

## Prologue

A shadowy figure slunk to the console. A simple black screen, white text showing on it. Carefully, he plugged in a drive, about half the size of his thumbnail, into the only slot.

C:\>

...the console read expectantly.

C:\>OS\devscan.exe

... he typed quickly, his heart thumping.

Device Scan:

148...

The device scan went up to thousands within a few seconds, and he hit Ctrl+C, cancelling it, tutting at himself.

C:\>OS\devscan.exe -runauto -devtype=usb

This time only one device showed, the drive he just plugged in.

Device Scan:

1 device found.

Executing autorun.exe:

Warning: accessing root privileges. Continue? (Y/N)

He hit Y, his heart beating faster and faster, waiting for the sound of footsteps on metal grilles. His breath became a cold cloud of gas in front of him as the console emotionlessly gave more warnings.

Warning: re-writing permissions. Continue? (Y/N)

Warning: re-writing virtual reality world level array. Continue? (Y/N)

Locking out console interface. Enter password for lock.

He typed an English phrase in.

Locking out embedded interface. Enter password for lock.

He typed gibberish to the casual onlooker.

Ready for world task transaction. Press I key to activate immediately, or D for delay.

He hit D, then typed 1728000. He would be in prison for life if he was found here. His body at peak alertness, he hit Return.

Task scheduled with selected permissions. Will start in 20 hour(s), 0 minute(s), 0 second(s). Locked against changes in 10 hour(s), 0 minute(s), 0 second(s).

He typed ccs.

Immediately the screen emptied, removing his presence. His fingers trembling violently, he fumbled with the drive, pocketing it roughly. In 20 hours, all hell was going to break loose. He had plenty of time to escape, and hopefully it wasn't so long an administrator would discover it.

Triumph mixed with adrenaline, fear with pure energy. He wanted to be logged in as normal when it happened. When the world changed irreversibly.

## Chapter 1 System maintenance

"Good morning, Alex!" a voice said cheerily.

Alex didn't open his eyes. He hated waking up. He groaned instead.

"You're going to want to be up today." his mother said cheerily, pulling open the curtains. The sunlight revealed the small room and the thick brown hair of the waking child.

"Why?" Alex opened one dark blue eye, feeling the sleep being removed automatically.

His mother pointed at the small TV in his room. "System maintenance task will be running today!"

Alex shot upright. "No way!"

The small black TV didn't lie. Big bold headline, apparently the only headline anyone seemed interested in.

"They haven't done one in years, but all of a sudden we've got one today. Barely any notice. They must've found some serious bug."

"Did you tell Dad?"

"Not yet. I want you to see his reaction. He's an administrator, you know."

"Yes, I know." Alex sighed. "He's obsessed with that."

"You remember when sometimes rain would..."

"...flow upwards? Yes, I know. He fixed that."

"Yes." His mum beamed at him. "Hold on."

She walked into the other room. Alex rubbed his eyes, strolling after her.

"He says he has admin powers and such. But he never shows me them!"

"Dear?" she pushed her husband's shoulder gently.

Alex's father grinned at his short son as he woke up.

At thousands of places in the virtual world, a number after "Admins online" incremented.

"Do you know what's happening today?" she asked. "And you didn't tell us?"

"What?" he mimicked Alex's way of sitting up. He clapped his hands together, and a hologram appeared in front of him. The admin console, it was called. It gave admins all the information they needed to solve any server problem, and gave them the ability to use some admin commands.

Alex tried to see what it said but in a tenth of a second it had closed itself.

"What?" His dad wasn't a morning person but his voice suddenly had urgency.

"There's a system maintenance task going on."

"Really?!" His dad *dived* out of bed and ran to the TV. "Shit!"

Alex suddenly realised something was terribly wrong. His dad clapped his hands, the console opened, and immediately closed. He swore again under his breath. "I wasn't told about this!"

"Maybe it fixes the admin consoles?" Alex tried to reassure him.

"There's no bugs with the admin consoles, since they were introduced. They're written perfectly, even things that are nearly impossible are checked for."

He clapped his hands again. The console appeared, then vanished.

"I've got to contact other admins. It's required that all admins are sent a message when a maintenance task is scheduled. Maybe it's just my console, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"The update activates in... 5 hours, 32 minutes."

"Lunch break at school." Alex grinned.

"Alex, maybe you... never mind."

"What is it, dear?"

"I need to go. First, Linda..."

He whispered to her, out of Alex's earshot. "This is an unscheduled update. They always announce it and make sure every admin either knows beforehand or can find out at any point - within three days' minimum. And admin consoles never cut out or get disabled. This could be a serious problem."

