

Hell is a place like this. Dead recycled air, pastel backlit plants and black cube couches. The only thing that sets this factory apart is the view outside.

Robin paced, glared at the gold and chrome clock that decorated the blind end of the corridor; 0923 on the morning of the day they had been working towards for three years.

I said I would wait for him.

Movement in the window caught the eye, red letters scrolling up the glass, bright in contrast to the black of space.

Implanted Masking Algorithm Global Effect. (IMAGE™) v5.1*

Upgrade your 'IMAGE™' today.

Improved touch function, seamless projection under all light conditions.

We Guarantee NO phase banding, NO transition pixelation.

(Standard terms and conditions apply.)

*Complies with all international Privacy Acts provisions and transparent to IdentifiMe™ and Bankeazy™ systems, UniKU™ transparent. Standard and custom Interface compatible.

Robin read the advertisement and then snorted in derision.

Provincials. Version five was released a month ago on Earth.

Robin's mouth quirked up, reminded of Blaise's addiction to the flashiest of Image Corp's appearance-wear offerings. He would be appalled at the delay. The man loved to be the centre of attention and his tastes ran inevitably to the gaudy end of the range. Robin thought he must spend at least half of his salary on whatever was the latest 'look'.

The letters cleared the window. On impulse Robin bracketed two hands over the cold surface and leaned forward.

The moon was concealed by the bulk of the factory; the diamond fleck of stars seemed to rotate as the industrial complex spun for gravity. Robin picked out the letters 'IMAGE' in red, sunlit on a cooling tower, saw the orange flash of operation lights bright in the unlit shadow, saw vaguely industrial-looking pipes and vents.

What did you expect to see, grass?

Shifting focus Robin examined the reflection of the corridor that seemed to be suspended outside in the vacuum and was unsurprised to see the image of a slight female wearing a blue form-fitting coverall looking back. A familiar feeling of discontent nagged at Robin's stomach.

For crying out loud, pull yourself together! He won't be much longer.

Robin scowled, turned away and looked at the still-shut door Blaise had disappeared behind, nearly half an hour ago, sighed faintly, and then wandered across the corridor to sit down on one of the black seats.

Not allowed my interface, in case we somehow steal their precious ideas.

The text rotated up the port again, Robin's eyes followed it, reading out of ingrained habit.

No personally targeted campaigns, my arse! Robin turned away from the relentlessly scrolling words. *Dammit, I wonder if someone in Promotions has guessed?*

Robin shivered. Hypocritical to want Image Corp to stop advertising, they were bankrolling this venture as Blaise was using a new extrapolation of their basic product to work with his novel engineering solution.

Robin picked over the details of the job, had a think about what deep digging had found out about the panel of executives Blaise was facing.

Formby and Collins saw the demonstration in Earth-orbit six months ago. Michaels has seen and approved the test results. Not a lot of point worrying about them now. Robyn tried again for distraction.

*Blaise wants the best tug crews; The Norwegians are good, they understood the nets.
I hope Blaise has managed to convince the panel that my estimates are cost effective.*
Robin looked at the door again.
I wish I felt some of Blaise's confidence.

The feeling of inadequacy pulled Robin into a memory of being with Blaise at the station mixer last night, circulating through the glittering crowd, carefully maintaining a supportive place at Blaise's shoulder.

I was fine until Taruni started.

Robin remembered being focused, analytical comfortable until Blaise was included in a convivial group of station officials.

"And is this your lovely life partner?"

The official was conservatively decorated in a standard, 'HindU@', IMAGE™, the arch of her eyebrow expressed polite surprise at Robin's dowdy self. The woman touched Blaise's arm, curiosity overcoming manners, angling for an introduction.

"Robin is my business partner, Councillor Taruni. My good right hand," Blaise smiled indulgently at Robin.

Robin could almost hear him thinking '*-- and I don't shag the staff.*'

Taruni moved her head side to side, looked at Robin, moving her gaze up and down deliberately, and then glanced back at Blaise for a further explanation.

Blaise put a warm arm around Robin's shoulder, as if claiming the relationship he had just denied.

"Robin, natural girl here, she's the best – she can pick up influences that no-one can see; she has favours owed everywhere. Give her a week in any workplace and she'll know everyone's family; how their mother's operation went, why they work and who they live with." Blaise tightened his grip, "I make the plans, but she makes sure, they happen."

Robin blushed and ducked out from under Blaise's arm.

Blaise grinned, "Perhaps people trust her because she is so old fashioned. She refuses to buy into all this flashy stuff."

Blaise waved a negligent hand at his hair, his body.

Blaise was wearing his favourite, 'Pillar of Fire ®', IMAGE™, the one, he had confided in the lift coming down to this function, he chose when he needed a confidence boost.

