<u>SCRIPT TITLE</u>

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EXT. OFFICE BUILDING LOBBY - NIGHT

MICHAEL stands outside the locked front door of an office
building, looking at his smart watch.

It shows an incoming message from "Peter", saying "Down in a
min".

Michael looks around, then into the lobby, at the closed lift
doors on the wall opposite.

He pulls his phone out, looking down at it. He continues
reading an article on machine learning via neural networks,
before being startled by a knock on the glass doors, right by
his face.

PETER stands there looking a little hesitant, nodding at
Michael. Michael offers a polite smile in return while Peter
unlocks the door with a swipe card.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING LIFT - NIGHT

Michael and Peter ride in the lift, ascending to floor 7.

                    PETER
          Did you drive, or..?

                    MICHAEL
          No. Took the tram.

Peter nods slowly. The lift arrives, and they exit.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING SEVENTH FLOOR - NIGHT

Peter leads Michael between rows of darkened cubicles in the
dimly lit seventh floor, to the single lit computer screen at
the far end.

Peter takes another swipe card and a USB stick, on their own
lanyard from a locked drawer in his desk, as well as a manila
folder, then walks back past Michael.

                    MICHAEL
          It's not here?

Peter stops, looking a bit puzzled.

                    PETER
          In the basement. They only demo to
          clients up here, the QA builds are
          running where no one important has
          to look at the developers.

Michael follows Peter back to the lift.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING LIFT - NIGHT

Peter leafs through the manila folder, showing Michael
digital painted concept art of futuristic looking pods, each
with a person reclining inside, wired up with VR goggles,
headphones, and a sensor-laden body suit.

                    PETER
          This is some of the concept art for
          the final product.

He hands one of the glossy art pieces to Michael, who nods at
it, impressed.

                    MICHAEL
          Pretty cool.

They exit the lift on the basement level.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING BASEMENT - NIGHT

They walk into an unimpressive room with several small desks
and chairs set up, each containing a PC terminal, and ad hoc
VR headset with headphones.

Seeing the taped-together headsets, Michael looks again at
the concept art in his hand.

                    MICHAEL
          You really get much immersion out
          of technology this old?

Peter seems confused, looking at the old VR equipment on one
of the desks.

                    PETER
          We don't use the view screens
          anymore for content. We only flash
          lights through them, in sequence
          with the magnetic massage.

Michael frowns.

                    MICHAEL
          What's a--

Peter lifts the headset, showing Michael an arrangement of
magnets inside the helmet part.

                         PETER
              It's a Shakti device, basically. It
              sends out cascading magnetic pulses
              that become like waves on the
              surface of the brain, entraining
              without penetrating. We used to do
              the stimulation electronically, but
              we were able to get the same effect
              with magnets.

Michael stares at the helmet.

                         MICHAEL
              It's safe?

Peter half shrugs, placing the headset back on the table,
leading Michael to a similarly outfitted desk and office
chair, booting the PC there.

                         PETER
                    (half mutters)
              Safer than when it was electric.

Michael follows, leaning his messenger bag beside the desk.

                         MICHAEL
              How many people do you have in
              there right now?

Peter thinks.

                         PETER
              Active users? Oh I guess about...
              thirty? Ten of those are devs.

Peter pulls a thick contract from his folder.

                         MICHAEL
              When do you plan to come out of
              beta then?

Peter hands Michael the contract, then a pen.

                         PETER
              Well, if we can iron out a few
              issues with level design, and get
              the messaging right around
              safety...

Michael leafs through the contract.

                         MICHAEL
              What is all this?

                  PETER
        Our standard NDA, waiver,
        indemnity, bank and tax details,
        and work-for-hire contract.

                  MICHAEL
        Can I fill this in later?

Peter thinks.

                  PETER
        Just sign the indemnity first.

Michael frowns slightly as he reads it, closing the page when
Peter's back is turned, laying the thick collection of
documents on the desk beside the still booting Linux PC.

Peter picks up the headset attached by cables to the PC,
beckoning Michael to sit in the chair.

Michael sits, then Peter fastens the headset to his head and
face.

                  MICHAEL
        Should I go to the toilet first?
        How long is a session normally?

Peter thinks.

                  PETER
        I don't know, really. However long
        it takes us to reach the areas you
        need to debug.

                  MICHAEL
        Why would it vary?

Peter half shrugs again.

                  PETER
        It just does. You'll see when we
        get in there.

Michael, eyes obscured by the headset, turns to Peter.