"Is Alex safe?" she asked with some fear.

"I think so. There's no difference to him being at home or school if he's on the system anyway, he'll get affected the same way."

"He's not going to get hurt, is he?"

"I can't tell. I very much doubt it. If the update hurts people in the virtual world, it'll hurt the guy who implemented it. At any rate, it's best to send him to school. Last thing anyone there would want is the admin's kid staying away."

"I see what you mean." she said reluctantly.

"If there's anything up, I'll go to the school. I'll keep an eye on him."

Alex was at school within a hour, having ate breakfast and got the bus there. Peter gave him a nod as he got on.

Peter was the son of a programmer. The programmers rewrote the virtual reality system from the inside. They worked with administrators, but they had the ability to change, whereas the admins could only request changes. Admins had to unite up with other admins in groups of five or more to start editing the world.

There were only a hundred programmers in the entire population of about 8.3 billion. Beyond that there were five people who managed them. And there was no higher authority besides those - the system demanded democracy.

Having the son of a programmer coming to your school was a big deal, because they were so rare.

Peter was a British Indian, dressed fashionably as normal, wearing his black rectangular glasses, jeans and a t-shirt.

And Peter always nodded to Alex, as he was the son of an administrator. As he nodded to Chris, Trent, Kurt and Ivan.

Some programmers got big heads over their position, and some had sons with the same attitude. Peter wasn't like that though. His father, which Alex had met once, had been polite and articulate. The sort of gentleman from decades back.

Peter was more laid-back, and was highly popular in school, mostly due to the small tattoo on his neck, which simply showed P, with a Jr beneath it.

Alex wouldn't say he was best friends with him but they got on well, all the admin's kids did. As soon as one of them started getting arrogant, Peter would put them in their place firmly.

Peter's father's position, and Peter's own charisma, wasn't the cause of his popularity. It was a fight at school some time ago.

Jed was one of those people you don't want be sat in front of on the bus. Irritating, bulky, self-obsessed, and always acting superior. So when a small kid strode past him during PE, he started confronting him.

The kid was obviously freaked, and forked out his wallet. Peter stepped in as he handed it over though, cutting Jed off short. He even whacked Jed's hand away. Jed blew up and threw a punch.

Peter simply grinned, clapping his hands together, and spoke clearly. "Programmer access: scene lock."

Immediately everyone around him froze. Alex was nearby, and his body literally locked up, like the air had changed to a solid. He struggled, awed by Peter's casual use of such extreme powers. Jed had stopped dead, all his aggression worth nothing.

Peter meanwhile could move fine. He strode amongst the frozen kids, even winking at Alex. "Programmer access: scene lock, release."

Immediately everyone unfroze. Alex nearly fell over.

There was probably not a kid in school that was saying those four words hopefully, but the world only responded to Peter.

Alex asked his dad if he had any admin powers. His dad claimed he had, but only three, which the programmers could also use.

"What are they?"

"Admin chat, scene history, and family protection."

"How do I turn on the protection?" Alex had asked.

"Oh, don't worry. It activates itself."

"What's the other two?"

"I can get on a channel with other admins and chat if something is happening, get us to meet together. And if there's a crime, I can use scene history to view what happened, like a CCTV camera."

"Like if I steal cookies?"

"Yeah..."

When lunch rolled around, everyone had been talking about it all day, and Alex wasn't the only one who felt butterflies from the tension.

"When's the maintenance task?"

"Pretty soon."

Nearly everyone in the school was talking about it, looking out the windows, staring at the bright sky.

"The sun always goes first." Peter said calmly.

As if on cue, the world suddenly paused.

Green gridlines appeared on the flat quad, the sky instantly turned black, the sun and the clouds vanishing like someone had flicked a switch. Alex's jaw was agape and then, Peter spoke, disbelief in his tone. "A world rewrite?!"

Alex's body changed too, suddenly beginning to glow. His clothes began to vanish, but it was fine because everyone else had vanished from sight, including Peter. Alex could still hear them chatter excitedly, but no visual trace of them.

Then everything went black and the chatter stopped. All feeling of wind and clothing disappeared, and Alex suddenly realised he was nude. A pang of panic hit him but he reasoned that his clothes would reappear with the world.

Then reality began to rebuild. Alex could imagine smoke pouring out the servers as they took the gargantuan virtual reality back online, feeding the signals back to the 8.3 billion connections. First, the clothes reappeared again, much to Alex's relief. Next, the sound suddenly exploded back, with everyone's chatter turning to a high-pitched squeal. Alex winced, then suddenly the black grid of the quad reappeared, followed shortly by the real colours.

