

Fade to Black

By

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Six years Federal Police Force, last two on Homicide. Done it all...murder bars where a shooter's more than a drink, psychotrips when the poor bastard who'd just hacked up a family comes down on death row and finds out he'd been tripping on Kill Pills. And now this stuff, Arties getting wiped by some sicko who wants to play Old Testament.

"I mean, they're not even *real*."

"Yes they are, they're real as you are." Lydia ran her fingers across the edges of the plastic disc casings, each the size of a quarter. Everything had already been scanned for prints. "Those are *people* in there, Mickey. People who think and dream and want to live just like anyone else."

"Yeah, but anyone else doesn't have to be booted up to think and dream and live. Can't just turn *me* off with a flick of a switch," I said.

"If that switch is on a zap gun, and that zap gun's pointed at your head," Lydia said, and I involuntarily flinched at the tone of her voice. I'd seen her do it, up close, face-to-face when she took 'em down without blinking. Cold. Wondered why she let this, of all the shit we had to deal with, why *this* did it to her. But every cop has that one thing that gets to him, or her. With most of us it was little kids, murdered without really knowing why or even what dead meant. That wasn't what got to Lydia.

These games, for lack of a better word. They got to her.

"Guess we might as well do our job," she said, removing one from the shelf. We had to watch one, just one. We needed the evidence. We needed eye-witnesses. So that was us. It gave me the chills, why I don't know, and I regretted taking the promotion from the street to this. Give me hard tarmac and the stinking breath of real people over *this*. Any day.

"This one's called *Fade To Black*," Lydia told me, showing me the case. Like I cared. That one, the one beside it, any of the damn things would do.

"Fine," I said. "Let's earn our pay."

We wore standard virtual reality gear. No plugging directly into the brain, like some damn swell-head. Besides being illegal, it was just stupid. The brain constantly changed. Plugs didn't. Do the math. A plug that sent you into Wonderland one day might rob you of your sight the next, or worse. Lots worse.

The standard VR gear was bad enough for me.

Static, then a rather impressive looking mansion, or castle, or something. Like a combination of an antebellum plantation house and a castle overlooking the Rhine. There was a party going on inside, music, laughter, party voices talking about things people never talked about anywhere else but at parties.

And we were invited, me and Lydia.

"This is a good one," she whispered as we went up the gravel walk, the little stones crunching beneath our feet. Presumably we'd just left a limo or a fancy Italian sports car down the driveway somewhere. Those details were fuzzy, but they didn't matter. What mattered was ahead of us.

"Ah, there you two are," came a voice, pleased.

A young man waited for us at the top of the stairs, leaning against a fluted column, in front of a wrought iron portcullis between us and the front door. His face was soft and round, eyes brown, lips thin, and he wore a silk robe and slippers. His hair hung limp across his forehead, and I imagined he tended to move it out of his eyes with a toss of his head. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Yes," I said, trying to stay just plain old me amidst what was obviously a part of society that would just as soon spit on a cop as call one for help. "We're glad we could make it, too."

"Do come in, then," said the chap, whose name didn't filter through. Maybe no one here had names. Wouldn't be the first time. Chap suited him fine, though.

The portcullis rose, and we followed him in.

"This is *really* good," Lydia whispered to me, an odd sort of giddiness in her voice. "I think we've hit a major operation, with real money behind it."

I just nodded, but frankly I couldn't tell a good show from a half-rate job. Oh, sure, sometimes it was obvious, like the people flickered, went out of focus, or the words that came out of their mouths didn't match how their lips moved. Anyone could spot those kinds of defects, which were typical for the operations we usually came across.

The people nodded and acknowledged us with smiles as we passed, and they were everywhere, all beautiful young men and women, sipping champagne and eating hors d'oeuvres, laughing, flirting.

"Okay," I said. "Now what?"

"I guess we just...enjoy the party," Lydia said. There was an oak bar at the far end of the room. We walked over to it. The rules varied with these games, but there the action always depended on the players. On us. Something would happen, and our actions would begin the process of...whatever the process was. These people would die, somehow.

"Isn't there supposed to be a way for us to trigger it?" I asked her in a low whisper.

"Yes, but let's wait a minute and enjoy ourselves."

Enjoy ourselves?

The chap led us to a group who all turned and grinned as we approached. One, a stunning red-headed woman with big, green eyes, said, "Oh, Charles, you brought friends!"

Charles. My, weren't we stuffy. I decided to see about that. In real life nothing gave me as much pleasure as to put some snooty rich asshole in his, or her, place.

"Yeah," I said, "We just got here. Chuckie here met us at the door." The others looked nervously at me, and I felt Lydia's hand on my arm suddenly. She gave me a tight squeeze. I was forgetting myself, getting drawn into the faux reality of the game. A sick game, but a game nonetheless. Of course, if that were true, if it really was just a

game, then we wouldn't have busted the place that was selling it.

Charles broke the ice by laughing. "I rather like that," he said. "'Chuckie'. Has a relaxed, laid-back ring to it, don't you think?"

"Indeed," one of the other men said. "And you can call me 'Mickey'. Or better yet, how about just 'Mick'?" This time they all laughed.

"Well, ahem," the woman said, fluttering her eyelashes. "We were just in the middle of a discussion. Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

I knew this was what we were supposed to do. I half wondered what would happen if I said no, but the urge to join was almost too strong to resist, like I was dying to hear what they all had to say.

"We'd love to," Lydia said, and the next thing I realized the circle had expanded to include us and Chuckie.

