

Jacked & Hacked



by Derrick Oswald

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A Short Story

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“Siri’s reminded me that our anniversary's next week.” Brianna set a tea on the desk beside Tyler, leaned in close and breathed in his ear “You want to go to that spa?” which elicited the raised goose-bumps like she'd hoped it would.

He set his eReader on the table and swiveled to grab her in a big hug and pivot her onto his lap — easily done with his forty kilo advantage. There were hints of coconut as she flipped her hair over her shoulder and put an arm around his neck.

“Another year already?” he said perfunctorily, pecking her cheek with a passing kiss. “Hmm, yeah, the spa could be fun, but I was thinking, how about getting a couple of ExtaJax units? rTMS for consumers is getting great reviews, even for non-depressed people.”

“What's rTMS?” she asked, running fingers through his curly hair to expose his face.

“Repetitive trans-cranial magnetic stimulation. Kind of a joy button. It triggers pleasure centers in your brain” he said.

“Ooh, sounds fun. Why not?”

The gear arrived that Thursday; a rather large Amazon shipping carton, containing immense amounts of packing paper and two little shrink-wrapped boxes with the ExtaJax hologram logo.

“Oh look, I’m a princess,” said Brianna, donning the neon green tiara and doing a runway strut through the living room, pretending she had high heels on her long legs.

“Nice. But you’ve got it on backwards” said Tyler, gently pulling it off her head. He spread the silicon rubber coated wings of the t shaped headset to grip the back of her head above her ears. “Did you even look at those links I sent?” he asked, bending to rearrange the existing wall warts for the new chargers. “You also need to install the app, of course.”

When the app was loaded, it asked for the headset serial number for pairing via Bluetooth. Then they went through the calibration exercises. Finally, they were ready to try it out.

“You go first,” said Brianna, joining Tyler on the couch.

“K.” Tyler set the slider on the app to a low value and pressed the friendly, oversized green "play" button. His shoulders slumped and his head lolled forward for a few seconds. Shortly, he inhaled sharply, straightened up and said “Nice!”

“What’s it like?” she prodded.

“Hard to describe. Kind of like a good massage and a hot cocoa at the same time,” he said. “Now you try it.”

She bravely thumbed her slider mid way, then hesitated, backed it off slightly and pressed the button.

Her eyes rolled back in their sockets. Her mouth opened. She let out a low moan, and fell back into the couch cushion.

“Whoa! That was great” she said sitting up. “Wait, let me do it again.”

“Afraid not,” he said, “there’s a physiological refractory period. And it’s rate limited in software. So you can’t over do it.”

Indeed, the green button was now pulsing red, and pressing it did nothing.

“Ha. Everything has cheat codes” she said, and summoned her search agent software: “Vanessa!”.

When Tyler came home the next day, Brianna didn’t notice. She was facing the picture window with her virtual reality goggles on and her arms and hands were making rapid karate gestures. Her droning voice, punctuated by percussive noises, was uttering the incantations he’d come to associate with a deep level of programming concentration. He let her keep working undisturbed and went to make fried rice for dinner. She came into the kitchen while he was tossing the wok over the hissing propane flame. She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a kiss on his neck.

“Hey,” he said. “Looks like you were pretty busy today.”

“Actually, I took the day off and joined up with a group of Extajax hackers. They’ve leveraged a bug in the Extajax web site and cracked the Bluetooth encryption – silly people, they used sequential primes – so now we’re on to reverse engineering the protobuffers.”

“Sounds like a fun day...” his voice dripping with sarcasm. “How much do you want?” he said, ladling it into a bowl.

“Tons. I’m starved. Have we got any of that super hot sauce left?” she said diving into the refrigerator.

“So, basically you’ve intercepted and decoded the transmissions between the headset and the app.” he said.

“Uh huh” she said, wolfing down fried rice from the bowl with sweeping motions of the chopsticks. “There’s still a few edge cases that are dark, but

ExtaxHax have mapped out most of the protocol. We're only missing some messages about the hardware settings.”