Alex jumped for no particular reason. He flew a good five metres upward before he suddenly was back on the pavement, like he had never jumped at all. It was awesome.

Suddenly, Peter reappeared beside him. Next, despite their having being several kids between them before the task, Alex could see Chris, who reappeared on the far end of the quad.

Next, the rest of the admins' kids. Then, like a flood, all the other kids reappeared within a few seconds.

It was one of the most awesome things Alex had ever seen. And scary. The nudity, too, just made it really weird. But clothes wasn't part of a person, that was part of the main point of the Virtual Reality engine. Otherwise someone would have to disconnect to

"A world rewrite." Peter breathed. "Shit!"

"What's up Peter?" Alex asked.

"A world rewrite is never supposed to happen. It's the biggest level of editing, meaning part of the entire world's structure has been changed. Even big weather changes don't call for a world rewrite."

"That big?" Alex grinned. "I wonder what they changed."

Peter frowned. "Yeah."

Out of the two people Alex thought would know about it, neither knew. Alex suddenly was worried.

"Family protection protocol activated." a woman's voice said calmly beside him.

Next thing Alex knew, a grid of glowing purple symbols, forming a 4-sided cuboid roughly 3 metres high, appeared around him. Peter had a grid appear too about ten seconds later. Then there was a soft whining noise and Alex was suddenly standing in a large hall.

Correction, a huge hall. It was made like a cathedral, with huge white stone arches overhead, but no seats or pews, just a stage with a figure on it and a huge empty floor, where Alex had appeared. The symbols were still visible around him, but then they vanished too.

Peter had appeared some distance away, next to his father. Alex suddenly realised he was next to his father, too. And his mother, who put her hand on his shoulder.

The hall was filling with thousands upon thousands of people. As soon as symbols appeared, people were pushed out of them, until someone was teleported in and the symbols faded.

The hall became very crowded instantly, yet all Alex could hear was people's apologies for bumping into each other. No one was screaming or panicking, despite the disorder. In fact, those that weren't apologising were urgently telling their children to shush.

A dingy noise rang out as the final teleport vanished.

"Excuse me." a calm voice said from the stage.

Despite the mountain of people saying the same thing, everyone grew quiet.

"I've activated family protection protocol safety for all users whose rankings are administrator or above. I have some very important announcements about the maintenance task."

The silence grew to dead silence. Alex stared ahead in awe at the speaker, who was dressed in a pure white ankle-length coat with a black 4-piece suit, with long white hair spiked upwards.

His eye was a pure black, the iris indistinguishable from the pupil. The whites of his eyes were pure white. His right eye was closed, as if winking purposefully.

More importantly, on his forehead was a clear black tattoo, marked C, with a small eye symbol inside the C.

"Who's he?" Alex tried to ask his father, but no sound came out his mouth.

"As you know, the task was issued without any standard warning. A second thing some of you might be aware of was it was a high-level, full world rewrite, changing the physical structure and dimensional design of the game. A third thing was that the programmer and admin consoles were disabled. There's a good reason for all of this."

He paused briefly. "This update was unauthorised."

There would have been a collective gasp but apparently everyone else was muted too. Alex instead saw everyone's jaws drop.

"At some point yesterday, an update was executed on a core server, and instantly copied to all other servers, with a scheduled task unstoppable by any admin or programmer, and a further ten hours for notification, pending for twenty hours. I won't go into details of how he or she broke in, but it was physically accessed, not via the virtual reality at all. We'll attempt to revert it, but even for our priviledge level, we're locked out by all methods we've tried so far.

"However, we can still access all other abilities, including reading the changes. Which is where we have more news, and it's bad. Firstly, an entire new energy dimension has been generated. We know only that it's tied in with emotion and with body positioning, with randomness tied in too. That said, there are levels tied to all the people in this virtual reality, as well as all other living beings."

"Secondly, the death routine has been modified. Instead of death transporting you to the nearest spawn centre, the body becomes ghost-like for what looks like a full year. This ghost-like state can speak and travel within a fifty metre radius of the place where they died. They cannot be respawned naturally until the duration is finished."

"Thirdly, the scene history command has been severely limited. Programmers can now access only ten minutes into the past, and admins only one minute."

"Fourthly, there has been new creatures added into the world. We can't identify them as yet, but mythology is suspected as the cause."

"Fifthly, pain reducers have been removed. All pain will be at full strength, and obviously the painkiller medicines' effects will be as potent but cannot reduce pain to the level they did before."

