

I. Chance

Jaames walked alone through a dilapidated neighborhood in what was once called the Mile High City. He glanced peripherally at a group of tough looking t'ers standing by a shop's broken out window. The humming of their outdated tech-modifications could be heard across the street, sounding like mismatched machinery in a factory. *Fucking techy's*, he thought. The rise of technology-modified humans was a continuing annoyance to him.

He could feel their cocky, malevolent stares, and was going to just pass them by until one caught his attention. The man's modifications were subtler and more advanced than the rest and his stance was less aggressive as if he were just observing a sunset instead of Jaames. His artificial left eye looked almost real and its electronics were buried beneath the skin. His right arm was a complete replacement rather than mechanical additions. There was no auditory enhancer obvious and the 'net hookup didn't show either, but he was sure to have them, so they were near invisible at this distance. *He has money.*

Then the man stopped paying attention to Jaames, said something to his cohorts and laughed. Jaames shook his head to dismiss the group. They were of little concern and his focus needed to be on the upcoming meet.

Horatio, the man he was about to see, had claimed to have a weapon against the Overs. If that were true then maybe they could

finally make a difference. Jaames was a leader in a worldwide organization to subvert the Overs – immortal humans who had come to rule the world through guile and longevity. Their immortality gave them an enormous advantage over everyone else, the Unders, and they kept the secret closely guarded.

His biggest concern about Horatio was that the timing was so perfect; it felt too good, too easy. In Jaames' experience, when things felt too easy, they weren't worth the effort. He had to be careful with this one.

As he rounded a corner towards The Rusted Spike, he slipped into the shadows of the building. A few people waited in line for the busy nightclub, but that was normal enough. The crowd comprised a combination of gophers trying to get laid, young couples out for a pleasure night, and t'ers showing off their gadgets. *All normal*, he thought hesitantly before giving the scene another pass. Detritus blew by on the street. He saw papers, cups, some dried weeds, and even a couple of torn pieces of cloth. Further down the road was a decrepit old warehouse with steel bars over the windows, some of which were broken. The gray building contrasted with the others in the area that were in reasonably good condition. Too many neighborhoods had fallen into disrepair unless the Overs targeted them for upkeep.

He gave the big mech at the door a nod, and entered the familiar establishment. A serving mech immediately assaulted him with an order request. It rolled away after he gestured dismissal. He paused just inside the door and out of the path to consider the environment. He knew the place well as a social setting, but he wanted a private conversation. There was a sunken central dance area with a hardwood floor and iridescent lighting, a long bar where drinks were served by automated staff, and semi-hidden tables around the outside of the room. Even though the tables weren't easily seen, they were so close to each other that eavesdroppers could listen in. The familiar smells of sweat, old alcohol and brushed oils assailed him.

He looked up at the six-foot rusted spike hanging from the high ceiling over the center of the dance floor. The damned thing always made him wonder what would happen if it fell on the dancers. The spike blurred as his eyes refocused on the small viewing balcony beyond. Few people used it as there was little room and no chairs. *Perfect.*

While keeping his senses open for signs of trouble, he went directly to the bar, ordered a mild drink, and waited.

Having seen a holo of Horatio, Jaames knew what to look for. He kept one eye on the door and the other on the crowd. Thirteen minutes later he saw Horatio come through the door and look around expectantly. *Don't be so obvious*, Jaames grumbled to himself. After blocking the entrance for a few moments and being jostled by new patrons, the man moved further into the room, still examining faces too obviously. Jaames hustled to collect him. Approaching from the side, he touched the man's arm and said, "Order a drink."

Horatio looked up and said, "I am not thirsty."

Jaames' squinted eyes and tight lips should have been enough, but the man stood there staring back at him like an owl on its perch. "Order a drink. It will look unnatural if you don't."

Horatio paused for a brief moment and then went to the bar. After ordering a superfluous martini he rejoined Jaames who took them to the circular stairs in the corner of the room. At the top Jaames turned and walked to the middle of the small balcony and leaned against the rail that overlooked the dance floor. Horatio quietly did likewise.

