

Laceration

By Stephen P. Badham

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Sharp edges of the cityscape loomed through sulphurous drizzle in the twilight. Above the metropolis the clouds were aglow with light pollution from holographic advertisements. Dace tapped his foot as he watched the colors swell and fade across the sky through his window. His soundtrack throbbed out the latest *Laceration* song and its 90% white noise isolated him from the incessant chirping of his mother's inbox.

'Turn it down! Your eardrums will damage!' She must have seen him gesture the volume to max in-between sending out one of her pointless bulletins in the interspace. *Since when was it even possible to damage your eardrums? Let alone with implants* he mused. He made a show of performing the stop gesture and moped over towards his bedroom. Two more days and he would be sixteen, old enough to go to a Laceration concert. They were in town this summer. This gave him a few months to save up for tickets - he would probably get a few globals for his birthday too.

Laceration were a new hypermetal sensation, pushing the boundaries of music to harder and faster levels. They were also surrounded by some controversy that was no doubt semi-deliberate. Their fans were known to drive themselves into frenzy in *blood pits* during concerts; reports would occasionally spring up of serious injuries but nothing that wasn't settled out of court. Ever since drug scanners were common place at the turnstiles, fans had started to look for new highs. Laceration soon found their niche and began spouting lyrics filled with self-harm messages appealing to the latest wave of teen angst. Pain was the new high and Laceration were the new conduit.

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On Dace's birthday his family gathered in their chromed and sleek living area, which was configured into "social mode". The furniture was slightly shabby and probably failed to make the impression that the original designer intended. For Dace however, it made the place feel more like home.

'Dace, Happy birthday!' his mother said as she presented his main gift in a moment of triumph. He could tell from her half smile that she had got him what he wanted. 'I hope it's the right one. If you think you're wearing it at the table though -forget it.' He held up the t-shirt for them all to see.

'Very impressive son.' His father couldn't entirely suppress his distaste. Jaz, his younger brother, clearly thought it was a fantastic garment; he reached out to touch it and seemed disappointed when his hand hit what felt exactly like normal fabric. It was the latest in 3D technology and when Dace put it on, the effect really came to life. A large rectangular *active* section on the front of the shirt simulated a cavity extending into his chest. Within the cavity were a set of exposed and blackened organs - a heart, lungs and digestive system, each pulsating in rhythm with Dace's actual bodily functions. There were other settings of course, but this was the best. Periodically, a drop of black tar would trickle from the neck area down over the lungs. Overall, it had the desired effect.

Dace went to work straight away calling friends and family with the videowall, delighting in their reactions when they picked up. He occasionally pulled the fabric, warping the image into distorted shapes and sending iridescent rainbows of color flowing over his chest. He couldn't wait to wear it at the concert. People always dressed up and you never knew what you were going to see. In the interspace he saw a video once where some girl had smuggled in a holoprojector in a backpack that was programmed to double her size. A 12 foot Goth loped about through the crowd, almost as big as the projections of the artists.

Concert security was tightened after that event. It didn't stop the video getting a few hundred million hits and the aforementioned Goth receiving her own channel space. The woman was a local celebrity. She would often promote views and opinions about modern life with various levels of enthusiasm depending on the topic. One video she would be shouting

in horror about some stupid snack advert and the next she would be intelligently criticizing some political move or another.

Later in the day Dace let his brother Jaz wear the t-shirt. He was a couple of years younger than Dace and looked up to him a lot. Jaz fiddled with the settings intensely, trying out different images and patterns until he finally settled on an equally morbid exhibit. A gnarled and bloodied hand protruded from an opening in his chest, twitching and writhing over a steady flow of blood from the wound. It was not as compelling as Dace's chest cavity because the protrusion couldn't be maintained at an angle. This meant that the edges of the hand would seem to disappear into thin air when viewed from the side. Jaz waved his chest at Dace making the hand "touch" his face whilst performing a stupid dance. He was soon repelled by a swift dead-arm punch to his shoulder. Jaz retreated across the room and put the t-shirt over his head so the hand appeared to be emerging from his face. Then he started humming Laceration songs in increasing volume until Dace finally gave up and laughed deeply.

Dace phoned his best friend Rob in the evening.

'Looking forward to the Lassy concert Rob, you know?' Rob was a bigger hypermetal fan than Dace. He had self-harmed for real a couple of times before he discovered harm-bands.

