VIRUS!

by Jonathan Dotse

The portholes were set to un-shade as the airplane descended into heavy clouds and out of the blinding glare of the West African sun. The small plane trembled through the haze before breaking out to a panoramic view of the sprawling metropolis.

Accra stretched out to bridge the horizons, barely held in check at the southern coastline, where its hyperactive edge threatened to spill over into the Gulf of Guinea. From above, the city seemed without a plan; a vibrant mosaic of infrastructure, haphazardly diced and spliced to make use of every square foot of space. Ramshackle settlements jutted out into the ocean, perched above the water on nests of illegal support structures. Massive holographic logos hovered above the skyline in a brilliant display of optics, familiar corporate logos visible from miles away. Dela leaned into the porthole, scanning for meaning across the organic pattern of the cityscape, searching for answers to the matters on her mind. She felt an overwhelming sense of calm as she soared far above the blind chaos of the streets, certain that if she remained up here long enough she would eventually find what she was looking for.

'Incoming call from Khadija,' came a message from the Grid.

'Answer,' Dela thought in response, and felt a connection opening up within her mind.

'Delali,' came a thought from across the link. 'It's time for the run. Where are you?'

'I'm at Roundabout,' Dela replied. 'I've been waiting for you.'

'Alright, meet me at the Lounge,' Khadija said, and then cut the connection. Outside the portholes, the landscape was falling away into the distance, gradually becoming enshrouded in a white mist as the aircraft climbed into the clouds, rocking gently with turbulence. The plane broke through the clouds and sailed into a red-stained sky, where the setting sun met the western horizon. The horizon. Dela gazed into the heart of that infinite line, into the point where land didn't quite meet sky, and held her breath as she braced herself for the transition.

'Escape,' Dela thought, and reality came rushing back into her senses. She was suddenly experiencing the lost and disoriented feeling of leaving a virtual reality simulation; the feeling of returning to a forgotten world. It took her a few moments to realize that she was sitting in the shade of a bus stop, squinting into the sunlit street and beginning to remember where she was. Bus conductors yelled out destinations from the windows of slow-moving buses while

hawkers weaved between the traffic, advertising the wares that balanced delicately on top of their heads. Several of them were teenage girls, and Dela knew that she could easily have ended up like them; uneducated and selling goods on the streets of the city. Her father had been a fisherman all his life and wanted her to find a job in Accra right after primary school. He certainly didn't see the sense in putting a computer inside her head, but her mother insisted on giving her an education, and raised enough money to buy the second-hand biocore implant she used through high school. She had now come to find work in Accra while she waited for the West African Examinations Council to grade her final exam results, then she could legally install tertiary education software. An entire month in the city had passed without any sign of a job, and now all Dela had was Khadija's shady connection and a single-minded determination not to return home empty-handed. She would do whatever it took to make it in Accra, Dela thought, as she stepped out from under the shade. She wiped the sweat off her forehead as she walked toward the eastern end of the interchange. Virtual displays of various shapes, sizes, and colors hovered around the sidewalk, streaming adverts into the minds of pedestrians, selling everything from designer clothing to antiviral software. One display showed a woman from behind, brushing her hair aside to press a finger against the nape of her neck. She then threw her head back as the display burst into a splash of brilliant colors and music.

'Isis Biocores,' came the voice-over, 'A world awaits you!' Dela crossed onto the Spintex road, walking past a bus station towards the green-themed facade of the gaming center, placed in-between a coffee shop and a business center. Luigi's Lounge was a popular place for teenagers to play virtual games and tournaments, where Dela had first met Khadija a week before. Now Dela found her sitting alone in a dark corner of the Lounge, staring intently at a set of displays across the room, where a young boy was immersed in the pilot seat of a fighter jet. Her concentration was broken when she saw Dela approaching her, and then seemed to be inspecting Dela as she walked over.

"So, you want to be a runner," Khadija said, when Dela stood before her.

"Of course," Dela replied. "That's why I'm here."

"You know that it's risky business, don't you?"

"I can handle risky business," Dela replied as confidently as she could. Khadija shook her head gently and smiled.

"You're not in Keta anymore-o," Khadija said, "This is Accra. Here, the police are like eagles: they have eyes and ears all over the Grid. I've seen too many people go down for being a little bit careless, so if you want to stay out of jail you have to do exactly as I say. If you know you can't handle this you'd better think escape before we go any further." But Dela wasn't about to change her mind. She had already come too far to turn back.

"How much are we talking?" Dela asked. Khadija studied her for a moment and then stood up to stretch, before leading the way out of Luigi's. The evening congestion was backing up the traffic heading into the Spintex road. Virtual displays followed them, playing commercials as they walked through the stream of pedestrians up the road.

"One-fifty," Khadija said, "maybe two hundred cedis."

"That's a lot of money."

"Oh, that's not any money. We could bargain for more, depending on how much the data is actually worth. You just wait until I get us a proper job and then I'll show you what money means." Khadija branched off the main road and led Dela through a maze of back alleys until they reached a clearing between the buildings, through which ran set of train tracks. The sun lay low in the sky, casting a pair of long shadows ahead of them as they walked along the tracks, past several industrial buildings until they met a sagging chain-link fence that surrounded an abandoned warehouse. An airplane roared across the sky as a police siren wailed ominously in the distance. They scaled the unsteady fence and ran up to the wall of the warehouse, where a steel-rung ladder ran about twenty meters up to its roof. Dela wasn't comfortable with heights, and hesitated for a moment before following Khadija up the ladder. She never took her gaze off the concrete wall in front of her until they finally climbed over the edge of the rooftop. A telecommunications mast stood in the center of the rooftop, rising thirty meters into the sky.

"Are we going up there?" Dela asked when stood at the base of the structure, not excited about the situation.

