

Losing My Religion (Vector/Recursion)

Intro

LostProphet lay on his back, in a pool of his own blood. His right leg was twisted savagely underneath him, his arms broken in five places.

He repeatedly tried to move but only succeeded in spreading the blood further over his brown duster and sending agonising signals of pain to his brain.

Through blurred and bloody eyes he could see the outline of the warehouse around him, the half-built cars blocking all views into the building from the road outside.

Prophet let his head roll to one side to look towards the crackly sound of the radio that had just been turned on and shuddered - creating more lightning bolts of pain - as the sound of someone walking echoed around the warehouse.

Life is bigger
It's bigger than you
And you are not me
The lengths that I will go to

"And so here we are," a gravelly voice said over the introduction and first lines of the song, "All our work has come to fruition."

The distance in your eyes
Oh no I've said too much
I set it up

"Ironic, don't you think?"

The sound of the single explosion from the barrel of the 9mm filled the neighbourhood, and LostProphet knew no more pain.

Part 1

24 hours earlier

"That's me in the corner, that's me in the spotlight, losing my religion"

Echosnare shot a glance at LostProphet, sitting beside him in the front of the 1965 Lincoln Continental that currently cocooned some of the Children of Zion's top operatives.

"You're out of tune LP."

LostProphet grinned back and launched into the last part of the verse with a melodramatic, pained look on his face.

"I thought that I heard you laughing, I thought that I heard you sing, I think I thought I saw you try."

Echo flicked an irritated finger at the stereo and immediately the local radio station snapped out of existence, at least to them. The pristine black example of American motoring oozed down Park & Vine, its occupants hidden behind the darkened windows, heads turning as it slipped past the bluepills like oil.

PBlade sat in the centre seat at the back, Baku and Luneran either side of him, "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music."

"Is that so?" Echo asked irritably, leaning over his shoulder to look at PBlade, who just shrugged and grinned, then busied himself polishing his Clamours.

"You're damn itchy today Echo, what's up?" Prophet asked as they turned off the road into a small alley.

"I don't know. Just something about this mission that makes me uncomfortable," he muttered, turning off the engine and coasting to a halt under a conveniently broken light fixture.

Baku leaned forward and patted his operative on the shoulder, "Don't worry about it, this should be simple enough. We pick up the defector, place the signal disruptor, and get the hell out."

The suicide doors clicked open as one and the black-clad operatives emerged into the rapidly-darkening evening. A fluorescent light buzzed and flickered a few metres away, partially lighting a doorway that all five knew was their way in.

One less-than-gentle shoulder-charge later and they were inside the building and the elevator.

Baku dipped his hand into a pocket and removed a cellphone. Flipping it open, he punched in a single digit and held it to his ear.

"How many of them?"

Pocketing the phone, he thumbed the button for the seventh floor and grinned at the others.

"Showtime."

Part 2

Luneran's fist slammed into the so-called Elite Guard's chest and he staggered back into the wall, the unmistakable, sickening sound of a shattering breastbone making him grimace, before a swift sky-high sidekick implanted his head in the plasterboard and his eyes glazed over, programming overwhelmed from the onslaught.

She smiled and entered the back room where her fellow operatives were gathered.

The man standing in the corner looked to be about twenty seven, not that appearances and age meant much in the Matrix. His black hair ran in a tangle of confusion down to his shoulders and over his forehead, casting shadows over sharp blue eyes, the only part of him to reveal the intelligence within. He carried several days of growth on his chin and his clothes - a brown suit with cream-coloured tie - were rumpled and slightly torn.

"This is Grayscale?" Luneran asked, thinking that 'Sepia' might have been a more sensible choice of alias.

"This is him," LostProphet replied, "Our great defector."

Grayscale shifted uncomfortably at this remark.

"Okay let's get him out of here," Baku said, clapping his hands together and marching from the room, "We've got to debrief him ASAP."

LostProphet and PBlade frogmarched Grayscale down to the car, and Echosnare popped the trunk.

"What is this?" the rumpled man asked suspiciously, backing away.

"It's lined with material that will block anyone trying to track your RSI signature, or trying to force you to jackout. Unless you want your old buddies to join the party, I suggest you get inside."

Echo withdrew a handgun and motioned impatiently to the car. Grayscale eyed him warily, but got in anyway.

"I don't trust him," Echo muttered as the car reversed out and joined the flow of traffic.

"He's a Merovingian defector," PBlade pointed out, "That's pretty much the most duplicitous sonovabitch you can find around here."

"We've got our bases covered," Baku interrupted, "Chill guys, everything will be fine."

Part 3

Flood stood before his master, fists curling and uncurling nervously as the Merovingian swallowed the contents of his cocktail glass.

"Now then, Flood," he placed the glass on the arm of the large red leather sofa, "our plan comes to fruition. The next few hours are critical, as you well know."

Flood shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Of course he knew, the Merovingian had spoken of little else in every communique for the last five weeks.

"What - exactly - does the informant know that is so valuable?"