'Am so, Dace. I'm going into the blood-pit with a couple of 'bands and I'm gonna slash it up'

'No slashing for me but I'll go in the pit for the experience and a shower.'

Rob had let Dace try one of his harm-bands once. It was a rubberized tube that squeezed over the forearm; the inner surface formed a microbond with the wearer's skin and touching the tube felt almost like touching your own arm. The band could be cut and sliced with a knife and would deliver a sensation of pain to the skin while emitting trickles of synth-blood. Dace found the experience very weird and didn't particularly enjoy it when Rob flicked a kitchen knife across it. Harm-bands were developed by Lacerations' parent company (52% owned by the lead singer) and were promoted as a release for self-harmers. It turned out that most people who used them had never cut themselves for real and many users actually went on to cut themselves for real afterwards. Ever pushing boundaries, Laceration handed out a couple of hundred 'bands at a concert once, encouraging people to hack and slash themselves in the mosh pit. The crowd was scarlet with synth-blood and the music rolled them into a new kind of pain high. Hundreds of red hands and faces jumped and pounded to the rhythm in an orgy of anger, pain and metal. The mosh pit became the blood pit and it was all legal. Dace wondered if the blood pit was really any safer than the home made drugs from the old days.

'You always were a softie in one way or another. I'll get you slashing one day Dace – you can in preference set them to half-pain.'

'It is simple in that I don't enjoy it, pain or not.' They talked about school for a while after that and then rang off.

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Before long, the spring had rolled into summer. Rob and Dace were due to go to the concert in just over a week's time. Dace had been hyping up the event in his mind by reading blogs and watching videos covering recent concerts from earlier in the tour. The word was that the blood pits were getting really intense and everyone was saying how exciting they were. Most people that were not fans of Laceration only knew about them because of the blood pits – they were their gimmick and the angle that gave them the edge. The media was begging to turn, recognizing the implications of encouraging this very realistic violence. The "12 foot Goth" occasionally spoke out against the violence too on her channel space. In some

ways however, such views just heightened the popularity of the pits. This sent more money into coffers of Laceration PLC.

‘I’ve got some bad news Dace’ mumbled Rob on a gloomy morning before school. ‘Mum caught me doing a slice without my ‘band on and she is all worry. Her mother was around in the tail end of the politically-correct-save-the-planet era and she’s been taught to be über careful about the state of my wellbeing. On the bottom line, I’ve been banned from going to the Lassy gig.’

‘Really? That’s bad but you got to watch yourself as a priority. I guess she’s only looking out for you but you’re really going to miss out on a good one.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Things were a bit quiet and miserable for the rest of the morning. Eventually Rob had an idea; he was considerate if nothing else. ‘Hey you give my ticket to Jaz –he’ll get in no worries. Anyone is anyone at a Lassy concert what with all the face art these days. Trust me I’ve been looking it up, the security cut all sorts of corners to save money.’

‘He’ll be pleased. I suppose we may as well make the most of it.’ Dace felt sorry for Rob but he would have just as much fun with his brother. He hoped Rob would take things easy; even for this day and age he was a bit of an extremist.

Jaz was indeed very happy with the idea when Dace discussed it with him that evening. Their parents weren’t very strict so they didn’t even need to concoct a lie. Jaz would simply use Rob’s ticket and wear a bit of face art. Rob was right about the security. The interspace indicated that anyone could get in if they really tried. Jaz wanted to borrow some of Rob’s ‘bands but Dace wouldn’t allow his little brother to slash himself – even if it wasn’t for real. They would still go in to the blood pits of course.

The two brothers synched their implants and listened to a few hypermetal tracks together. They started jumping around Dace’s room miming the lyrics and putting on their best pain faces. Jaz started jabbing Dace lightly around the midriff in time with the kick drum beats but shortly moved on to performing his best “fist of emotion” - holding his clenched hand in the air with his eyes closed. Dace cut his own implant and stitched the videowall to blast out cheesy pop music. He recorded Jaz on his phone apparently rocking out to the *Pinky Girls*. Jaz was not amused but without breaking his rhythm, he switched back to the midriff jabbing with renewed enthusiasm.

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It was a clear night on the evening of the concert. Dace and Jaz made their way to the venue on the public transport network. As they neared their destination the number of hypermetal fans using the network increased; eventually there were more music fans than commuters and a sense of camaraderie settled on the brothers as they followed the crowd along the various tubes and walkways connecting the transport modules.