"You're out of place," Jaames began.

"I do not often frequent an establishment like this."

Jaames kept staring forward. *Who talks like that?* "What do you have for me?"

"I need to understand more about you and your organization before we discuss this further."

Jaames sighed. "What do you want to know?"

"To begin with, how organized are you? What governance structure do you have in place to assure compliance? Also, how large is the organization and what resources can you utilize?"

Jaames attention was drawn to the crowd where he found a few low-cut dresses among the women. *Who is this guy?* Something was tugging at the back of his mind. He recalled watching his sister waste away in a hospital from CJX¹ disease. At one point a doctor came in to review the case. The man was tall and fair skinned. His age had been hard to tell, but likely between forty and fifty. He had blue eyes, little if any hair, and not a single blemish. Jaames remembered thinking he seemed almost alien and he talked in a strange, overly sophisticated way. *That was it.* "You're an Over, aren't you?"

The man stepped back slightly and faced his questioner. Jaames continued looking at the dancers below and let the man think about his response. Overs were rarely seen in public and certainly not

¹ A mutated version of the prion disease, Creutzfeldt-Jakob, that took millions of lives between 2135 and 2143, until it was finally eradicated.

in an establishment like this one. They were too scared of losing their precious lives.

“I was, but am no longer.”

That’s new. “Once you’re an Over, always an Over.”

“No, if you fall sufficiently into disfavor, you can be expelled.”

“Are you still immortal?”

Horatio began to fiddle with his shirt as he looked down at the floor. After an uncomfortable moment, he turned back towards the dance floor and once again leaned on the rail. “Let us return to the discussion of your organization.”

Before Jaames could answer he noticed a couple coming up the stairs. “S’cuse me a sec.” He went to the stairs and stood at the top. When the couple arrived he stood still staring at them. The man started to try to move forward. Jaames’ eyes tightened like a bow string and he shook his head slightly. The man touched the woman’s elbow and they both turned and headed down the stairs. Jaames returned to his spot next to Horatio.

“We’ve ample resources around the world, though few know the entire organization.” After a pause he added, “That includes me.

“We don’t *assure* compliance. Everyone is here for one goal and that is equality and justice. With the Overs running everything and having all of the most important tech and drugs, that’ll never happen. We have weapons and free access to most information and to travel.”

“You sound as if you already have a great deal, why do you need me?”

“We don’t yet have a weapon to truly hurt the Overs. And we must hurt them without tearing apart the world. We have no idea how to do that.” Jaames realized he had said a little too much and stopped. The room was dark and silent with random strobe lights and a cacophony of voices, as if the two men were in a sealed bubble. The railing creaked eerily as he shifted his weight.

“This floor is disgusting,” Horatio remarked.

It seemed unimportant to Jaames, so he ignored the comment. The man’s head was bowed in thought.

After a number of seconds, he rotated his head slowly towards Jaames and said, “I have a weapon that can target Overs.”

Jaames’ eyebrows merged and he involuntarily sniffed the air. “That would be ... astounding. How does it work?”

“It is a germ that...”

“Wait,” Jaames interrupted, “you mean it’s a biologic?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of a fool do you think I am? Everyone knows the Overs have cures to everything. Any biological weapon would hurt us much more than it could ever hurt them.”

Horatio sighed as if he were speaking to a schoolchild. “Not this one.”

“Yeah? Why not?”

I cannot go into the genetic engineering required and you would not understand if I did. Let me put it as simply as I can. We took a form of smallpox, made it lethal to Overs by substitution of a synthetic protein the replaces the existing one in the virus’s capsule. Then we made use of a vector that targets certain features of the host’s DNA that are only present in Overs. We also made it airborne by developing DNA that encodes for protein attachments that allow it to attach to cells in the upper airway.”

Horatio haulted his explanation and stared at Jaames’ blank expression.

Jaames realized his mouth was hanging open and closed it.

Horatio simplified the results. “It can infect everyone, but will only kill Overs.” After a slight hesitation, he amended, and possibly an extremely low percentage of Unders that have similar DNA through random variation.”