He paused again, his open eye scanning everyone. "With regards to family protection protocols, these will be disabled after three hours, as part of the task. We have some time to discuss this, which was obviously intended by whoever broke in, before the disabling take effect. During such a time you may wish to place your family at home. Anyone caught spreading information about the reduction of authority will be encouraging criminal behaviour and will be punished accordingly, regardless of rank."

His eye narrowed slightly and Alex felt a chill run up his spine. This C man had an aura of power that scared him.

"So, questions. If you have any, ask now."

Alex suddenly could hear his breathing again. He'd been unmuted.

"What is the form of this energy?" someone asked.

"An excellent question. The best way to describe it is electrified water in everyone's bloodstream. It is attached to a person much like DNA is, but can be removed from them, at which case like a muscle the energy will be deteriorated but will eventually grow back with greater potency and strength."

"You said the energy differs per person. Are there exactly the number of types of energy as they are per person?"

"No. There are usually two types of energy per person, one smaller in amount. Both of these energies are part of thirty types, of which five are highly common and the others are very rare."

"Is this energy unstable or painful to keep contained?"

"In the majority of cases no. It's never painful, but it can become a severe obstacle to life as the energy may make people restless or agitated. Stability is proportional to how much there is, which seems random."

"How do you know all this?"

The man frowned slightly. "I read the source code for the new dimension. Most of it is protected but some is fairly easy to assatain."

His eye that was closed squinted slightly. "I expect you, Brian McSheddler, to have known something about the Council."

Alex's jaw dropped. This was a Council member? They had ultimate authority on the virtual reality. They could quite literally bend laws of physics as they willed. And they read the source code like plain language, so experienced with it there were rumours they had memorised the entire thing. They oversaw the 100 programmers, but were rarely known to be seen in the real world.

"It may come as a surprise to you that despite our being monitors of the reality, we appear to have all our abilities intact, as far as the new changes are not affected. We have all have an ability to turn down the energy too, by about 20%, but no more, and the effect does not last. Next question."

"That sounds fishy." someone muttered.

The Council member locked onto him instantly, his closed eyelid twitching again. "Charles Ingram, you have a statement?"

"Why were your permissions not affected?" Ingram asked bluntly.

"Because our permissions are not available in the same coding language as yours, they are hard-coded in encrypted machine language. As such hard-coded abilities are incredibly difficult to modify. Beware, Ingram, of questioning the integrity of the Council. We are the ones who gave you your position, and it is not for spreading mistrust."

He squinted slightly. "Trent Krubyer, I will be contacting you privately. Nefred Ischaar, you too."

Trent was his dad, Alex thought, suddenly beginning to worry. Why was it him? And that Nefred guy, who was a black-skinned guy and seemed confused to have been picked as well. At least it wasn't *just* his dad. That would have been more obviously something problematic.

"To all of you: you needn't be worried about your positions - a decrease in your abilities, if anything, provides more reason for them. Expect to be busy."

"What role will the Council take in all of this?"

"The Council will attempt to revert the task entirely. In the case of mass damage to towns, we will also be there to fix the damage. Additionally, due to our toning down ability, we was also be monitoring those with high energy levels and lower their energy if it becomes problematic."

"You two head back. I'll be home soon." Alex's father told him. "I don't want you two to get worried, if the Council is finally stepping in we've got no problems. They usually just stay on the sidelines."

So saying, he clapped his hands quietly, and the console reappeared, this time remaining there like normal. He pressed a few things on the screen and symbols appeared around Alex and his mother as the teleport began.

Alex was going to complain when he saw Peter was heading back too. If any problem did turn up, Peter could use his scene lock thing. Still, it was irritating not being able to listen in.

Suddenly Alex was back in the quad, surrounded by other kids, who instantly began asking him questions about what was going on. He was too put out by the crowding and didn't respond, so they crowded around Peter instead.

"Guys, knock it off." Peter ordered, taking off running. Alex watched, a grin slowly forming as the curious mob pursued after the popular kid. Even some of the teachers were out on the quad, although they didn't join in the fray.

"Peter," a teacher caught him midway, stopping him in his tracks, "why don't you just explain what is going on?"

"I can't, sir, the Council just spoke to everyone and said any spreading of information will be punished." Peter said, catching his breath.

There was a collective in-take of breath. "The Council?!" everyone said in awe.

Alex spoke up. "I was there too. Someone from the Council summoned every admin and programmer, and then..."

"...basically, they said shut it."

"But we don't have to worry. If there are any problems, they'll fix it themselves."

"The Council never just walk around fixing things themselves." the teacher said in disbelief.

"They don't even show their face in public."

