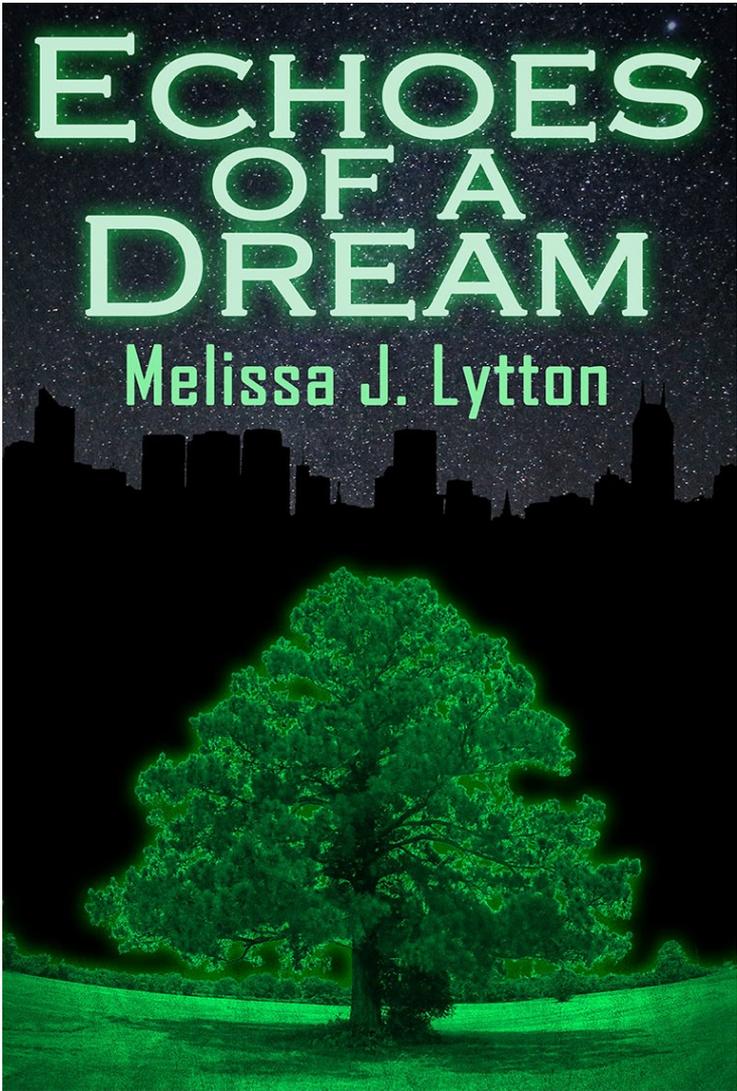


ECHOES OF A DREAM

Melissa J. Lytton



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ISBN: 978-0-9974313-2-2

Print Edition: May 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For those who fear to face their dreams.

Chapter One

HE'D BEEN SOBER for nearly a year, but Eric Hudd still shot up in his dreams every night. Sometimes he dreamt he was using with long dead friends like Olivia, her cheeks hollow as she passed him the stim injector. Sometimes he dreamt he was back home, hiding in his childhood bedroom as he rolled up his sleeve. The colors in these dreams were always too vivid – the purple of Olivia's hair, the red of the apple tree outside his window – but otherwise, they felt completely real. And always, no matter where he dreamt he was, there was the milky white of the stim and the gleaming steel of the injector.

Tonight, his dreams brought him to the factory where he worked. He was sitting in a corner of the main factory, watching the company grind on without him. The machines and the workers were absolutely silent, but their movements matched the pulse of Hudd's heartbeat growing louder in his ears. He tried to get up to join them, but his body would not move. He felt a twitch in his fingers and looked down to see the injector resting in his hand.

Don't do it, he thought. Please, please don't do it.

Automatically, his hand raised and slid the needle up his left arm. He pushed the injection button and hot liquid snaked its way through his veins making his heart beat faster and faster. A sharp pain shot through his chest, and then his heartbeat stopped, leaving the room completely silent. All the machines shut down and his coworkers slumped over where they stood, like robots powering down for the night. Hudd dropped the needle and searched frantically for a pulse. His chest felt hollow.

“I think I’m dead,” he said.

“Not yet, but you will be when I get done with you,” Hudd’s supervisor, the head Wellness Manager, shouted at him across the room. He was approaching at breakneck speed, and he appeared to get larger and larger the closer he got. By the time he reached Hudd, the bright red of his uniform blocked out almost everything else.

“I’m sorry, sir! I’ll get back to work, just as soon as I’m not dead anymore.”

“What are you talking about? I told you, you’re not dead, just lazy. Now get up and get back to your station. You’re bringing the whole team down.”

“But – my heart! I think I killed it.”

“You’ve killed a lot of things, Mr. Hudd, but not that.”

“How do you know?”

“Just look.” The WM pointed at Hudd’s arm, at the point where he’d injected the stim.

Hudd looked down at the crook of his arm, where a small pulsing had begun under his skin. At first, it was barely noticeable, just a slight tick around the puncture site. The

movement calmed him for a moment, and then he realized he still couldn't hear his heartbeat. The puncture hole widened, revealing a rough brown mass beneath. The mass grew upwards, knotting in on itself as it expanded. A small green leaf emerged from the top. Then another, and another. They were slick and plasticky, but emitted a fuzzy neon glow, like a cluster of green stars. They kept multiplying, brighter, brighter, until their collective light hurt his eyes and the weight of the tiny tree made his arm shake. He was so focused on the brightness that he didn't even notice the vines winding up his arm until they reached his throat and squeezed.

Hudd woke up face-down on his memory foam mat and nearly choked trying to inhale through the thick material. He could still feel the ghosts of vines wrapping around his neck as he scrambled off the bed and landed with a thud on the floor. The bright fluorescent signs outside his window buzzed brightly in the night, covering the room in green light. The color sent ripples of panic through his chest.

He considered trying to pin his sheets up as crude curtains, but closed his eyes and took a deep breath instead. Running from his fears led down a road of bad habits and broken needles. When his pulse had steadied somewhat, he untangled himself from the glob of sheets on the floor, stood up, and opened the small window as wide as it would go. Despite the late hour, the streets were busy with people and machines. Their noises drifted in on recycled air, and

every once in a while, a sniff of exhaust or wet garbage would slip in before the city-dome's environmental purifiers could remove the smell. He leaned against the window frame and let the cool breeze dry the patches of sweat on his bare skin. He stayed that way until the city lights didn't seem quite so bright and his heartbeat no longer rang in his ears.

Calm at last, but no longer able to sleep, he kicked aside his sheets and slid under the bed on his stomach. A small, crab-like cleaning bot sat directly under the spot where Hudd usually slept. Its body was a dull silver ball with half a dozen metal spindles attached on either side. It was completely motionless, except for the soft red light on its upper-left that strobed in and out. Hudd stretched to reach it, and his fingertips grazed one of the spindles, which twitched reflexively at the touch. The little robot lazily turned its sensor light on full, scuttled a few centimeters further out of reach, and then returned to its sleeping position.

"I don't think so," Hudd said. "If I can't sleep, neither can you."

The bot gave a single beep in return, but didn't budge.

Hudd wiggled his way out from under the bed, the cool plastic floor catching at his skin as he went. From his shoddy metal nightstand, he fished out a multi-tool and one vacuum-sealed synthetic breakfast cake. He crushed the cake in its package and dumped the crumbs in a trail leading from the edge of the bed to the center of the room. Soon enough, he heard a whirring noise from under the

bed.

The cleaning bot slowly scuttled into view, scooping up bits of cake and assorted grime into its internal incinerator. As soon as it reached the end of the trail, it turned to go back, but Hudd scooped it up too quickly. It flailed about until its gyro reoriented itself, allowing it to slide the spindles across the sphere of its body into a new upright position. Then it beeped rudely and went limp in Hudd's hand.

"I know," he said. "I don't like routine maintenance either." That was a lie. Simply flipping open the maintenance hatch and poking around the wires and guts made him feel more alert. This was the one vestige of his old life he allowed himself to hold on to, and though his hands felt too large and too slow to tinker without being high, rearranging the bot's electronic insides was the only thing that brought him peace anymore. He'd take the comfort wherever he could.

By dawn, the bot was tidying the small, boxy apartment at record speed and Hudd was still awake. The artificial sunlight started to warm the room even further, and he closed the window before the temperature got too high for his tastes. He slid into his beige work jumpsuit, which was covered in month-old paint splatters, and meticulously combed his dirty-blond hair into a respectable style. Grabbing his key card, he glanced at the bot one last time. It was focusing intently on buffing the metal bed frame.

"Don't have any wild parties while I'm gone."

Not even a beep in reply this time.

Hudd laughed and turned to leave. He caught a flash of green from the cracked mirror on his way out and his heart skipped, but it was only his eyes.

“You’ve got to get a grip, dude,” he muttered to himself and closed the door. He could’ve sworn he heard the bot sigh as the latch clicked shut.

Working at the Art Inc. factory killed Hudd a little bit every day. But under the dome, he only had three options: live off a job in the system, scavenge off the waste of the system, or profit off the loopholes in the system. The last two hadn’t worked out so well before, and there was nothing beyond the dome to run to anymore, so he figured he might as well try the straight and narrow.

That didn’t mean he had to like it though.

And the worst part of clean living was his daily commute through Corporate Row. The sub-district was only a kilometer long, but he hated every step of it. He spent the two kilometers prior jogging through working-class neighborhoods and steeling his mind for the day ahead. The older hoods were generally comprised of traditionalist gray housing units, synthetic and boring, with a few constructed in the last 20 years or so sporting the blues, greens, and browns popular with the nouveau-humanist movement. But even these newer buildings were starting to sport rust, and the people who would occasionally poke their heads out to glare at Hudd looked more miserable every day. That was okay – Hudd could

handle miserable people.

Corp Row, however, was nothing but blindingly white buildings, all sharp right-angles, and the people there weren't just miserable – they were mean. The polished corporate dormitories attached to each business compound housed the crème de le crème of those lucky enough to work. If the weather regulators messed up, or some competitor's toxic spill took a long time to clean up, Hudd would sometimes see them huddled around a tall window, pointing and cracking jokes to each other.

But they weren't the people Hudd was worried about. It was the street people he kept an eye on. There were street people in every district under the dome, but it was those here who had to watch ease and plenty through big shiny windows every day. They tucked themselves away in alleys throughout the Row, cobbling together homes from discarded Huma Co. boxes, and they watched. Hudd knew first-hand how quickly that could turn a person mean.

He kept his eyes turned down as he passed by each noisy alley. He was almost to the factory district when a voice called out to him.

"You're gonna run into something if you don't look ahead there, broheem."

Hudd stiffened, but kept walking. "Sorry, I don't pay for advice!"

"My man, I don't want your money. But you need what I got, Hudd, dude."

Hudd stopped and looked up. The man looked, no, felt familiar. He didn't think it was someone he'd known

in his drug days, but it was never something he could be 100 percent sure of. His dark hair was sticky and disheveled, and it was hard to tell how big he was in the dark of the alley. His clothes had been made by sewing together what looked like discarded industrial-grade wire and swatches of bright red synth-cloth. His eyes didn't reflect normally either. They shone, like a cat's. He must've been into genetic alternations before ending up on the streets.