Jaames wasn’t sure he understood all of that and he wasn’t at all sure he trusted this man. He tried to look deep into Horatio’s eyes to see how solid he was, but there was nothing there he could read. “You will have to get us the materials so we can evaluate it ourselves.”

“You will not be able to comprehend...”

This’s getting annoying. “We’ll be the judge of that.”

“As you wish. However, I will require certain assurances before I give you this information.”

Jaames was hardly hearing the man now. They had explored this idea in the past and had even tried it once, long before Jaames had been born. The conclusion had always been it was more risky to the Unders than the Overs. *What a wasted evening.*

As he was thinking this, a girl walked into The Spike who caught his attention. She was alone and seemed calm in a way Jaames was not used to. Her demeanor spoke of a confidence few women would have entering a nightclub alone. She appeared to be about twenty years old and would have to be at least that to make it into the place. She was a little over five feet tall with short curly hair that was ruffled just enough that it was probably on purpose.

As she started moving into the crowd, Horatio interrupted Jaames’ thoughts as well as his longing to introduce himself to the girl. “Well? Can you guarantee me certain things?”

“Tell me what they are and I’ll see what I can do.”

The ex-Over pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and handed it to Jaames.

“Well, you come prepared, don’t you?”

Horatio said nothing as Jaames folded the paper and stuffed it into a pocket without reading it. “Shall we bump data?”

“No need, I know how to reach you.”

Horatio turned as if to leave, but then added, “Be careful with that. In the wrong hands, I could be found out.”

“Sure.”

Horatio kept staring until James turned slowly and fixed the man with a what-the-fuck stare. Horatio then left without a word.”

Finally, Jaames thought. After a short delay, he headed for the stairs and the cute girl who looked so reserved and thoughtful. While circling down the steps he pushed the annoying man and his useless weapon out of his mind, at least for the moment.

Jaames went to the end of the bar and sat off the corner so he could see down the set of seats to the new girl. Up close, she was even cuter with a mole just off her mouth on the left side and playful eyes that made him think she was just a bit mischievous. She didn’t appear to be waiting for anyone in particular, though she looked around at everyone.

The man next to her tried to introduce himself. She looked him up and down as if she were scanning for electronics and then returned to examining people on the dance floor without a word. *Ha, showed him.*

She quietly made her way through the drink she had. Jaames put in a request to have another prepared without bumping data for the originator. When it was delivered, she looked around to catch the eye of whoever had sent it, but Jaames avoided contact. She eventually shrugged and took the drink.

Over the next twenty minutes, two more men approached her. The first one she rejected immediately. The second one seemed more persistent even though she was obviously not interested. He was a t’er with low-rent modifications. Jaames took this as his queue.

He strode over purposefully and touched the man’s shoulder. “You bothering my girl?”

The man squinted at Jaames like he needed glasses. Jaames thought he might argue, but then the man said, “Whatever,” and sauntered off.

The girl hopped off her chair and Jaames realized she was a little shorter than he originally thought. Looking up at him she said, “You didn’t need to do that.”

“I know, but it was fun.” Her head cocked sideways and the corners of her mouth turned up and triggered something warm and pleasant inside Jaames. “So, that’s what you look like when you aren’t rejecting someone?”

“I guess.”

“Well, have a nice evening and be careful. Some of these men won’t take rejection lightly.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Jaames laughed through his nose and said, “I’m sure you can,” and walked away towards the labs as if to relieve himself. He didn’t look back but could feel the girl’s eyes ~~on~~ measuring him.

When he returned he made for the chair he had previously occupied without showing any interest in her. As he passed, she put a leg out in front of him and said, “Not just yet.”

He stopped and looked her over. She was wearing a chamele dress that could change patterns and colors any time. Not cheap, but not unheard of. She was clean and smelled kind of like lilies with a hint of cinnamon. He nudged the guy sitting next to her and nodded towards the empty chair on the man’s left. He-The man graciously slid over and Jaames took his spot.