"They're telling the truth." Chris had apparently turned up. "And if you think the programmers have cool tricks, wait 'til you see what the Council can do!"

There was an excited buzz going around now and everyone was talking.

Chris spoke again. "The Council guy muted everyone without any console when he was talking."

"What does he look like?"

"He has this white hair spiked up, and one eye closed all the time... He wears a black and white suit, and this big white coat over it. I don't think he took his hands out his pockets once."

"Was he handsome?" one girl asked.

"What?" the three turned to look at her.

"How would I know?" Chris asked, perturbed.

Alex thought back and mentally concluded he was. He was the type of always-laidback, apathetic guy. That was probably what made his irritation scarier.

"Did he do any other cool stuff?"

The teachers meanwhile had huddled together, muttering and looking across at the kids worriedly.

Why were all the adults so worried? Alex wondered. That scene lock thing made anywhere safe. The sheer number of admins plus the fact they could teleport...

"The Council is on the news!" a teacher shouted from the school. Alex ran in with the crowd to see the one-eyed guy from earlier on the TV.

"That's him!" Alex grinned.

"...and as some of you are finding this major update a little uncomfortable, the Council itself will be present in situations of need until we are sure it is stable. We've watched over citizens for several decades and we're not going to back away now you really need us."

"He speaks French?!" someone said in awe.

"That was English, doofus."

"No, Spanish."

"Hush. The Council speak all the languages. They have to read the language of the virtual world, you know."

The white-haired man was very brief and never said his name, just referred to "the Council" instead.

"Why's he got white hair when he only looks, like, 20?" someone asked.

"Alright kids." the headteacher started pushing them away. "You can watch this later on."

You've got lessons now."

The kids barely noticed her, too busy waiting for a higher-than-programmer ability to be used by the nonchalant figure on the screen.

The headteacher sighed and turned off the TV, to a loud chorus of groans.

"Lessons. Now." she ordered in a just-try-it tone.

Alex headed home at the end of the day to find his dad still hadn't returned. His mum greeted him cheerfully and started making supper, but by supertime his dad still hadn't got back. The empty chair stared at them while they ate, and Alex began to worry again about what the Council wanted his dad for. It couldn't have been him who had made the changes, right? Admins couldn't even change the source code. He'd need to be a programmer for that.

Plus his dad wasn't against his superiors at all. He barely even mentioned them. If he had been secretly devising a new world he'd been very secretive about it.

Alex was too worried to play his *Call of Duty: Death's Scythe* multiplayer with any concentration. He was off it by bedtime, a rare feat for him, and laid in bed still worrying, his dad still not back. Eventually, though, he drifted into an uneasy sleep.

## Chapter 2 Stay Undisturbed

The first thing Alex did the next morning was run quietly into his parents' bedroom. He was relieved to see his dad was finally home.

His mum stopped him from waking him up, which was difficult because Alex was bouncing with energy. "Dad has some news for you, but he needs his rest."

Alex considered the extra used cereal bowl by the sink. Mum must've stayed up late too, he thought, smiling slightly with pride at their family bond.

After that uneasy night he was fidgety and impatient for his dad to turn up. His mum kept giving him concerned looks, but Alex had no intention of waking his dad up early now. He ate very slowly but was still nearly done when his dad finally got up.

"Good morning." Alex's dad groaned, apparently still tired.

"Dear, you remember what we discussed last night?"

"Yes, yes." his dad said, taking the coffee she had made him. Alex watched him like a hawk, his mouth paused in mid-chew.

His dad looked around the room curiously. "Do you know where he's gone?" he asked his wife, who shook her head.

"Hmm." his dad turned to his expectant son. "Alex, put basically, the new change resulted in magic energy. You heard what the Council member said, right?"

"Yeah..." Alex said.

"You've got one of those rare forms of energy, not part of the other five, so there'll be someone escorting you around for a while."

"Oh." Alex absorbed this fact slowly. Rare form of energy... it kind of made him feel special. "But why can't you escort me? You're an administrator!"

"I have work to do elsewhere. Besides, he volunteered, and I didn't want to offend him." his dad said wearily.

"Is he going to like... watch me all the time?" Alex immediately imagined heading to the loo with an adult "companion". He cringed.

"No, he'll have some discretion. Hopefully, you won't even notice he's there. He wasn't specific about how much distance he'll be from you, but he *did* say he doesn't want to interrupt your way of life." his dad gave a long sip, peering over the cup.

"Think of it as having Peter around as a bodyguard all the time." his mother suggested.

That... sounded awesome! A programmer was going to be his bodyguard? Say hello to fame, Alex grinned.