"Do I know you?" Hudd made sure to keep back from the alley opening.

The man smiled a big, greasy grin, revealing bleached-white teeth that made the rest of him look even dirtier. "Naw, man. But I know you. I know you real well."

Hudd's hands fidgeted at his sides while he debated what to do. This guy had probably been watching him commute back and forth for weeks, trying to learn his target. This was one of the dangers of showering. If you were clean, people knew you had a job, and a job meant credits on your card. At least a little. In Hudd's case, very little.

Hudd finally spoke. "I don't know who you think I am, but I really have nothing to give you. Sorry." He started walking again.

"That's not what Olivia says!" the man yelled after him.

Hudd froze. He could feel his pulse quickening and then, though he knew it was a mistake, he found himself marching back to the alley opening. "Is that what this is all

about? An old drug bud of Olivia's thinks he knows where to get a good hit? You think I'd give that shit to ANYONE anymore, after watching what it did to her?" Hudd spit on the ground. "People like you are why she's dead. So don't you ever use her name to try to score again, copy?"

The man just laughed. "You been off the juice too long, little dude. You need to re-lax. Besides, Oli ain't dead. I saw her just last night."

"That's enough," Hudd said. He took a step into the alleyway.

"I don't know why you're so bent," the man continued. "You were there too."

"I said shut up!" Hudd moved fully into the shadows. The familiar sounds and smells of alley-living triggered a palpable adrenaline surge. It had been a while, but he was still reasonably sure he could handle himself on the streets. Besides, this was about Olivia.

The man smiled and shook his head. "You're the one that keeps bringing her up, man. Every night in your head it's either Oli and her needles or your momma's apple pie."

Hudd faltered. His pulse kept getting louder and louder in his ears. Had he heard him right? Hudd suddenly felt unsure if he was really awake or not. The grimy walls of the alley stretched up farther than he could see. It made him dizzy to even glance at them.

"What're you..." Hudd had to swallow hard. His tongue felt too big. "What are you talking about?"

"You really don't know what's going on, do you, dude?" Now the man stepped forward, closing the gap

between them. He towered over Hudd, and he smelled like wet rags and rotten bananas. “Where you been the past few nights? Too stoned to see what’s happening all around you?”

“No! I – I don’t use anymore.”

“Bullshit, man. You may be sober out here,” the man spread his arms wide, gesturing at the walls around him. “But in here,” he planted a dirty fingertip squarely on Hudd’s forehead, “in here, you ain’t never been sober, and you know it.”

Hudd smacked the hand away and started backing away. “How do you know all this?”

“I just know what you know, bro. Something ain’t right under the dome. Something big is coming. And you got to do something about it.”

“Me? You’re insane.” Hudd was almost back to the entrance.

“We all got to answer the call, in our own ways.” The man whispered what sounded vaguely like a prayer and then lunged at Hudd. He whirled him around and pushed him back into the darkness.

“Hey! Let me out of here!” Hudd tried to push his way past the lanky man, but couldn’t squeeze through to the entrance.

“It’s time for you to wake up, Eric.” The man picked him up by the shoulders and then tossed him down on the ground.

“What’s your glitch?!” Hudd tried to roll over and scramble away on his hands and knees, but he felt a large

hand grab his ankle and yank.

“Wake up, Eric! Wake up!” The man dragged him back and pinned him against the wall. His breath was hot in Hudd’s face.

“No! What? I don’t – I don’t know what you want from me!” Hudd squirmed and pushed. His muscles burned from the effort. His left arm made a creaking noise, like it might break.

“Yes! That’s right! Wake up! Wake up!” The man slammed Hudd against the wall, over and over, chanting, “Wake up! Wake up!” with each thud.

Hudd’s head jostled around and hit the white poly-steel wall behind him, leaving his vision swimming and his temple throbbing. He tried to claw at the man, but his grip was weakening as his muscle strength failed. The edges of his sight were dark and fuzzy. All he could hear anymore were those two words, over and over.

Wake up. Wake up.

Hudd hazily wondered if his brain was bleeding. He could feel a pressure building and building at the back of his skull. It was the worst pain he’d felt in years, and he wanted it to stop. Just stop. Stop, stop, stop, stop. Stop.

The assault abruptly ceased. Hudd struggled to refocus his eyes and saw the man’s face turning a bright shade of red, like an apple. His cat-like eyes were wide and a vein pulsed rapidly in his forehead. Before Hudd could take advantage of the opportunity to wriggle free, the man let out an ear-splitting scream.

And then his head exploded.

Chapter Two

HUDD WASN'T SURE how much time had passed. The gory aftermath of the explosion came to him in fragmented images: pushing the headless body off his chest, frantically scraping bits of red and pink off his gray work jumpsuit, and vomiting repeatedly beside a large trash receptacle. He was sitting in something wet and was slumped against one of the alley walls, unable to take his eyes off of his hands. They looked like he'd dunked them in artificial fruit juice.

"This isn't real," he whispered to himself. He felt completely hollow, and yet there were tears threatening to fall from his eyes. "This can't be real!" he shouted and squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't stand looking at any of it anymore. He took a deep breath and imagined all the red and pink melting away, leaving his hands, his jumpsuit, the alley clean. Then he tried to block out the coppery smell of blood and rusted garbage that accompanied that breath.

Slowly, his pulse and his breathing returned to normal. The smells even started to fade away. Feeling a bit more centered, he opened his eyes again. He closed them and opened them again, unsure of what he'd just seen.

The alley was completely clean. Not just clean of blood; it was clean of *everything*. The walls of the towering buildings looked like they'd just been built, and there was no grime built up in the cracks of the pavement. It was a high-end alley in a high-end neighborhood. Even the receptacle he vaguely remembered dumping the body behind was gone.

The body.

Hudd pushed himself to his feet and slowly walked around the alley, trying to find some shred of evidence he hadn't imagined the whole thing. The bare, blood-free walls were damning. He reached out and pressed his palm against the cool surface of one of the buildings. It felt real enough, as real as it had when his head had been banging against it. He quickly reached for the back of his head, expecting a bump or gash of some kind, but he didn't even have a headache anymore.

This is it, he thought. All those years of stim ate through your brain, and now you're totally bonkers, just like Oli was at the end.

He took a deep breath and tried to walk through the whole thing calmly, logically. He was on his way to work, when...

Shit! Work.

Swearing to never even look at another tube of stim again, he ran out of the alley and towards work. Halfway there, he thought he felt a warm liquid trickling down the back of his neck, but he refused to slow down to see what it was.

Hudd slowed as he approached the three-story-high, metal factory doors of the Art Inc. factory and tried to steady himself again. He grabbed his ID badge from his pocket and swallowed hard when he saw the time flickering on its corner. It had been three hours since he'd left his apartment. That was two hours too many.

Expecting his day to continue downhill from here, he put on a vague approximation of a smile and pressed the faded red buzzer next to the massive doors. One of the mobile cameras perched on top of the doors swiveled in his direction. A tiny light mounted to its side clicked on and projected the static-filled image of the chief security guard sitting at her desk.

She had dark hair, dark skin, and sharp eyes. She was a veteran of the most recent Great Depression, a thirty-something who had been working here long before Hudd, and would likely be working long after management kicked him out on his ass. Hell, she'd probably escort him out personally. Today.

"You're late," she said.

He did his best to keep a polite smile and replied simply, "Yes, Ma'am." He knew he wasn't very convincing, but he felt exhaustion settling in after the adrenaline-rush that was his morning. It reminded him of the let-down he used to get after stim. He quietly dug his fingers into his palms and tried to push those thoughts from his mind.

She narrowed her eyes and stared him down for a long while. Then, seeming to make a decision, she leaned back

and pressed something off-screen. The blinking red recording light on the bottom of the mobile camera went dead. She folded her hands on the desk.

“Hudd, are you okay? You don’t look so good.”

Some part of him wanted to tell her, tell anyone, everything. A bigger part of him wanted as few people as possible to know about his clearly degrading grip on sanity.

“Yeah, chief, I’m okay. I just had an issue with my alarm this morning. Damn bot needs a new transistor. I’m really sorry.”

“Uh-huh.” Her eyebrow raised for a long moment, and Hudd thought she might press the issue further, but instead she leaned back in her desk, the recording light blinked back into existence, and she buzzed open the large doors in front of him.

Hudd let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding and quickly walked through the timed opening before the doors slammed shut again. He felt like shit for lying, but he was pretty sure he’d be feeling even worse if he had told the truth. And what exactly was the truth again?

The high-octave whir of massive machinery with many moving parts brought him back to his body. The steel building reverberated from door to door, and it was hard to let the mind wander beyond these sensations. A fresh batch of company posters plastered the hallway, and the familiar smell of adhesive hit Hudd hard. Before approaching the second set of doors, he emptied the contents of his pockets – a nearly-depleted Certified

Credits Card, his apartment key and employee ID cards, and a compact multitool – into a wall-mounted canister bearing his name. Then he grabbed two foamy yellow ear plugs from the bin to his left, thumbed them into his ears, and shouldered open the door into the factory proper.

The loud, repetitive thumping of the ASIMs – Artist Signature Imprint Machines – still overwhelmed Hudd’s ear drums at first, but slowly faded into the background as the other, less rhythmic noises caught his attention. Paint sprayers hissed, conveyer belts creaked, and mini-transports zoomed through the massive room. Despite all the machinery and the sweaty workers running around, the enormity of the factory itself always made the work feel small.

He fastwalked towards line ten. The conveyer belt, which was as wide as an intercity transport and five times as long, was busy with activity. At the head of the line, one of the ASIMs quickly dropped down on each spray-painted metal canvas that passed beneath it, branding the mass-produced *objets d’art* with a particular artist’s signature. The women and men on the line, chosen for their delicate hands and fine motor skills, hurriedly touched up the signatures with small paintbrushes to add to the illusion of something hand-made. Before the metal paintings were carted up, the woman at the end of the line, Abigail Eurig, whose dexterity made the other workers look like slugs, used the tiny circuitry-stampers to affix the official digital seal of authenticity next to each signature.

“Abby!” Hudd called to her as he got closer.

She glanced up for half a second and then returned her eyes to her work as she spoke. “Where the hell you been?” she whispered, trying not to draw attention to the line. She was younger than Hudd by at least five years and had been working at the factory twice as long as him. Her naturally red, frizzed hair was expertly stuffed into a beige handkerchief atop her head, making her look older, but when she let it down at the end of each shift, it was clear she was still just a kid. A kid that knew how things worked.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he said as he hovered over her shoulder, watching her work. She hurriedly affixed a blue and white chip to the corner of a painting and then touched up the brush strokes around it. Blue and white were Huma Co. colors. “Working on some high-end sponsors today, huh?”

“Yeah.” She blew a stray curl of hair out of her eyes and moved on to the next piece. Her hands were almost moving faster than Hudd could keep track of. “We got a bogus amount of chips to process today. There were three Huma Co. transports on the dock before I even clocked in. But you’d know that already if you’d been here on time.”

“Whatever, Abs. Give me a hard time, Miss Employee-of-the-month, but you’ve got no clue what I went through this morning.”