                  MICHAEL
        Will I see? Will it--look like
        something?

Peter wakes the PC at the desk next to Michael's, sitting
down.

                  PETER
        Absolutely.

Peter types his login, booting into a desktop environment with multiple text-based windows, each streaming lines of network data and code.

                    MICHAEL
          How? Are you doing what that
          Kickstarter project in Korea tried?
          Stimulating the visual cortex or
          something?

Peter types a few commands, running "init.sequence", then puts his own headset on quickly.

                    PETER
          No, it works a bit more like
          binaural beats--the left hemisphere
          is brought into theta, and the
          right to gamma, then they find an
          equilibrium, in between the two
          states.

Both helmets begin to hum, then pulse.

                    MICHAEL
          When I encounter you there, where
          are we seeing each other? In my
          brain, or yours?

The pulsing quickens. Michael leans forward slightly, jaw slackening.

                    PETER
          Neither. We're both projecting into
          the Substrate. Most of its
          processes run as quantum state
          microservices, so we're not
          physically interacting with the
          hardware. Only mentally, you might
          say

A long pause.

                    PETER
          Michael? Can you still hear me?

Peter waits, then lets his head roll back as he drifts into a similar half sleep.

Fade to bright blue.

EXT. SUBSTRATE - ROLLING HILLS - DAY

Now fully animated, Peter walks across rolling hills, silhouetted by a blue sky.

He joins Michael at the top of one hill, both looking out across the eerily animated landscape.

Michael looks at Peter, surprised, blinking it away.

                    MICHAEL
          This is insane.

Peter smiles.

                    PETER
          It can feel a bit that way.

Michael looks down at his own hands, shaking them, touching them.

                    MICHAEL
          It's so unreal.

                    PETER
          At first. But you get used to it.

Peter begins to walk downhill.

                    PETER
          Come on. I'll show you round the
          points of interchange.

EXT. SUBSTRATE - LONG ROAD - DAY

Michael and Peter walk together along a quiet road.

                    MICHAEL
          The map is huge. Do they all mimic
          real world environments?

                    PETER
          No, we can do a few scifi settings
          with their own set of unique NPCs--
          or scatter the assets through
          urban, rural, coastal environments.
          We drop people somewhere familiar
          on insertion by default, but you
          can return to waypoints in
          storylines. Of course no one has
          built the modules for that yet...

                    MICHAEL
          Is it a game, or a... social
          network?

                    PETER
          It's everything. You branch out in
          world. For now it's mostly a
          sandbox. With each round of funding
          we can build layers of complexity
          into the system. Then the community
          will iterate with the open SDK.

                    MICHAEL
          It seems like you're barely laying
          down railway as you go.

                    PETER
          A project like this wouldn't have
          been funded any other way.

Peter stops.

                    PETER
          Doorway please, corridor fifty-
          seven.

A door appears beside Peter. He enters it. Michael follows,
curious.

INT. SUBSTRATE – CORRIDOR 57

Michael follows Peter through a featureless white hallway,
both nodding to a PROGRAMMER who stands at a keyboard and
flat screen that folds out from the otherwise blank wall. The
programmer wears headphones and a white dust suit and mask--
covering his clothes, head and face.

Michael catches up to Peter.

                    MICHAEL
          Who's that?

                    PETER
          That's Dave, one of the
          programmers. Don't interrupt him
          when he has the headphones on.

                    MICHAEL
          Where is he, physically? With us in
          the building?

                         PETER
               No, these guys all login from home
               most of the time. You'll only see
               the engineering team all in the one
               place when we run a marathon debug
               session, or hackathon some new
               feature.

They exit through a door on the opposite side of the
corridor, coming out into a dirty alley.

EXT. SUBSTRATE - DIRTY ALLEY - DAY

Michael looks around while Peter goes over to a couple of
scifi-looking SOLDIERS, dressed in body armor, one of them
handing him a tablet device.

                         MICHAEL
               Hey I know this alley. I walk past
               it all the time.

Peter reads, distracted.

                         PETER
               We captured this entire block with
               scanners, inside and out. Most of
               the private residence interiors are
               done with procedural generation,
               but most of the businesses let us
               scan their buildings.

                         MICHAEL
               These guys are bots? What are they
               doing here?

Peter looks up, handing the tablet back to the soldier, then
stepping closer to Michael, lowering his head and voice.

                         PETER
               We had an incident here. The
               working theory, right now, is that
               the level glitched, and our user's
               projection became trapped somewhere
               below ground.

Michael frowns, looking around.