"That's where we're going," Khadija replied.

"But someone could see us up there."

"Not if we leave right now," Khadija said. "The only people who come around here are the security guards who patrol this area, and they usually change shifts at six pm. That gives us about ten minutes to get the data and get out of here. Don't worry; it'll be dark in a few

minutes, and then we'll have the cover of night. Let's go; we don't have any more time to waste." With that she began climbing up the mast. The entire structure was littered with satellite dishes and radio equipment that they had to avoid as they climbed. Through the empty frame of the mast, she could see as far as Roundabout, the Kotoka International Airport, and beyond; the gleaming towers of Airport City. Accra was unfolding before her eyes, an infinite sea of light that began to come alive like a million fireflies waking up from the same dream. "This is a Grid hub," Khadija explained as she positioned herself to face a rectangular box with a long antenna. Dela gingerly maneuvered closer to Khadija, watching attentively as she pulled a screwdriver out of her jacket and began to take the box apart. "Thousands of these devices generate the wireless networks that relay information throughout the city; information that could make us rich if we can just get our hands on it." Khadija managed to remove a panel from the Grid box to reveal a circuit board underneath. She produced a small card from her jacket; a circuit breaker, which she inserted into a slot on the board. The card flashed bright red several times before turning green.

'A new data stream is available,' Dela's biocore informed her.

"We're in," Khadija said. "Get inside the stream and search for any files labeled 'Sol Seven.' The search program will find all instances of those files on the networks right now."

"What's Sol Seven?" Dela asked. "It's nothing you need to know. Just do your job and get the data." With that, she became completely still as her mind entered the data stream. Dela shifted herself into a comfortable sitting position on a beam, held on tightly to the frame and prepared to follow her friend.

'Enter data stream,' Dela thought, and darkness engulfed her senses shortly before her biocore generated a virtual environment in the void around her. She had no physical body inside that world; instead she had the ability to perceive and interact with the many thousands of files that were zipping through the stream. She felt Khadija's presence nearby; a hyperactive avatar generating a furious buzz of electronic activity. 'Locate 'Sol Seven,'' she thought, and felt a search program stir to life, its electronic sensors scouring the networks for the target. A list of several hundred files began to pile up before her, each one of them with the words 'Sol Seven' embedded somewhere within their code. 'Which of these files should I download?' Dela asked Khadija as the list continued to grow.

'Take as many as you can,' Khadija replied. 'We don't have much time, so we'll sort them out later.'

'Download search results to memory,' Dela thought, and another program began to download all the files accumulating before her. 'Escape,' she thought, and was returned to her body, still perched on a beam near the apex of the telecommunications mast. The sun dipped below the horizon, casting its dying rays across the skies, which were now covered with shrieking bats on their nightly hunt. Somewhere in the distance, the evening call to prayer was broadcasting across the audio channels of the local Grid. Khadija's body was propped against the frame of the mast; a serene, rigid shell, while her mind was diving deep inside the data stream. Dela was about to return to the stream when she noticed a light in the darkness below. It took her a few moments to make out the shape of a man holding a flashlight, entering through the gate of the warehouse lot. 'Someone is here,' Dela transmitted to Khadija, whose facial features instantly morphed to life and scanned the environment until she located the threat.

"Security guard," Khadija rasped and then ripped the card out of the Grid box. The two hurriedly worked their way down the mast until they were close enough to jump onto the roof the warehouse. Khadija landed expertly while Dela tumbled across the dusty concrete, and they both sprinted to the edge of the rooftop only in time to meet the flashlight of the security guard at the bottom of the steel-rung ladder.

"Stop!" the security guard yelled, and began to climb up.

"Follow me," Khadija said, grabbing Dela by the arm and running towards the other end of the rooftop. "When we get to the edge, you jump!" As they ran towards the end of the rooftop, Dela saw another building next to the warehouse, just beyond a gap that seemed to be growing wider as they got closer. Khadija leaped across the gap without breaking stride, but Dela panicked and froze just as she reached the edge, peering down several meters into pitch darkness. Khadija landed and turned around to find Dela still on the other side of the warehouse. "Delali, you have to jump!" Dela's mind raced as she struggled to weigh the chances of losing her life if she jumped against the chances of going to jail if she stayed. Her frantic thoughts were soon deluged by the deafening roar of an airplane flying low overhead.

'Warning!' Dela's biocore alerted. 'An illegal file download has been initiated… Warning! System files are being corrupted…'

'Disconnect from the Grid,' Dela instructed, trying to stop the situation from turning into a nightmare.

'Disconnecting from the Accra Grid… Error! Unable to disconnect…'

'Disconnect!' Dela insisted.

'Error! Unable to disconnect…'

"Jump, Delali, Jump!" Khadija shouted. Realizing she had no time and no options, Dela abandoned her biocore's warnings and prepared to jump, backtracking until there was a good distance between herself and the edge. She held her breath and sprinted forward, trying to muster as much courage as she could, knowing without a doubt that her fate was to be decided in the next few moments. She was just about to jump when she faltered short of the edge, feeling her muscles turn to jelly as her body gave way to gravity.

'Virus!' Dela's biocore alerted, but it was already too late. She tumbled onto the ground, feeling nothing but a faint and distant pain, and then lay on her back with her gaze fixed against the night sky. The world around her rapidly began to lose meaning as the icy fingers of the hostile program traced the boundaries of her mind, distorting her perception and warping her consciousness.

'Virus!' A light appeared above her; a small light that began to expand, growing larger and brighter until it came to encompass all of her vision. She felt a powerful force dragging her down into the depths of nothingness, but fought hard to maintain a grip on reality with all the willpower she had left.

'Virus!' And then her mind caved in.