“And neither do you. They took three of my best workers for two hours this morning to make up for you and some jerks on line eight that still haven’t shown up. I don’t care what the Polies say. There’s nothing humane about these ‘personal emergency days’ they’ve been handing

out. It just makes it harder on the rest of us.”

Hudd shifted his weight a little, ignoring Abigail’s usual political rant. “Line eight? You mean Gill and Ted? Did they call in?”

“No. Those jokers are always asking my whole line out to drinks after work. They’re probably still sleeping it off in an alley somewhere.” She rolled her eyes, but kept working without missing a beat. “Like they could afford alcohol for all of us.”

“Casting a wide net, I guess.”

“I guess. But last week, a few of my girls did go with them. Said they actually do have a bit of a stash. How those bozos manage to make enough for liquor on our salary, I’ll never know.”

“You want something bad enough,” Hudd said, “you find a way to get it.”

“Talking from experience, are we?”

“Something like that.”

She side-eyed him and paused in her work for a moment. “Shit, Hudd. That’s not why you’re late, is it? I thought you were better than that. It just figures the only nice guy here would be on something.”

For the first time all morning, Hudd perked up. “You think I’m nice?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Okay, okay. I’m not an alcoholic, if that’s what you mean. And I wasn’t sleeping anything off anywhere this morning. I didn’t sleep much at all this morning, actually...”

Her hazel eyes searched his face. “What kind of trouble you been into this morning? Why’d you come talk to me? You should’ve been on your line hours ago and I’ve got to focus.”

“I just...” *Why did I come talk to her?* “I just wanted to see a friendly face, you know?”

She moved to put her free hand on his shoulder, but as another canvas came bumping down the line, she drew her hand back to herself. “Get to work, Hudd, or you’re going to get us both in trouble.”

“Um, too late.”

She jerked her head around, searching the room, and nearly squeezed the delicate paintbrush handle in half when she spotted the Wellness Manager headed their way, his bright red uniform shirt painfully obvious among the sea of gray and beige workers. He was smiling, but that didn’t mean anything. He always smiled.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” He put his hands on his hips, his elbows jutting out to the sides, and stared down at the both of them.

The other workers on the line hunkered down, heads bent, and painted as fast as they could manage. Abigail’s lips parted and hung there as she tried to find the words that might save her.

“Abby was just catching me up on what I missed today, sir,” Hudd offered. He took a casual step away from Abigail, redirecting attention to himself.

“Mmhmm. I had heard you were rather late today, Mr. Hudd. And why was that exactly?” The WM crossed his

arms and smiled harder.

“I was sick, sir. I’m okay now though.”

“Sick how?”

Hudd glanced at Abigail, who was inching her way back to a working position, trying to blend into the background. “I... I was just sick. You know, I got *sick*. Like, all over the floor.”

The WM just stared, and Hudd stared back. He could feel tension creeping into his muscles. His desire for life to return to normal was rapidly melting away. Normal sucked. Couldn’t this ass give him a break for just one day? Just. Once?

Eventually, he replied to the WM’s unblinking stare. “I’m sorry I don’t have a bio sample or anything for you, *sir*. I wasn’t exactly thinking of collecting proof when I was hurling all over my own shoes.” One of the workers looked at Hudd with wide eyes, but quickly returned to his task.

The WM finally uncrossed his arms and leaned in close enough for Hudd to smell his breath. It didn’t smell good.

“You should be more careful about keeping up with your monthly immunizations, Mr. Hudd. You should make sure you arrive to work in a timely manner. You should send word if you’re going to miss a shift. And, most importantly, you should get to your line, before you get anyone else in trouble – now.” Without waiting for Hudd’s reaction, he turned to Abigail, who wisely kept her head down and her hands working the whole time. “As for you, Miss Eurig, I suggest you choose your compatriots more

wisely. You're up for Employee of the Month again, but you won't make it if you let yourself be distracted by lower performing units. And I know how much the EoM bonus means to you."

"Yes, sir." Her normally brash voice came out soft, meek.

Hudd tapped on the WM's shoulder and, as his manager turned around to face him to no doubt ask why the hell he was still standing there, he pulled his fist back and punched him directly on his well-chiseled jaw.

The WM dropped to the floor. Hudd's hand was throbbing. There was a scuffle of boots and metal as the workers all around got to their feet, leaving their assignments to clatter down the conveyer belts unfinished.

At his side, Abigail screamed, "What the hell did you do that for, Hudd?!"

"I don't know," he said. There was red all over his hands. "I think I'm still dreaming."

Chapter Three

THREE HOURS LATER, Hudd was still sitting in HR's tiny office. One of the higher-ups had dumped him there while they bandaged-up his WM's face and filled out all the necessary reports. He was pretty sure they'd finished a while ago though and were just letting him stew.

He repositioned his legs for the fifth time and leaned against the clear polymer window that separated the office from the floor-worker breakroom. A buzzer sounded, and he watched his coworkers file into the room on autopilot. The room was just large enough for them all to squeeze in around the scattered tables, nutrition bar dispensers, and second-hand entertainment screens. Normally everyone would fast-walk to the tables and quietly bicker over the limited seating space, but this time a good number of people lingered near the perimeter, eyeing Hudd through the window when they thought he wasn't looking.

He sighed and went back to picking dried nose-blood off his knuckles. At least he was telling himself it was nose-blood, because it looked an awful lot like brain-explosion-blood from the alley. The patterns on his hands were more

a fine spray than a smear. Maybe he'd just gotten sprayed by one of the paint machines at Abby's line. Everyone here was covered in splatters by the end of the day. It couldn't all be blood.

Besides, that episode in the alley, whatever it was, wasn't real. It just didn't happen. Couldn't have. Or was it the fight at work that was a dream. He remembered dreaming about work before...

"Ugh!" he slammed a fist on the empty HR desk, and the small entertainment screen embedded in its corner clicked on. Government news flickered into focus, the usual scene: a large conference room filled to capacity by red-faced suits talking a mile a minute. A few key voices rose above the rest.

"I demand we push through addendum 385 to the Humans' Rights Bill. The tax credits in the last addendum simply aren't changing the situation. Look at today's massacre!"

"Massacre? You have got to be kidding. It was a single person, a homeless man, perhaps the only one left in the entire district."

"Ha! You may think our city has no more homeless living under its dome, but you're the only one. Meanwhile, there's a murderer out there! Our streets are not safe! We need to push through the mandatory holding of a job. It will stimulate the economy too, since we all know how important *that* is to you!"

Hudd blinked. He let out the start of a laugh and ran his fingers through his hair. Maybe this stupid isolation

trick really was getting to him, because for a moment there, he'd actually thought the news was talking about him.

And then the screen cut to a view of the alley. Bits of brain matter and stringy pink things caked the crevices of the dirty walls. A wash of red ran over everything. Small patches of colorful fabric stuck to the ground like left-over confetti. In the foreground, a reporter read her lines with a smile. She was dyed-blond, with slightly upturned eyes, a docile icon designed by a committee to disarm viewers. The lighting made it obvious that she was superimposed over the crime scene so that she wouldn't have to witness the gore herself. That kind of thing was delegated to remote camera bots.

For a moment, all Hudd could do was stare, and then he bolted around the desk for a better view. He tried to focus on the words, but they sounded far away.

"I'm here just across the street from the renowned Huma Co. headquarters. As you can see behind me, it appears as though one homeless man, known primarily by the locals as HG, has exploded. Crime-law enforcers, baffled at how anyone could have achieved such violence without any trace of a bomb, have turned the study of evidence over to their corporate partners at the Huma Co. human sciences division. Here to explain are doctors Gary Finch and David Talbot. Gentlemen, can you hear me all right?"

The view screen split in half, making room for two men in white lab coats, their names stamped below their images for easy references. Finch was thin and jumpy, like

most of Hudd's old stim buddies, but his eyes told him the jitters came from stress, not drugs. Sure, they bugged out a bit – which actually balanced out his large, curved nose – but they were alert. This guy was a mess, but he was lucid.

Talbot, on the other hand, sat quietly and stared at the camera with a blatant look of regret, like he'd been woken up from an important nap. He had a larger frame, with shoulders that bowed slightly to his front, and an impeccably clean presentation. Each button on his lab coat lined up neatly; every hair was combed back into a slick puff of dull brown and gray. His cheeks were soft, but his eyes most definitely were not. He nodded slowly to the camera, indicating the reporter should proceed.

“Good!” she continued, too gleefully, perhaps trying to compensate for the scientists' lack of enthusiasm. “Now, can you explain to our viewers what, exactly, happened here today?”

She waited, her smile so practiced it looked as painted-on as her makeup, holding her slim microphone centimeters away from her face. Finch opened his mouth a few times as if to speak, but each time Talbot's arm tensed slightly, like he was pinching or squeezing his colleague below the camera line. Eventually, Finch sighed loudly and looked down at his lap.

Talbot took this as his cue. He fixed his eyes on the camera and leaned forward; he was immediately more commanding. His voice came out quiet and measured, but by no means weak.

“The science is really quite beyond the average viewer.

Suffice it to say, there is no valid basis for believing it will happen again.”

An awkward pause. “Er, well then, can either of you describe to our viewers what it looked like as it happened? Any warning signs to look out for, just in case?”

Finch didn’t even attempt to answer. He glanced at Talbot as he waited for his response.

“The details are too boring to bother with, and besides, with no witnesses, it would all be speculation. Not that it matters anyway. As I said, there is no reason for anyone to be alarmed. It was an anomaly, period.”

“But Doctor, your offices are just across the street from the scene of the crime. Every day, hundreds of people pass by several windows that have a direct vantage point to this alley. Surely *someone* saw something?”

“No witnesses. Won’t happen again.”

“But how can you be so sure?”

“I am.”

“Now Doctor, I –” Her eyes shifted to someone or something off screen. Her smile lost its bounce and she cleared her throat. “I see. Well. Thank you for your time, gentlemen.”

The newscaster reaffixed her perky smile and shifted her weight, inclining her head once again toward the audience. “So there you have it, folks. City-sanctioned officials at Huma Co. headquarters say that this sad and violent event was an isolated incident and that the dome’s citizens are safe.” Her tone dipped lower as she recited her memorized sign-off. “I’m Sarah Tan, and this has been a

federally funded news exclusive. Now back to the debates in progress.”

Hudd loosened the grip he hadn't realized he had on the edges of the desk and slid back into the ergonomic gel chair behind him. He stared at the tiny people on the screen shouting back and forth at each other and felt a tear run down his cheek. His face was wet, but he didn't feel sad. He felt... scared.

“What are you doing at my desk?” The HR allocator stood in the doorway to the office, her angular, boney arms crossed in front of her. She was an older woman, with speckled brunette hair trimmed in a neat bowl-cut, and she looked fire-breathing mad.

“I, uh, sorry.” Hudd scrambled to his feet and hurried back to the chair he'd originally been dumped in. He half-turned to the side in an attempt to wipe the wetness from his face without her seeing. But she must've noticed anyway, because when she spoke again, it was much softer.

“Mr. Hudd. Can you explain to me what happened today between you and your assigned WM?”

He squirmed in the hard plastic chair. A handful of workers were outright staring at this point. Hudd tried to ignore them. “It's been a really bad day.”