"Don't go to make trouble though. I know what you're like, Alex." his dad grinned. "As soon as you get impatient for fame you'll be starting fights."

"He can fight me!" a young boy's voice called.

"Whoa!" Alex was startled and couldn't help smiling at the serious-looking kid around his age who had apparently jumped onto the windowsill.

"Huh. Neat." his dad muttered into his cup.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." his mum said concernedly.

"Hiding in plain sight are we?" his dad said as the kid carefully hopped over the kitchen sink and stood triumphantly in front of Alex.

He had jet-black hair and a determined look in his black eyes. The hair fell over his right eye as well as spiking into the air.

There was no programmer's child tattoo on him despite Alex's careful inspection, but Alex couldn't help feeling this boy was tough.

"So, you'll keep Alex safe?"

"Yep!" the kid grinned.

"Uh, how will he?" Alex asked bluntly. "He can walk around with a tough look, but honestly I don't see why a regular kid offers extra protection than an admin's son already has."

There was an awkward pause. The kid turned to Alex's dad and said sarkily, "He doesn't have a girlfriend does he?"

"What?!" Alex was peeved. The third thing his 'bodyguard' said was an insult. His dad somehow managed to hide behind the cup and his mum turned away quickly, but it was sooo obvious they were smirking. Alex considered jumping the kid, but it was too early in the morning and too small a room to take him.

Although despite his determined look, his body posture was completely slack. He reminded Alex of someone.

"What's your name?" Alex asked.

"Zach." the boy said, striding over to Alex and offering his hand in a very adult way.

Alex took his hand, surprised by his strong grip. Maybe it was worth having him around.

"It'll be interesting keeping you company, Alex." Zach grinned at him.

"Were you already in my school?" Alex asked.

"No, not really." Zach said. "But as of yesterday I'm in all your classes."

"That's kind of stalkerish." Alex raised his eyebrows.

"I won't crowd you." Zach promised earnestly, then paused in thought. "Unless you want me to."

"Why would I want that?" Alex asked with some disdain.

Zach reached up to his hair, pulling it back to reveal his forehead.

The symbol of an eye, sat squarely in a C, was tattooed clearly on his forehead.

"You're part of the Council?!" Alex spluttered. Zach nodded, smiling. "But you're just a kid!"

Zach shrugged. "Council members can change their physical appearance. I just thought this would be preferable for your environment."

"So how old are you?" Alex asked.

"Eleven." Zach said, rolling his eyes, "five months, three days, fifteen minutes, two seconds, an exact duplicate of your age."

"I mean, before you..." Alex gestured at him, "...changed."

Zach raised an eyebrow, his left one to be exact. "Let's not go there. My normal appearance hasn't been adopted for years."

"Umm... okay." Alex decided. He was still curious but if Zach was, to all appearances, an 11-year-old, then there was no point arguing it. He didn't want him to change to a granny or something.

"So are you uh... actually a guy?"

"If by that you mean male, yes. I am originally male. A hetmale."

Heterosexual male. Fine, then. Alex felt a bit more comfortable. Don't get him wrong, he wasn't homophobic, but with someone that could change their age and gender, he could quickly imagine a scene turning upside-down.

Hommales were actually very low levels in society. There were tens of theories about why the level had shot down since virtual reality was introduced, but the main theory was due to the mass merging of cultures.

"Alex, your school bus'll be here in five minutes." Zach interrupted his thoughts.

"Oh yeah..." Alex rushed back to get his things, carefully checking his things. He had PE today - he wondered if Jed would try anything on Zach.

Just the thought gave him an adrenaline rush. He was practically skipping downstairs, somehow checking himself for the unmanliness.

"One minute, twenty one seconds." Zach said lazily, leaning against the hallway wall. Alex ignored him and went to the bus stop. He got there on time, but the bus was late - pulling up just under a minute late. Zach had just strolled onto the bus stop area by then.

The other two students - both girls - gave him a sideways glance. And another one.

Alex hopped on after the girls, all three flashing their passes at the scanner. Zach got onto the bus with the laziness of a student who would pay a lot of cash to avoid going to school. He glanced at the scanner and waved his clearly empty hand at it.

The scanner beeped like it had done for Alex, who suddenly had a feeling Zach was going to be more obvious than he thought, the few that had saw his trick giving him a curious look.

Science droned on. The digestive system of the human body, like *that* was relevant. Seems the digestion worked the same regardless of whether you knew how or not.

Zach slouched at the back, poring over the textbooks. He seemed to have collected every single different science textbook, for all the biology classes. He paid no attention to the teacher and she ignored him back, apparently not really noticing he was supposed to be in her class.

