

**Ghost Mode**  
**&**  
**Other Strange Stories**

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ONEMILLIONWORDS



## Ghost Mode

Quentin E. Donovan—*the* Quentin E. Donovan—side-stepped into an alley, closed his eyes, and did something he hadn't done in nearly a decade.

With a deliberate twitch of his left thumb, the twin IRIS mods went offline. A whispered password triggered the auto-transcript program fueling a half-dozen feeds to quit, killing a headline about the latest darknet virus mid-scroll. Finally, he removed the sleek, pearlescent PAM—an eighth-generation iCoin Pro—from his pocket and thumbed the command to repel all incoming v-captures.

No feeds, no casts, no signals whatsoever. He was completely grid-locked.

Without the translucent menus and rolling text in his periphery, the world seemed impossibly plain. And slightly pink. It took him a moment to realize his eyes were compensating for the absence of the green tinge that always coated the corners of his vision—a much-missed reassurance that the ocular implants were successfully uploading his sensory data to the Sphere.

He shivered, as though losing his connection to the local hotspots had reduced his actual body temperature. Real-life silence usurped the subtle, soothing soundtrack of white noise in his ears.

No wonder why they call it ghost mode, he thought

morosely. The air even *tasted* dead.

Quentin returned to the main thoroughfare, where a woman was approaching from the opposite direction. He smiled politely—no, eagerly—but she didn't acknowledge him as she passed, her shaky, far-off stare skimming a number of feeds he couldn't see. For several heart-pounding seconds, he could only stand there, until he finally identified the long-forgotten feeling as solitude.

He thrust one hand inside his pocket, pressed his palm against the smooth surface of the iCoin, and flirted with the idea of rebooting all of his AR apps—longing to hear the comforting chime of the PAM booting up. But he found courage, then, in the thought of what glory lay ahead.

A pity his millions of fans wouldn't be able to enjoy the thrill of the clandestine meeting he had arranged mere hours ago on the darknet!

Releasing his hold on the hibernating PAM to rub his eyes—though that did nothing to restore the reassuring green glow of the IRIS implants—Quentin trudged the remaining block to the agreed-upon FaceCafé and entered. Without the aid of any tech, he scanned the restaurant for someone who looked out of place.

Closest to the entrance, a middle-aged woman wearing a strappy, alligator-skin dress fished a cord out of her purse and connected one end to the table's charge-port and the other to an oversized, blaze-orange PAM. The infant in the highchair beside her wailed until the woman returned the device to his or her eager little hands.

Elsewhere in the dining room, a guy in a red power suit talked to an invisible partner across the table, laughing suggestively as he adjusted his crotch.

A few tables away, a woman wearing all white swiped the air furiously with her fingers and frowned at what Quentin could only assume was bad news. Maybe a relative

had contracted that new, nasty virus the newsfeeds had been squawking about? Her smooth scalp and sheer outfit, while undoubtedly vibrant if viewed through an AR interface, looked dull and dumb in RL.

He sighed. No one appeared to be doing anything unusual.

Disappointed, he sat down at an empty table and keyed in an order for a black, half-stim coffee. He would just have to trust that the darknet lurker he had pinged—the professional villain he had promised to pay half a million Cs—would recognize him.

No worries there. He was *the* Quentin E. Donovan, after all.

The ten minutes he spent waiting, bereft of feeds and all other digital augmentation, were perfectly intolerable.

For one thing, the FaceCafé resembled a tomb. The smooth gray panels that normally flashed a parade of high-production promos, including a holotrailer for his own QED Feed, formed a bleak perimeter around the sparsely populated tables. Whatever tunes the restaurant subtly pumped into visitors' inputs couldn't reach Quentin's ears. The only sounds interrupting the sepulcher stillness were monosyllabic murmurs from the other customers and an occasional chime of the infant's PAM.

For another thing, the coffee tasted funny. He spent a full sixty seconds trying to determine if the FaceCafé's signature drink was just plain terrible or if he had never before taken the time to consider the flavor of coffee in the first place.

Pushing the acrid brew to the middle of the table, he watched the other patrons go about their wonderfully linked lives. This amused him for a while. It felt deliciously bold to stare. But after several minutes, it was obvious that he—like

a real ghost—was invisible to them. Inconsequential. And observing them was akin to accessing a glitching vid that showed only half of the story.

Elbows propped on the table, he cradled his head and rubbed his temples. All of this unfiltered RL was giving him a migraine.

“Mr. Donovan?”

At last!

Looking up, he discovered two things at once: the pink haze that had haunted his peripheral vision was completely gone, and the young woman now seated across from him was a reasonably attractive specimen, even without his IRIS mods accessing her AR enhancements.

Regardless, he couldn't hide his disappointment. This was no villain.