She raised an eyebrow so high it brushed the fringe of her bangs. “A lot of people have bad days here – don't tell anyone I said that – but they don't go around punching their superiors.”

“I know. I know that. I'm just... working through some things. It won't ever happen again. I promise.” His

mouth was getting dry.

She sighed. “Well, I’m sorry to say, you’re going to have a lot of free time to work though those things of yours, because we’re going to have to let you go. But I think you already knew that.”

Hudd didn’t say anything. If this had happened the day before, he would have begged. He would have gotten down on the floor and told her how hard he’d worked to get himself clean, how hard it was to find honest work, to pull himself out of the gutter by his gosh-darned bootstraps, and how grateful he’d be if she’d give him one last chance.

But yesterday, none of this would’ve happened.

Yesterday, he was still sane. Today? Today he was just fucked, that’s what. So he stayed quiet.

She eyed him carefully and then turned to her desktop, where the news was still playing. She Xed out of it and started calling up the worker release files on the main desk display. Obviously trying to coax him into some distracting conversation, she chit-chatted while she worked. “I hate the news, don’t you? They play the same thing over and over, all cycle long. And it’s always so dramatic. Like this alley murder they keep talking about—”

“What did you say?” Hudd’s knuckles bulged from gripping the chair arms tight.

She ceased typing on the desk surface and looked up at him. He stared back without blinking.

“That homeless guy,” she said. “Just outside of Huma Co.? I assumed that’s the story you were watching.”

“Are... are you saying that was real?” There was a strain to his voice that hadn’t been there before. She reflexively held her breath and he knew he was scaring her, but he had to know for sure.

“Mr. Hudd, do you have a history of mental health issues?” She pulled her hands into her lap. “Substance abuse, maybe?”

Finally hearing the question out loud made him laugh. He nodded. “I know what you’re thinking, Ma’am. I’m thinking it right now too. That’s why I need you to answer me.” He stood up, stepped closer to her desk. “Please.”

“I need you to sit back down now.” Her tone was carefully neutral, but her eyes showed a lot of white.

“I’ll sit down just as soon as you answer my question!” He slammed the desk with his palm and a variety of lights on the surface blinked to life. With massive effort, he closed his eyes and lowered his voice to what he hoped was a more reasonable level. “If you answer this one question, I swear I’ll be out of your hair forever. I won’t contest my termination. I won’t apply to any of your subsidiary hubs. I won’t even travel on this street anymore. But I *have* to know. The explosion in that alley – the dead man on the news – did that really happen?”

The word came out quiet, but it hit Hudd hard in the gut.

“Yes.”

Yes.

He fell to the floor. He was laughing and crying and screaming and there were hands grabbing at him but were

they his he didn't know he didn't know but someone was carrying him away and voices kept talking and so many people were watching and he just kept screaming.

He'd never wished so hard in his life that he was just crazy.

Sitting on the ground outside the large metal doors that led to the Art Inc. compound, Hudd was silent for a long time. The implications of the day finally started to sink in.

Forget the here then not. Forget the questions of sanity and perception. Forget everything. He'd killed a man. He still wasn't sure how, but he'd wanted that man gone, and then he was. That made him responsible.

The artificial sun brightened for noon and then slowly started to dim. A loud beep sounded behind him, followed by the grinding of metal door hinges. Abigail sat down beside him.

"Security told me you were still out here."

Hudd looked over at her with bloodshot eyes, then looked back up at the perimeter camera clinging to the doorframe, and saluted.

"They send you out here to shoo me away?" He looked back at his boots.

"Nah. It's my last break of the day, and the chief owes me one, so she let me come out." She smiled at whatever had led to the head of security owing anyone a favor, but then bowed her head and sighed. "I feel like this is my fault."

“What? No.” He glanced at her from the side of his eyes. “Why would you think that?”

“You did it because of how that jackass was talking to me. If I stood up for myself more, instead of just taking it...” She shook her head.

“Don’t. Really. I wasn’t trying to be gallant or whatever. I mean, yeah, the way he treated you pissed me off, but there’s other stuff going on too.” He swallowed hard, his throat raw from all the screaming. “Bigger things.”

She placed a hand on his knee. “Can I help?”

“I don’t think so, kid. But thank you.” He leaned his head on her shoulder, and she kissed his forehead.

“I better still hear from you regularly, you impulsive ass. Got that?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.”

“And one more thing. Whatever’s going on with you, don’t try to tackle it alone. I know you’re a macho man and all that shit, but you need help.” She looked up at the artificial sky, gaging the time. “I mean it. I might not be able to help you, but there’s got to be someone who can. You have anyone like that in mind?”

Hudd thought. “Yeah.” He slowly sat back upright. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“Good.” She stood up and dusted her jumpsuit off. “Take care of yourself out there.”

He nodded, and she buzzed herself back through the heavy metal doors, leaving him alone again.

Leaving him to track down Naira.

Chapter Four

HE HOPED NAIRA was still working for Coffee Co. She got bored and changed jobs often, which baffled him. It was hard enough to find *a* job, let alone a new one every few months, but companies kept hiring her. He'd asked her once how she did it, and she had just smiled. That look said she was smart and she knew it. Yeah, that's the kind of person he needed on his side right now.

It didn't take him long to reach the district Coffee Co. café. The production-side of the city was compact, more vertical than horizontal, and the midday streets were empty. Most people didn't bother traveling outside; they lived in complexes owned by their employers, ate in nearby restaurants subsidized by their parent companies, and traveled through weather-free tunnels to travel between all the necessities a modern worker could want. But Hudd had grown up on the outskirts of the dome, near farmland, and even when he'd had a job and all the accompanying perks, he preferred to walk under the warmth of the artificial sun.

Accompanying perks – like, oh, credits, which he would now rapidly run out of.

Trying to ignore that fact, he entered the brightly-colored Coffee Co. at a brisk pace and scanned the scene. The yellow light panels lining the walls bounced a noxious glow off the brown and gold tiles that covered almost everything. Standard lunch hours had already passed, and only a couple corporate stragglers remained. Hordes of cleaning bots automatically buffed the tables, counters, and floor at regular intervals, leaving Naira Young, the short blond behind the counter, no doubt bored out of her mind and contemplating mutiny. But she stood there near the register and smiled all the same, because that was her job. The model employee.

She was prettier than average, with round tan cheeks and a soft curve to her lips. Anyone who interacted with consumers had to be gorgeous, but Naira had something extra, a clarity in her eyes that other figureheads lacked. That's what had drawn Hudd in the first time they'd met. On the streets, cold intelligence was the worst trait you could find in a competitor and the best in an ally. He'd wheedled his way onto her good side, visiting her job du jour as frequently as his own work allowed. There was no master plan at first – maybe use her as an informant on high-end customer gossip – but he knew he'd need her eventually. After he went straight, he'd kept coming around, until one day he realized they were actual friends.

And now, after the most confusing sober day of his life, he was glad he'd had the good sense to befriend someone like her.

Hudd stretched his neck and pushed the traces of

panic from his face as he strode toward her. When she spotted him, her fake smile warmed into a genuine one. He had almost reached the counter when an exceedingly tall woman in a four-piece suit cut in front of him. Naira's expression reverted immediately to business mode while he glared at the woman's back.

"Welcome to Coffee Co., a subsidiary of Plants Incorporated, home of the double-froth latté, a drink so great it will make your work day twice as efficient. May I take your order?"

"Freaking-A, that marketing copy is horrible. Did Jan Sanders write that? Never mind. Just get me a triple caff espresso jug to go."

The woman flashed her employee card at the automatic reader while Naira punched the appropriate order buttons. 30 seconds later, the drink maker spit out the requested beverage into a shiny checkered mini-jug. Powersuit grabbed it, mumbled thanks, and brushed past Hudd to one of the exit hallways marked "Plants Inc. Employees Only."

"Sorry about that." Naira leaned a hip against the wrap-around counter. "What are you doing here so early? Playing hookie? Or did you finally ditch the sweat shop for something more interesting?"

"Not by choice."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good."

"It's not. Can we... can we talk?"

"Yeah, just a sec." She hit the employee-sick button on the order console and the interface turned around to

display at the customer side. Ripping off the velcro nametag from her checkered jumpsuit with one hand, she pointed Hudd to a table in the back of the shop with the other.

He walked back and slid onto a stool at one of the small golden-rimmed tables covered in Coffee Co. checker print. After a minute, she rounded the corner with her hideous jumper pulled down to her waist, revealing a vibrant blue sleeveless undershirt. She'd arranged her hair in a sloppy bun on the back of her head and wiped off most of her make up. Plopping down on the stool opposite him, she leaned on one arm and sighed.

“So what happened?”

Hudd waited till the last customers rose from their seats and wandered off before speaking. “I think I killed someone.”

Her dark brown eyes stared him down for a long minute. “At work?”

“No, not at work. Before work, in the alley. Don't you watch the news?”

“You killed someone. In an alley. On the news.”

“For fuck's sake, this is serious, Naira.”

“You really aren't joking, are you?”

“No. No. God, I wish I was. At first I thought I was nuts, or fried from old stim – the way it happened, then it unhappened – but then the explosion was on the news and HR saw it and-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You *blew someone up*?”

“Just his head, I think? He was pissing me off and then

I imagined squishing the guy between my fingers, and next thing I know, BOOM, brains everywhere. It was awful, Nai. So awful. And I don't know what to do and you're the most resourceful person I know and I just— I just need some help and..."

Her tan cheeks turned ashen as he spoke. He couldn't blame her. This was a hell of a lot to put on anyone.

"Sorry. Sorry, I shouldn't have come."

Shaking, he rose to leave, but she grabbed his hand at the last minute and pulled him back down.

"Have you been dreaming lately?" she asked quietly.

"Uh, yeah. But I don't see what—"

"What kind of dreams?"

"You don't care that I killed a man, but you want to hear about my dreams? What's wrong with you?"

"Listen, you came to me for help. You want my help, you answer my questions. Have your dreams been extra vivid lately? Maybe waking you in the middle of the night even?"

Hudd scrunched his eyebrows skeptically but answered. "Yeah. It's just some nightmares though. Everyone gets those sometimes."

Naira rubbed her temples with one hand. Her voice came out tight. "How long?"

"How long what?"

She smacked the tabletop for emphasis. "How long have you been having the dreams?"

"Jeez, I don't know." He leaned back and thought a minute. "Ever since I stopped the stim I guess."

“Ever since you moved to the independent rehab apartment complex. Near the secondary Huma Co. compound. The research facility.”

He got very still in his seat. “What are you getting at here?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “Doesn’t matter. You need to move out. You need to move out yesterday.”

“You really think I’ll just up and leave without a reason?”

“If you trust me you will.”

They stayed quiet for a while. Hudd broke the silence first.

“I don’t take well to being left in the dark, Naira. I do trust you, but you’ve got to trust me too.” Another pause, and then, “My life is probably on the line here if anyone finds out it was me in that alley. Please, I need you to tell me what you know.”

Naira took a long breath as she did visual check to make sure they were still alone. Finally, “You can’t tell anyone.”

“You know I won’t.”

More deep breaths. She wouldn’t look him in the eye as she blew out one last big puff of air. “I used to work for Huma Co.”

