
Intercept

ACHILLES PLAN

Gweon Hyo-ja could feel her stiff neck relaxing as her bone implant began to oscillate with the gentle notes of *Claire De Lune*. The day had been filled with endless meetings with government officials, and the Seoul-3 PD chief welcomed the moment of calm.

"Music, the universal language", she mused, stepping into the interrogation chamber.

Hovering before her, a cyborg was suspended in a T-pose, giving her nice views of his high-end prosthetics. His golden \$ACCADE eyes, unblinking, tracked her every move with precision.

"PG. That's for ProthesenGott, is it? Nice one—you don't strike me as a guy who reads Freud. "Nothing beats a well-read mind to go with those bionic muscles, huh?"

She found that using *banmal*, the impolite register, worked better on this kind. He was just a 'ke', a mere dog, and she needed to establish her authority.

"That's an expensive body. Look, we know you're ChaOS' favourite puppy. Tell us how to find it, and you won't be adjusted—Well, I'll be honest with you. Your track record is far from angelic. You'll *still* be adjusted, but what we're discussing here is—" Gweon paused. <She cepted him the experience of mining Deuterium on one of 1-Korea's smallest and farthest off-globe farms in the Kuiper belt, juxtaposed against a peaceful life on the second-level cabbage fields near the Sejong Metropolis.>

"We know your mother lives there, and that she's sick. I'm sure she'd appreciate your visit. Spill some coordinates and you'll fly to the moon instead of Kuiper. Help us arrest him, and Sejong it is. Your call, big guy."

Gweon could tell she had struck a chord. For a fleeting moment, raw emotion flickered in PG's eyes, a storm of feelings ready to erupt directly into her callosal implant.

"Do you really want to see grey dust for the rest of your life? Let's hear it, PG. Tell us."

<PG cepted vivid threats and showed Gweon the violence, he'd unleash if not restrained.> Gweon was unimpressed.

"Trust me fem. You dun wanna swoosh anyone there. Ain't no bogging with the ChaOS," PG said. <He cepted his fear, followed by images of tortured subordinates.> Gweon sensed the authenticity of his emotion, discerning it wasn't a mere construct of a Natural Ception Processing (NCP) algorithm.

"ChaOS ain't fleshling. ChaOS ain't intercepted."

"You underestimate what FODOR can do. We have the latest implementation.", Gweon replied.

"Whut's FODOR?" PG asked, unfamiliar.

"It's the cepting module our Exec Force uses. It can handle all ception modalities: sign language, spatial representations of the blind, you name it. It can even communicate with bots. I believe its name is derived from a cognitive scientist who passed away 70 years ago. He was the one who first described the 'language of thought' or 'Mentalese'. Though, most people use CEPCOMM's terminology these days. "

"Way to ballflex a monopoly. " <PG cepted his despise for contemporary neoradical consumerism.> <Gweon responded with four-dimensional commercials showcasing his luxurious prosthetic arms.> She smiled briefly.

"Well, bye now. We've noted your decision."

<...>

Somewhere amidst the bustling skystreets of Seoul-4's consumer level, Exec Force Special Agent O Jae-In was on standby, awaiting instructions. The moment 3rd HQ cepted him the coordinates, he broadcast his voice to the entire squad.

"Predictably, it's in the underground docks beneath the Han River in the Fourth. We can't waste time; it might anticipate our approach. Five support squads will join us in phases. Ready, Agent Bak?"

"Absolutely. This is one of the few things I enjoy about this job."

<Agent Bak shared a vivid cept of her whirling taekwondo kicks landing in the faces of thugs on a neon-soaked karaoke train, amidst a cascade of spilled drinks and shattered glass.> Though Bak had only recently joined Jae-In's squad, she had swiftly proven herself to be one of his most capable Execs. She carried an enigmatic aura, a certain indefinable quality that Jae-In couldn't pin down.

Jae-In watched Bak activate her priority light after which she dove into the intricate chaos of Seoul-4's skystreets. These streets were a dense mesh of multi-layered

streams: passenger vehicles, delivery drones, and consumer trains. From above, the traffic resembled a fabric being woven, its complex pattern momentarily disrupted as their bikes pierced vertically through. But there was no danger; Execs always had priority. He trailed her, their bikes descending like smooth oil droplets parting water. As they entered the tunnels, they were joined by the first squad of rangers.