"What have *you* got to learn?!" Alex asked him as they left.

"What else there is to know." Zach replied smartly.



The next lesson was maths. Zach visibly held back laughter at the algebra on the board and did the same as the last lesson - gather textbooks and read.

Apparently his idea of monitoring Alex was quite flexible.

They went to lunch, no one really paying attention to them for half of it. Then suddenly a blonde kid named Brian came up, along with a crowd of tagalongs.

Zach looked up with a raised eyebrow, eating his lasagna nonchalantly. They ignored him.

"Alex, is it true you saw a Council member?"

Zach looked over at him with a grin forming on his face.

"Yeah, I did. Didn't I already tell you?" Alex replied, glaring back at Zach.

There was more excited chatter as Brian asked another question. "How do you know it was a Council member anyway?"

"He had this tattoo on his forehead, it was like this C..." Alex demonstrated, "with an eye symbol in it. I didn't know he was in the Council, he said it whilst he was answering a question."

"What did he say?"

Alex looked back at Zach. "He said a ton of stuff. Like his life story or something."

Zach started coughing, but it was so obvious he was hiding laughter, Alex started grinning too.

"Why are you smiling?" one of the group asked.

"Jed says you never saw them." Brian accused.

"Does he?" Alex grinned. "It's true they're rare, though. It's like they're an endangered species. Can't find any of them nowadays."

Zach started laughing, much to the group's confusion.

"Jed says..." Brian started.

"Jed says a lot of stuff. Ask Chris. Or Peter. Or um... Ivan."

"There's Chris!" one of the group pointed excitedly, and the herd moved off toward him, some calling, "See ya Alex!"

"You're quite popular around here." Zach commented after they had finished chuckling.

"If the truth ever got out, Mr. Zach of The Council," Alex said in a dramatic James Bond tone, "it would be you who was popular."

"Have you actually seen the new James Bond film?" Zach asked. "It's a huge one, since it's the fiftieth."

"That's a lot of watching time..." Alex said.

"You're telling me. The most recent one is nearly six hours."

"No way..."

They chatted on until next period. Despite not knowing Zach's real age or appearance, Alex found he was surprisingly good at keeping a conversation.

They moved to PE, where Zach found, which came as no surprise to Alex, that he had no PE kit.

"So hang on, you had a bag for that?"

"Yes..." Alex showed him the black PE bag he had brought. "That's got my PE shorts & t-shirt."

"Are they clean?" Zach looked noticeably more relaxed in a PE changing room than the other 11-year-olds. Alex could see muscle-bound Jed shooting glares from across the room. Zach finally caught one of those glares and gave him a disarming smile.

"Hold on, can I borrow this?" he took Alex's PE bag before Alex had a chance to get dressed.

"You can't borrow my kit dude, I have to wear it."

"I know. One sec." Zach strolled off to the toilet cubicle at the end of the changing room, bag slung over his shoulder and his hands in his pockets.

He was only in there for about half a minute, but he was dressed in the PE clothes when he came out. Alex sighed. "I told you I need to wear them."

"I said I heard you. Your stuff is still in there."

"Huh?" Alex took the full bag of clothes and realised it was his PE kit, looking undisturbed.

Zach's stylish clothes were nowhere to be seen.

"Did you leave your clothes in there..." Alex's question trailed off.

"No. I just duplicated your clothes and deleted mine." Zach said like it was obvious.

"You have too many abilities."

"Abilities don't matter. It's how much I use them." the other boy said smartly, striding to the changing room doors.

Alex hurried to get dressed, slightly awestruck by the ability. True, it didn't save much time, but it was probably a required ability if you could change your body appearance. After all, if you set your body to be bigger, small clothes could become very painful. Zach would probably not even take any time getting back into his regular clothes.

Alex wondered what it looked like. Was there some sort of transition? Or did he just change looks instantaneously?

Smiling, he hurried after him.

The PE teacher had them run the bleep test. Zach did a solid 17.3 before slowing to a stop. He was about seventh to stop. "Been a long time since I did one of those." he said, flopping down beside Alex.

"Really?" Alex offered him his water bottle. Zach gulped down some mouthfuls. "I thought the Council was all about bleep tests."

"No, we're not very active really. Especially because of the teleportation we can do."

"What exactly do you guys do all the time?" Alex asked. "You seem to be just hiding out of sight being all mysterious like Batman or something."

Zach chuckled, nearly spitting out the water. He swallowed. "We keep an eye on the programmers' changes, make sure they look alright. While we're not doing that, we manage the external hubs, keeping everyone online. We basically communicate between reality and here. Finally, if we're done with that, we stroll around whilst invisible. I thought it would be more useful to be visible for your case though - especially since the newspaper reporters are veering towards hostility to our apparent inaction."