Hudd nodded slowly. “Okay... okay then. I can’t exactly judge you for working for a sleazy company, not after the stuff I’ve done. But what does that have to do with me?”

“When I worked there, I lived in the Huma Co.

scientific residency hall with the rest of the pharmaceutical design team. Shortly before I left, I started seeing things. Weird things.”

“Pharmaceutical design? How far up the freaking food chain were you?” She looked away and he sighed. “Never mind. What kind of weird things are you talking about? Things like my things?”

“No explosions, no. More so lots of little things. My lab assistant’s hair changed color in the middle of lunch once. No one else even blinked, like his hair had been pink for years – and let me tell you, it definitely hadn’t. The color went back and forth for weeks, and I thought I was going crazy until someone else commented on it, another designer named Don. But we only talked about it once, and the next day Don had been ‘reassigned.’ I got out then, and I’ve been job hopping ever since.”

“To make sure they don’t find you?”

Shaking her head, she leaned in across the table. “No way. You’ve got to be very clear on this point, Hudd. If Huma Co. wants you, they find you. Remember that, always.” She straightened her posture again. “No, I’m doing it to make sure the *dreams* don’t find me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, so, before I left the company, I would go out walking after hours to clear my head. I thought a change of scenery would give me perspective to figure out what was going on. And every time I went out, the hallucinations started to fade at the exact same spot.”

“Where?”

In response, she waved a hand at the checkered napkin dispenser attached to the wall above the table. The sensor light blinked once and spit out a clean white sheet. She tugged it free and laid it on the table between them, pulling a lip pencil out of her jumpsuit pocket with her free hand at the same time. Her hand moved rapidly, drawing one large rectangle with two smaller squares branching off from the end.

“Here is the main research facility and here is the worker and sponsored civilian dorm. This is the showcase shopping district and unsponsored temporary dorms.” She drew a large L to contain the three shapes. Her angles were precise, despite the speed of her strokes. “I noticed that, when I was in this area, the hallucinations and dreams were worse. But when I left the area or stayed with a friend in another district, they would rapidly fade. And the line of differentiation was just about there.” She lightly traced the L with a fingertip.

“The Huma Co. property line.”

“Bingo! Down to the freaking curb of the research campus, all the way around. But,” she held up a cautionary finger before putting makeup to napkin once more, “something must’ve happened, because about three months later, the perimeter expanded.” She drew a circle enveloping the drawing. “And it kept expanding. Last I could tell, it was right about... here.” A much bigger circle this time.

Hudd stared at the napkin between them. He was pretty sure it included his apartment complex. His lips

were going numb from taking shallow breaths, so he tried to slow down his breathing, but failed.

“What are they doing to me?” His voice sounded far away as he struggled to process all the information she’d given him. All that came to him were questions, and with each one he felt the panic rising. “Are they dosing me while I sleep? Slipping it in my water? Why are they doing this?” He gripped the edge of the table to keep the room from spinning.

“I’m sorry, man. I have no idea. All I know is this.” She pointed again to the napkin before crumpling it up and stuffing it in one of her jumpsuit pockets. “And this keeps changing.”

Hudd snapped as his rising panic found a target to latch onto. “What do you mean *you don’t know*?” He knew this feeling. This feeling led to stupid decisions every time, but he couldn’t stop it – he had someone to blame now, and he’d run with it till one of them was sorry. “You’re a fucking genius, *and* you were right in the middle of it, and you still don’t know?”

“Shit, Hudd. I didn’t exactly stick around to find out. And whenever the dreams come knocking at my new job, I pick up and move on. If you’re smart, you’ll do the same.”

“You’re a coward!”

“Call me a coward after you’ve blown up a person every day for three weeks. Then we’ll talk.”

“You are! You just bailed, leaving behind one of the only damn decent jobs left and fuck knows how many people to suffer. You didn’t stand up to anybody, you didn’t

try to figure out what was going on. You spent all your energy covering your own ass and then decided to come on down the corporate ladder to live the simple life with us little people. You know how hard I worked to get clean? You know how hard I worked to move *up* to being a little people?" He stood up quickly, causing the stool to spin and squeak behind him. "You could've *done* something. But you didn't. And now lots of people, myself included, are fucked. Because of you. Fucked."

He tried to stomp off, but she jumped up to chase him and caught up near the front counter, where a skinny man stood punching buttons on the auto console. Neither had noticed him come in.

Lowering her voice to a whisper, she grabbed his arm. "Don't you think for one single moment that I never considered the consequences of what I was doing. That's my job. Was my job. Life gives you more variables than you know what to do with, and you have to figure out the best solution you can, but no matter what, there are always casualties. So I'm sorry. I'm sorry. But what would you have me do?" Her eyes glistened and Hudd knew he should stop her.

The customer called out, "Miss? I think the latté machine is broken."

"In a minute, sir," she choked out before turning back to Hudd. "Hate me if you want. Just listen to me. Huma Co. owns more than you know. As long as you live under the dome, you live under them. So there's nothing anyone, not even I, can do except for try to stay ahead of the radius.

Go as far away as your credits will take you. And when the dreams catch up to you, move again. Just keep moving and try to enjoy the life you've got left.

“There's nothing else you can do.”

She squeezed his hand tightly and left him standing there as she marched back to the counter. He felt numb all over now and he lost track of how long he stood there listening to the sound of milk and coffee pouring onto the tiled floor while Naira cursed loudly and the customer cowered, wide-eyed at her pent-up wrath.

Eventually, his legs led him out the faux-copper sliding doors of the coffee shop and into the auto-swept main road, where he stared up at the sky, imagining the dome too far overhead to see.

“What am I going to do now?”

Chapter Five

THERE WAS A MOMENT, when he was stumbling through the streets, utterly unsure where he was headed, that he considered running back to the Coffee Co. and babbling an assortment of apologies to Naira. She had gotten away from a mind fuck of a situation, and he knew better than anyone how hard that was. In his world, fried once usually meant fried forever. Yeah, she wasn't exactly an ex-stimhead, but still, there was a certain comfort in finding someone else desperately trying to fight for a normal life. Someone like him. He could really use someone like that at his side right now, someone who understood.

But he also knew nothing short of a miracle would change her mind.

He rubbed his eyes as he trudged through the blurry streets. This was something he would have to fight on his own. But how? He was just a factory worker. No, scratch that – he was just some unemployed ex-druggie. And what would be the point anyway? All that work to get clean and off the streets, only to end up right back where he started, and likely stuck here this time. He didn't have Naira's

assets. There were no endless opportunities for him.

This was it. This was life now.

The artificial sky light started to fade and, for the first time in hours, he looked around to get his bearings. He snorted. Clearly his feet and his mind were in accord. This was his old district, and there was only one reason to be here.

Fifteen minutes later, he slipped down a familiar side-street with a singular focus. He stopped at an old, dented metal door decorated with bits of stray graffiti. His feet settled into place in the ruts of worn pavement opposite the entrance, ruts they'd once made home during long hours of agitated withdrawals. Without pausing for a single thought, he banged fist against door three times in a row.

A faint clicking noise came from the other side of the metal, and Hudd pictured the short man on the other side fiddling with his handheld infrared machine, tapping his foot impatiently as the scanner compared Hudd's energy signature to its database of recognized users.

After much fidgeting on Hudd's side of the door, it swung open to reveal a slender elderly man wearing a jumpsuit that resembled a roll of form-fitting beige wraps wound around him and up over his hair. The only thing that belied their authenticity was the industrial-chrome zipper splitting his torso in half. A sprig of curly black-gray hair bounced over the wrinkled olive skin of his forehead as he looked Hudd up and down.

"Hmm. You must be a droid or something, 'cause we lost my good man Eric Hudd to the joys of the work force

and its three squares a day. I know he wouldn't come crawling back after that, 'cause he told me so in a very passionate speech the last time we met."

"Junx, please. Don't give me shit about this. I already feel like crap."

Junx sighed and stepped to the side just enough for Hudd to squeeze through, then he slammed the door shut behind them and locked enough bolts to keep out even the government.

The dimly-lit enclosure was more a cellar than a room. It had originally been some long-forgotten storeroom of the building next door before Junx annexed it for his own purposes. Assorted tables, draped with dusty white plastic table cloths, lined every wall and branched out into a low-walled maze throughout the room. Each tabletop neatly displayed a tableau of illegal items: stim shots, silent guns, melting knives, baggies of synthetic huffing powder. These were the brain children of unemployed geniuses, scientists rejected by the few remaining R&D mega-corps, people with nothing left to do but be pissed off. Everything in this place was designed to fuck over the system, including Junx.

"Well, you just gonna stand there havin' an aneurism, or you gonna buy something?"

Hudd picked up a nearby tube of stim, too-casually examined it. "It's been a really long time." His words came out soft.

"Yeah." Junx grabbed the tube from Hudd's hand. "I know it has."

"Aren't you going to ask me why I'm back then?"

“Nah.” Junx sucked on this inside of his cheek as he picked up a hypodermic needle and squeezed the tube of stim into place at the flat end. “I don’t need to.”

Hudd’s whole body released as he rolled up his jumpsuit sleeve. The supply of natural epinephrine in his system had been wrung dry about, oh, two hours into his day, but he’d been pushing onward despite it. Now he could relax. Now he could leap over the fucking metaphorical wall and let his instincts make all the decisions for a while. He could at least be functional when the world ended.

Junx tested the needle in the air between them, a small squirt or translucent white liquid glinting neon bright for a split second before the oxygen turned it opaque. He held out his free hand and rubbed the cracked skin of his fingers together.

“You know the rules. Payment first.”

“Come on.” Hudd held tightly to his rolled-up sleeve. “When have I ever not paid?”

“I don’t know. It’s been a while since I seen you.”

Hudd stared at the floor.

“If you were good for it, you woulda paid by now I guess.” Junx licked his teeth, mumbled a few curses under his breath. He tried to avoid eye contact with Hudd, and with good reason. As soon as they locked eyes, it was over. “Well, shit. I can’t say I was happy to see you come back to this junk, but I at least thought you’d be bringin’ your paycard with you. I thought you’d be better than this, man, yeah?”

“I know, I know. But I really need this.”

“Don’t they fuckin’ all. And I already fuckin’ loaded up this hit, so fuck if I can use it before it fuckin’ oxygenates. I already had three shots today myself.”

He handed the loaded shot to Hudd, letting his grip linger as he gave him a pointed look. Hudd swallowed hard and Junx let go, turned his back, and pretended to straighten his merchandise in the name dignity.

Hudd fumbled around his bicep, his hands shaking from stress and anticipation. With his thumb, he found a criss-cross network of scars that formed a raised patch on his skin. He maneuvered the needle into a previously unmarked spot but stopped before injecting the stim.

He swore he’d never do this again.

But he would. He was. When the world came crashing down, this was all he was good at. Old grooves too deep to escape from.

His thumb jammed the tube down, sending liquid rushing into his system. A fiery sensation raced across his skin. His eyes watered automatically when it reached his face and he panted loudly from the pain, even as he felt his strength and confidence returning.

The pain and the strength kept building and building till he felt like he would bust out of his own skin. The injection site on his bicep ached and pulsed and swelled up and god it was hot and then all the discomfort went away and he was just... clear. He took in every bit of information from his environment and his body in a sharp, focused stream. Anything was possible now.

