

The elevator shaft jolts me out of my deep drug-induced slumber. It's not so much the loud, grinding noise that you would expect from old-style elevators; this is a corp tower, so you get corp quality. Instead it's a loud hum from the electromagnets that run the thing. In some ways it's worse than old elevators, because you think you can bear it for a few seconds but then it starts to really tick you off. It's a false sense of security. Luckily I know the (admittedly obvious) trick for living here: noise-cancelling headphones. I can't wear them while sleeping though because then I might sleep past the 6 hours of guaranteed sleep my implants give me.

I put on the headphones to keep myself from going insane with the noise and stretch. One of my lovers once told me that I look exceptionally unsexy in the morning, almost like I lose all my looks while I'm asleep and then slowly gain them throughout the night until I look sexy as hell in the morning. I reacted by doing my best "fuck me now" pose and he took it back while taking his pants back off.

My place is small and cozy, tucked into a little grotto that someone "forgot" to put in the regular security droid sweeps. There's still cameras and everything, but they're not hooked up to the security network. They're hooked up to some closed-circuit deal with some top Pfizercorp execs. My employers.

You see, squatting in a corp tower is kind of like a weird form of employment. The screening process is the difficulty of getting to a place where security won't get you; they have a few places tucked away in maintenance rooms that are prone to lax security, a few methods of getting in and out undetected that shouldn't really be there. Perfect for someone with the right skills(me) to set up shop. Once you settle in one of your neighbors shows up, knocks you out, and you wake up back in your room decked out with the latest military-grade tech, and an SecMail address on a note. I've analyzed the gear a bit, and although I'm no pro in wetware it doesn't look backdoored. There's even source code for most of it if you're into that kind of thing. There is, however, one caveat: they have a kill switch.

At that point the contract is set in stone: you are an employee of Pfizercorp, like it or not, for the rest of your life. I was too slow on the uptake, I didn't realise what I was getting into until I signed my life away. At first I was paranoid that they might pull the plug if I did anything out of line, but after a few jobs I realized what I was supposed to be: the zero-accountability, quick-and-dirty fix to their problems. More importantly they didn't expect perfect loyalty, they just wanted their jobs done with no fuss. I could take normal jobs from other places, and they wouldn't give a damn so long as I do theirs. Not that I would need to do other jobs, they give me more cryptocoin than I would ever need. I just do odd jobs for fun now.

Sound diabolical? It sure is. All you ground-dwellers think you're outsmarting the corps at every turn, digging little warrens in the undercity and hiding out from them. But they're the winners here: they sit in their glass towers

ordering their pawns around, sipping fine wines and laughing at the idiots who live like rats just to keep their businesses going. I'd be laughing too if I cared for fine wine.

Anyway, back to the present. I eat some soylent for breakfast and climb up to the top of the building, through a vent. There's no security up here either, but why anyone would want to live up here I would never be able to guess. It's tilted at about a 20-degree angle and it's windy as hell. However it is a very nice place to watch the sun set over the sprawl. Far away I can almost make out the peaks of the Cascades, their snowy tops reflecting all the purples and reds and oranges of the sunset. I've been there once, on vacation. I hiked partway up Mount St. Helens, and for the first time in my life I was completely exposed to the elements, with nobody around me, and it was extremely disconcerting.

Once the sun was all the way over the horizon I figured I'd go down and visit some friends. Getting off Pfizercorp's 1300-meter megatower without any security clearance is actually pretty easy. All you have to do is punch the ground floor into the elevator and it takes you right there, since it's one of the few places that's totally open to the public. Getting up is a little harder.

Once I'm there I strut out the door, making sure my fatigues are appropriately disheveled. It's always funny to see all the conservatively-dressed middle-classers staring at me.

I'm so stacked these days I can actually afford a car. One of those old '37 Mitsubushis. I type in the address of Nux's Tavern and wait while it drives me about 7 clicks. The one disadvantages of living in a corp tower is that the police are everywhere for kilometers around, and they really put a damper on things.

Nux is the kind of guy who will see you after 2 years and act like he just had a beer with you yesterday. He long ago automated the tavern with droids of his own making, just so he could socialize with regulars like myself. He's sort of crazy; when I mentioned that he should quit being a bartender and make his money by designing droids, he looked at me like I had just suggested he sell his only child. It's strictly a hobby, even though he's probably a better engineer than anyone at Applecorp.

Today he was sitting at a table with Max and Jason, two ex-navy guys who now work as netrunners. Max is the console jockey, and Jason is the gunner. Max and I have had an off-and-on friends with benefits deal, we hook up once every few weeks when circumstances permit. Jason tried to get in on the deal too but it got really awkward really fast, so me and Max got him together with our mutual friend Amy.

Nux waved me over loudly over the music, "Ay! Ay! Sheila, over here!" I walked over and sat down, enticed by Nux's welcoming smile and his free beer. We talked about this and that for a little while. Eventually Max and Nux went off about some new AI development, making me zone out. Jacob saw Amy walking in

and left to go sit with her. I read news articles on my holodeck.

“Well, what do you think Sheila?”

I jolted back into the conversation at the sound of Max's voice. Both of them were looking at me expectantly, as if I was expected to answer. I had a habit of doing that.

“Well, uh... I'm sorry, I wasn't listening. What are you walking about?”