                         MICHAEL
               Somewhere inaccessible...

                         PETER
               Right.

Michael walks around, feeling the walls of graffiti-tagged
buildings with boarded up windows.

He tries a door handle, going into the lobby of an old
building.

INT. SUBSTRATE - OLD BUILDING - DAY

                    MICHAEL
          How did you generate the abandoned
          buildings?

                    PETER
          Scanned some, others we guessed.

                    MICHAEL
          You would have boarded up the
          entries and exits, removed lifts
          from shafts?

                    PETER
          Right. Hm. Lift shafts. I forgot
          about those. Hang on.

Peter walks back to the two soldiers, speaking for a moment.
They flash away, seemingly teleporting.

                    MICHAEL
          What happens to a user who loses
          their projection? They wake up,
          right?

                    PETER
          Of course. But the session has a
          unique ID in qspace that's attached
          to the user's mental thumbprint and
          the substrate projection. We can't
          reset the connection for the user
          until we retrieve the projection
          within the substrate's
          architecture, and bring it back to
          a loading point--effectively
          recreating the circuit between mind
          and token.

                    MICHAEL
          That is insane. You're saying I
          need to go somewhere specific
          within the environment to leave, or
          I can never get back in? What
          happens if people's wifi drops out
          at home when you go to production?

                    PETER
          There are bots to retrieve the
          dropped projections, return them to
          load points.

One of the soldiers reappears, speaking briefly with Peter.
Peter nods, then it disappears again.

                    PETER
          Doorway please, corridor thirty.

A doorway appears. They go through.

INT. SUBSTRATE - CORRIDOR 30

In another featureless corridor, Peter folds a terminal out
from the wall.

                    PETER
          We need you to sift through the
          code that generates the
          environments, and see if you can
          find anything... unusual.

Michael's eyes narrow.

                    MICHAEL
          Why did you say it like that? What
          do you mean unusual?

                    PETER
          Something that doesn't look right.

Michael looks around.

                    MICHAEL
          A lot of this doesn't look right,
          if I'm being honest.

A BOT walks past them, a white silhouette, featureless.

                    PETER
          I need to log out of this session
          to run as superuser, can I leave
          you to familiarize yourself with
          the maps for a few hours?

                    MICHAEL
          Of course. Is there a chair I can--

A STOOL materializes beneath Michael. He half-falls into it
at the panel.

                    PETER
          Anything you need, just ask the
          world for it. There are half a
          million natural language stems
          built into the kernel, and billions
          of combinations it will understand.
          Objects, actions--and importantly,
          doors.

                    MICHAEL
          You said I need a load point--

                    PETER
          You're sitting at one of them.
          Every admin panel is a load point.
          Just touch the icon--

Peter points to a symbol that glows beside the admin panel, a
circle with small bars radiating out, sunshine-like.

                    PETER (CONT'D)
          --and say "Log me out, please."

Michael chuckles, distracted by the lines of code he scrolls
through at the panel.

                    MICHAEL
          I really have to say please?

                    PETER
          Yeah, manners. It's one of our
          differentiators, so the world knows
          we're not talking to each other.

Michael blinks, looking at Peter.

                    MICHAEL
          That's very deep, Pete.

Peter smiles, then walks away, stopping a few steps up the
corridor to turn back.

                    PETER
          If you need to walk around one of
          the levels, ask for a guide. That
          word specifically. A bot will give
          you the full tour, or take you to
          the block you need.

                    MICHAEL
          Cheers.

Peter exits through another door.

When he's gone, Michael lets out a huge, long sigh.

                    MICHAEL
          This is insane.

Another BOT walks past, looking at Michael, who smiles, awkward, slowly shaking his head when it's gone, resuming scrolling.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING BASEMENT - NIGHT

Peter sits up at his workstation, taking off the headset, wiping away sweat, combing fingers through his hair.

He sips from a bottle of water, then walks to the lift, pressing the button.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING SEVENTH FLOOR - NIGHT

Peter returns to the darkened seventh floor, walking down the central aisle again, this time to an office at the far end.

He opens a door that says LARS PACKMAN - CTO.

INT. CTO OFFICE - NIGHT

Inside the CTO's office, a worried-looking CRAIG stands watching the unconscious LARS PACKMAN, who reclines in a more comfortable, modern version of the VR setup behind his nice, large desk.

                    PETER
          Anything?

Craig shakes his head.

                    CRAIG
          Did you get the troubleshooter
          inside?

                    PETER
          Yeah, he's sifting through the
          levels now.