The stadium was on the edge of the city and had an enormous capacity of a quarter million. With the aid of holographics, the real stage on which the artists performed was not so much center of attention in a modern concert. The real stage was at the front end of the stadium and only the closest and most expensive seats faced it. Even from that distance there wasn’t much to see because of all of the holocameras rigged around the periphery. In the middle of the stadium resided a gigantic holostage. A perfect 3D replica of the artists was beamed in real time to the holostage and displayed at a much more impressive two to four times scale. This setup allowed the capacity of modern stadiums to reach ridiculous levels without significantly ruining the view for people at the back of the crowd.

The fans, or slashers, as the media called them, filed their way in. Jaz got through security easy enough and the two brothers worked their way down towards the holostage. The face scanners were not used as religiously as the drug scanners. This was because the fines

were much larger for allowing drug use at a concert compared to allowing under age fans in. Time was money at the turnstiles and evicting youngsters was not worth the effort.

The sound of the crowd was immense and a roar of energy resonated around the stands and into the night sky. Suddenly, the stadium was plunged into darkness. A black holofield obscured the sky and all that could be seen were occasional luminous faces in the distance from the slashers who had chosen to wear florescent makeup. Everyone tuned their implants to local and listened to a deep rumble that rolled through the soundscape. The support act *Rail Gun* were revealed on stage and their two-times images appeared on the holostage. The music pounded loud and fast as the crowd began to get in the zone.

After a few tracks, Rail Gun departed in a flash of light which was followed again by holo-induced blackness. A single snare drum rolled out an old military beat. The holofield, that blocked out the sky above the stadium, turned blood red and undulated like the surface of a crimson sea seen from below. The crowd was bathed in a deep red light and drops of real synth-blood started to rain from the roof. The five members of Laceration appeared one at a time on the holostage, gigantic four-times images ominously towered above the eager crowd. Their faces and bodies were manipulated in the real-time link so that they each appeared as a different grotesque demonic beast. As each appeared, their instrument was added to the mix and the music rose to a richer and heavier onslaught. They definitely knew how to put on a show.

After about an hour of energetic tracks, the huge demons jumped into a gigantic virtual grinder at the same time as rubberized guts and synth blood were flung into the crowd. An image of a giant harm-band appeared on the holostage indicating that the blood pit was about to begin in earnest. Synth-blood continued to rain into the crowd and Laceration's heaviest and most popular track boomed through the soundscape. The real band members could be seen in the distance on a walkway encouraging people to slash and feel the pain. Dace and Jaz jumped around with the crowd, barging into people whilst getting shoved and pushed themselves. They were lost in the music, completely immersed in the energy of the show. This was the last time they would have fun together.

Jaz slipped on a piece of fake gut and went down under the crowd. Knees and booted feet slammed into him as he tried to rise. Dace tried to reach him but he had himself been pushed a few meters away. By the time he reached Jaz the situation was bad. With a titanic effort he managed to swiftly create a space and drag his brother up by gripping him under his arms. Crying for help, he pulled Jaz towards the edge of the stadium. Everyone was in too much of a frenzy to notice the struggle and several times he was smashed into by ignorant besotted fans, causing him to stumble and loose grip. When he finally got out of the crowd he managed to summon a member of staff.

The ambulance arrived quickly but it was already too late. There had been a loss of blood and damage to the brain. The synth-blood complicated things by obscuring real damage, not that it mattered in the end. Dace had been sitting in the hospital half an hour before his parents arrived. He found it hard to speak. For a moment they all held each other and wept as Jaz's body lay in front of them on a stretcher in a quiet ward. The doctors had done their best to hard-resuscitate him but that hadn't worked. In the distance they could faintly hear music. Then it dawned upon them that Jaz's implants were still running - his mother burst into tears again as his father went to get a nurse.

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Strangely the media didn't make too much of the story, which was a good thing in a way. Dace suspected this was due to some sort of incentive or bribery from Laceration PLC. It saved the family from being constantly reminded of the tragedy but at the same time it felt as if no one cared. Apparently nothing could touch the corporate machine that was Laceration. Rob called up and he was devastated; not only was he good friends with Jaz, but

he also felt partly responsible. That was an emotion he could share with Dace, they talked about things a lot, which provided them with some comfort. Dace's parents were equally devastated and it was a credit to them both that they managed to remain strong and support their remaining son. They were very considerate and tried to keep Dace isolated from the swathe of condolences that flooded into their apartment through the various communications systems.