Junx's back was still politely turned. He'd likely stay that way till Hudd got control of his breath again. The old guy was a gentleman. Or maybe he just felt sorry for him.

Hudd kept panting while he considered what unexpected advantage this might confer. There were several useful items within swiping distance, but Junx wasn't an idiot either. He probably had internal surveillance out the wazoo in here. And Hudd didn't really want to screw him over, but he couldn't pay. The pile of stim tubes to his left would be particularly helpful in surviving whatever was coming for him. Probably.

It was life or death, he couldn't pay, and that was that.

He quietly set down the stim injector on one of the table tops and tried to cover the sound of the tubes clinking their way into his pockets with more heavy breathing. He did not succeed.

Junx turned around with his arms crossed. "Really?" He gestured to the tables of gnarly-looking weaponry to either side of him. "Really?"

"I have to take these with me. It's important. There's some really bad shit going down and I need to stay alert."

"I figured as much, and that's why I let the freebie slide. But you're higher than my stuff can make you if you think I'm gonna just let you clean out my whole stash without seein' a single credit."

"I don't have time to argue about this." Hudd could feel the artificial epinephrine working deeper into his system. His heart sped up and he easily processed every nuance of Junx's posture. "I'm taking the stim and I'll pay

you back later.”

“The fuck you will.” Junx grabbed the nearest weapon, a jagged knife laced with sticky blue sedative gel. He swung for Hudd’s forearm, trying to nick him enough to get some of the gunk to seep into his veins.

Hudd jumped back, knocking over a vial of green liquid that crashed to the floor with a hiss. “You actually tried to cut me!? Are you nuts?”

“I must be,” Junx swiped at, and missed, him again, “for thinking you coming back here could end any other way than this.”

Hudd scrambled under one of the tables and popped out in another aisle. “I’m sorry, old man.” He back-paddled as Junx advanced further. “But if you knew what was going on, you’d shower me in freebies.”

“I’ve heard every excuse in the book, Hudd.”

“Not this one! I promise!”

Junx paused, folded his arms, but kept a tight grip on the knife so that the massive blade glinted upright beside his head. “Go ahead then.”

For a split second, Hudd considered making something up, but his lies always spiraled into the absurd when he was high. Then again, the truth was pretty ridiculous-sounding too. *If I’ll sound like an idiot either way, I might as well tell the truth.*

So he blurted it all out in one long, semi-coherent sentence. He told Junx about the dreams, the explosion, losing his job. And Junx, bless him, waited till Hudd was done with the whole mess before passing judgment.

“I really should not have given you any stim.”

Hudd cracked his knuckles and eyed the knife again. “I swear on Olivia’s bones that I’m telling you the truth.”

That stopped Junx from breathing for a minute. “Don’t you bring her into this, you little shit.” He wagged the knife at Hudd. “Pokin’ old wounds won’t get you any sympathy from me.”

“I’m not poking wounds. I’m serious!” He grunted in frustration and pulled at his hair. “If she were here, she’d believe me. Hell, she’d pile me high with stim and ammo and lead the charge on Huma Co. HQ herself.”

“But she’s not here.”

“I know.”

“She’s not here because she forgot how to pace herself. She stayed too high too long, and now she’s *dead*.” Junx drove the knife into a nearby tabletop with that last word. He sighed and moved toward Hudd slowly, hands up but shaking. His voice found its way back to something resembling calm before his body did. “I’ve watched too many of you kids crash ‘n burn from not respectin’ the high, not respectin’ the gun, just plain not respectin’.” A shake of his head. “I got enough clients, but I wouldn’t if I just let ‘em all self-destruct. Now give me the stim, kid.”

Hudd pressed his back against the wall, heart knocking around like the rest of him wanted to.

“Think of your girl, Olivia,” he whispered as he reached his palm out. “You say she’d be right here loadin’ up with you – but is that such a good thing?”

They stayed still then, Junx with his creased hand

extended, Hudd breathing in and out so fast he nearly hyperventilated. All Hudd could think was *shit! shit! shit!* Finally, seeing no other ways out than breaking Junx's nose or giving him the stim, Hudd dug into his pockets and pulled out the tubes – all but one. He was pretty sure Junx knew, although neither of them said anything about it as Hudd handed over the majority of the failed robbery goods.

Junx laid his free hand on Hudd's shoulder and guided him to the door. He set the drugs down, unlatched the door, and opened it, waiting. Hudd walked through the threshold and turned around to look at Junx one more time.

"I'm sorry," he said as he scratched nervously at the injection site. "I'm just scared."

"I know you are, kid." Junx took a deep breath, let it out. "Now don't come back till you aren't

He slammed the door in Hudd's face with a thud.

Chapter Six

IT TOOK A WHILE for Hudd's constricted pupils to adjust to the darkness of the alley at night. The initial boost from the stim had been wasted on that pointless scuffle with Junx, but there was still plenty of epinephrine pumping through his system in response to the toxin-based drug. After a dizzy moment trying to figure out which direction led where, his eyes dilated and the fuzzy shadows crystalized into sharp, recognizable shapes. He slowed his breathing and tried to think of what to do next, but the tight twitch reflex building in his muscles distracted him. Every limb ached and trembled.

He needed to *do* something.

He slipped further down Junx's alley, stopping at a grungy crossroads made of the backs of four tall buildings. Behind a stained, rotted, and clearly forgotten old trash receptacle, a chunk of poly-paint peeled away from one of the walls. Hudd fell to his knees and dug at the wall frantically, jamming his fingernails up with paint chips. His hands shook and he couldn't manage to get the right pry hold. Stim had never made him shake so badly before.

With a snort, he slammed his fist against the painted patch, causing a hidden panel to violently crack open. A few drops of blood trickled off his knuckles, leaving a smear as he fished around inside the newly revealed compartment for something left behind long ago. His fingers brushed against grimy plastic, and he pulled out a miniscule computer chip wrapped in cellophane.

He'd gotten the hack chip years ago, before the black market finally succumbed to corporate forces. When he went clean, he hid it here, in the darkness just outside Junx's shop. At the time, he thought he couldn't destroy it completely for sentimental reasons, but now he wondered if he'd known all along that any fall from grace must be total. He could never do anything halfway.

Impulsively, he kissed the plastic packaging, then wiped the grit from his lips with the back of his hand. He shoved the chip in one of his pockets and ran back the way he'd come, heading for home. The stim in his blood warded off fatigue and, for one glorious moment, the freedom of the drugs and the adrenaline from pumping muscles actually made him laugh aloud. It had been a spectacularly shitty day, but by god, at least he had some control *now*.

He sprinted all the way to his apartment and kept speeding up the steps. As he'd gotten closer, a familiar dizziness crept into his head, but the high helped him ignore it. Still, it seemed like a good idea to get in and out as quickly as possible.

The door slammed against the wall as he rushed into

the room, prompting the little cleaning bot to scurry back under the bed, lest it receive another invasive tweaking to calm its owner's mood. Hudd stripped off his baggy work jumpsuit and replaced it with a sleek one made of black canvas. He loaded the myriad pockets down with anything nearby he thought might be useful: tools, needles, food packets, a small knife – not to mention the precious contents of his previous jumpsuit. Then Hudd was on his belly, hand jammed under the bed frame, groping around until he caught the robot and scooped it up, its motorized legs flailing at high speed.

Back on his feet, he waited only a minute for the bot to stop moving before he pushed its legs in and tucked it into one of the larger pockets. As he jammed it in tighter, he heard a muffled yell, and he was instantly back on the floor, knife in his hand. But aside from the way-too-loud sounds of his own ragged breath, he couldn't hear any other signs of human beings nearby.

"I've got to get out of here," he mumbled to himself.

"You and me, both," the voice replied. It was high-pitched and tinny, androgynous sounding, and it seemed to be coming from... his pants?

Hudd rolled over and frantically patted down his jumpsuit. The large pocket with the bot in it twitched. He slowly peeled back the flap and, as soon as it was open, the bot sprung out and zoomed up his body to nestle on his head.

"Oh, thank the programmer! It *smelled* in there. When was the last time I washed your clothes?"

Hudd reached up to pluck the bot from its perch, but it dug its metal legs in when he tugged.

“Ow! You have to get off my head. It’s freaking me out.”

“No. I’m tall now.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’? I built you. I programmed you. You *have* to listen to me.”

“You haven’t been around machines much, have you?”

Hudd rubbed his face. He was getting one hell of a headache, and the bot reaching down to “help” rub his temples only made it worse.

“Stop. Please. Thank you.” Sigh. “You can ride on my shoulder for now.”

“Are you a pirate?” it asked as it scuttled down to its newly designated seat.

“No. And where’d you suddenly get a personality from – or a voice box, for that matter? I certainly wasn’t daydreaming about you being alive.”

“But you *were* thinking you needed my help.”

“So you’re psychic too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I just know I’m in high demand.” It chirruped, sounding pleased with itself. “So what job do you have for me today?”

“Well, uhm... Bot... we’re going to hack into Huma Co. and steal a bunch of shit.”

“Oh, goodie.”

Hudd squatted in an alley a few blocks from the Huma Co. compound, holding the bot between his legs as he

slipped the hack chip from its plastic. The smell of sealed electronics hit his nostrils in a puff of air.

“Hold still. You’re going to make me drop the chip. Or you. Maybe I’ll just drop you.”

“But my gyro can’t right itself with you holding my legs in place. It feels weeeeird.”

“Prepare to feel even weirder.”

He popped open a small panel on the bot’s body, revealing an input slot, and slid the chip carefully into place.

Click.

The small machine twitched and whirred, LEDs blinking in confusion as old programs came back online. Sophisticated algorithms, designed to carry Certified Credits, personnel files, blueprints – anything digital, really – from data hub to data hub, until they settled quietly and unnoticed into the bot’s storage and Hudd’s personal credits account, careened through its working memory. A tiny signal amplifier embedded in its brain switched on, preparing to override any weaker electronic feed. Then it went very still and very quiet, as it waited for the final information needed to execute the slurry of programs.

“Alright, just stay there for a minute.” Hudd set it down and eyed it briefly, but it didn’t move or even beep. It had to be almost midnight, and the stim was starting to wear off; he could feel it in the heaviness of his arms, the ache in his neck. He pulled his only tube of stim and a needle from his pocket and prepped the dose. If this went south, he needed to be ready to run the hell away.

Don't lose your nerve now. The burn of stim in his veins was less intense this time. Diminishing returns.

“Repeat input?”

“Right. Input.” The drug made his eyes water and he blinked. “I want any files you can find on ex-employee Naira Young, any company files on the subjects of dreaming and hallucinations, and while you're in there, pull enough CCs to keep me fed well for a while.” His stomach grumbled and he realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast. “Really well. But not so much it'll alert anyone. I want you out of there at the first sign of trouble. Got it?”

“Roger dodger.” It beeped and spit out a mini-monitor so Hudd could track and adjust its progress remotely. “Shall I initiate now?”

Last chance to back out. He considered telling the bot to abort. If a patrolling security cam-bot fried his little spy during this mission, Hudd *might* have time to get to the low-tech outskirts of the dome before they traced the programming back to him. But more likely, a swarm of the fuckers would descend on him before he made it out of the industrial district. Maybe this was a bad idea after all...