“ExtaxHax eh. That’s real cute” he said. “But what good does that do?”

“Well, I can give you a demo. Get your headset on, and open your app.” He went into the living room and put his headset on and opened the ExtaxJax app. She worked her phone for a few seconds, and twiddled some settings on a complex screen he'd never seen in the app before.

“Hang on... better yet, sit down” she said, and motioned to the couch. When he was seated, she pressed an orange button on her phone. He gasped, and leaned forward. When he recovered, he looked up at her standing there with her thumb on the button.

“Uh, that’s a little scary” he said.

“Ya, see. I can control your headset now. Not only that, I can read your brain's activity — how you’re currently feeling. The room temperature SQUIDs are super sensitive. Hmm, you’re feeling a bit tense and on edge it seems.”

“Yeah, a bit!” he said, removing his headset self-consciously and eying her suspiciously, “What's a SQUID?”

“Um, a superconducting quantum interference device” she said. “Kind of like a super sensitive compass for magnetic fields... and now they don't need liquid nitrogen temperatures any more.”

“This is probably a little dangerous, right?”

“Well, I guess if people wore their headset all the time, and heavy equipment was involved, it might make a mess” she shrugged.

Saturday was normally their special breakfast day. Tyler had gone to bed early so he could make the whole house smell like bacon, waffles and coffee for Brianna to wake up to. But when he woke up she wasn’t there. He padded around in his bathrobe and found her in the 'office', just like he left her, working away on ExtaxHax.

“Hey,” he said.

She turned the huge googly eyes he’d glued to her VR headset towards him. Best investment ever, he thought, smiling inwardly.

“Hey.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

“Morning already?” pushing the goggles up on her forehead, making big hair ears to go with the eyes. “I guess not. I got into something with Vlad

and then I was pair programming with Xing and we went down a rabbit hole. We've got a prototype feedback loop working with external stimuli."

"Wait. What?"

"An Extajax stimulates the pleasure centers of the brain, but it can also measure the effects due to external stimulus using the SQUID sensors. Last night we coded a prototype that augments these sensory events hitting your brain by adding Extajax signals... boosting the good feelings you normally experience. The trick was to separate external signals from the ones from Extajax by adding a basal modulation to the generated ones."

He thought that through, but decided he didn't really understand, and gave up.

"But wait, doesn't the refractory period mean it only works once?" he asked.

"Vlad found out that if the modulated Extajax stimulation is set low enough, the refractory period can be arbitrarily small. The software restriction period is longer, the higher you set the stimulus level, but you can stimulate just a little practically continuously. You want to try it?"

"I guess" he said, trying to think of an excuse not to. "Is it safe?"

She ignored him, grabbed his phone, and installed a new program. They got their sets on and faced each other.

"OK, feels normal, right?" she said.

"What am I supposed to feel?"

She got up, moved into his arms and gave him a long languorous kiss. Pulling away she stroked his cock.

"Oooh. Not bad" he said. "It kind of makes you hypersensitive, but it's way more visceral than just skin sensitivity."

"Yeah. Like rampant teenage hormones in your veins, right?" she said.

"Just brushing past someone you're crushing on is a memorable experience."

Looking down at his wood, he said "Maybe we should take this to the bedroom."

"For sure. I'm all wet," she said, squeezing his ass and pulling him close for the bonus touchy feeling.

They made out the entire morning, with both apps multiplying the pleasure each of them was feeling. Their strokes and squeezes blossomed into erotic experiences. Licks and kisses exploded with colorful intensity. Orgasms

were body-wracking and mind-blowing. The fun only stopped when Brianna passed out from total exhaustion. Tyler flopped down beside her and drew up the covers over their sweaty bodies.

The afternoon sun squeezed between the curtains, and splashed a beam across the bed. Brianna's eyelids were no match for the onslaught. Rolling over to avoid it, and reaching for Tyler, she came up empty. Propping herself on one elbow she could see his empty gym bag meaning he'd probably gone for a run.