The Frenchman fixed Flood with a stare, "That is my business and my business alone! Suffice it to say that it must NOT leave the Matrix, in any hands."

"Yes, I under..."

"And let me reiterate that you are all expendable in this. Where are they now?"

"I'll go and find out," Flood muttered, slinking away into the darkness.

Part 4

The light was gone now, the MegaCity plunged into an oppressive, smoggy darkness. At least it was in Westview.

The fires dotted around Rogers Way cast eerie shadows over decrepit buildings and cracked asphalt as unidentified beasts of the night scampered through deserted and overgrown parks. Not many bluepills lived in this area anymore; it was perfect for the Awakened.

The car drew to a halt outside a particularly nasty example of urban decay and the Children of Zion hopped out smartly, freed Grayscale from the boot, and hurried inside.

"Elevator doesn't work," Baku said, taking to the stairs at an effortless jog. LostProphet and Grayscale were the last to enter the stairwell.

"I just wanted to say thankyou," Grayscale said, "I assure you that the information I have will make this all worthwhile."

He stuck out a hand and LostProphet regarded it with disdain, but then took it and shook it firmly.

"What the ..." he withdrew the hand, a brief sharp stinging sensation on his palm, and examined it. There was nothing there, and when he turned back Grayscale had already mounted the stairs.

Prophet shook his head and followed.

"Hello?" Echo called out as he opened the door to the apartment and was met with darkness.

"They'll be in the back room," Luneran said, feeling around for the lightswitch, finding it, and then discovering that it didn't work.

The sextet walked through the darkness and entered the back room, spirits raised as they saw the standard-issue Zion monitoring kit. This was an outpost for operatives to monitor goings on in the Matrix, and also for extraction of bluepills.

"Hey Elco, why are all the lights off?" PBlade asked one of the operatives, brushing his hand along the black metal surface of one of the machines.

"I ... I'm sorry," he said, voice breaking, "I ... they're onboard. They've got our operator!"

He glanced at Grayscale who was glaring angrily.

"They said if I didn't, that they'd kill ... but now! ..."

His head suddenly jerked back and his lifeless body fell to the floor, followed a second later by the other two that stood quivering at the back of the room.

Echosnare whirled around and pointed his gun at Grayscale's head.

"What the fuck is going on here?"

"I ... I don't know..."

"TALK!" he shouted as the safety was released on the weapon.

"Wait! Listen, I have codes! Access codes! If you kill me you'll never .."

"What? Never say never my man. Unless you've got access codes to the land of fucking Narnia, I don't want to know."

"The Merovingian!" Grayscale blurted, "I know where to obtain the killcodes for the Merovingian."

Part 5

The room was silent, the only sound came from the pyres burning out on the street below, and some sporadic gunfire in the distance.

"Say that again," PBlade said, finally breaking the silence and gently moving Echosnare's gun away from Grayscale's head.

"I can get you into some of the Merovingian's most secret and protected constructs," Grayscale said, oddly calm, "You can destroy him from the inside out."

"How, exactly, do you expect us to believe all of that?" PBlade muttered, fixing the defector with a stare. Grayscale did not reply, but walked with slow,

measured steps to the door that they entered by. What followed, most of them had seen before.

He shut the door tight, then withdrew a red key from his pocket.

"This is access to the gateway construct," he explained to the sceptical operatives, "From within this construct I can get you into the heart of the Merovingian's world. There he is not so invincible."

The key slid into the lock and Grayscale turned it, and opened the door. Red light seeped into the dark room, turning the faces of the Children of Zion a sickly blood colour.

LostProphet stepped forward to look directly into the construct.

"This has 'trap' written all over it," he growled, "Our greed for destroying that bilingual bastard doesn't extend to suicide."

Grayscale glared at him.

"Five is ideal, but one is enough."

With an unanticipated turn of strength and speed, he grabbed LostProphet's brown duster and threw himself through the door.

Prophet cursed and shot a hand out to save himself, catching the door handle.

"NO!" Baku yelled, running forward to grab his comrade, but the door slammed shut as he got there. He wrenched it open, ripping it clean off its hinges, but the dank, miserable corridor of the building looked back at him.

The four operatives stood silently, staring agape at the doorway.

Luneran pulled out her phone.

"Operator."

"You saw all that?"

"Yeah, well .. what I could make sense of it anyway."

"Where did he go?"

"I ... don't know. I've lost his signal completely, I'll have to run a full scan of the Matrix."

She pocketed the phone dejectedly, the others having heard the conversation.

"Not much more we can do here," Baku said, "Let's get back to our ships and find his signal."

Part 6

The Merovingian threw back his head and laughed, long and hard, as Flood relayed an update to him.

"I thought you wanted all of them." Flood said, a statement, not a question.

"At first I did yes," the Merovingian said, his voice flowing like silk ... or oil, "but this is perhaps even better. If at first you do not catch a fly, track it, wait until it tires, and then kill it. This is what I shall do with those that got away. But now ... now I can devote the entire plan into destroying one of the bigger thorns in my side."

"LostProphet."