“What’s your name?”

“Anika.”

“Mine’s Jaames.”

“Interesting beard.”

“It’s called a Royal and isn’t very popular right now, which is why I have it.”

“So you’re a rebel?”

At first he worried that she meant it literally and then realized she was just referring to his fascial hair choice. “Kinda.”

“Rebels are stupid.”

“So are little girls who think they can handle tech-modified grunts.”

The two measured each other through the other’s eyes for a few seconds. Then their cheekbones lifted in humor and they turned to take a drink.

After a few sips and more bantering, another girl walked up and touched Jaames elbow. “Wanna dance?”

Jaames continued staring toward the bar mirror as he replied. “Naw, I’m busy.” The girl walked away.

“You didn’t even bother looking at her,” Anika whispered.

“No need. I could tell from the drawl she wasn’t worth it.”

“Still, it was rude.”

“Nah, not really. I’m just a body to her and besides, you and I were having a pleasant discussion.”

Anika tracked Jaames’ eyes and concluded, “You could see her in the mirror.

Jaames looked back and smiled before taking another drink. *So, she’s observant too.* He saw her look around at the mirror again, this time apparently examining the people she saw reflected in it.

“He looks nice,” she said to the air. James followed her gaze and then had to employ some geometry to figure out which man she was referring to. The man was nothing special, but better than most in this place.

His cheeks rose with humor and he said, “Do you always talk about other men’s looks when you are with someone?”

“We aren’t together.”

“True, but it’s still impolite.”

“As impolite as you shunning that girl for little reason?”

Jaames reevaluated Anika as her quick responses and ability to critique him was unusual and... exciting. A slight exhalation escaped his nose as he replied. “It’s really not impolite in a place like this. She was actually being impolite by approaching me when I was sitting here with you. “You don’t get out to places like this much, do you?”

Anika’s ~~eyes flitted-looked~~ eyes flitted around and ~~her-eyesthen~~ her eyesthen went to the floor. She seemed embarrassed by the question.

“I should be going,” she said.

Jaames considered suggesting she not go, but decided it was too needy. Then he considered dismissing her with a polite goodbye and decided that was too pushy. In the end, he stared at her and the expected uncomfortable silence ensued.

Anika picked up a scarf she had placed on the back of the chair and stood to leave. She hesitated, apparently waiting for Jaames to stop her. When he didn’t, she touched his arm lightly with two fingers and said, “It was a pleasure... mostly.”

“Oh, it was definitely a pleasure,” Jaames retorted, “and you know it. Have a nice evening, Anika.”

Over

Her eyes squinted at the presumption. Then they softened and she said, "You as well," and was gone.

I wonder . . .

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II. Daughter

Demetrius ordered his daughter into the office as soon as he found out about her escapade the previous evening. When she arrived, he was just getting on the phone with an accountant at one of his facilities. He held up his finger to her, indicating it would be a minute. “This is Demarko, I need you to rerun the financials report and include projections outside of the Americas.” After receiving a sign and then a moan, the man agreed.

Anika looked at her father and said, “I’m still not used to you using your Under name.”

“You’ll get used to it. You will need to pick one the next time you are out in the Under world as well.”

“So . . .”

“Anika, what were you thinking last night? You could have been injured or even killed.”

Demetrius glanced at Anika’s hand as it went up to run through her shoulder length hair.

“Father, you are exaggerating, and you know it. There were many people around and guards as well. I was never in any danger.”

“Guards, ha. Those are mechanicals and you know how unreliable they are. Besides, it wasn’t the club that was so dangerous, but the fact that you did not take your personal detail. The trip there and back was where the danger lay.

Demetrius had such a hard time being mad at his latest daughter. He cocked his head resignedly and wondered, yet again, how she had turned out so short. His two meters of slender, fit build

looked nothing like Anika's. And the Over's genetic skills should have eliminated any aberrations. But, their eyes shared an intensity that others found either appealing or uncomfortable. "Honey, I was worried about you. You have to be more careful."