Blaise wriggled his fingers at Robin, who looked like a slim, athletic twenty-five year old woman wearing the sort of classic little black dress that had been in fashion for more than a century.

"What you see is what you get with my Robin."

Robin, stupid heart thudding at the possessive, looked down and made a soft sound of denial.

Robin remembered, *'I don't shag the staff'*, and changed the subject, complimented Councillor Taruni on her 'IMAGE™', enquired about her family, her grandchildren, and then filed the information away in the fluke of a memory that had secured the place at Blaise's side.

And now Blaise was behind that sealed door, finalizing the last details of the operation. Image Corp security had excluded Robin as a non-engineer, and the waiting was getting difficult.

It's stupid to feel this anxious. Mrs. Collins told me her son was fully on board, Formby represents the refining cartel, and Michaels is a company man. I must find out more about Michaels. Robin's hands reached automatically for the interface, felt the clench of teeth grinding when it was not there, tried to stop the spiralling worry and patiently observed the advertisement crawling up the window three more times.

Thought, *I should go back to the office*, but waited instead, outwardly serene except for a finger that picked at the hard side of a nail.

Finally, the door slid open and Blaise sprang out to fill the sterile corridor with life and noise and colour.

Robin, feeling the magnetic pull of his presence, stood and stepped to the position just to the right of his shoulder that felt like home.

Blaise strode off down the corridor, twisting his head around to grin at Robin, waving his arms. "We are go, Robin! Four, count 'em and weep, four lifters approved, eighteen tugs."

Blaise slapped his hand on the lift controls, bounced on his feet as he waited for the doors to open.

"Crew?" Robin asked.

"Anyone you can dig up, sweetheart. No union restrictions. They..." Blaise flapped a hand up the corridor and then used it to pull Robin into the suddenly arrived lift, "they are just happy to get their problem solved."

"Blaise?" Robin met his eyes, stomach sinking despite Blaise's optimism. "Are you sure about this? There's probably a reason no-one has used IMAGE tractor and pressor effects at this scale."

Blaise winked, and then grinned at Robin again. "No cold feet from you, Dickey Bird!" He declaimed. "We'll be fine, perfect operation, us. I do the clever engineering; you get the team together to do its stuff at the right time. Let's get to work."

Blaise charged out of the opening lift doors and marched towards the office, Robin trailing behind like a tethered balloon.

Five days later, Robin, ear-plugged into coms, spread sure fingers over the intricately customized interface and willed all the parts of the project to coalesce into the whole that danced almost graspable on the view screen.

"Now!"

Blaise gave the order and the lifters moved into position at compass points.

The virtual display beeped and used primary colours to illustrate the lines of force that joined the lifters.

Robin used a soothing rhythmic alto voice to orchestrate the team. "Tugs one through five away, bring in the net, William. Fifteen, Eighteen, stand by. Ari, on my mark."

Blaise watched the silent ballet on the screen. He leaned forward in his seat as if his physical presence would, could make a difference.

"Robin!"

"I see it, Blaise. Fourteen to point delta, Christof, one has got through."

"On to it, Ma'am."

Blaise sighed as the IMAGE presser nets deployed by the tug snagged the tumbling debris and directed the mass to the centre of the catch zone.

Blaise's fingers moved as he adjusted the balance of the lifters, his concentration on the readouts from the four slaved panels.

"Mark! Ari."

Robin switched channels, checked in with all the other tugs, and risked a glance at Blaise.

Today Blaise wore 'UAngel®', white feathered wings; they beat once, twice in the air behind him. Blaise played the console, the lifters shifted. The panels showed a rainbow of stress in the field.

"Got them." Satisfaction coloured Blaise's voice.

Blaise allowed the lifter's jointed arms to flex as the weight of space junk collected by the tugs met at the designated spot and welded itself together, inertia lending spin to the ungainly shape. He paused, watching the screens like the hawk he resembled, wings spread, as if hovering. Robin did not breathe, and then finally Blaise flicked the control stick.

The junk moved, Robin inhaled sharply and then scanned the bands. Felt a soft blanket of relief flood calm over strained nerves. The payload was on track.

Robin said, "Well done!" to the tug captains, plotted the course of the junk and then smiled and met Blaise's eyes. "Direct to the asteroid, Blaise, congratulations. The Belters will have to pay you that bonus."

The wings on Blaise's back relaxed and then folded, beautiful, sweeping the floor. "Unclaimed for twenty years!" Blaise tapped his hand sharply, once, on the console and then stood; the wings sloped forward and folded around him so that only his head was free, he let the feathers hug him. "We've done it, Robin. No more grafting, those Belters will keep us in beer until we have grandchildren."

Robin disconnected, checked the board again, and diverted the congratulation messages to be read later; pushed the seat back and then moved to Blaise's shoulder and ran a hand down the downy illusion of his wings.