"The stench even penetrates my visor," Jae-In remarked, flying over the ramshackle dwellings of Seoul-4's underground docks. The 4th Government believed there were three levels, but that was speculative. The deeper levels were lawless, rarely seeing exec deployment due to the high equipment loss risk. "Despicable that people endure this."

"Many have no other option. Here, try this—"

<Bak cepted him the scent of flowerfields.>

"Appreciated, Agent Bak. That aroma reminds me of—" Out of the blue, Ex-4's bike crashed into a bungalow below, and Bak heard the distinctive growl of modified Exec-bikes.

"Dogs!" she shouted.

"Execs, scatter!" Jae-In's bike surged, its engines humming. The squad dispersed, darting between buildings, under bridges, through narrow alleyways. The dim and sparse lights of the docks blurred past Jae-In as he weaved through the complex web of skystreets. Many of these paths were unregistered or defunct, yet still frequented by dockers. His onboard assistant estimated at least three Dogs on his tail. Their bikes, identifiable by their distinct growl, were gaining on him.

After an intense chase, Jae-In managed to corner two Dogs in a narrow alley, neutralising them with accurate shots from his seeker gun. However, his relief was short-lived.

His onboard assistant predicted that the third Dog was heading into a dead-end alley. As Jae-In approached, the Dog's bike came to a sudden halt and descended. The Dog dismounted, and slowly walked towards Jae-in with arms outstretched, seemingly signalling surrender.

"Right decision, punk." Jae-In remarked, assuming the Dog had realised the futility of escape given the dead-end and the superiority of Jae-In's weaponry. While Dogs could steal their bikes or weapons, the seeker function was genetically locked, only operable by Execs whose DNA was registered in the system. Jae-In decelerated, reaching for his cuffs.

Suddenly, his gun's interface flickered. Warning cepts intruded his thoughts.

<!System Compromised!>

It's a trap, he realised. He quickly drew his gun and fired, but his reaction was a split second too late. The bullet narrowly missed the Dog's helmet, instead piercing the wall at the alley's dead end. Further warnings bombarded him.

<Disable external filtering? Cept "NO" to prevent harmful access.>

"No wait!"

<Firewall disabled. Unauthorised access granted.>

< A digital maelstrom of mocking faces in glitchy and distorted graphics barraged Jae-In's mind. The visual assault was accompanied

by a cacophony of clowns laughing in deranged unison, their cackles echoing in a maniacal chorus.>

Amidst this sensory onslaught, Jae-In struggled to focus on the Dog. He fired once more, but the shot veered wildly, sharply turning right and shattering a window of a nearby dwelling. The bullet narrowly missed an occupant who had been observing the confrontation.

“Whut do ye boggin Exec piggers think yer doing?!” the resident yelled.

The Dogs had successfully hacked his weapon, rendering it useless. Left with no alternatives, Jae-In shut down onboard, cutting off all communication. He switched to manual control, accelerating to escape. The moment the Dog took to remount his bike gave Jae-In precious seconds.

With adrenaline pumping, Jae-In navigated without the aid of his onboard assistant. The menacing growl of the Dog's bike echoed through the vast expanse of the underground. Up ahead, he spotted a dimly lit entrance leading to a lower dock. Without hesitation, he swerved into it, hoping to lose his pursuer in the labyrinth below.

The lower dock stood in stark contrast to the lively skystreets above. An eerie silence prevailed, ruptured only by the distant hum of machinery and the sporadic dripping of water. As Jae-In navigated through the gloom, his bike lights briefly illuminated a section of a wall. It was only when a stray water droplet rippled across the surface that he noticed the holographic projection masking the entrance to a tunnel.

Without hesitation Jae-In turned into the tunnel, the entrance sealing shut behind him. The ambiance inside was unsettling. A group of children, none seemingly older than twelve, sat huddled in a circle. Their eyes, glazed and distant, were locked onto some

virtual reality, the soft luminescence of their bionic eyes casting ghostly shadows in the dimness.

"Hey!" Jae-In called out, trying to get their attention. But it was as if he was invisible to them. Some of the children appeared almost catatonic, utterly detached from their surroundings.

