

Lethe
Intro

His heart beat loudly in his ears. Sweat poured down his forehead and cascaded off his body, soaking the sheets beneath him.

But he did not wake.

His face contorted with anguish and pain, tears squeezed themselves free from tightly-shut lids.

Still he did not wake.

His body twitched, his lips moving, whispering quietly, things that nobody alive would remember.

Prophet's eyes snapped open. He screamed a soundless scream, and clawed at the bedsheets and metal walls. But nobody was there, nobody to help him. He fell back onto the bed and the eyes snapped shut, and he began to live it all over again.

Chapter 1

LostProphet landed from a particularly elaborate jump.

The pavement cracked, birds flew away in startled confusion – their programming not designed to deal with such a bizarre occurrence.

He grinned, his brilliant white teeth glinting in the sunlight. It was a nice day – rare for the Matrix. The machines liked to keep their humans as doleful as possible - nothing that convinced them to better themselves. Just keep the status quo, and that'll be grand.

He flicked his phone open and punched the direct line to his operator.

"The corner of Chesterfield and Seventh Street; be there in 10 minutes."

"Alright."

10 minutes later

"Mr White?" a voice said behind him.

Prophet turned around.

"I have the package you requested."

The voice was soft, but it exuded power. Prophet knew the guy probably had sharpshooters aiming at him. But they weren't the Awakened; they had no chance of hitting him.

"Where is it?"

"AhhAhhAhh." A strange laugh, "You don't think I would be so foolish as to carry it with me do you?"

"I had my doubts."

A frown creased his features.

"I have it in safe house."

He clicked his fingers. An arm reached around and clamped a rag to Prophet's mouth. He stood there and smiled beneath the rag. They thought that was air he was breathing.

In a trice, he had his would-be-anaesthesiologist on the ground with a broken arm. Only training stopped him from screaming in pain.

"I suggest we go there now, wouldn't you agree?"

The man was unfazed, and clearly uncaring about his dogsbody writhing on the ground.

"As you wish."

**

The elevator stopped four floors beneath ground level, and they alighted. "They" being Prophet, the man, and three heavily armed guards.

"What's your name?" Prophet asked as they walked down a narrow corridor.

"AhhAhhAhh," that laugh again, "I'm not foolish enough to reveal that information."

"Our deal is almost complete."

"You can be traced. If you know my name, I can be traced. Know me only as The Acquirer."

They reached the end of the corridor. Passing through the doorway, they entered a room full of locked safes. Prophet was led to Number 363, and The Acquirer removed a golden key from his inner jacket pocket to unlock the safe.

Inside was a small box, and inside the box was a set of discs.

They were termination codes for several highly powered machine Agents. The war was intensifying. The machines had made no bones about the fact they were looking for access codes to the Zion Mainframe.

Zion, in a feat of brilliance, had managed to locate an open machine node that connected back to 01. A carefully planned feedback loop brought out a huge information dump. Unfortunately, other interested parties had managed to steal the most important pieces.

Zion was now bargaining for the discs – Prophet didn't know what they were giving in return, he just knew he was there to pick up the goods and upload them to his hovercraft.

The troupe returned to the elevator and travelled to the ground level in silence. The doors pinged open and they walked into the foyer ... and that's when things got incredibly messy.

Chapter 2

The windows shattered as motorcycles burst into the building. The three guards fell instantly as bullets ripped through their bodies. They weren't awakened or programs, and they were now dead.

Prophet grabbed The Acquirer and manhandled him towards the front door. The gunning had stopped – the bikers wanted both of them alive.

As they reached the door, it came crashing inwards, and The Acquirer wet himself. Three Agents stood there, one with his fist outstretched, having "knocked".

The bikers turned their weapons fire on the Agents, who fanned out and began to work on taking them down. Prophet and the frightened man ran back the way they had come.

"Down here! We can get out the back way." The Acquirer shouted, gasping for breath. They hared towards the back door and burst out into a courtyard. A

roofed courtyard. A stretched car screeched to a halt at the only exit, and the rear door swung open.

Prophet swung round, and saw Agents coming towards them fast. There was no choice.

They both bundled into the car, which accelerated mind buggingly quickly and they were soon several blocks away.

Prophet knew instinctively that he was in the company of Exiles. If they had been regular people, Agents would have been inside the car in seconds.

"LostProphet, welcome. And hello to you, Mr Backer."

The Acquirer was silent. His plans had gone fantastically wrong. He was scared shitless.

"We know you don't have the discs. In fact, you're of no use to us anymore. You're dangerous, Mr Backer. You don't realise, but you have the potential to become a very good federal agent."

The Acquirer looked startled and confused. The Exile speaker pulled out a serrated knife and plunged the tip into his neck.

The Acquirer screamed, then gurgled as he rapidly choked on his own blood.

The knife was pulled across his throat, almost severing his head, and the screaming stopped abruptly. The exile ripped the head off and tossed it into the footwell. Prophet grimaced at the nasty way the businessman had met his end.

"Unfortunately, you can't do that to me." He said quietly, wiping blood off his face.

"No," the exile said wistfully, "I wouldn't want to anyway. We will take the termination codes from you, and you will tell us what else that information dump revealed."

Prophet laughed.