The door swished open and Blaise's backers charged in.

"Well done, man."

"Genius, that last flick."

"Blaise, my boy. Thanks to you IMAGE Corp now owns orbital reclaim!"

The Corporation organized an impromptu celebration on the huge recreation deck. Blaise's technique would bring work and profit the station's way for at least five years. Blaise was everyone's hero and he, smirking, wore 'Superman™' for the first time since Robin, and he had graduated.

"Just make sure you never choose 'Batman'," Robin commented tartly.

Blaise swatted his partner on the backside, "Never a hero to your valet, eh?"

Robin hid the wince.

Robin wore the little black dress and stayed as much in the background of the party as possible.

As the evening turned into morning Robin found a place by the great arched viewing window that opened on to the station hub, watched the relentless traffic shifting in seeming

anarchy across the cavernous space; counted the tugs into their berths and the lifters into their ports. Robin shifted sideways on the armless couch and watched as Blaise circulated through the diminishing crowd; felt the seat dip when later he sat down and handed over a condensation-misted glass.

Robin poked a finger into the waving red cape and Blaise, his grin dimmed by exhaustion, turned off the projection. Slumped there in his grey ship-mesh looking rumpled.

Robin looked into his face and saw, in the dim light, the dark smudges under his eyes, the lines beside his mouth and the slight shake in his hands. The dull jewels of his implants scattered like stars across his skin. Robin reached up and pushed an errant lock of brown hair back off his forehead.

“The sad face of the real me.”

Blaise stole the drink and took a mouthful, handed it back and then rubbed both hands over his face.

Robin put the glass down on a table and said, “You look tired, shall we go?” Held out a hand and pulled Blaise to his feet.

Blaise wavered slightly but nodded, balancing using Robin’s supporting grip and peering at his friend through bloodshot eyes.

“I see the real you all the time, and you look as beautiful as ever, Robin, my little bird. What’s your secret, huh?”

“I don’t drink.”

“Don’t drink, don’t ‘mage, what do you do, birdling?”

“Look after you.”

Robin tugged Blaise by that warm hand, out of the side door, along to the lift, and down to the door of Blaise’s room.

A woman in an expensive, individualized, ‘GlamaUP®’, dozed against the doorframe, but woke as Blaise approached. She managed to look seductive despite the late hour.

Blaise stopped, pulled himself together, re-engaged, ‘Superman®’, and dug up a grin for Robin.

“You’ll be OK?”

“Yes.”

Robin ignored the unwarranted feeling of betrayal, pretended to not think about the anticipated and imagined quiet and convivial wind-down, the crumbs allowed a business partner and friend, gave Blaise a little push towards the better offer.

Robin also did not look as the pair came murmurously together but slipped back around the corner to the rooms that opened obediently to the proximity of the, ‘IdentifiMe™’, implant that all citizens wore.

Robin stepped inside, waited until the door shut, and then slid down it as if strings had been cut, to land on the floor, legs out in front.

Robin’s eyes closed, the dark felt tight, scratchy. “Room, mirror back wall. Lights on full.”

The projection and soft susurrations of sea against sand ended, replaced by a floor to ceiling mirror.

Robin opened his eyes.

“IMAGE; end little black dress, end birdyvoice, end default.”

Robin shivered a little as the projections faded; ship mesh preserved modesty but provided little insulation. Robin met the black eyes that stared at him in the mirrored wall,

scraped a hand over the stubble that stained his gaunt scarred cheeks, turned sideways to look at the hook in his nose. Stumbled to his feet and looked again, as he did every night, at the thin, ungainly man in the mirror.

I wish, a daily ritual, things were different.

Robin remembered being sixteen when, among his peers, he felt only the beautiful were allowed to be different. He remembered his skin marred with violent acne and his hair greased with the exudations of youth.

Robin wished he could have come to terms with his orientation earlier, that he had not chosen to seem female so that at least the teen jock's he crushed on wouldn't recoil from his distant worship.

Wished his rich parents had not let him choose a lifestyle of subtle 'IMAGE™' lies. Lies that had become too tangled to undo, well before he met Blaise at university.

I wish -- No, he still could not bring himself to wish he did not love Blaise.

Robin grimaced at his reflection, peeled out of his undergarment, stepped into the shower, used a week's ration of water in deference to the Belter's bonus, shaved his chin under the deluge and ran the razor over his head, under his arms, up his legs.

He dried his naked and unenhanced skin in the hot blast of air that came for free, watching the light glint off the dense grid of implants as he twisted and turned. He fished a new suit of ship mesh out of the dispenser and rolled it on.

Robin said "IMAGE; engage default," and saw the familiar face and contours of his female body return, watched the dark hair bounce on his shoulders.

Robin said, "Mirror off, lights ten percent," and then he went to bed, soothed by the pulse of water on sand.