"Precisely. Did our messenger deliver the parcel as well?"

Flood nodded and a bigger smile leapt onto the Frenchman's face.

"Excellent. I shall watch this with great interest."

Part 7

"You little twat!" LostProphet exploded as he stumbled into the corridor. He swung around and felt his fist connect with Grayscale's chin.

"Maybe I am," he responded from the floor, "but recognition of the fact is not going to help you get out of here."

"And where is here, exactly?" Prophet fumed, aiming a kick at the figure on the floor but not going through with it.

"Like I told you, a gateway construct. I'm a man of my word Mr Prophet, if nothing else."

"Okay so it's a gateway, but how do we get through it to something useful, hmmm?"

"You will be transferred automatically, once certain things have been taken care of."

"What things?"

"The disconnection of your autojackout mechanism, for one."

Grayscale threw back his head and began to laugh. LostProphet pulled an FM700 from his belt and emptied the clip into the man, an icy fear coursing through his veins.

He hurled the gun at the bloody corpse with a bellow, and then the floor disappeared from beneath his feet.

Part 8

Baku stood on the Operations deck of the Behemoth, arms folded nervously as his operator - along with every other CoZ vessel at Broadcast Depth - ran a scan of the Matrix for LostProphet.

"Shit." he said as the screens turned blank momentarily, refreshing to the last view before the search had been run - nothing was found.

Over the next few minutes, reports poured in saying the same thing. All known constructs had also been scanned, yielding nothing.

The last report, much more disturbing, came from the Cerberus.

"Baku, it's me" came Orezoen's static-laded voice.

"You got anything?"

"Nope, but I have bad news. His auto-jackout mechanism has been disabled, we don't know how."

"Say that again?!"

"We picked up a sudden spike in feedback, and it disconnected itself. We've been trying to re-enable it, but without him jacking out first, there's nothing much we can do."

"Shit. Okay ... Prophet used to run with Soren's crew, he's well aware of the realities of life in there without that backup. But we need to find him, and fast."

"Agreed. We're sending a team in shortly. Last known location."

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LostProphet landed painfully on his backside on a white tiled floor, as the surrounding walls built themselves up around him. He clambered to his feet and took stock of his situation.

He was in a church; despite its bright white construction, it looked somehow familiar.

"Bonjour, LostProphet."

He visibly leapt, spinning round at the sound of the too-familiar voice and scrabbling for a weapon.

"Ah nonono, there is no point at all in that. We have taken the liberty of removing them anyway." the Merovingian smirked.

The smirk remained as Prophet hurled himself at him and found himself tumbling headlong onto the smooth flooring.

"I am but an apparition in this place. I believe you have met the Effectuator's ... many personalities," he let out a short, halting laugh, "It is through his means that I speak to you now."

Prophet glared at the spectre from his position on the floor, "What exactly is it that you want? You disabled my auto-jackout, why not just come here yourself and put a bullet in me?"

The Merovingian laughed again and shook his head, "Where is the fun in that? The struggle for survival of a desperate man is such an entertaining thing to see. I had hoped to ensnare more of you of course, but you will amuse me perfectly well on your own."

"Whatever game you're playing, I'll win."

"Ha! Strong words for a man who is lost and alone. You stupid humans have such primitive minds. As soon as the truce was signed you developed methods to tie yourselves closer to the Matrix. You hack at each others minds because of the technology you have developed. I have studied the mechanisms closely."

Prophet felt a sinking feeling inside his stomach, "That's how you killed the auto-jackout."

"Oh I did much more than that, dear boy. You have no idea. You showed great promise, in your own insignificant way. A human mind that can make itself so ... apparent, on my radar as often as you have is an impressive one. But your continued allegiance to Zion and determination to meddle in my affairs cannot be allowed to continue."

"And so we're back to 'why not just kill me'."

"Oh you will die, make no mistake. But first, I'm going to enjoy watching you suffer."

The apparition exploded with a flash of blinding light, forcing Prophet onto his back once again, arms shielding his eyes.

He removed them a few seconds later, and realised why the construct had looked so familiar - it was Mara Congregational Church.

Nobody was there, not even Sister Margaret, and Prophet quickly got to his feet and ran outside. Everything was as it should be. He ran for the phonebox, pushing his way through the small crowd of redpills that surrounded it and wrenched the receiver off its hook.

"Operator, how may I direct your call?"

He punched in a key combination.

"I'm sorry, that is not a recognised number. May I provide assistance?"

Prophet's heart beat faster, and he tried several more combinations.

"Sir? Madam? Please tell me who you are trying to call."

"SHIT!" Prophet yelled, slamming the phone back down. As he turned to leave, he caught his reflection in the glass. An old, grizzled tramp stared back at him and for the first time he noticed his clothes. His hands shot to his face in horror, confirming what he saw.

"No no no ... this can't be happening," he muttered, stumbling back out into the group of redpills.

"Hey man, something up?" one asked, stepping into his path. Prophet grabbed him and pushed him to one side, eyes widening in surprise as he found that his abilities were still intact.

