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Overdrive (excerpt)

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was brought into workshop in progress. Because we operate under a workshop model, we see value in an unfinished piece.

Overdrive (excerpt)

Enter Night

There is only a faint buzzing in Blu's left ear, signaling the absence of his teammates. He is alone now, facing down at the constant traffic of Neo-Tokyo. Directly in front of him, flashing on the glossy surface of a skyscraper, is the gigantic Geisha commercial – all stretched out in her neon-colored glory, her kimono opened to reveal round, pinkish breasts. Her white-powdered face and red puckered lips make him wonder how on Earth anyone will be attracted to her. Well, he supposes she can do him no harm now. She is not even able to register his presence, preferring to swoop down towards unsuspecting pedestrians and seduce them with preprogramed lines such as, “What do you dream of?”

Blu never dreams anymore, and he thinks of it as a relief. In his mortal life, he was inflicted with either insomnia or nightmares – there was no in-between; if he slept, he was subjected to the cruel memories of his broken home and his broken heart; if he stayed awake, he was dead tired the next morning. Now he walks the shadowy night, wide-awake and able to escape his past for longer than he ever imagined he could. But it does not mean his waking moments are much more peaceful. Throughout the five months since his first awakening, he has had to deal with the aftermath of his death – the secret half-life code forbids direct contact with mortals, but he found a way home. And when he thinks of home, it really is not much. His father, upon his death, promptly remarried, perhaps as a way to replace him and act as though he had never been born. Now he has two mortal step siblings a step mom who goes out of her way to help her husband forget about his last marriage, trying everything from begging him to buy a new apartment all the way on the South End of Neo-Tokyo to visiting the black-market doctors for conception acceleration procedures. The last bit irked Blu; she really wants to help his father get over his grief so much that she is willing to have illegal doctors poke around in her uterus with cyber-tools? Shady, but that is not even the end of it. His mother, Desdemona Pratts, nee Endel, is now the CEO of Endel Enterprises following the passing of her father, Morgan Endel, a cyber-tech mogul who made his fortune in cyber-prosthetics in the late 2030s. As soon as she is in power, she starts diverting the corporation's capital into the construction of Eco-domes, working overtime behind a desk stacked mile high with paperwork and surrounded by a small army of cyborgs. She barely speaks to anyone anymore, and when she speaks in public, it isn't really her.

Averting his gaze from the horrifying hologram before his eyes, he checks his inlaid wrist watch. The green interface is bright against the paleness of his skin, and it reads 1:30AM. Time for him to do his job.

Precision has always been his strong suit. In cadet class, he was always the best shooter, being able to aim at as far a distance as half a mile with his Sniper rifle. His eyes, connected to his newly acquired temporary cyber-brain, can now zoom in on the target, making his success rates even higher. And his target is currently right below the Geisha's chin – Thomas Garrish, PM assistant, middle-aged with graying hair, a crooked raven-like nose, and dark-rimmed spectacles. Holographic interfaces float around his chair as he barks out comments. There is no other person in the entire floor, which makes it both easy and suspicious. On a normal week day like this, office workers clock out at 1PM, but many choose to stay behind and earn some extra credit hours – it's all about how much time can be turned into money, and it does not matter how much work they actually accomplish. Perhaps there is somebody with his own rifle lurking somewhere Blu cannot see; his teammate, Kat, perceives no heat signature in a half-mile radius, but he can never be too

careful. The one assuring thought he has is that his brain-feeds goes directly to a separate and private line at the Central Information Bureau, which has yet to be cracked by the Strays.

For a brief moment, as he sets up his rifle stand near the edge of the building, he contemplates the rights and wrongs of his mission. His days on the mortal realm are numbered by the expiration date of his cyber-brain, after which he either gets discarded or uploaded – it all depends on his performance under the contract. Technically, he has no choice but to obey. As he lies flat down on the asphalt rooftop and takes aim, he absent-mindedly chuckles at the irony of the situation. He, out of all people, is afraid of permanent death. The thoughts he had on that fateful day come rushing back to his mind, and he flicks his head to the left to cut them off. The digital floodgates in his cyber-brain are able to keep the thoughts at bay for about an hour, which is plenty opportunity for him to complete his task. He squints his right eye, and his focus zooms in on the unfortunate man 300 feet away. The victim carries on commanding his digital secretaries, oblivious of the .45 mm bullet that is zipping through the air towards him. It penetrates the glass surface of the building as smoothly and soundlessly as a mosquito sinking its stinger into a person's skin. Everything happens in less than a fraction of a second, and the man drops dead before he can finish saying the sentence, "And make sure to send General Knight----"

In Blu's ear, the signal crackles to life once again, and the husky voice of Trip, his ground-man, comes through.