                    CRAIG
          Did you tell him what's going on?

                    PETER
          Sort of. I said we lost the
          projection of a beta user.

                    CRAIG
          And?

                    PETER
          One bite at a time, I think.

They both look at Lars.

                    CRAIG
          Should we throw some water on him,
          maybe?

                    PETER
          No. Are his vitals all the same
          still?

                    CRAIG
          Yeah. His heart rate jumped a
          couple of times, but nothing
          significant.

                    PETER
          He's having the time of his life in
          there.

                    CRAIG
          Is that why he's hiding from us, do
          you think? It's not something more
          concerning?

                    PETER
          I don't know.

                    CRAIG
          This isn't normal behavior. He's
          either had a complete mental break,
          or he's found something... better
          than his real life?

Peter shrugs.

                    CRAIG
          I'm wondering when we should start
          alerting people to this, to cover
          our asses.

                    PETER
          Let's just give this guy some time
          to go into the levels and find the
          back doors and tunnels Lars made.

INT. SUBSTRATE – CORRIDOR 30

Michael sits at the panel, growing tired as he continues to read.

He gets off the stool, looking up and down the featureless hallway.

                    MICHAEL
          Ah, can I have a guide please.

A featureless white BOT walks to him from the other end of the hall.

                    GUIDE
          Hello, I am--*NAME OF GUIDE*. Which
          map would you like to visit?

                    MICHAEL
          Which one is the most popular?

                    GUIDE
          The beach.

                    MICHAEL
          Let's go to the beach.

The guide opens a door, stepping through, followed by Michael.

EXT. SUBSTRATE – THE BEACH – DAY

Wide as Michael and the guide walk side by side along a sprawling strip of empty sand. The guide points at things while Michael nods.

The guide and Michael stop, seeing a MAN sitting alone atop a cliff high above the beach.

                    MICHAEL
          Who is that?

                    GUIDE
          User: Lars Packman.

The guide disappears.

                    MICHAEL
          Hey!

EXT. SUBSTRATE - BEACH CLIFFS - DAY

Michael approaches LARS, sitting by himself, looking out to
sea.

                    MICHAEL
          Hello?

Lars glances up at Michael briefly as he joins him, sitting
down beside him.

                    MICHAEL
          Do you mind if I sit down? You're
          the first user I've come across.

Lars gives Michael a longer look.

                    LARS
          You work for the company?

                    MICHAEL
          Contractor. Doing some debugging.

Lars laughs a bit, cynical.

                    LARS
          Let me save you some time. The
          error isn't in their code. It's not
          the infrastructure, or even the
          anchor points they engineered, to
          keep the whole structure
          consistent. It's the substrate.

Michael processes this a moment.

                    MICHAEL
          What do you mean? I thought
          substrate was the name of their
          server farm, in qspace.

                    LARS
          No, it's the place itself. It's an
          entire dimension, curled up in
          qspace. It's not physical, in the
          way that we are, but it's not
          intangible, either.

                    MICHAEL
          Wait, it's a... type of space?

                    LARS
          It's a metaspace. The negative
          space that branches through gaps in
          the quantum foam.

Michael looks up at the sky, which seems to have taken on a sudden psychedelic quality, reflecting the churning sea beneath.

> MICHAEL
> Then this place existed before the
> platform. They just, what,
> colonized it?

When he looks back down, Lars is gone. Michael stands, looking around.

> MICHAEL
> Doorway please, corridor... ah,
> what was it? Any corridor really.

A doorway appears. Michael enters.

INT. SUBSTRATE - OFFICE BUILDING LIFT

Michael stands in the same lift that he rode in earlier, only now in the substrate.

> MICHAEL
> Oh, right. Same building.

The doors open at the basement level.

INT. SUBSTRATE - OFFICE BUILDING BASEMENT - NIGHT

Michael walks into the same basement where he entered the substrate, seeing himself there, unconscious at one of the workstations, alone in the basement.

He walks over to himself, looking closer at the VR headset, then his own unconscious body.

> MICHAEL
> Wait. Should I be... hey, world?
> Should I be able to see myself
> here? Is that how the rendering
> works? It's real time?

He waits, with no response.

> MICHAEL
> Can I have a guide?

A long pause, but nothing.

Michael leans over himself, looking at his own substrate-rendered face.

He slaps it.

INT. OFFICE BUILDING BASEMENT - MORNING

Michael jerks awake in the basement, ripping the headset off, looking around.

                    MICHAEL
          Holy shit.

To be continued.