Before the group could react, he leapt into the sky.

Part 9

Prophet landed awkwardly on the terrace of the Kedemoth West building and blew out a breath, trying to ignore the pain in his feet. The soles of his poor excuse for shoes had been torn away about ten jumps ago and his feet were now blistered and bleeding profusely.

He staggered up the steps and through the doorway, crying out as he saw the figure in the room.

"Swift! Thank god ..."

The floor shuddered as Swift turned with a look of confusion on his face, and three figures suddenly appeared through the second door. A fist impacted Prophet's surprised face, sending him staggering back, watching helplessly as they opened fire on his unprepared friend.

The bloodstained body dropped to the floor, and the Merovingian operatives turned to LostProphet.

"It won't be long before they're all here. I like the new look, by the way."

The male operative shot out a hand and thumped Prophet's head against the window next to them, smashing it in the process. He pulled him back, and then hurled them both outside.

Prophet grappled with his assailant, his head burning as blood and glass intermingled, and managed to slam him up against the wall.

"Sending his lackeys to do his dirty work, huh?" he snarled. The operative sneered back at him.

"Never leave your back exposed."

Prophet saw the raised knife reflecting in the smashed pieces of glass that still hung in the frame to their right and wheeled around.

The knife plunged into the male operative's chest and Prophet began to run, a limping, painful exercise. He reached the end of the terrace and hurled himself into the sky, feeling free for a few seconds before a high powered bullet tore through his shoulder.

Momentum lost, he fell gracelessly through the air, landing unceremoniously in a tree and demolishing the branches on one side of it before finally coming to a painful halt on terra firma.

He lay groaning, bones broken, at the side of the road as a black car pulled up and the back door opened. A female face leaned out into his field of view.

"We want the same thing, I can help you."

She injected something into his neck, then quickly dragged his body into the car and sped away. They were gone by the time the Merovingian operatives arrived.

Part 10

"Be calm," a voice said as Prophet struggled to rise, "We have restored your Self Image, but you have not yet fully healed."

LostProphet opened his eyes. His head was resting in the lap of a pretty young woman, and he smiled weakly.

"Who are you?"

She returned the smile, "My name is Nel. I'm an exile, under the employ of the Merovingian, but," she struggled to hold Prophet down as he tried hurriedly to get up, "I wish to bring him toppling down."

Prophet's smile was replaced with a look of suspicion.

"And how exactly do we do that? He's watching me, and probably you as well now."

"He altered your RSI to confuse and disorient you. But whoever brought you here was true to their word - you have on you a code artifact that can be used to gain access to the Frenchman's weakest areas."

Nel slid a hand into the pocket of Prophet's duster, withdrew a small key and pressed it into his hand. It was warm to the touch.

"Ascension monument. That's where we're headed."

Part 11

The car came to an abrupt halt. LostProphet and Nel stepped out and looked up at the Ascension Monument, specifically the door at the top.

"I always wondered what that was for," he mused, rolling the warm key around in his pocket.

"Many things," Nel replied, "But naturally like all high-profile parts of the Matrix, the Merovingian has claimed a part of it."

"So what now? I put the key in, turn it, and boom I get a one way ticket to Merv-death?"

Nel smiled gently, "If rumours are to be believed, the Merovingian has stored the shutdown routines to his program somewhere in full view. Sometimes when you look hard for something, you can miss the obvious. Naturally people have looked - humans, machines, even exiles. But nobody has found anything, not even a trace."

Prophet looked up at the door again.

"And this will help me find it."

"That key was given to you by him. It leads to only one place."

"I'm going to die, if I find it. He'd never allow the code to get into anyone's hands."

"That is, of course, his plan. Your task is to avoid being killed."

Prophet smiled, "I've had a lot of practice."

He turned and leapt to the top of the monument. His mind screamed that he was walking towards certain death, but for the moment he ignored it.

He slid the key into the lock and pulled the door open.

A huge gust of wind almost knocked him backwards off his feet and a bright yellow light rushed to claim him.

Three seconds later, the door clicked shut again. At the foot of the monument, Nel pocketed her phone.

"It is done," she said, getting into the car and speeding away.

Part 12

The 'phone' began to ring onboard the Behemoth. Baku snatched the headset up and clicked the 'accept' button. A high pitched screeching noise burst from the headphones and he immediately tore the headset off again.

The operator appeared back on deck and listened for a minute, then began to fiddle with wires.

"What's going on?" Baku asked, rubbing the side of his head.

"It's some sort of data stream. If I can patch it through to one of our isolated hard drives ... got it!"

He punched a sequence of buttons and one of the auxiliary screens turned blank, then white. Numbers began to scroll.

"They look like co-ordinates." Baku muttered.

"Yeah, but to what?"

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Prophet stood and looked at his surroundings. He was in a room with cream coloured walls, measuring about thirty metres square. A single metal chair sat in the middle, and a dark gray door stood in one corner.

"Sit down." said a voice with no discernible source. Prophet shrugged and complied. Five minutes of silence passed.