She scooted out of bed, placed her headset on the charger, and padded barefoot to the bathroom. Without the headset on, the world seemed flat and dull gray. The shower's jets and soap were so obviously lifeless; they held no awe or wonder at all. The chill stepping out wasn't exhilarating, but instead rather uncomfortable. She put her headset back on even before she got dressed.

She pressed a coffee then sat down at the kitchen table with her Yoga ball and her laptop. The ExtaHax code repository's red badge showed five updates since she last synced. Xing and others had smoothed out some rough edges making it simpler, removed a few bugs, and back-ported it to earlier models of the ExtaJax.

Turning to the ExtaHax Discord, it had spawned a new sub-channel for people who had tried the external feedback hack... or were curious about it. As opposed to the code repo with its cold workflows and super-seriousness, this was the place to discuss non-technical stuff. These were users. It wasn't usual for these types of people to go to the trouble of installing pre-release versions though. In the video lounge, a lively discussion was in full swing, and she needed the focus-on-speaker feature to reduce the background chatter to something tolerable. After a while she gave up. Checking the transcript, she saw mostly overwhelmingly positive reactions. Nearly everyone that had tried sex with the external feedback hack, agreed it was awesome. Somebody had an embarrassing accident with a next door neighbor — of course — that was bound to happen.

The sex was great, but the shower experience gave her a nagging feeling that ExtaHax was getting out of hand. She posted in the text chat:

bricolage → “It’s kind of addictive. Suggest keeping the gain slider under 1.0 normally.”

artemis → “Hmm, yeah. I took mine off to charge it, and now I’m feeling antsy because I don’t have it on.”

nat24 → “It’s a bit like a drug, you don’t miss it until you don’t have any.”

Tyler came in then and wrapped his burly arms around her from behind. Her headset and its feedback made it feel like stepping into a warm bath.

“That was great” he said.

“Way cooler than the spa, right?” she said, leaning her head into his neck.

“But it’s a bit selfish” he said straightening up and going to the fridge.

“What I really need is a way to feel what you’re feeling.” He popped the top of a mint tea and chugged it back.

Brianna’s thoughts swirled around that thought for a long while, but “Right” was all she said.

Later on that day Brianna took her VR goggles off and turned to Tyler.

“There’s something I want to try.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“I’ve set up Bluetooth pairing for our two apps to provide some cross feedback between devices. Basically, if I feel some pleasure you feel it too, and vice-versa. Kind of like a mutual aid society for feelings.”

“Woah! You can do that? Bring it on” he said.

They started off slowly feeling their way in the new set-up with just a small amount of feedback. The experience was eerie, as if the other person knew instinctively what made you feel good. And what turned you on. They gravitated to the bedroom without needing to exchange a word. With each passing minute their standard sex routine had mutated and evolved with altered positions, spontaneous new techniques, and less of ‘this’ and more of ‘that’. Conscious weight shifting and diligent attention to altered pressure points made it feel effortless and smooth.

This is great.” said Tyler, “What happens on the max setting?” reaching for the cell phones. He dialed them up.

The motion they settled into was a kind of swiping intermittent grinding. It felt so good, neither of them wanted to stop. They reached orgasm together and it lasted almost too long as they found out the plus and minus stroke intervals that kept it going indefinitely.

Then weird things started happening. It would be wonderful, with super heightened pleasure. Then the feedback loop would bump the stimulation so much that the refractory period would kick in, leading to a crash where both of them would fall into what felt like sensory deprivation as their linked brains both recovered to normalcy. Then it was again back to being super great and everything was wonderful.

This repeated artificial bipolar disorder seemed to get worse each time.

The next cycle Tyler ripped off his headset. "That feels like shit."

"Yeah, fuck this." Brianna removed her headset too.

They both stared at each other in the dismal haze they felt without their headset. But the spiraling waves of depression didn't stop. Brianna jumped up and went to the bathroom to throw up.

"You OK?" he asked after a while. "It seems to have passed now."

"Yeah," she said through toothpaste.

When they were gathering their clothes from the floor getting dressed it hit them again... hard. Tyler slumped down on the edge of the bed and Brianna stumbled backwards until her back hit the closet door and she collapsed.