"Sure thing. How about I give you access codes to the Zion Mainframe whilst I'm at it? Go back to your master, whoever the hell he is, and tell him to find the info himself."

The remainder of the car journey was made in silence. Prophet knew that if he tried to escape he'd get a bullet in the head, but was confident that when they got to their destination, something could be arranged.

Twenty minutes later, he was not so confident. Not at all.

**

When he had arrived, a huge ensemble of rough-looking exiles were there to meet him, and they had rapidly bundled him into an interrogation room. He was currently sitting strapped to a chair with very few clothes on.

A knock on the door, and a voice said quietly "They're here." When the door opened, Prophet got the shock of his life.

Chapter 3

"Glad you could make it, Mr Hirst." The first of three Agents said almost amiably, "Say hello to my colleagues, Agents Jones and Brown."

LostProphet glowered at them and struggled in his restraints.

"You know my old name, so what's yours?" he spat.

"Smith. Agent Smith. And I am in control here so don't bother your tiny mind with trying to escape."

Smith turned to one of the Exiles, "You have the discs?"
The exile handed them over.
"Good. And now for your ... reward."

Two minutes later and the dead bodies were stacked neatly in the corner. Jones had set out a medical kit on the desk next to Prophet.
"What's this all about? Machines using exiles to capture me ... you're losing your touch boys."

Smith stared blankly at him, inscrutable behind his dark glasses.

"We all know Zion caused that information dump. Unfortunately for you, they were sloppy. They didn't know where the dump would be, or how many dumps there would be. And so we find ourselves in this situation."

"You have the termination codes, now either kill me or release me."

Smith smiled. It sent chills down Prophet's spine.

"Wrong requests, Mr Hirst. We want the access codes to Zion's Mainframe, and you're going to give them to us."

"I don't have them. I'm just an operative."

He felt something sharp and cold stab into his neck. He winced, tried not to cry out, as the plunger of the hypodermic was pushed, injecting him with code.

"Either you tell us the codes, or how to get them, or you're going to suffer in ways you can't even imagine. The fluid injected into you is code, like so much of this world, and we can make it do anything we want. Anything."

Smith clicked his fingers and immediately Prophet felt his temperature rising. He fought against it, but was soon sweating profusely.

"As you can see, we've had our eye on you for some time now, Mr Hirst. You and Zion, that is."

"Then you'll know I'm just the messenger."

"Unfortunately for you, we DO shoot the messenger. Unless the messenger tells us where the codes can be found."

Prophet found his vision beginning to blur. He hadn't been briefed on the Agents mind-bending techniques. He wasn't prepared.

"Only a captain would have the codes. Not even a first mate, only a captain."

Smith murmured approvingly. Prophet realised what he had said.

"But you'll never get your hands on one. My captain will never show around here – as far as they're concerned, I'm as good as dead." He spat, though it was more of a dribble of a comment, drugged as he was.

Smith un-holstered his Desert Eagle and pointed it at Prophet's head. Calculating the angle perfectly.

"What the fu..."

There was a short, sharp bang. Prophet's head snapped backwards, then his whole body lolled forwards in the chair. The bullet had ripped a chunk of his face away, but he was still alive.

"Let us hope the shock wasn't too much for his real body." Agent Jones said quietly, helping to remove Prophet from the restraints. They carried him quickly to a waiting black sedan, and sped away.

Ten minutes later on Stratford Campus, a car almost ran several citizens over as it steamed through a busy square. The back door flew open and a body, its face half decimated, rolled out and stopped in a bloody heap. Somebody screamed. In the car, the Agents smiled.

Chapter 4

It was mere minutes before LostProphet's rescuers arrived on the scene. They bundled him back into a car and left at high speed.

As they hurtled down some stone steps and onto the road, there was a thud on the roof, and a fist came smashing through.

"An Agent!" the driver screamed, pulling on the handbrake and spinning the wheel in his hands. The car skidded into a U-turn and then accelerated hard the way it had come. The hand withdrew, but the Agent was now pulling the roof apart. As the gap opened, the passengers immediately opened fire.

A hail of bullets – too many to dodge – ripped through the Agent. Except it was now an old man again. The tattered body fell like a rag doll onto the road and the car sped on. But not for much longer.

The brake lights of the car ahead flared a deep red, and the group ploughed into the back of it, and over its back. The car barrelled through the air and landed on its roof, skidding to a messy halt and almost demolishing a payphone.

As the crew pulled themselves painfully out of the wreckage, they saw Agents walking slowly towards them from the car that had braked heavily to a stop. The payphone started to ring.

As Prophet was jacked out, the Agents started to run.

Soon the captain was left, staying behind to make sure his crew got out safely.

A bullet from a Desert Eagle ripped through the receiver of the payphone. He was trapped. The Agents stood there, two immovable, unemotional rocks.

"The access codes." Smith intoned, smiling.

* *

Prophet finally awoke, crying. He remembered it all – his captain had blown his own brains out to stop the codes falling into the hands of the Agents. For some reason he was reliving this over and over tonight, after blocking it out successfully for so long. Unbeknown to him, it was the work of his neural transceiver – repairing its pathways now that he was growing in strength and knowledge.

He stumbled out of bed to the bathroom and hurled cold water all over his sweat-drenched body. His convalescence was over and he had a ship to lead once again. He had to make his mind strong again.