"This is pointless," he said loudly, "You won't let me get away with the code, and if I'm going to die anyway, there's no point in even seeing it."

"This is a game, and you will play by the rules. You will follow it to the end."

"Fine, whatever. Let's just hurry it up, shall we?"

"You will wait for further instructions."

"Like hell I will."

Prophet leapt off the chair and delivered a powerful kick to the door, which made a cracking noise and visibly buckled.

"You will desist with these actions."

"Fuck you."

The door smashed outwards, and Prophet threw himself through

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"What do they mean?!" Baku shouted into a headset. Reports from all CoZ vessels at broadcast depth had been saying the same thing - numbers. Lots of numbers.

"We don't have the sort of processing power to even begin to work out what they're referring to."

"The machines might," Orezoen suggested, "Just a thought. We could be running out of time."

"You're right ..."

"It's your call. We can put the call out, see if they can lend a hand."

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"Huh. Not what I expected." Prophet said out loud. He stood at the entrance to the two-storey Edgewater warehouse and looked at the partially built cars that littered the area, listened to the crackly radio wafting out, carried by the gentle breeze.

"A bodyshop. Well, I guess it kind of fits."

He slowly walked inside, the lazy afternoon sun beating down softly on the asphalt outside and the interior around the large roller-door.

"Hello?"

His shoes made a dull clapping noise as he moved across the concrete, instinctively avoided patches of oil and paint. A desk sat in the far corner, an ancient computer terminal chugging away on top of it. A grizzled old man sat behind it, looking lost in a daydream.

"Er ... hello? Sir?" Prophet ventured as he got closer.

The man's head jerked up and he regarded the intruder with a suspicious glare, then a smile.

"You must be LostProphet!" he said, his voice gravelly and stronger than his appearance would have suggested, "I wasn't told to expect you for a while longer."

"Why am I not surprised that you know who I am?"

"There were supposed to be more of you. I'd be harder pressed to remember names then."

Prophet now stood directly in front of the man. He looked to be about sixty-five, tinted glasses hid his eyes, and his face was coated with silvery-grey bristles. He wore a faded, dog-eared denim cap on his head, and baggy overalls swallowed the rest of his body up.

He reached over and switched the radio off.

"Why don't you have a sit down? Take the weight off your feet for a while. I'm sure we have much to talk about."

Part 13

Baku waited, somewhat nervously, on the bench next to the Mara West hardline. The door opposite him opened and a figure strode out to meet him.

"Agent Gray, thanks for coming."

"I must admit, this is a little ... unconventional."

Baku dipped his hand into his pocket and withdrew a handful of diskettes.

"This is all the data we received. It's stopped pouring in now - we couldn't trace the source."

Gray took them and nodded curtly.

"I will be in touch as soon as possible."

He re-entered the building, shutting the door behind him, and Baku frowned. An awfully short meeting, he thought. He was about to sit down again when the hardline began to ring.

"Hello?" he ventured as he picked up the receiver.

"We have the data analysis results."

"Jesus H! ... you guys are efficient."

"Thank you. We determined that sets of co-ordinates were triangulation references. The points of each set are various locations around this city."

"Did you determine the source?"

"Unfortunately not. We have, however, compared the triangulation points against our recent records of these areas. Some have been exhibiting unusually high code overlap readings."

"Which means? ..."

"We believe that doorways to constructs have been opened at some of these points. The most recent has been in Vauxton."

"Can you give me the co-ordinates?"

"Certainly."

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"So," Prophet began, reclining slightly in the rickety chair that had been provided, "You're the gatekeeper to the Merovingian's biggest weak spot."

"That I am," the old man replied, "Let me tell you, it's not all that it's cracked up to be."

"So, what now? I just ... take it? No disrespect intended, but it looks like you've been doing this for a long time, and I'm not sure how comfortable I'd feel kicking your ass."

The man laughed, revealing blackened, crooked teeth.

"Hold on, let me see if I can find it for you."

He leant backwards, the chair groaning in protest, and pulled open a desk drawer. He huffed and puffed a bit, then finally deposited a large box of disks on the desk.

"It'll take me a while to look through all of these. There's a kettle in the kitchenette if you want to make yourself something."

Prophet gazed at the box, then at the man, a ridiculous grin on his face as the crazy situation worked its way around his brain. Finally, he stood up.

"Sure, whatever."

"I'll have a tea! Milk, no sugar!" the man called after him.

Part 14

Nel's car drew to a halt suddenly, the driver giving a strong blast of the horn as it did so.

Picking herself out of the footwell, she rapped on the glass partition.

"What in the hell is going on ..."

The doors clicked open and Nel was pulled by two strong pairs of hands onto the road. She gazed upwards at the five guns pointed straight at her by the brown-suited individuals and swallowed heavily.

"We'll make this easy on you," said the one with short, cropped black hair, "You tell us where LostProphet is and we won't kill you."

A smile crept slowly over her lips.

"You must be the Children of Zion."

"Correct. Again, where is LostProphet."

