

Salindra's head.

Zach could sense that there was somebody different doing her this morning by the rhythm. Either he was maybe older and fatter or maybe she had her hair up. The knocking on their shared bedroom wall was more muffled than usual and there were no sharp bangs at all. Or maybe he was just too drowsy to recognize the tedium of his neighbor's promiscuity. Salindra was in Zach's group. She was beginning to get more influential. With any luck this time next year it will be a fuck buddy group proper. There was a time when that's all Zach wanted. As soon as he finished Uni he left his family group and joined in a newly forming circle. It was typical of freshman adult groups mostly guys, a few with girlfriends, a club owner or bouncer, a couple guys from sport teams and a graduate of the same Uni as secretary. Unlike most groups almost nobody in it had any immediate plans to get their microbials rebalanced. That made it a little bit more level headed and stable than most, which was not so surprising since several of its 30 odd members were justice majors like Zach. Zach's group was not formally registered, but like most groups of its type, it was named after their hangout spot. In this case, SharkBar 3. Or SB3 as they often called it. It was the third generation of SharkBar groups, this one mostly around the class of 2045, ten years ago.

The Shark Bar was just off Reseda. It had once been part of a chain of psuedo surfer bars that existed before the Plague. So it was kind of cool for this one Valley location to retain the name and the surf motif. Nobody in the club knew how to surf real waves. Surfing died out in Southern California as soon as they discovered C-Marburg in the kelp beds. Still most of the SB3s were pretty good at the game sims. Sally claimed that she had actually been out on the surf on a real board down in Cabo, but she was always dropping that kind of brag. During his Uni days he'd come down on Fridays just to play the sim and collect his head before going out on the town. If the music was any good he'd stick around, but mostly it was to have a drink. Sometimes he would just go and see who's going to go out and see which movie. They would then carpool to Citywalk, LA Live or Hollymax and hang out together there, typical easy evenings. SB3 was a very small group.

Zach had been around Sharkies most of his life. They were pretty much the only family he knew. When he lost his parents in '38, like so many others, he was adopted into the Shark Bar's patronage. It was kind of weird as he thought about it. A neighborhood bar that his parents used to frequent becoming a sort of part time orphanage. But when martial law descended on Los Angeles, you'd take anything you could get. Zach remembered his parents and unlike a lot of other Sharkies, he was devastated by the Plague in a way that made him a lot more strong. Not brittle.

Zach sat up in bed and eyeballed the map of his group that he fell asleep watching. His C2s had fallen to a meager population of 2 and by his own reckoning, it was way past time for him to hit the road.

The average group had about 20 to 100 members. There are larger groups, but they tend to be small churches or really big families. The C2 ratio more or less corresponds properly. There was only one active 'leader' of any group and that was the group Secretary, although larger groups sometimes appointed more than one. The roles and responsibilities of any Secretary were pretty well understood. The Secretary holds the keys to the group and basically is the single person responsible for entries and exits. It is also traditional that a Secretary have a little bit of wealth and discretion. At any time, the level of confidence the group has in the Secretary is known by a periodic pass/fail vote. If the pass rate falls below 80%, the group can elect a new Secretary. That was basically it, and it was what kids were learning in school. But since LastID and the new software, things had become more complicated. But the whole idea came out of a simple buddy system necessitated by the Plague. You wanted somebody to know where you were, period. That was the Secretary's primary job. Everybody could know where everybody in their family was in realtime, no matter where they went. It was a necessity created by the creation of millions of refugees and orphans, now it was the basic organizing fact of society.

One thing that hadn't changed is that any group's secretary had to know someone face to face. There was no escaping that. A secretary had to vouch for the identity of any member. They needed to exchange skin. At least that's how it's done now. Zach mused about previous generations of groups and infiltration methods and all sorts of squeamish possibilities. Thank God that kind of stuff didn't happen nowadays. But, then again, there are the Billies. Always a problem, those off-gridders.

Now the problem was coming to a head. SB3 was swerving off course because of Salindra's new boyfriend. Or at least that was what the new rhythms sounded like. And if it came up that Salindra wanted to add another lover to the group, well Zach thought anyway that its reputation was going to become nothing more than a fuck buddy group. The ratio and durations of Salindra's C2s were just too suspicious, and since she was the secretary of SB3, it didn't look right to people who thought about such things, like the Wizards. Already this morning Zach notice a change in the ads that were getting pushed over to his screens. That was not going to be right for he and Molly. Still, since she had come onto the grid, it was important to Zach that he join her up to a proper Dunbar group. Even though SB3 was a kind of odd, small Uni group, he had a sentimental attachment to it. Plus, because of its small size, he only had to have a few C2s. So maybe it could work. Nah.

Zach decided that he was formally going to leave his Uni group and start a

completely new group with Molly. Starting a new group from scratch was something of a risk because nobody would know any group history. He was going to get bombarded by crap from left field that had no idea about his preferences. But the more important thing was that he was going to start a new group, and now that he was getting married and joining the Association, it was a perfect time. A new life. It was common to do a lot of this kind of stuff at weddings. Some couples did it before, most did as part of the reception, some did it after. The complexities of secretarial work when families get together was a nightmare, but it had to be done.