"So you do plan on revealing your identity."

"I expect it would happen within a week regardless of plans. A new kid who has incomplete registration showing up in school, using a bus without a bus pass, and not paying attention in lessons - a new kid in an admin's house with the household members not fully explaining how he got there - it's not going to take long."

Alex nodded. He was half-expecting Zach to be some sort of tireless superhuman during the bleep test. True, he was one of the last, but he was sweating buckets like the rest of them, although his spiked hair seemed to look the same.

"It especially won't take long if you keep speed-dressing."

"Hey Alex." Peter poked him, making them both turn. "Who's the new kid?"

"Oh, this is Zach. He's kinda new." Alex introduced. "And Zach, this is Peter."

"Peter, eh? The programmer's kid?" Zach offered his hand. "Found any bugs yet?"

Peter grinned back at him, shaking at the somewhat awkward angle. "I found a beetle earlier. But there you go."

Zach smiled. "How's your programmer abilities since the task ran? Have you used them?"

"I trust they're fine." Peter frowned. "I don't have unlimited access to them, so I haven't tested. In fact my dad wants me to steer clear of using them where possible."

"Well, that is the law." Zach nodded.

Peter's frown deepened. "Yeah. Why do you expect them to have changed?"

"I heard a rumour..." Zach leant back and whispered only just loud enough for Alex to make out, "that the abilities of server staff has decreased."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "Who'd you hear that from?"

Alex suddenly remembered the Council guy had promised punishment on whoever spread that information. Zach just smiled. "I overheard it between two guys in the street."

It was an unlikely, but still possible event, so it seemed to satisfy Peter. The two seemed to hit it off well, which wasn't surprising since both were so easy-going.

"Jed looks like he has the hots for you." Peter commented.

"It's fine. I'll handle him." Zach said dismissively.

"You sure?" Peter asked. Zach nodded.

"Right." Peter gave Alex an uncertain look. "Don't stick around Zach if he starts winding Jed up."

"Oh don't worry. Zach can handle himself." Alex reassured.

"It's not handling himself I'm worried about. It's handling Jed."

Were all programmers this aggressively particular about language? So far both Zach and Peter had pointed out common wording as illogical.

"Don't worry about me, Petey." Zach grinned. "You might want to watch it when it does kick off."

When, not if, Alex thought. Zach was clearly *planning* to fight. A Council member versus a overgrown schoolboy. Slightly unbalanced, then.

Still, the mystery surrounding Zach was too much for anything besides excitement boiling up in Alex. Just how would he fight?

Peter turned back, and as they left the quad to get dressed again, Alex asked. "Just what's up with your eye?"

"It's a very dangerous eye." Zach said matter-of-factly. "All Council members need some form of instant defence and control. I'm more fond of martial arts, but if an ocean is about to topple on your head, you can't exactly karate-chop it away."

"What happens when you open that eye?"

"That's available on a need-to-know basis." Zach said mysteriously.

"How are you keeping it closed?" Alex asked. "Do you have to just wink all day?"

"No, no. It's designed like you've put your hand over your eye. You don't put any effort into keeping it closed, but you need to focus to keep it open, because of the blinking reflex."

"Oh right." Alex nodded. "You might want to take a bit longer in the toilet, if you're going again."

"I suppose I'd better." Zach strode off to the cubicle again. This time he took slightly longer, returning in his old clothes. "I just realised." he grinned, "I hadn't brought any bags with me to the loo, so where did I get my old clothes back from?"

The two had reached the end of the school day without incident when Jed confronted him. "Alright, new kid. You need to pay for the bus." he tried his brilliant logic. Alex stepped back from him. Surrounded by buses on the quad that kids were filing on, they were in clear view. Jed must want an impact.

"No I don't." Zach replied clearly, hands still in his pockets and looking relaxed.

Jed wasn't backed by anyone, as usual. He was a loner.

"If you don't pay for the ticket, you don't get on the bus." Jed threatened.

"Ah. And I suppose an overgrown gorilla like you will stop me?"

Jed threw a punch.

Zach stepped back, the punch missing by about a centimetre. Jed tried again, and this time Zach dived backwards, giving him room.

"Physics: collision velocity bend multiplier eight decimal zero." Zach said calmly.

Jed threw another punch and Zach dodged it, punching Jed squarely on the chest.

Jed went *flying* backwards, easily making it seven metres before he skimmed on the ground.

"What the hell..." he said in shock. "You're not a programmer!"