"I won't waste time asking how you traced me. But I will tell you that he is no longer here. I left him at the Ascension Monument, or rather, he left me."

"Say that again?" one of the other gun-bearers said, the green and black tattoo on his face creasing as he frowned.

"He went through the door. Hey ..."

They hoisted her upright and held her against the side of the car.

"Through the door?" the black-haired one asked, "How is that possible?"

"Quite simply, he had a key that opened it. But if your next question is where he went, I can't answer it. All I know is that he went to the place where the killcodes for the Merovingian's program can be found. I was merely told to assist him in realising what he had in his possession."

"Who?"

Nel smiled, "Who do you think?"

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LostProphet returned to the desk with two mugs of tea and set them down on the end.

"Have you got the disk yet?" he asked, taking his seat.

"Here," the old man said, proffering an old 5.25" diskette.

"That? Seriously?"

"Storage is not important. It's just a shell to protect what it really is."

Prophet turned the disk over in his hands, a faint smile on his lips, then placed it gently in one of the outer pockets of his duster.

"So, now what? I have the killcodes for the Merovingian, arguably the most powerful exile that exists. I'm expecting the heavies to get here any time now. Let me guess. Causality? Les Enfants Terribles? Or a specially brewed bunch of programs made purely to kick my ass?"

The old man laughed and slowly drew an old revolver from a pocket on his overalls, and laid it on the desk.

"I could kill you with this," he said, and laughed again - Prophet joined in.

"I'm really struggling with this ... I can't possibly have the killcodes. This is too bizarre."

The man shrugged and sipped his tea.

"I tell you what. I'm gonna finish this tea, get up, and walk right out of here. Something tells me that if I was in possession of the codes, I'd be dead already."

Part 15

"So," Baku began, "What exactly is going on this time?"

The cigarette was dabbed into the ashtray, as if it carried something more significant than an old woman smoking herself into an early grave.

"Honestly Baku? This one's a bit of a mystery."

"Well tell me what you do know, because we're running out of time."

The Oracle adjusted herself on the kitchen chair and lit another cigarette.

"Some time ago I found out that the Merovingian was planning something to 'ensnare' a group of opponents that had been bothering him for some time. I did not know who - let's face it, that man has many opponents."

She blew smoke slowly upwards towards the gently rotating ceiling fan.

"More and more recently, activity began to heighten. I took a chance and contacted some exiles that have been particularly good double agents in the past. It's through this that I discovered what had happened to LostProphet."

A long drag on the cigarette.

"The Merovingian is playing a very dangerous game, but one that he intends to win. It is clear to me now that he intended to get you all involved in this - wipe out the leadership of the Children of Zion. Such a feat would strike a heavy blow to Zion and greatly strengthen his hand, especially with the activity with the General and his men."

"Well he didn't get us all, he got LP. Do you know where he is?"

"No, I don't. I believe the Merovingian intends to give him what was promised, but if that happens, he will not be allowed to live to pass it on."

"Killcodes to his program?"

The Oracle nodded, "Yes, even I do not know where they are. I do know, however, that the gatekeeper he employs is a fiercely powerful program. I suggest you find him before he gets to his ultimate destination."

Baku stood up rapidly and turned to leave when she called after him.

"Good luck," she said gravely, "Talk to Nel about those co-ordinates. She'll be able to help you."

**

Prophet drained his cup and made a satisfied smacking noise with his lips.

"So," he said, rising, "I guess I'll be going now."

The old man winked at him.

"I guess you will."

Prophet began to walk towards the big roller doors, not too fast, but not too slow. He was almost there when suddenly they came crashing down with a loud clattering noise.

He whirled around to see the old man standing, one hand on a large button, the other pointing the revolver at him.

"Unfortunately - for you - those are the codes in your pocket. It wouldn't be very wise of me to let you leave, would it?"

"Then what the hell was all that about before?" Prophet growled, his skin prickling, every sense suddenly heightened.

"I'm a lonely old program, LostProphet. I like a chat now and again with someone that doesn't think this place is real."

They stood and stared at each other for a minute, and then Prophet made his move as the man pulled the trigger. Dodging rapidly to his right, he watched the bullet miss him by a mile and ducked into a roll behind a car as another two glanced off its bonnet.

"You're a crap shot!" he called out, adrenaline pumping. Three more bullets punctured the car, and he heard the old man remove the empty shells. He raised his head and looked through the windows, saw him look disgustedly at the weapon and toss it away.

"I never liked shootin' anyway," he called at the car, but Prophet was already moving. He crouched and ran along an aisle of tools and spare parts, rapidly approaching the desk area.

As he did so, he slowed, pictured his next move in his mind, and then swung out from the aisle into the open and straightened up.

The fist hit him square in the jaw with a force Prophet hadn't felt since he had been punched by Agent Jones, back before the truce was in effect. He cartwheeled backwards and landed perfectly, but his head was still spinning from the blow.

His vision cleared just in time to see the old man deliver a sky-high sidekick, again to the jaw.