The rumble of a bike engine broke the silence. The Dog who had been chasing him had discovered the hidden entrance. Jae-In hastily hid himself behind a pile of discarded crates, watching as the Dog slowly approached the group of kids.

The Dog looked around, his eyes scanning the tunnel for any sign of Jae-In. But the kids, lost in their virtual world, paid him no attention. Frustrated, the Dog revved his bike and sped off, leaving the tunnel and its oblivious inhabitants behind.

Jae-In let out a sigh of relief. However, lingering wasn't an option. He needed to regroup with the other rangers. Reactivating onboard, he cepted his coordinates to Bak.

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"Glad you're here, Bak. They infected my gun. Every time I fire a bullet, the accuracy goes down. And these children... have you encountered this before?"

"These are blip kids," began Bak, her voice heavy with a mix of pity and understanding.

"Orphans, most of them. They've grown up in the shadows of these docks, turning to VR as an escape from their bleak existence. For them, it's not entertainment; it's a lifeline.

Within these virtual realms, they connect, form bonds, and even find ways to earn.

Many dream of making it in esports, hoping it's their ticket out."

Jae-In looked at the children, their faces frozen and illuminated by the yellowish glow.

"But why don't they respond? Why can't they speak?"

Bak sighed, "They lack language, Agent O. Or at least as we comprehend it. In the absence of caregivers or formal education, they've never acquired the means to communicate through words or manual signs. Their universe is this virtual dimension, where they've forged their unique mode of interaction."

Jae-In's eyes widened in realisation. "You mean... cepting?"

Bak nodded, "Precisely. But it's not like the cepting we know. Theirs is raw, unrefined, and in a perpetual state of flux. There aren't static interpretations, no fixed meanings. It's a fluid dance across modalities: auditory, tactile, visual."

Determined to understand, Jae-In engaged his cepting module attempting to interface with one of the children. Almost immediately, he was bombarded with a barrage of sensations and thoughts. <Flashing images, fragmented memories, and scattered voices of children reverberated in his mind, both deafening and distant. The thoughts swirled in chaos, devoid of any discernible structure or coherence. He witnessed non-Euclidean landscapes and inconceivable conceptual connections. Ideas transformed and shifted at breakneck speed, with perceptions emerging and vanishing in the blink of an eye.>

As additional children detected his intrusion and joined this mental dialogue, the torrent of thoughts intensified. Jae-In felt submerged in an ocean of indecipherable emotions and recollections. Abruptly, he disconnected, gasping for breath.

Bak placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's tragic, really. These kids have crafted their own universes, complete with distinct rituals, reasoning, and regulations. It's crystal clear to them. Yet, to outsiders like us, it's an enigma."

Jae-In looked back at the blip kids, a newfound understanding in his eyes. "We have to intervene, Bak. No child should have to endure this existence."

Bak gave a solemn nod. "Our immediate concern is the Dogs and ChaOS. Interestingly, I just received a clue from one of these kids."

"You deciphered their thoughts? How are you so well-versed in this—" Their conversation was cut short by an amplifying growl resonating through the tunnel, prompting a swift, shared look between them.

"Let's hack him back," Jae-In whispered in determination.

A transparent terminal materialised before him, overlaying his vision. He began cepting code sequences into it, his fingers moving swiftly in the air. The integration of FODOR with his neural interface empowered him to think directly in solutions. Activating the ABSTRACT plugin, he boosted FODOR's mental rotation engine, translating complex logical problems into architectural arrangements. The virtual space in front of him transformed into a game of sliding tatami mats and interlocking tetrominoids.

Bak observed him briefly, her face inscrutable. "Visual methods are so sluggish, Agent O," she commented. "TREESENSE is more optimal." As an aphantasic lacking visual imagery, she favoured sleek code segments that her mind could select in milliseconds using Bayesian decision tree autocompletion.

Before Jae-In could respond, the Dog burst into the tunnel, his bike's headlights blinding them briefly. However, Bak had already executed her task. With a decisive cepted directive, she unleashed a wave of disruptive code at the Dog's bike. Its engine choked and faltered, causing the Dog to crash.

Bak swiftly closed in on the downed biker, extracting data from his vehicle's interface. "The blip kids revealed ChaOS's true nature to me. It isn't an individual person. It's an entity, an all-knowing, gender-neutral force that not only governs the underworld but also nurtures these children, crafting their digital sanctuary.