“Yes...and who are...? Ah, but you must be a fan.” He straightened his back and reclaimed the hated cup of coffee, his only prop. “You're probably wondering what happened to the QED Feed. Don't worry...we're just experiencing some technical difficulties.”

The slight smile of Beautiful Stranger was unexpected. Usually, his female fans—and a significant percentage of his male demographic—downright swooned when they recognized him in public. Not that that was often. A custom-made app on his PAM permanently masked his Sphere ID to unauthorized passersby, ensuring his 24/7/365 lifecast wasn't polluted with random encounters of star-struck rubes. And by the time devotees ID'd themselves as unintended extras in any given scene, he was already en route to the next set.

But this woman's bright blue eyes weren't sending signals of excitement—sexual or otherwise. No, she looked...self-satisfied, maybe even sly...

“You're not the only one with tech issues,” she said.

A few tables away, the woman in white frantically

wiggled her fingers, trying to reestablish a connection to the Sphere. Meanwhile, across the room, the mom barked a few words that were banned on all but the grittiest of lifecasts while her baby tossed its unresponsive PAM to the floor. Quentin then watched the only other man there stand up and abruptly exit the FaceCafé, his obvious erection leading the way.

Turning back to Mysterious Stranger, he said, “So *that* is how you recognized me. You’ve lost your Sphere link too and are seeing the world through naked eyes.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms, accentuating a pair of modest-sized breasts augmented neither by AR code nor cosmetic bioware. Her face was pretty, albeit in a straightforward manner. A few years back, Sphere celebs paid small fortunes to manufacture faces that looked effortlessly beautiful. However, the latest trend embraced the other extreme: exaggerated features that deemphasized traditional traits and championed dehumanizing effects.

He theorized it was her brazen adoption of outdated fashion—particularly the monochromatic shirt, naturally black hair, and the pale blue eyes unlike any gemstone—that intrigued him more than anything.

Then he remembered he was seeing her RL face. Had the Sphere connection not died and had his IRISes been online, she probably would have looked as celebulous as anyone.

“I always see the world through naked eyes,” she replied, and her pink-lipped half-smile made a repeat performance.

He chuckled lewdly at the double entendre until he realized she was speaking literally. And was that a subtle shade of lipstick—*actual* lipstick—around her mouth?

“You can’t be serious,” he said. “Nobody can lead a normal life without linking to the Sphere.”

“That’s not what I said.” Eccentric Stranger leaned forward and tapped a fingernail against the lifeless screen

implanted in the center of the table. “Everyone has to plug in sometimes. A gal has to eat, though I wouldn’t recommend anything from this menu...especially not the coffee.”

Cup halfway to his lips, Quentin returned the foul beverage to the table.

“I said I always see *the world* through naked eyes,” she continued. “When I need to make a purchase in person, I use a C-card instead of direct linking. And when I need to drop by the Sphere, I use an ancient base-model screen that takes five minutes to bloody boot up.”

He scoffed. “What are you, some kind of technophobe? Or one of those zealots from the Church of Minimalists?”

She laughed, somehow sounding girly and worldly at the same time. There was no denying the woman was peculiar. She might even make an intriguing love interest during his next ratings lull. He made a mental note to file away her facepic but then remembered he was still in ghost mode.

“Actually, I’ve got quite a knack for tech,” she replied. “This didn’t happen by accident.”

She punctuated her point with another tap of her fingernail against the table’s blank screen. Quentin’s heart pumped harder.

“*You* did this?” he asked, gesturing at the empty tables around them. “How?”

Dangerous Stranger reached beneath the conservative neckline of her shirt and withdrew a pendant. Its white stone was a stark contrast to her black shirt. “It’s a jinx charm. I scrambled Sphere links for a two-kil radius...maybe more.”

He tried to summon everything he knew about anti-Sphere terrorists and blackhats in general, but his only experiences with the Sphere’s seedy underbelly was the time a jacker had blasted through all nine walls of his firefortress and wreaked havoc while impersonating him—*the* Quentin E. Donovan—on the Sphere.



The jacker, who turned out to be only a grayhat, hadn't siphoned any money or done any significant damage during what turned out to be a foolish prank. On the contrary, the QED Feed had enjoyed a huge ratings spike.

His fingers twitched, eager to reactivate his PAM and do a search for "jinx charm" and "citiZEN"—the Sphere's most notorious anarchists—or better yet, power up his IRISes and upload that pretty little face of hers to CrimeCheck. But considering the table's screen wasn't even displaying an apologetic out-of-order alert, the woman's pendant had done more than just disrupt Sphere connectivity.

She had somehow crippled tech itself.

A single thought surfaced above his mounting panic: aside from that grayhat prankster, he had encountered *one* other denizen of the darknet...

"You! You're the...the..."

Devious Villain chuckled. "Wow, that took you long enough to piece together. I guess fans of the QED Feed aren't tuning in for mental stimulation."

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