

Frontline Vision

He felt the familiar sensation, a tugging behind the eyes and an unscratchable itch in his throat and nose as they tried to lift him out again. He fell back on his training, clamping down inside with the last of his reserves as he tried once more to fight them off. He followed his focusing procedure, pushing the sharpened pencil tip further into the skin of his thigh, this time retaining control by the smallest of margins. As the pain demanded his attention he sensed the mental invasion fall back for a moment as the FV team regrouped, preparing for another attempt to forcefully divorce his body and mind. Desperately he scanned his surroundings for what he knew would be the last time, searching for anything that could prevent the extraction.

The old warehouse was largely empty, like most in this district since the depression had really hit ten years ago and businesses in Chicago had started to drop like so many overripe fruit from a blighted tree. Back then no-one knew who to blame - terrorists, bankers, foreign money. Unfortunately for him, Hooper knew the truth all too well. Right now it was amongst the few reasons he was still alive. The bad news being that it was also the reason behind a dedicated team of FV Operators using all of their talent, resources and brute force to smash his consciousness from its seat in his head and into permanent storage. Confined to a software prison cell, he would languish alongside others who had thought to question the way the country had been run over the last ten years. As well as the everyday dissidents, this silicon gulag would house those like Hooper who had worked on projects designed to control an increasingly uneasy populace in the evermore questionable name of National Security.

If ever, thought Hooper, a phrase needed permanent inverted commas following it round everywhere, like a pair of giant bunny ears, ready to change a meaning at a moment's notice, it was 'National Fucking Security'. (He added the 'Fucking' himself, but then he did that a lot).

The cavernous space was at once desolate and cold, a monument to failed policy and an over-eager government trying just-too-hard to control every variable of a crumbling economy. The harsh bite in the air was one of the few things Hooper could count as a stroke of luck in his otherwise increasingly bad day. The FV Claw was much less effective in removing a person's *self* from inside their head when the head in question was exposed to low temperatures. He rose, tumbling under the weight of their last attempt and staggered along one wall, hoping for anything that might help him defend his private cerebral real estate.

On the north wall was a series of smaller anterooms used for storage prior to distribution to customers across the country. In the later days of the crisis this had meant only those who could afford a driver and the luxury of taking a chance that the transport would not make it at all. Hooper knew this area of the city used to be the meat packing district but doubted very much fate would be on his side in this final race to literally keep his head.

But perhaps in this case he was wrong and fate had decided to be slightly less of a bastard to him today. In the second anteroom he found four large freezers. Used to temporarily store meat in busier periods, although they didn't compare to the warehouse's walk-in meat lockers, these beasts could still swallow three men whole without pausing for a drink. Their presence here now was as remnants of the factory's working life, left behind in the rush to clear the sixteen square blocks between downtown and the docks before the predicted rioting began. The civil unrest was another thing that the Frontline Vision Project had managed to prevent. This simultaneously increased their funding, the government's faith in them and their own remit to take charge in emergencies. "Using technology where might has failed" - Or so the adverts went.

The power had been left connected in many of the city's commercial centres in the hope that trade and money would quickly return. The buildings had been routinely guarded by the new generation of drones developed by Homeland so vagrants setting up home or looting had never become a problem. That was of course back in the days

when the administration still clung to control and things still ran smoothly. Well, smoothly compared to the huge fuck up that was today's America.

Throwing himself across the room as the exploratory fingertips of the FV Claw once again began to probe the outer edges of his mind, Hooper grasped the handle of the nearest freezer and hauled it open. This brief sacrifice of mental strength for physical allowed the FV Claw's conceptual teeth slide slightly deeper into his consciousness.

The first huge icebox was empty but switched off and full of that awful stench that God sends down to fill empty fridges and freezers; one part stale air and chemicals, two parts pure evil. Recoiling from the nasal assault with a cry and more than a little dry-heaving, he let the heavy lid drop and made his way desperately to the next white monolith.

This one was a more positive find and he allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction as he began reaching in to tug at the bags of still-frozen meat, imagining how unpleasant the task could have been if this machine's power had failed along with the others.

After a little time and some scabbling with too-cold fingers he had excavated a decent-sized cavity amongst the preserved chunks of animal. Hooper scrambled up the side of the freezer, slick with condensate now, and tumbled his massive figure into the welcoming, if bloody cold, embrace of anonymous flesh.

The lid dropped almost closed leaving him only a small gap for air and Hooper felt the Claw's horribly familiar, invasive touch begin to fade. This was going to make them angry - they would redouble their efforts to find him and cage his consciousness, to be picked apart and analysed at their leisure.

He had perhaps twenty minutes to scour back over everything he could remember about the project, looking for a clue in the objectives for which he had once aimed, the rules by which he used to live and the vital techniques he had learned from Cathy, the least likely of teachers. After that the clock would stop ticking. Either freezing to death or finding his senses confined to a very small drive in a very large server, Hooper's time was running out.