"Fuck." he muttered as his entire body was lifted from the ground and hurled into the corrugated metal that made up the walls of the warehouse, dropping to the ground in a heap.

The man was already at the spot and hauled him into the air, his frail body breaking all the rules. Prophet stared through the glasses for the first time, saw the eyes at last, looked into the black, empty pits with a pinprick of red light in the centre of each, and shuddered.

"I must say, it's nice to stretch the old fightin' muscles again after all this time."

He held Prophet out at arms length with his left hand as with his right, he took hold of an overhead chain and pulled it down. He wrapped it around Prophet's neck and made a crude slipknot, letting him fall to his knees, hands clawing at the chains.

"And up we go!" the old man laughed, clearly enjoying himself. He walked over to the wall, took hold of a large lever and wrenched it towards the floor. The chain pulled taught and Prophet felt himself being pulled into the air, the noose tightened around his neck and soon he was completely airborne.

It's not air you're breathing, it's not air you're breathing. Prophet told himself frantically as he went higher. He satisfied himself that he wasn't suffocating, now

he just needed to keep a good enough grip on the chain to ensure that his neck didn't snap.

"Oh-ho! I see you've mastered the art of not breathing," the man cackled from below as the winch machinery in the roof came to a halt and Prophet dangled two storeys above, "but I bet you haven't mastered the art of bouncing off a concrete floor."

Part 16

Nel eyed Agent Gray suspiciously as she stood with him and Baku in the small office in Kedemoth.

"Thanks to the data you've provided us with from the opening of that door, we've traced remnants of code at an exit point to what went through it. Mr Hirst should be in Edgewater, at this point." he pointed to a map on the laptop that they had on the desk.

Baku nodded and pulled a phone from his pocket.

"We will mobilise our Agents." Gray intoned and rapidly exited the room. "Operator," Baku said as he was connected, "Edgewater. Get everyone there now. Right now."

* *

Prophet felt as if his eyes were going to explode out of his head as the blood was forced and constricted by the chains and he tried to think of a way out of the situation.

"Time for a little ride!" the old man called, taking hold of another lever and wrenching it hard to the right. The motors above started to whirr and Prophet began to skim through the air, picking up speed as he raced towards the far end of the warehouse.

He braced himself for the impact, but crashed into the wall with a sickening crunch. He groaned and emitted a gurgled yelp of pain as he took the brunt of the crash with his left arm and heard the old man laughing, then a click as the lever was pushed the other way.

The wall rushed towards him, the items below just a blur as Prophet tried to position himself for the best possible impact. He concentrated, pushing his legs out in front of him, ready to cushion the blow ... and a moment later felt searing pain and again heard the sound of breaking bones. As his mind fought against the pain, tried to think of survival, the motors in the roof clicked free, and he plummeted towards the ground, his broken body twisting in a useless attempt to break the fall.

He crunched onto the desk, demolishing the ancient wood, sending oily papers and disks skidding across the floor, and stared up at the ceiling as the phone began to ring nearby.

The man picked it up, listened for a moment, then hung up.

"Well," he said, "I hoped we'd have a little more fun, but it seems that my time here is up."

Prophet felt a hand dip into his outer pocket and withdraw the disk as he lay on his back, surrounded by debris and a pool of his own blood. His right leg was twisted savagely underneath him, his arms broken in five places. He repeatedly tried to move but only succeeded in spreading the blood further over his brown duster and sending agonising signals of pain to his brain.

Through blurred and bloody eyes he could see the outline of the warehouse around him, the half-built cars blocking all views into the building from the road outside.

Prophet let his head roll to one side to look towards the crackly sound of the radio that had just been turned on and shuddered - creating more lightning bolts of pain - as the sound of footsteps echoed around the warehouse.

Life is bigger
It's bigger than you
And you are not me
The lengths that I will go to

"And so here we are," the gravelly voice said over the introduction and first lines of the song, "All our work has come to fruition."

The distance in your eyes
Oh no I've said too much
I set it up

"Ironic, don't you think?"

The sound of the single explosion from the barrel of the 9mm filled the neighbourhood, and LostProphet knew no more pain.

*

Baku and ten other Children of Zion heard a gunshot echo out and knew they were nearby. As they turned towards it, an Agent sailed overhead, landing in the road below. Three warehouses away, the sound of an engine starting could be heard, then the screech of tyres as it sped away.

They reached the warehouse a moment after Agent Johns.

"Operatives ..." he began, but they ran past him, all stopping as they saw the carnage in the far corner, the crushed and crumpled body of their comrade. Luneran reached him first and checked his pulse, standing back up with a look of shock on her face. A call to the Cerberus' operator confirmed it.

"He's dead."

Part 17

White light. Blurred shapes faded in and out of view, somehow familiar yet not. "Do we have a stable signal?" said a voice, floating whimsically as the shapes around him bobbed and weaved and melted into one another. "Not yet. We're running another pass. Now."

The blurred, dreamy vision corrected itself with a sudden jerk and LostProphet felt a sharp kick in the stomach.