Everybody has circles, and groups are made up of people and their circles. C1 was you. C0 is the group itself, even though some people think of C0 as God or Country or whatever their ultimate authority figure was. C0 was your loyalty anchor and that's how LastID marketing got to you indirectly. These were sometimes linked. For named groups, founders 'roots' of the group often go by the title of Zero. Your innermost circle, your C2s were your closest friends and family, but mostly family. A good rule of thumb was that you would give the keys to your house to anyone in your C2 without much thought. These were people you essentially trusted with your life. Importantly, you would contract with them through your root identity. Even though you could revoke and re-establish that contract, it was really painful and tedious. You had to do it with something like three validations a day for three days before the current LastID protocol would accept a change in contracts to your root ID. That's why C2s were really important and it's why you want C2s to be directly in your group. You could have C2s in another group. Long distance C2s were common, but it wasn't really healthy to have a long distance C2 with access to your root identity if you're not in contact on a regular basis. Some groups were less tolerant of that sort of thing unless they were parents and happy exes. Some people resented being moved from C2 to C3, others didn't mind so much. But you couldn't be in any group unless you had 2 or 3 C2s in it, that is unless you were starting a new group.

C3 consisted of friends, partners, in-laws, cousins and whatnot. Anybody on a first name basis that could eat and sleep over your house, but you wouldn't necessarily give the keys to. C3s needed three mutual confirmations in a day and a follow-up confirmation a week later, so it was a fairly secure relationship. All of the circle management stuff was pretty straightforward until you got into legal custody battles and whatnot - when people wanted to bend rules. You could move family members from C2 to C3, but it had to be mutual. The biggest headache of being a secretary was getting involved in this kind of mess. That's why better groups and stable groups and kiretsus of groups had paralegals or people with state bar certs as their secretaries. But you could easily contract for the services in arbitration. Still C2s and C3s - well, the less motion around those the better. C2 and C3 were basically your inner circles.

The important thing about inner circles was that they were maintained outside of the LastID net proper. The best way to think about it was that your inner circles were a private network and your outer circles were a public network. People could get to your C4 and higher because those were broadcast on the open networks of LastID. Everything inside of C4, was a different protocol and that was transacted strictly by short-range and foafmesh. It worked out because people were generally in close proximity to their inner circles.

Circles are reflexive. That means whatever you can see about a C3, they can see about you at your C3 level.

When you know somebody's root ID, you can guess or determine the rest of their circle memberships. The LastID and Brick people make as much money on third party requests as they do for general transaction processes, if not more. You can generally turn around a request overnight, or get it priority if you wanted. It was said that the Archons could hack that, but like the old CIA, people believed they could do anything.

C4 was basically the services and professionals circle and somewhat ironically your dating profile. C4 is designated the Contractual Circle. It involves all of your formal relationships. When you spin off an ID for use in C4, you're supposed to take it fairly serious. Most people don't, of course, because there's all kinds of fine print involved. Still, it's fairly transparent and most of all, easy to use. People actually get bored looking at their own C4 activities, except, of course their dating profiles. Lots of people get burned going from C4 to C3 too fast, but. I think it's because we actually know about it that things seem to be so dramatic. Zach was the kind of guy who looked at everything before he made such moves. Considering how much bullshit he took from SB3, it's a wonder he hadn't moved on before.

C4s for normal contracts are people you might admit over your home, but it would seem unusual. More likely you were going to go to their place of business. Or you're presenting yourself for an interview - basically putting some nice things out there about you. By default C4 is kinda 'too much information'. Then again, some people are desperate. C4s have four classes. C4-A is for your attorneys, accountants, medical professionals and all that kind of stuff. C4-B is for your banking, brokerage, basically bucks. C4-C is citizenship, commercial licenses and certifications, this is like your work IDs and everything under your driver's licenses and stuff like that. C4-D is your dating profile, or in the case of some people, your disease profile.

C5 are formally known as passerby circles. It's basically your public profile, also known as your shopping profile. Whenever you leave the house, you set access on yourself to C5 and accept C5 transactions most of the time contracted out for the day. It's kinda like first name basis you give and get at a Jack Denny's for a sit down dinner. There are three kinds of C5s though. There is an open C5-X for your

exchanges and an opaque C5-Y, like why should I tell you who I am?. Opaque C5 is also known as 'going foggy' or 'going blocky' after the style of anonymizing video that garbles the face and voice;; it's for the equivalent of a cash transactions. C5-Y is also what all minor children's transactions go through. Finally there's C5-Z, aka Zulu mode. You're uniquely identifiable but only for the transaction. Going Zulu means you basically want to be about as anonymous as possible. Socially, it's considered rude to go Zulu in any respectable business, and the authorities do not take kindly to many or large transfers of money going Zulu or coming from Zulu. Most people don't do commerce Zulu style. On the other hand, nobody quite knows who is doing what with whom in Zulu. Doing business in Zulu is like those old gangster videos where the two parties meet on a bridge at midnight to exchange a hostage for cash. Even though both parties are effectively anonymous, you kinda know who they are and they kinda know who you are. It's sketchy business, but on the other hand, lots of people only trust their business to Zulu. Some folks are really stupid though, because they think that there are not other ways of tracking who you are when you transact Zulu.