"Since you two just arrived, as you say," the woman went on. "Maybe you can help us figure something out."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's actually rather embarrassing," she said, blushing slightly. Her eyes were also brown, though darker than the chap, than Chuckie's. And large. Her face was roundish, but high cheekbones gave it a friendlier quality than it would've had otherwise. She was tall, too, my height.

"You can tell us," Lydia said. "We're all friends here."

I glanced at her, and realized she didn't look like the Lydia I knew, the one in the real world. Here she was a little taller, and thinner, and her hair was blond and straight instead of brown and wavy, and her eyes were bright green instead of dark green, and her body was, well, not the one she normally had on. She caught my gaze with her own, frowned just barely so only I could see it. I guess I looked like some leading man or male model to her, but I couldn't see myself. There were no mirrors anywhere.

"You were telling our guests, Carolyn?" Charles said to the woman, who nodded with a weak grin.

"We were just discussing this odd feeling we all seem to have here, all of us at this party that is, that, well, none of us can remember a *thing* before the party. Nothing. Not last year, not yesterday, not waking up this morning, not arriving here as you two have. Nothing before standing, drink in hand, and chatting with our friends."

"As if we simply didn't exist before this party," Charles said. "As if this party, in this house, were all the universe consisted of. Yet we know better than that, don't we?" This last he asked of his friends, the ones all standing around sipping and nodding and looking worried.

"What do you think?" Carolyn asked Lydia. "Are we all mad?" It was apparent, from the tone of her voice, Lydia was supposed to answer "yes." And then they would all laugh and joke about how far over the edge they'd gone this time, and everything would be all right. As if all that hinged, all that depended on Lydia saying *yes, you are all mad*.

Lydia shook her head. "You're not mad at all," she told them. She took a gulp of air and then said, "You're right."

"God," Charles said with a short, sharp laugh. "I'd rather be mad!"

"What do you mean we're *right*?" Carolyn asked. "What's that supposed to

mean? Of course we're not! How can this be all there is? What, am I supposed to believe that I'm to spend the rest of my life at a party?" She was upset, though her bearing didn't permit it to really show through.

"You're all going to die here," Lydia said. "Soon."

No one responded. Something in them, maybe a subtlety in their programming, maybe intuition, if Arties can have intuition, but something in them had to be saying *yes, this is the truth*. I caught the look on Lydia's face as she said it, although to be honest I'd been eyeing this new version of Lydia since I first thought to look at her, trying to keep my mouth from hanging open. But seeing Lydia's face as she told them they were all going to die soon, I learned something new about her.

This shit didn't get to her. She *liked* it. She was one of them, one of those sick mothers who bought these programs to see what were supposedly artificially created, sentient beings murdered. Right now a programmer of this stuff could get coldsleep fifty to a hundred, a user five realtime to fifty cold. The jury was still out, so to speak, on whether or not they were real, actual, living, intelligent, sentient people. Artificial life, definitely. Artificial intelligence, that had been proven. But sentience was the key. Sentience could get a first degree murder rap for some of these programmers, as well as kidnapping, assault, false imprisonment, and a whole slew of other charges we couldn't touch them with yet.

"What's going to happen to us?" Carolyn asked Lydia. "Is there a bomb? Is the champagne poisoned?"

"All I can tell you is this," Lydia said. "This, all this, is a game called *Fade to Black*."

"Oh my God!" another one, one who hadn't yet said anything, cried. He pointed to the wall. We all turned to look. The wall was disintegrating, melting away, crumbling into fine powder that miraculously hung in mid-air.

"Everything's getting darker!" Carolyn screamed. She dropped the champagne glass, it shattered musically on the floor. Everything was getting darker and disintegrating. Fading to black. Carolyn lunged for Charles, to throw herself into his arms no doubt, but they passed right through each other. Bits of them were already gone, little pockets of nothing, holes in their very being. One woman turned to face me, sobbing and arms outstretched, hands opening and closing, grasping for something to hold her, or *someone*, her eyes gone, blackness wiped across them.

"Why?" Charles asked. Amazingly he was able to keep his demeanor, square-shouldered and straight-backed, as he regarded me with a quizzical expression. "Why is this happening to us?"

I wished I could tell him, I really did. But I didn't know how to say that it was somebody's sick idea of fun. All I could do was watch, stare at him as his body disintegrated, oh so slowly, into static. Virtual dust to virtual dust. Glasses shattered as they were dropped, the effect never stopped during the whole thing as one by one the party people faded away. They stumbled around like zombies, some crying, some incapable of it because they didn't have mouths anymore, or even faces. Charles and Carolyn gradually were unrecognizable among the others, just two more vaguely human shaped Rorschach blobs.

And then it was over. I removed the VR gear and discovered I'd been sweating.

"They were real," Lydia said, a faraway look in her eyes like she could still see

them.

"Yeah," I said. " Christ, this was one was sick."

She looked at me to explain. "What made this one any sicker than the rest?"

"These people knew," I told her.

"Knew what?"

She knew *what*, but she was trying to get me to admit it, that they were sentient.

But I couldn't.

"They knew they weren't real," I said. "And when they started fading out like that...they knew it was all coming to an end. They weren't just dying, they weren't being killed, they were being wiped from existence. Just like that. The End. They didn't even have the dignity of dying the way living things are supposed to die."

Lydia snorted.

Fade out, the End, *finis*, ON/OFF...the wave of the future of life on Earth. You think, therefore you are, or so you *think*.

I didn't know what to think. All I knew was after that, after *Fade To Black*, I wanted nothing more than to die like a flesh and blood man, natural, honest, with dignity.

Fade to black.