A week or so after the event, they received an actual paper letter, courier delivered, that they needed to sign for. It was from Laceration PLC:

Dear Mr and Mrs Carpenter,

It is with great regret that we acknowledge the bereavement of your son under the circumstances of recent events. We are aware that words can do little to assuage the emotions you must be feeling, but we hope that they can provide you with some comfort in this time of need. As a mark of respect, we hold the memory of this tragic occurrence in our hearts and have dedicated our monthly newsletter to your family.

As you are no doubt currently aware, it is against the law for individuals under the age of 16 to attend age-certified concerts. The presence of your son at the July 17th event was therefore illegal and in breach of several clearly outlined safety standards. These standards are outlined in the terms and conditions attached to the sale and use of our concert tickets. The illegal actions of your son have therefore corresponded to prosecution proceedings from the local government towards Laceration PLC. The outcome of this legal activity is that the company has been fined 2000 GLB. As this loss resulted from actions undertaken by a minor, who was under your guardianship during the aforementioned breach, we are wholly justified in seeking damages from yourselves for the loss that we have incurred.

Again we offer, as a mark of respect, no charge for the legal fees resulting from the production of this letter. However, such courtesy will not be extended to any future legal activity that may arise if the sum of 2000 GLB is not deposited in our account 10-586-5222-869-42 within the next 72 hours.

*Yours Sincerely,
Laceration PLC**

**Please note that as this is a legal document that has been presented in person, the contents of this message cannot be communicated to any individuals (such as media outlets) other than your personal representative.*

The letter was a real blow to the family; the sum was only a couple of week's wages but the outright audacity of the company was ghastly considering the amount of money that they must have possessed. His parents couldn't hide such a horrific thing from Dace, who had previously worshipped the band. In a way, he wasn't surprised; he had read many horror stories in the interspace about Laceration's dealings but this action was particularly low. A deep-seated hatred began to form in the vulnerable young man.

Initially Dace became withdrawn, emanating a sense of defeat as he dragged himself through each day. Rob was particularly concerned so he made a point of deleting all of his hypermetal and discarding his harm-bands. He would constantly slag off any piece of news about Laceration and one day, a particularly salient story grabbed his attention. 'Have you seen this Dace?'

'What?' Dace tried not to read anything about Laceration.

'They got some new type of 'bands – they're calling it a bleed suit'. The harm-band technology had been used to develop an entire suit of the material. This meant that all real skin was totally covered. It was not much of an innovation in itself but it meant that the blood pits could take on a new form. New pits were created where people were only allowed in if

they were wearing a suit. As the music pounded through the soundscape, people would hack and slash each other in an orgy of pain. In Dace's mind, this was a complete disgrace and it was leading entertainment down a dark, dark path.

Strangely, Dace showed newfound signs of motivation after hearing the news.

'I've got to see it with my own eyes Rob, you know.' Rob was not enthused by the idea but went along with it as Dace seemed to be making progress and was much more like his usual self.

'Ok. I'll try and make an acquisition of tickets.' This time Dace didn't tell his parents. He spent a lot of time working on a new "school project" and stayed in his room most evenings. In reality, he had managed to strike up conversation with the 12 foot Goth who had gained fame through her concert stunt. In an email he had explained to the Goth the story of his brother and this had gained her attention. Dace was hoping that she could help him speak out about the pain culture. They had been talking for a few weeks and the Goth was becoming increasingly tired of Laceration and their exploits. Dace explained an idea to her about the next Laceration concert and asked if she had any virus code that he could adapt.

'No problem Dace, it sounds like you are going to put on a good show.' She also hooked Dace up with a couple of bleed suits and promised she would attend the concert with a camera.

As the local concert date drew nearer, Dace's mood continued to improve markedly. On the day of the concert, Rob was particularly concerned when Dace produced the bleed suits. Dace explained his idea and it made sense now as to the source of his new found motivation.

'Well Dace, I hope it works. There is no doubt fun in trying nonetheless!' These were Dace's sentiments exactly. The two made their way to the stadium.