Something like the Zulu Protocol itself was always part of the design of LastID. There were open contests for the C5-Z specification. The winning protocol came out of South Africa from some anonymous American expatriates. It was part of their contract to never identify whom they actually were. They didn't want the glory. Some people said that it was some ex government spies who used a deeply secret spy encryption code that was shared between the United States and Israel, others say it was a dissatisfied team of programmers who opposed the Guhu merger, others said it was created by an East German botnet collective. The bottom line was that it was open sourced and people in the know around the globe said it was good. Good enough to be approved by the Quant Marketers, Unis, government entities and all others concerned. It became part of the LastID framework, ironically because nobody knew who actually wrote the code, and everyone who tried to crack it failed to do so. What that basically meant was that everybody trusted it, and since nobody has ever determined who wrote the actual code that was accepted as C5-Z (although many entities have tried to take credit) the one thing that has remained is that an anonymous hacker (or group of hackers) known as Archon Zyro has busted many attempts to bypass the protocol.

The most important thing about C5-Z was that several grid providers decided, or colluded with Archon Zyro to set up compute space for the authentications. The most brilliant aspect of Zulu transactions was that trusted Zulu servers could be spawned spontaneously. If too many transactions were generated, then they simply died, failed and went nowhere. People had to generate a new transaction. The result is that nobody has been able to fake a Zulu transaction yet. Although part of it is the social sketchiness of using Zulu in the first place which tends to fail a few times for people out of proximity. Archon Zyro has become known as the

Lord Protector of the Zulu Protocol, something he, she, it or they have done for the past 12 years. Politicians and governments have tried to argue against C5-Z but everybody basically accepts, (even though it's not true) that if there is a change to the Zulu Protocol, then all of LastID would be invalidated. It's odd that it has become the thing that nobody admits to using but makes them completely trusting in the capabilities of the system. In that way, it's rather like pornography on the old Internet. It was the killer app that proved that video on demand could be done and manufacturers started building machines and networks that could do for everyone what it had been doing for spies and pornographers. People expected their IT to be a little bit dirty and corrupt by association. However there was so much dirt and corruption exposed by the Ballers, that it paled in significance.

You see the biggest benefit by far of all of the LastID system was that it made public a new class of activities. It was something of an unexpected consequence of the existence of the decades old plan of the major credit card companies of the world, telecom and utility companies to merge with banking. Basically, as the trend towards transportation and all that fossil fuel cashflow dropped dramatically after the Plague, there was a consequent surge in electronic communications. If you were safe in your home and wanted to interact with the world, you could. Once you got your government IDs all synchronized with your banking and credit cards and medical along with any court records and official certs, then you were in. Once you were in, there was not much of a way to get out, until you died.

C6 is where you're basically anonymous broadcasted as a dot. It's basically you at a beacon level. Like saying, hey I'm on the grid and I exist. I am not a Billie. You essentially can't turn your C6 off and every thing on the planet with a chip in it sees that you exist. It's basically how a public vending machine recognizes you as a human being as opposed to a dog. It's less than name, rank and serial number. Almost nobody has a chip embedded in their body because nobody goes anywhere without some path to their LastID in their clothes. Most people have a path in their jewelry or their shoes, shades or underwear, and of course most people have redundancies. But it's possible to be off C6 or mess up. There are stories of frat parties where guys get their shoes mixed up after a drunk party and lived for a couple days as the other guy, and weird things ensue. But those are mostly urban legends and fairy tales like the Prince and the Pauper.

Nobody screws with LastID, mostly because it's decentralized for the inner circles and it's so well integrated and secure at the C4 levels and above. If it's possible for C4 to be hacked, then nobody's saying so, anywhere. The C4 protocols are like the formula for gasoline or the frequency of electricity coming out of the wall socket. It's not in anybody's interest to mess with it or come up with an alternative. Besides, all the drama is elsewhere, out in public in your inner circles.

Zach, like his two remaining C2s in SB3, was a justice major at Uni. So naturally he

has a love-hate relationship with the Baller Network. On the one hand, now that he is officially an Associate, a kind of cybercop investigator, he resents the sort of petty squabbles that ballers get involved in. On the other hand, if he wasn't such a good baller himself, the Association would never have taken notice of him, especially given how often he goes blocky.

Sitting in his chair with the screens doing random browses, and following his feeds, Zach contemplated whom he'd like to include in his next group. A good group has to have a good mix of C2s C3s and C4s. Zach remembered when he moved Salindra over to a C4-D from C3. It was a nasty business.