Jae-In's eyes widened. "So, ChaOS isn't just driven by power and dominance over the black market. There's more depth to their intentions."

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Triangulating information from Gweon, the dog, and the blip kids, the agents navigated the labyrinthine tunnels, finally arriving at a holographically concealed and heavily fortified door. Adorned with intricate circuits and childish graffiti, it stood as a gateway to untold secrets. They cautiously combined a blend of physical and digital keys to unlock its mysteries. As the door slid open, it revealed a vast chamber lined with rows of towering servers, their pulsating LEDs casting an otherworldly glow. The hum of machinery filled the air, a testament to the power and reach of ChaOS.

"We've reached the core, Bak. How do we initiate contact with ChaOS?" Jae-In's voice echoed slightly in the vast space.

Bak, her gaze fixed on the central console, replied, "The mainframe. We need to connect it to our FODOR modules to *intercept* ChaOS' mind and launch an NCP assault to incapacitate their operation."

As Jae-In pointed to the console, Bak's mind raced. "Exactly. I'll guide you through the process. Just access that terminal."

In a swift move, Bak stunned Jae-In with her gun. He collapsed, his eyes reflecting a mix of shock and betrayal, while Bak's expression was a blend of determination and sorrow.

<She cepted a wave of genuine remorse, intertwined with flashes of her own past. She, too, had been a blip kid, raised by ChaOS in the shadowy depths of the underground.> "I'm sorry, Jae-In," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "I must face ChaOS alone. It's been 15 years since I last stood here, since ChaOS gave me a voice and purpose."

She initiated FODOR and commenced the intercept, her mind racing with thoughts and emotions. As the connection established, she found herself in a digital mindscape, facing the entity that had shaped her life.

"Seonsaengnim," she began, <shifting from spoken words to direct cepting, echoing the mode of communication from her prelinguistic days>. "You raised me, imparted language and logic, and gave me a chance to rise above the docks. But now, I've seen both worlds—the depths where we were forgotten and the heights where we are invisible. Both flawed. Both incomplete."

ChaOS, an omnipresent force in this realm, responded, its voice a symphony of countless minds. "Bak-ssi, you are the embodiment of our hopes, a bridge between two worlds."

Bak's determination intensified. "I advocate for my brothers and sisters, for the rich culture you've cultivated. They, too, deserve a voice, as you once granted me."

A profound silence enveloped them, laden with mutual recognition. Then ChaOS spoke, "What course do you suggest, Bak-ssi?"

Inhaling deeply, Bak braced herself.

<She outlined her meticulously devised plan.>

Central to her vision was the establishment of a self-governed autonomous zone within the docks where blip kids could thrive independently, free from the influence of the surface world. Her plan included new cultural and educational opportunities. She envisioned collaboration with a psycholinguistics professor at Cepcomm-Yonsei University, eager to explore the children's unique culture, aiding their development, and shaping policies for their societal integration, particularly in roles within the expanding virtual ecosystem.

However, this required significant concessions from ChaOS. They would need to scale back underground operations, surrender certain assets, and carefully navigate a relationship with the PD, balancing autonomy and governmental oversight. The plan came close to a revolutionary shift, challenging the status quo and promising a future where blip kids could actively participate in society.

The risks were immense, but Bak's incisive logic, deeply comprehended by ChaOS, held the promise of more than just coexistence – it was a blueprint for an uprising, containing layers of complexity that the surface world might initially overlook.

"Let's reveal the true splendour of your creation, Seonsaengnim. Help me bring these voices to light."

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Outside the chamber, Jae-In regained consciousness, his thoughts clouded with uncertainty. The console before him was now deactivated, sealed permanently, and Bak had vanished. Amidst his confusion, one thing became clear: Bak was more than just an Exec.

Meanwhile, Bak's bike sliced elegantly through the city's dense traffic as she ascended from the depths of the underground toward Seoul-3. Her mission was defined—facilitate a dialogue between Gweon and ChaOS, mediating between two worlds. Raised by machines, she was surrendering her mechanised heritage to infuse genuine humanity into a society increasingly indistinguishable from the machines it relied upon. As she navigated the stratified layers of the city, her callosal implant resonated with the haunting melody of "Voice of the Voiceless," a symphony of her new beginning.