His body spasmed briefly in the chair and rattled the restraints. A searing pain burnt through his skull, finding the centre of his brain and sitting, pulsating, malevolent.

"The procedure is exceedingly uncomfortable for a human mind. I apologise that we weren't able to sedate you, but time was of the essence."

Prophet look to his right at Agent Gray, then back at his restraints. The Agent waved a hand at two men in white lab coats, their backs turned, but the restraints popped open. Prophet massaged his wrists.

"It was for your own protection." Gray said simply.

"Right. Now ..." he ran a hand over his face, pulled it away suddenly as he felt something unfamiliar, "...what the hell ..."

Gray reached for something behind the chair and came back with a small circular mirror. Prophet gazed into it, unable to comprehend what he saw.

"Some time ago, an Agent of the system caused extensive damage to your neural jack, correct?"

Prophet nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Your appearance was altered irrevocably - hair, face, build."

"You're stating the obvious here," Prophet whispered, still running his hands around his beard, "I want to know how I got it all back."

Gray shifted uncomfortably on the spot. Despite extensive dealings with redpills over the last year, this sort of interaction still didn't come easily to him.

"This will not be easy to hear. You are dead, Mr Hirst. The Merovingian's gatekeeper destroyed your body in the Matrix and the resulting trauma caused a massive cardiac arrest in the real world."

"So how the hell am I here?"

"When you jack into the Matrix, you become - in essence - a program. We were able to extract the core runtime elements from your RSI and bring you here. The only thing distorting your self image was the damage to your neural jack. Now you are no longer tied to that body, your original RSI has been restored."

Gray shifted again as Prophet sat silently for a moment.

"I'm dead, but not dead," he finally said, louder now.

"Yes."

"Do CoZ know?"

"No. There is no way for us to restore your program into your body - it has ceased to function. We believe ..." he coughed, "It was decided that it would be easier for them to mourn your passing, rather than complicate matters in this way."

Prophet swallowed heavily, "So where do I go from here?"

"You will be reinserted into a body at our discretion and freed from the Matrix, if you wish. However, you will have to work for us."

"And if I don't want to?"

"You are dead, Mr Hirst. You are here at our leisure, and I will take this opportunity to point out that the memory engrams and other associated faculties you currently possess are temporary. We cannot and will not keep you here indefinitely, and we consider your allegiance to us to be ... as you might put it, a fair trade."

Prophet glared ahead and said nothing.

"You will be treated fairly. I anticipate you will enjoy your freedom in significantly higher levels of comfort than you are accustomed to from our Zionist friends. I will give you ten minutes to decide. We only have a certain window of stability which we can use to reinsert your runtime into another host."

Part 18

"It is time." Agent Gray intoned, placing a hand on LostProphet's shoulder - he had seen Agent Pace use such a gesture as a measure of comfort, for what it was worth.

"There's nothing to stop me from just turning right around as soon as I get out and going back to Zion, is there?"

"No. But we kept to our word when the truce was brokered. We hope, given your openminded views on the human/machine situation, that you will do us that same honour."

Prophet looked up at Gray, inscrutable behind the glasses, and realised that his point was a good one.

"Okay," he finally said, "Let's do this thing."

"We have secured a host body. A twenty four year old male that never survived the ... Smith encounter. He has been in a coma since the reset, and all tests run by us indicate that his mind is dead. The brain, however, is still viable. We can insert you."

Prophet stared incredulously.

"Our understanding of the human mind and body far surpasses your own." Gray said. Not bragging, it was a simple fact.

The two scientists finally came over to him. They were humanoid shapes, but instead of faces merely had a smooth, metallic-like surface.

No need for human touches in a place like this, Prophet guessed.

They reattached the restraints and also attached one to his head, then returned to the apparatus that was now almost out of his field of view.

Gray leant over the chair.

"I must attend to other business, but I'm sure we will speak soon."

"Yeah," Prophet said, his voice deflated, "See ya around."

There was silence, for a number of minutes. Prophet lay with his eyes closed, trying to relax, when there was a hot flash of pain that spread from his lower back and rapidly consumed his entire body. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. He opened his eyes but only saw darkness. A moment later, he was unconscious.

* * * *

LostProphet eased his eyes open then shut them immediately as burning white light flooded in. He turned his head to one side and tried again. He took in his immediate surroundings - it looked like a Zion hovercraft but ... new.

Somebody placed a hand on his forehead.

"Where am I?" he whispered.

"On a machine vessel. Do you remember your name?"

His brow furrowed for a second, "LostProphet ..."

"Yes, yes, good. Do you remember what happened?"

"No. No, I ... the last thing I remember is ... I .. nothing. I can't think of anything! Why can't I think of anything?!"

His voice rose to a hoarse cry and he struggled pathetically to get up. Hands held him down, though there really was no need.

"There was a problem, with the reinsertion. Your program destabilised ... they said you may have ... memory holes. But the important thing is that you woke up at all."

"Reinsertion? What? I don't understand!"

"Hush now - rest. The machines will look after you. You'll find the Recursion instance to be a good home."