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The show started with another macabre performance from some up-and-coming hypermetal band. Rob and Dace stood near the back in their bleed suits waiting for the main event. Laceration's signature entrance was the same as before with the crimson liquid sky and rain of synth-blood. Despite his hatred of the band, Dace had to admit their performance was still as exciting and heart racing as ever. There was no sign of the Goth anywhere but what were the chances of spotting her amongst a crowd of this size? From their vantage point, they could see the new blood pit cordoned off near the real stage, the place where the hardcore fans gathered. They could see a lot of what appeared to be exposed flesh near that area indicating many people wearing bleed suits waiting to enter the pit.

Dace switched his implants to noise cancellation and the roar of the concert was replaced with utter silence. He watched the show with a new found contentment and detachment. He had out grown the fans and enjoyed this voyeuristic moment before he once again entered the fray. Leaving the sound muted, he shoved his way down towards the pit with Rob.

The pit had just been opened when they arrived - fake innards were writhing over the floor and synth-blood was flowing into the pit like a fountain. Delirious fans were hacking and slashing each other with tiny blades as their crimson bodies jumped and writhed to the music. Laceration were above the pit head banging and playing their instruments. Strobe lights flashed and with each rapid illumination, a different blood-bathed image was seared on to Dace's retinas.

The two friends crossed the barrier and entered the pit. Immediately a crazed idiot struck a huge slash across Dace's chest. Dace ground his teeth in silence as he had the pain set to full - he didn't want to miss any of the current moment. As they approached the densest part of the throng, they acquired many more cuts, slashes and scrapes. They could also taste the realistic iron twang of synth- blood in their mouths. After a few minutes, they began to

get used to the constant stinging and agitation all over their bodies. They turned towards the holostage waiting for the right moment.

It had to happen fast, that was the plan. In fact it happened really fast. As the holostage showed an image of the band, the virus kicked in. A piece of malicious advertising code was adapted to alter the live feed from the band to the holostage. Initially the musicians appeared exactly as normal but then the images diverged from reality. The image of the lead singer leapt to the railing and tore open his jacket revealing a bleed suit. On this cue, Rob and Dace switched from slashing to punching and kicking. This sort of violence was banned as the suits offered little protection against bruising. A genuine ruckus erupted in the pit and the security team was too undermanned to handle trouble on this scale. The virus continued to work on the holostage and each of the band members were shown to be wearing bleed suits.

Surrounded by commotion, Rob and Dace worked their way to the front of the pit. The band were just beginning to notice something was wrong. The singer stopped signing but thanks to the virus his voice still went out as though nothing had changed. Then a simulation of the singer's voice announced "We're going in!" The show was detached from reality and the majority of people were completely unaware. Soaked in blood, Rob and Dace reached up to the band as several other fans joined in the game and stormed the platform above the pit. In the confusion, and with all the synth-blood everywhere, the fans thought the band were dressed in bleed suits for the pit. There was no telling who was wearing what and the musicians were dragged into the pit wearing nothing but their normal clothes. The security team thought it was all part of the act as the band had previously made regular use of harm-bands on stage (they were known to cut themselves and send streams of synth-blood into the crowd). Once the ruckus died down, security backed off and everyone went back to hacking and slashing. Again the virus showed Laceration in the thick of it but having a wonderful time. In reality it was not so wonderful.

The band members were hacked and slashed repeatedly, getting covered with more and more minor flesh wounds. Fans barged and shoved into them planting tiny slices on any exposed flesh available. The pit was full of maniacs and it got worse as the music reached a crescendo. The chaos rolled on for several minutes before reality kicked in. Security was alerted by one of the producers who knew this was not part of the show. The holostage flickered off and the main stadium lights kicked in, bathing everyone in white light and reality. The slashing stopped and the security team finally managed to extract the injured band members from the blood pit. They had lost a lot of blood but would recover in time (physically if not mentally). Reconstructive flesh surgery was cheap – around 2000 globals.

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The Goth had got all the good stuff on tape. She posted it on her channel and the video went viral worldwide within hours. Public awareness finally became fully tuned to the dangers of getting high on pain. The police never identified the culprits for the attack - there were too many suspects and there was not enough public will to prosecute. Unlike their usual selves, Laceration didn't make much of an effort to encourage the continued use of pain as a form of release. They seemed to have lost their spirit and shrank to obscurity over the following years. Dace was no longer clouded with hatred. He had got the message out and his brother could finally rest in peace.

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