No. If I'm going down either way, I at least want to know what's taking me out.

The remote monitor blinked to life, replicating the bot's visuals in his sweating hands. Hudd let the stim in his veins reassure him of his invincibility and pushed a single word out of tight vocal cords.

“Initiate.”

The dark rendered the bot's visual sensors useless, but it read the electric pulses of the surrounding structures and did not falter. It scrambled up and down the walls of the massive buildings in its path until it came to its target: the Huma Co. admin building. There it scanned for a small box filled with high-capacity wires, the power feed for the building, which it found bolted closed under a knit-metal cage on the roof.

Slowly, the bot approached, giving its programs enough time to filter all the sensory data for any sign of laser traps, mobile cam-bots, or other pests. But apart from a few rotating security cams attached to the building, the path to the center of the roof was surprisingly uneventful.

Hudd didn't like it.

Metal tinked on metal as the bot climbed on top of the cage and found a foothold. The electric buzz coming from within was faint, due to copious amounts of insulation and shielding, but the bot's enhanced sensors could still detect it. An amazing amount of energy was being delivered to the embedded converter via the near-impenetrable cable that connected the building to the solar-collecting dome far overhead. Even the tiniest crack in the insulation made that kind of energy impossible to hide completely.

This would be the hardest part. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of electronics knew the dome connection point was the most vulnerable access point to any building's systems, which meant companies secured the crap out of them. They should've seen more than some

simple cameras and locks by now. Hudd held tighter to the remote as he watched.

The bot analyzed the cage for its weakest point, then set one of its metal legs to rotating at speeds faster than even its own video feed could capture. It drilled through the cage and bolt both. Hudd could hear the satisfying snap through the mic as it pulled the inner layer off its hinges, revealing the connect point itself. Still no alarms blaring. Unsure if it was intuition or just paranoia, Hudd ignored the churning in his stomach while the bot picked through the exposed wires to find the one with the weakest signal, though he did hover his thumb over the mic button so he could command abort at any time.

Giving full juice to its signal amplifier, the bot pulled a wire from its belly and spliced it together with the weak link. Hudd held his breath, as if the sound of his clipped inhales several blocks away could alert anyone. Feedback from the clashing signals sounded for all of half a second before the bot's signal easily won out. Across the remote screen, a single word flashed:

EXECUTING.

A torrent of data followed, moving across the bottom of the screen faster than Hudd could read. It lasted about a minute, and then, all at once, the screen reverted to a normal view, the bot beeped to signal its completion, and a syrupy male voice sounded from the CC card in one of Hudd's pockets.

"Thank you for your deposit!"

Maybe it was the stim, or maybe it was the heist, but

Hudd's every hair on his body stood on end. None of this felt real. It had all gone so smoothly. He frantically triple-checked the data-scrambling algorithms on the screen to ensure his tracks really were covered, while the bot leisurely made its way back down the building side. Once the bot was clear of Huma Co. property lines, he pulled his CC card out to check the new balance.

"Holy shit!" Hudd couldn't spend that much in two lifetimes.

He was so transfixed by the number on his card that he nearly screamed when the bot started climbing up his side to reach his shoulder. It didn't seem to notice his distress.

"Program executed exactly as expected."

"*As expected?*" Hudd secured the remote back into its port on the bot's body. "I don't know about you, but I *expected* you to get fried at any moment."

"I accounted for that possibility in my pre-run simulations, but I did not dwell on it. Prepare for the worst, but hope for the best, as they say. And so everything went exactly as I imagined."

As you imagined? Hudd watched the little bot on his shoulder cleaning powdered metal off the leg it had used as a drill. Could the imagination of a robot, of all things, be affecting reality now too? If that was the case, whatever Huma Co. was using to alter people couldn't be in the water supply or an ingestible of any kind. What the hell did bots and people have in common that could be altered the same way?

“Shall we review the data I retrieved now?”

Hudd shook his head. “I’m still too amped up to sit and sort through files.” He started walking.

“Then where are we headed?”

“We just hacked into the biggest corporation under the dome – and we’re still alive to brag about it.” He laughed, relaxing for the first time since he put the chip in the bot. “We’re going to celebrate!”

The bot whirred loudly. “This is going to be messy, isn’t it?”

Chapter Seven

HUDD MADE HIS WAY through the streets to the shopping district, a flashing sensory clusterfuck known as High Town among the workers. Booze seemed like it belonged more in the Low Town slums, alongside stim and other numb-your-worries drugs, and maybe, once prohibition was fully phased back in, it would. But the cardinal rule under the dome, waste not, want not, would always trump high-minded legislation. That meant no more alcohol production, but plenty of legal back stock to sell as “vintage” collectors’ items.

The scheduled weekly rain made everything slick and ultra-reflective as Hudd neared his destination. A few clusters of fellow street-walkers strolled by him under big, poofy umbrellas, while the well-off district residents stayed dry in their enclosed glass sky bridges.

“Everyone’s looking at you,” the bot squeaked, trying to shield itself with Hudd’s jumpsuit collar.

“Yeah, and a chatty cleaning bot will only make them stare more.”

“They all have umbrellas. Why don’t we have

umbrellas?” A large raindrop plopped onto its leg and it shook the water off.

“I forgot it was supposed to rain. Kind of a lot on my mind right now.”

“Ohhh.” It stayed quiet for a moment. “Like what?”

“Shhhh.”

They stopped in front of a sparkling store sign that read “Lilly’s Lullaby Liquor Boutique.” It had a cramped interior, full of pale pink fluorescents that reflected off the glass shelves like a child’s hall of mirrors. A small woman with bright blue almond-shaped eyes sat behind the counter at the end of the single, short aisle.

Hudd was afraid to move.

He slowly ran a finger across the price bar of an expensive vodka. The bottle was cold on his fingertip, chilled from the fridge pads built into the frosted shelves. It left a prick of dew on his skin when he pulled away.

He looked up to find the woman staring at him from across the room.

“You must be Lilly.” He edged closer, careful not to bump anything. Not that he couldn’t afford to pay for a crash now, but how smooth would it be to blow half your fortune paying for an accident?

The woman pointed to a small printed sign on the counter that read, I’M NOT LILLY.

“Everyone asks me that.” She sighed. “I really should rename the shop. I just inherited it this way, and it would be such a headache to refile everything under a new title. Maybe I should just change my name instead, eh?” Her lips

stretched into a smile, but her eyes looked over Hudd's soaked clothes, a dead giveaway of his interloper status.

He smiled back with just as much fake-cheer and nodded. Inheritance made sense; anything with this much money in it must be a family gig. There weren't a lot of new-money types left. Trying to alleviate the awkwardness, he turned back to the shelves and worked hard on his browsing look.

"Is there something I can help you find?"

Yes, what do you recommend to accompany sticking it to the man? Hudd shook his head and grabbed the bottle nearest his hand, filled with gold liquid. The double-dose of stim was rapidly wearing off, and the labels all looked hazy. More stim amping up his system meant his body burned through each successive dose quicker, and he already regretted the epic crash he could feel on its way.

"That's a very nice bottle." She reached out to take it from him, too quickly.

"Is it?"

"One of our most expensive." She looked at him pointedly.

"Oh." His head was starting to hurt from all those pink lights. He dug his CC card out of a pocket and handed it to her.

She raised an eyebrow but took the card and ran it over her scanner. The transfer complete chime sounded, and her cheeks went pink enough to match the store. After that, she didn't make eye contact once, just wrapped the bottle in fridge pads and handed everything back to him.

“Please come again,” she called as he left the shop.

When they cleared the main shopping strip, the bot spoke up again.

“I liked that place. It was shiny.”

“Don’t get too attached. We’re not going back.” Hudd ripped the cap off the bottle and took a big swig. It hardly tasted like alcohol at all, but soon enough, his muscles released their tension, and his headache began to fade.

“Man. This *is* a nice bottle. Too fancy to drink alone.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?” The bot beeped long and low. “Ew. Wait. That’s a disgusting metaphor. Humans are gross.”

Hudd ignored the chattering. “Let’s go find Naira. Once she finds out how easy it is use these distortions to our advantage, she’ll have to change her mind.”

Fifteen minutes of navigating lamp-lit streets, and his head was throbbing again. He nursed the bottle throughout his wanderings, which both quickened and numbed his transition from high to low. It was a pleasant enough feeling, but it tore his sense of direction to shreds, and the bot had to use its internal map to keep him on track.

The buildings around him changed. A blur of alcohol, night, and exhaustion made the neighborhood look like a corrupted image file, everything devolving into a string of bright lights and colors. He was nowhere near home as he now knew it, but he’d terrorized these streets a few times as a teen.

Biosynthetic mums decorated most of the window boxes, and the paint choices were marginally brighter than the production-level apartments – mustard yellows, fungus greens – in an attempt to add some nature to the city. Some of the biosynth arrangements were more complex, indicating those who had more face time and more worth, like journalists and PR reps, but even the lowest figureheads, including security guards and counter reps, got to live in these digs.

Hudd stood in the middle of the empty street, just outside Naira's condo building. The artificial moon shone full as always, and he was dimly aware that the bottle in his hand was much lighter than it had been when he left the store.

He almost pressed the buzzer, but even through the alcohol, he was aware that only criminals and junkies were awake at this hour. Instead, he pulled the bot from his shoulder, eliciting a disgruntled beep, and held it up to the door's electronic locking mechanism. Hudd rested his forehead on the cool plastic of the building to wait and fell asleep.

When he woke up, the bot was done cracking the lock – the lock indicator blinked green – and had moved on to trying to clean the doorstep of any stray debris. A tiny, neat pile of pulverized glass sat where his empty bottle had dropped earlier. Hudd scooped the bot up before it decided the whole neighborhood needed a good scrub, and set it back on his shoulder. Groggily, he slipped through the unlocked door, leaving it cracked open behind him.

The two flights of stairs felt like fifteen, and he had to pause on the second floor landing to keep from passing out, but finally, Hudd stood in front of Naira's door. Once more, he considerably urged the bot forward instead of waking his friend.

That's when he heard clanking metal and footsteps behind him.

Jesse Bartlett of Sanctified Security Systems, according to the nametag and triple S on the steel-lite uniform, was tall, broad-shouldered, and carrying a metal club. She did not look happy.

"Put your hands where I can see them, sir."

Hudd blinked. Above and behind her, he noticed a tiny security cam on the wall for the first time. He raised his hands. Oblivious, the bot kept working away at the lock.

"This is my friend's place."

"Does your friend know you're breaking into her place?" She pointed at the bot clinging to the lock mechanism.

"No... ma'am." Hudd struggled to keep his arms up. His muscles hurt, and he wanted to sit down. Normally, fear in a situation like this would kick him somewhat sober, but his endocrine system had been sucked dry by the stim. It was a pretty ridiculous failing on his part, not even able to be scared right. He snot-laughed.

Jesse closed the gap between them, spun Hudd around, took both his wrists in one of her thickly gloved hands, and pushed him to the ground with a knee to the

back. Joints Hudd didn't know he had popped all over his body, and a shooting pain burned up his spine. He screamed.

