine gun.

Jax put the car into drive. "Jinx," Jax said, "we gotta go now. Sorry."

"Jax, wait!" Said Jinx hurriedly. In an instant, Jinx's cyberdeck registered the imminent loss of the signal. Not enough time existed for Jinx to jack out forcing her to retrace her path up through the Architecture. Unfortunately, Jinx had no time to react to the Hellhound attacks.

Jax glanced at Jinx in the passenger's seat.

Jinx arched her back and clenched her jaw as the black ice sent surges through her neuralware. Without the insulated wire, Jinx's cyberdeck sparked and caught fire. Jinx slumped forward in her seat. Only her leather jacket prevented Jinx from catching fire from the burning cyberdeck.

"Jinx," Jax yelled as she looked back at her best friend. "Wake up, Jinx," Jax said with welling tears.

Jinx did not respond.