

"Sanctuary"
by Michela Ledwidge

In the space of 24 hours sixteen-year-old Blake Parkinson will be a terrorist in the eyes of the State and a virtual superhero will be born.

The year is 2012 and government forces are patrolling fire-ravaged bush. Smoke and wrecked logging equipment suggest a recent disaster. Cameras from the Department of the Environment and Network Resources (DENR) have the area under surveillance.

24 hours earlier, a slick DENR video, the kind an oil company would make, is being played to a class of local high school students including sixteen-year-old hacker, Blake Parkinson. In the video, the bush (a wildlife sanctuary) is in pristine condition. With the teacher out of the room, Blake gains unauthorised access to the school computer network with the help of CD, a powerful software tool that she has smuggled into class on a PDA. CD is Blake's vehicle, knowledge base and guide for navigating `virtual worlds. "In the flesh" he looks like a badly drawn stick figure with attitude.

Blake look up live satellite data and sees that the bush is the last pocket of natural bushland in the State, surrounded on all sides by urban sprawl. She feeds this to the classroom video projector as a prank and gets caught.

That night Blake's teacher calls Blake's father, Daniel Parkinson, to warn that Blake risks being reported to the DENR. The veiled threat is not just aimed at Blake. In Blake's file are references to his career as a university professor. His field - Information Warfare.

In a fiery exchange, Daniel accuses Blake of taking his stuff. She hotly denies this, surreptitiously hiding the disk containing CD's source code. Dad is visibly uncomfortable. He doesn't know what to believe and Blake's cavalier attitude scares him. It's clear that she knows a lot about systems, his published work is scattered around for starters. Blake in turn is seething with resentment at being treated like "a kid". She doesn't understand what he is so angry about. Blake's casual mastery of her bedroom RIG, the latest screen-less computer technology (an augmented reality system that contains a wireless non-invasive interface to the brain) makes Dad uncomfortable.

Losing patience with Blake, Daniel grabs a chair and goes to remove the RIG hardware from the ceiling (which looks like a webcam). At that moment, he gets a message on his PDA and has to rush out, giving Blake a small reprieve from being grounded (in the online sense).

Back in the bush, State operatives examine a mysterious round object clipped to the underside of a branch.

Worn out by his domestic troubles, Daniel retreats to the relative calm of his local activist group, the Indys, who run a "Little Brother" surveillance campaign on the State. "Keeping the bastards honest" is one slogan. Daniel joins his friend Mark at a workbench of electronics parts and equipment. They are obviously the geeks in the group. The strange metal seen in the bush is revealed as another kind of webcam device (a nanobat).

Meanwhile Blake is back online, only this time she's hacking deeper - the State Registry itself. Blake and CD prowl a massive online repository of government records. CD retrieves files for Blake on the sanctuary so she can see what all the fuss was about. She finds plans for logging and re-developing the sanctuary and leaves the information out for others to find. The duo escape as the Registry security systems begin to narrow in on them.

Later on Dad and Mark prep their gear for an expedition into the sanctuary having received a tip-off that the State is about to start logging.

Disregarding CD's warning that it is none of her business, Blake can't resist going back to the Registry to monitor the swarm of activity now surrounding the file she leaked.

The activists are recorded as they enter the sanctuary by the State surveillance network. It appears as though they have been expected.

Blake is watching the same images, having hacked the surveillance system from the Registry. She follows the activists' progress through the bush. We see her in the scene as if she is there as a ghost but understand that she is really in her online workspace - a virtual world composed of floating panels in the void and digital junk along the lines of her bedroom. Blake's surroundings are composed of alternating images from footage hacked from the State surveillance network - the cameras in the bush.

As she walks Blake catches her reflection in a pool of water and plays with her visual appearance (her avatar).

The activists, invigorated with a sense of purpose march on, wondering where the loggers are. Daniel smells something burning.

On a State control room screen, something large and fast is seen approaching the Sanctuary.

Blake spies on the activists while CD warms up for a fight, joining the dots faster than Blake - something isn't right - if the State has Indys under surveillance, why would they let them interfere.

When suddenly the bush erupts into chaos both Blake and the activists are equally shocked. Aerial transports deposit a platoon

of State riot troopers and dogs. Each trooper is outfitted with a RIG (like Blake had) so that they move simultaneously in real and virtual space.

Pre-rigged explosions go off around the activists. They are being set-up to look like terrorists. The information Blake found was a ruse. She watches in horror as Daniel and the activists are fired upon and run for their lives.

Daniel pulls out a nanobat and hurls it into the air like a baseball. It unfurls revealing a crude mechanism with the maneuverability of a bat. It begins recording the carnage below. Elsewhere in the sanctuary, other nanobats activate and begin recording. Blake picks up the new network taps into their visuals, flitting between one perspective and the next. The nanobats try to fly away in the real world and simultaneously escape onto the Internet with their incriminating data. State troopers start to shoot them down.

Via one of the nanobats Blake sees Daniel get killed. He dies staring up at the device with a quizzical expression, wondering why it hesitates, looking straight at Blade.

As the activists are rounded up, the last of the nanobats is destroyed. The devastation caused by the troopers is also pre-text for re-developing the bush - irrevocable damage has been to the sanctuary. News reports begin blaming the destruction on the activists, now labelled terrorists, and indicate that all have been killed. Logging vehicles arrive on the scene.

Blake goes on the attack on hearing and seeing the above. Not every activist has been killed. Her avatar races through the virtual bush, becoming less and less recognisable, a pale ghost in the machine.

As a trooper hunts down the three remaining activists, he is stalked by Blake's new avatar (Blade)- older and more menacing. As he raises a rifle, Blade attacks the trooper through virtual space. The trooper's personal systems are whalloped by a massive surge and he keels over - his RIG hit by a major malfunction.

It is unclear whether the trooper is dead or not. Blake/Blade is too traumatised to care. She looks up at the activists, who can't see her and runs off into the void with CD, a loose cannon in search of a target.