"That old idiot didn't even conceal his thoughts," says the perpetually ill-tempered twenty-year-old. He is standing two hundred stories below Blu, Kat by his side. He looks up into the smoggy night, presumably at Blu. The light of a thousand neon bulbs is reflected through the clouds of exhaust that drift slowly across the Neo-Tokyo skyline, inadvertently becoming a mesmerizing laser show. Funny how something as deadly as smog can be made so beautiful.

"There's a car coming around the corner. 45 feet until turning into this alley," interjects Kat, whose ultra-sensitive senses more often exhaust her than they are useful. She turns towards the direction from which the car is to come, one hand pressing on the speaker in her ear, "The driver is Patricia Martin, Garrish's only human secretary. They're having an affair."

"Guess the guy had it coming," Trip chuckles.

Kat throws him a glare, her face contorted into an expression of annoyance. "Shush, quiet," she admonishes, "your voice is interfering with my reading."

At that, Trip gives a low grunt but otherwise obeys. He turns back towards the sky, "Blu, proceed to descend."

On the windy rooftop, Blu answers as he gathers up his equipment into his duffle bag, "Don't you think it's odd that he did not conceal his thoughts?"

From three miles beneath, Trip furrows his brows. It is indeed suspicious that the old man did not so much as attempt to cloak his thoughts with any sort of signal interference, exposing himself to not only Kat but also the CIB, which immediately latched onto his traitorous intentions. "Maybe he knew it was inevitable anyway?" conjectured Trip.

"She's turning," Kat reports in a clipped tone and grabs Trip by the collar, pulling him to the left side of the building, out of Patricia Martin's sight. It is not long before her crimson TS-456 hover-car lands on the parking space in front of the PM office building. The woman herself emerges seconds late, after having deployed her recon-bot, launching it to the sky and commanding it to survey the surrounding area for heat signatures and brainwaves.

Kat can see Patricia in her mind's eye; the young secretary possesses a slim, tall figure, dressed in a modest blouse and a pencil skirt. Her heels are dangerously high, and she dons a large-brimmed hat that casts a deep, dark shadow on her defined features. She has an elegance about her that

makes her meagre position as secretary to a PM assistant almost a waste. She could have easily become a prized blueprint, Kat thinks, her body can be used to model thousands of Icons. As she scans Patricia, she opens her cyber-brain's floodgates, letting her personal thoughts come unbidden. The recon-bot, which hovers lazily right above her and Trip's heads, stops dead in its track, having suddenly been overwhelmed with signals sent through the air. Usually, such a small bot cannot detect the mental surges of a half-digitalized individual, but three of them at the same time? Even a PM assistant's secretary can afford a good enough bot to protect herself from three people, no matter how far their digitalization is.

"Don't worry, I've got you," Trip grips Kat's slender shoulders as she visibly whitens, her gaze becoming unfocused. Her thoughts, once released from the guard of her floodgates, are debilitating.

"Thanks," comes Kat's weak response. Her feet are rooted to the ground, slightly parted for better support, and she clenches her jaws, trying her best to withstand the influx of deadly thoughts. Above her, Patricia Martin's recon-bot is slowly starting to reel in a circle, obviously disoriented by the signals it is picking up. Seeing that it is about to ram against the side of the building and break itself, Kat allows her floodgates to close halfway, hemming the flow of thoughts and thus somewhat relieving the bot of the info flood.

"Blu, get down here. *ASAP*," she all but hisses into her earphone. The urgent tone of her voice makes Blu forget about his concerns and turn to take his leave. Once within the gold-plated interior of the building's North-end elevator, he presses G for ground level. The door closes, and he can see his reflection on the polished gold. For his mission, he has disguised himself as an android electrician, supposedly called in to do monthly rounds on the building's robotic workforce. Given the fact that androids are at work full-time during the day, it makes sense that his visit occurs at night when there is no human staff for the androids to service. The electrician uniform is a drab color of gray, topped with a baseball cap which Blu pulls all the way down to cover his face – not that it matters, since his half-digitalized state makes it hard for any recon-bots to detect his presence, but it is better safe than sorry. The descent takes a mere five minutes, a feat given that he has to travel 200 stories. He exits the building soundlessly.