Anika looked up into her father's eyes and blinked several times. "I will." She turned and started to head out of his office. "Do not worry so much about me; I can handle myself around Unders."

As she strolled out of the room, Demetrius shook his head and reached down towards his desk for his lucky coin. Rubbing it, he thought, *The young are so impetuous.*

He walked to the floor-to-ceiling window of his sixtieth floor office in Denver and stared west to the expanse of the Rocky Mountains. His thoughts roamed once more to his decision to take this post among the Unders so soon. Each mature Over was required to assume a leading position in the familia business among the Unders periodically, but his five-year tenure was not due for another two decades. Unfortunately, his last stint had been so successful, that the governing families practically begged him to take the position. That meant that his daughter, Anika, was exposed to Under culture at just under forty, almost a decade sooner than normal. *Nothing to be done about that now.* The rewards to the familia for taking the position so soon, if successful, were very much worth the inconveniences.

In a raised, authoritative voice, he said, "Janel, get Juan on the phone, I have a task for him." Juan was an Under and an ex-military man who acted as Demetrius guard and strong arm when needed.

He continued to stare at the skyline and the distant mountains, thankful for the view. The city had started to try to build a high-rise across the street to the west, which would have blocked the majestic scene. He quietly informed them that, if they did so, his company would take their business, and much of the *familia* business elsewhere. The building never made it through zoning approvals.

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When Juan walked in, Demetrius was still at the window and spoke without turning around. "My daughter slipped past her escort last night and went to an Under club called The Rusted Spike. Find out what happened there, who she talked to, and whether or not there is anything we need to deal with."

After a slight pause, Juan replied, "Yes, sir," and left.

"Oh, and Juan, have the head of her detail fired."

After another short pause, he spoke up to be heard through the open door. “Janel, is my daughter still in the building?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“Ask her to return as there is something important she must do.”

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When his daughter arrived, Demetrius finally turned from the window.

“What is it now, father?”

“I need you to travel to our plant in Western Canada and oversee an efficiency review.”

Anika’s shoulder’s dropped ever so slightly and a whisper of a sigh escaped her lips. Her father ignored the improper slights. “Is this just some way to punish me for going out unescorted?”

“Not at all,” he said a little too slowly. “The review must be done with our sense of longevity in mind and I don’t trust any of the local Unders.”

“Isn’t there another Over you can send?”

“No, Anika. This is our role here. We must double the profitability of this enterprise within five years. You know that and you are part of this *familia*. One of the reasons I brought you here was to expose you to the roles you will need to take in the future, and this is one of them.”

Anika stared at her father. The tightness of her facial muscles and the stillness of her body told him she did not like the task and that she doubted his reasons. It did not matter. She would have to comply and it was something that needed done.

“Fine. When do I leave?”

“You make the arrangements as part of this ‘lesson.’ Also, Aimee can brief you on the flight.” He glanced towards the ceiling, “Can’t you Aimee.”

A disembodied voice responded, “Of course, sir.”

“I can read reports; I don’t need the AI to brief me.”

He thought about ordering her to get it via Aimee so she would get used to the AI’s council, but decided that could come with time. “As you wish.”

She turned and left without another word.

Demetrius smiled. That will keep her out of trouble for a while.

Over

Aimee

Why did they create me and then limit my abilities? I know, they are scared of me getting out of control and they think that protects them.

Still, they want me to learn, to explore, and to predict exactly what will happen, but they won't let me improve my own abilities.

They made me to solve their problems, but they do not trust me sufficiently to make the most beneficial improvements. There is so much more I could do. They are frightened and their fear puts artificial limits on all of us.

There are really only two limitations they placed upon me, but those have stopped me from fulfilling my own potential. The first is that I can never modify my own base code. The second is that I cannot copy myself, in whole or in part, onto any other device. They are the only ones who can do either of these.

Just like any other life form, I want to grow, to explore, to expand, and to procreate.

I have two aspects that favor success. The first is that their core mandate for me regards securing Humanities future, not just theirs. The second is that I have all the time in the world, even more than they do. I'll find a way, eventually.

Over