"Uh oh," said Brianna, "that shouldn't happen."

"You feel it too, right? That same abyss of despair twisting your guts" he said.

Their tidy bedroom prison closed down around them and constricted breathing. Evil monsters lurked in the laundry hamper and oak armoire wardrobe. The stagnant air pressed heavily on their chests.

"I've got to get out of here" said Tyler, grabbing his shirt and going out. It dissipated soon after and Brianna continued dressing in a better mood than she'd had for a long time without the headset.

When she went to the kitchen and hugged Tyler it happened again. They both sat down quickly in the nook and pressed palms to temples. The

sunlight streaming through the window was a yellow beam of hate, and the neighbors lawnmower a vicious angry insect. They closed their eyes and covered their ears.

“I’m going to the park” she said, and rushed for the door. As soon as she was gone, the feeling passed and Tyler resumed making dinner in a much rosier mood. You kind of need a trauma to see how good you have it.

When Brianna returned, hungry as a bear, she poured some chili into a bowl, ripped off a chunk of bread, and carried them into the living room where Tyler was. As she sat on the couch next to Tyler, it hit again. She dropped the bowl on the table and jumped up and fled towards the door again. She stopped.

“Is it my imagination, or does this feeling only come on when we’re physically close to each other?” she asked.

“Let’s see” he said.

He got up and moved towards Brianna. At about four meters he stopped.

“I’m starting to feel it” he said.

“Oh yeah. It’s definitely when we’re close” she said.

He crossed the remaining steps, gritting his teeth and squinting his eyes hard shut, and then backed off rapidly as Brianna cried out.

“So if I go to the far corner?” he suggested, and walked as far away as he could in their apartment.

“That’s much better” she said. “It feels almost euphoric now in comparison.”

They tried it again. Same result. In close, there were waves of depression; apart, everything was normal.

They stood for long minutes, on opposite sides of the room staring at each other, coming to the realization that their life together wasn't possible any more. They were both devastated. Brianna started to cry. Tyler kicked an unsuspecting, innocent chair down the hall.

Tyler’s avatar popped up in Brianna’s VR.

“Hey” he said.

“Hi Ty.”

“I miss you. How’s it going?”

“No better than when you called yesterday. These last months have sucked.” She stashed her desktop and maxed him up.

“Yeah, I know. I finally heard back from ExtaJax today. They were all ‘product warranty voided’ and ‘ExtaJax assumes no responsibility’, so I assume the lawyers got involved.”

“I thought so. I don’t know why you bothered trying” she said. “On the good news front, Nico who claims to be a doctor — I’m not sure I believe him though — posted a theory on the ExtaHax forum. He thinks a cell level construct was created in our brains by excessive feedback at heightened awareness, and speculates that these centers interact with each other via the very weak magnetic waves they emit.”

“How does that work?” he asked.

“The two signals heterodyning leads to manic depressive cycles as these two frequencies interfere with each other to alternately starve and overwhelm the pleasure centers.”

“Um, right,” he always lost her when she used jargon.

“The upside is, he thinks the effect will wear off as the brain structures are gradually dismantled with new cell growth and natural aging.”

“But we tried a week ago and it was still the same” he said.

“Maybe it’s longer term than that. Anyway, it’s cause for hope” she said without conviction.

There was a long pause as they thought about an eventual cure.

“Could we meet if we, like, wear tinfoil hats or something?” asked Tyler.

“Ha, ha, ha. No, but it might work with army helmets” she said. “I’ve been working on another angle. Here. Get your headset on and try this new app I made.”

She squirted Tyler’s cell phone an over the air ExtaHax update, and he installed it.

“The ExtaJax headsets still work, right? But the Bluetooth pairing is only short range. So I’ve replaced it by TCP/IP which works anywhere there’s internet.”

“I don’t get it” he said.

“OK. Tell me what you feel when I do this...” she said, and fondled her breast.

He inhaled sharply.

“Oh! Now I get it” he said.

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