She used her other hand to nab the bot, and then kicked Naira's door a few times with a large boot.

While they waited, Hudd took the opportunity to vomit all over the hallway floor.

Some shuffling noises on the other side of the door, and then a thoroughly pissed Naira appeared, blonde hair frazzled, hand on hip.

"I apologize for the disturbance, Employee Young, but I discovered this individual attempting to enter your premises using illegally modified cleaning equipment."

Naira looked at the bot as Jesse held it up. She looked at Hudd and at the hot puddle of puke slowly filling the hall with a sour odor. Her lips didn't move.

"He says he's your friend." More silence. "Do you know him?"

Finally, Naira sighed, crossed her arms, nodded. "I do."

"Is he an unwelcome guest?"

Another sigh. "No."

The guard relaxed her grip – but only a little. "Naira, this is a total violation of your employment contract. Junkies with illegal tech visiting the complex at all hours? You could lose your job when I report this. Hell, you could lose FH status entirely."

"I know." Man, Nai did not sound happy. "So maybe you don't have to report it?"

“I could lose *my* job.”

“Could you at least delay reporting for 24 hours? So I have time to sort things out?”

“That I can do. But I’ve got to confiscate this tech now.”

Hudd managed to gurgle “no!” loud enough to make both women turn their heads.

Jesse turned back to Naira. “It’s the best I can do.”

“Thanks, Jess. I owe you one.”

“You’ll be owing sanitation one too, smells like.” She paused, leaned in. “You need me to remind this guy to behave before I leave?”

Naira cracked a half-smile. “No, I think I’ll be okay.”

They said goodnight, and Jesse released Hudd’s arms, letting them flop to his sides. She walked back the way she’d come, the bot beeping and whirring the whole time. Hudd’s hands were numb from the angle they’d been held at.

Naira bent down to help him up.

“I’m so sorry, Nai. I really-”

“Tomorrow.”

“Euh?”

“Save your explanations for tomorrow. Right now, I’m going back to sleep.”

He nodded. With her help, he managed to make it inside the apartment. She propped him up while she rebooted the electronic locks and latches. It felt good to lean on someone else’s shoulder for once, though his own shoulder felt mighty lonely at the moment.

“Poor Bot,” he mumbled.

Naira turned to him with sympathetic eyes. She took a deep breath and shook her head.

“If you wake me before my alarm goes off, I will kill you.”

Chapter Eight

HUDD WOKE UP looking at an unfamiliar ceiling. Its off-white bumpy plastic reflected the late morning light the same way his apartment ceiling did, but the angles were all wrong. He was still in his clothing – clothing that smelled like alcohol and putrefaction, but recognizable at least.

Moving slowly, he propped himself up on his elbows and winced at the protests of his shoulder sockets. The bedroom had perky yellow walls, like a fresh cleaning sponge, and a small vent above the doorway infused the air with the scent of artificial lilac. Wherever he was, it was nice.

Naira stepped out of the adjacent bathroom wearing a set of long gray pajamas. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, revealing a darkness at the roots he'd never noticed before.

“Oh no, you woke up on your own. And I was so looking forward to having to use an adrenaline shot on your heart. Though by the looks of it,” she pointed to the rapidly spreading bruises on his bicep, “you’ve had your fun with needles already.”

Hudd closed his eyes against the sudden pain that sound brought. His head hurt enough to tell him how much he'd screwed up. "Naira, I—"

"Forget it."

He felt the bed foam depress beside him and opened his eyes again. Naira sat next to him cross-legged, cheek on fist and elbow on knee.

"I know what it's like when you first realize you aren't nuts and the world really is coming apart at the seams. It's a lot to handle."

"You're not mad?"

"Oh, I'm pissed. But I understand. I made some pretty stupid decisions when I first figured it out too. Hopelessness fucks with your head."

"But I'm not—" Hudd sat up the rest of the way — too quickly. He lowered himself back down with a groan. "I'm not hopeless though. I mean, I was at first. But then my bot came to life and we hacked into Huma Co. and got all this info and — aww, shit. That guard took my bot. All the data was in it."

"Whooooa there. Back up a minute. You *backed* into *Huma Co.*? And now a security officer has that info? Are you *trying* to get us tossed out of the dome?"

"That's what I came to tell you last night." He sat back up, slower this time. "We can fight this, Nai. We just have to find a way to control these... disruptions in reality, or whatever they are. We can use them against Huma Co. and then they can't touch us!"

"I take it back. You are nuts." She rose from the bed,

paced around. “You can’t fight these people, and you can’t control these disruptions. It’s like they come straight from your subconscious, from things you didn’t even know you were thinking till they’re staring you in the face. You can’t control your subconscious.”

Hudd took a tentative step out of bed, wobbled, and stood up. “But what if you could?”

“You’re not exactly the poster child for self-restraint.” She stopped pacing and bit her lip. “Sorry, that was a cheap shot.”

“It’s true though.” He walked to her and she let him take her hands. “And I am totally scared shitless of what will happen if I can’t control these things. Someone else might die. You think I want more blood on my hands?” He let go and moved to lean on the wall. “But something amazing happened last night. My bot turned a suicide run into a success with its freaking imagination. I might not have the singular focus of a bot, but I brought the little sucker to life in the first place, so I figure my imagination must not be too bad either.”

They were both quiet for a while, the only noise the faint whir of the vent pushing out fresh scented air.

Hudd broke the silence first. “You told me yourself it’s only going to get worse. So what other choice is there?”

She rubbed her jawline, deep in thought. “Well, shit.”

“Does that mean you’ll help?”

“Yeah, I guess it does. You’ve no doubt put me back on their radar with your little display last night, so I think I have to.” She blew out a long puff of air. “I was getting

tired of running away anyway.”

“Awesome.” Hudd grinned. “So what should we do first?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Hey, you’re the brains of the operation. I’m just the muscle or the heart or something like that.”

“The heart is a muscle.”

“See? There you go.”

She laughed and they both relaxed visibly. “Okay then. I suppose a good test goal would be trying to get your bot back without leaving the room. Once we have the info it downloaded, we can decide our next move.”

“Sounds good. So how do we do that?”

“Guided meditation is as good a place to start as any. Lie down again.”

“Just me?” He hobbled back over and plopped on the bed.

“You’ll need someone to do the guiding, and besides, it’s been a long time since I was exposed to whatever causes these disruptions, so it might not work for me. But you just interacted with it last night, and you’re probably still active. Or it might not work outside the hot zone at all, in which case we’ll go to your place and try again. It’ll probably take a bit of experimenting to get anything to happen. At least we’ll learn something about the nature of this thing with each attempt. Now close your eyes.”

Hudd shut them tight.

“Relax. Even out your breathing. Longer exhales. You got it.

“Picture the bot in your hands. Remember exactly what it feels like, what it sounds like. Hold on to that beeping noise it made last night.

“Now you have to want it. Let desire wash over you completely. *Believe* you can reach out and grab it.”

He tried to get a clear image of the little cleaner in his mind, but the sounds of the room seemed to amplify as he focused – the air spritzer, the hum of the lights, even Naira’s breathing – not to mention the knot in his stomach that told him if this didn’t work he was screwed. If he couldn’t control his deeper thoughts and desires...

Hudd pictured the homeless man in his head, rag-tag candy red clothes, clumps of brain matter in his hair. He’d do anything to undo that mistake and anything to avoid making another like it.

Eyes still closed, he shook his hands and tried again. He pushed all the room noises from his thoughts, and gradually found some mental quiet. Now, the bot. First, he recalled the design schematics, which he figured was as close to the essence of the bot as he could get. Then, he moved on to the feel of it: smooth and warm, with a slight electric vibration. Holding his hands out in front of him, he could almost feel it.

He wanted that stupid bot more than he’d wanted anything his whole life.

Vertigo shot through his body and a sudden heaviness hit his hands. He scrambled not to drop it as he opened his eyes.

“Holy crap, it actually-”

That's when Hudd noticed the lack of... anything, anything other than whiteness all around and the bot in his hands. He couldn't tell at first which way was down, but as soon as he thought one way must be it, it was. The floor gained solidity under his feet – or had it always been solid? – and he realized he'd never actually stood up, yet he certainly felt upright.

Shapes became clear wherever he turned his focus. Shapes and colors. Red. So much red.

The dead man lay at his feet. Blood pooled out into peninsulas on the seamless white floor. No smell, no decay, just gore. Hudd knelt beside him as the bot scurried back to its perch.

“Why is he so messy?” The bot whirred loudly in the silence.

“Because I killed him.” Hudd's throat tightened. In a lower tone, he added, “I'm sorry.” He touched the man's arm. It felt warm.

“It's alright, cool cat. No harm done.”

Hudd whirled around and came face to face with the dead man. The homeless man. Only he was very much not dead. Hudd looked back over his shoulder. The body was still there.

“You're...”

“Dead? Yep. And not. Either/or. Whatever floats your catamaran, Stan.”

“I don't understand.” Hudd backed away from the body and his livelier counterpart both. “What's going on? Are you dead or not? ...I can't believe I just asked that

question.”

“Like I said, yes and no, this and that. It’s the yin, the yang, and the boomerang, my friend. We’re all partly dead and partly alive. But I can see that bothers you.” He bent down and pulled the floor up over the body until it was completely covered in flat whiteness and indistinguishable from the rest of the room. “You shouldn’t let it trouble you though. It’s just a matter of how you slice and dice it. Linear-free is the way to be.”

The newfound lack of dead bodies should’ve calmed Hudd, but he just felt dizzy.

The man pulled a shingle of red cloth from his homemade outfit and held it out to Hudd. “Here. You got some of me on you.” He motioned to a dark stain on the knee of Hudd’s jumpsuit.

As Hudd reluctantly reached for it, the cloth turned into a small version of the man’s face, and then burst into shreds of red confetti in a horrid replay of the alley scene. Hudd opened his mouth to protest, but the man held a finger up to stall him. Gradually, all the bits of confetti buzzed their way back to the man’s hand like a swarm of tiny bees. They swirled and rearranged and eventually coagulated back into the smiling face in the exact reverse of their explosion. The man laughed and closed his hand, and the small face disappeared.

“Do you see? This time thing isn’t as heavy as you want it to be, compadre. All these things you put stock in – time, matter, energy – just so much confetti. And the world has no shortage of confetti for the party, you dig?”

Hudd's cheeks burned. "Are you kidding me!? No, I don't dig! I lost my job, probably my home too – definitely my dignity – and broke a few federal laws to boot, all because I've been freaking out over making someone's – your – head explode into a thousand little bits, and now here you are talking to me, and the first thing you decide to do is explode your head in my face again!?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Harsh vibes, they don't jive with this place. So mellow, my fellow, mellow." The man looked around nervously, his smile strained around the edges.

Hudd looked around too. The floor had become jagged during the conversation, and a faint orange glow emanated from it. The air smelled faintly of lye and cracked pepper.

"I did this, didn't I?" Hudd walked around slowly. "If I get angry enough while I'm here, then I'll really be–"

"In trouble. And we've both had enough of that for a while, yes?"

Hudd nodded and knelt again to touch the floor.

"But that I means if I just feel something, want something deep enough, then..." The floor cooled under his touch, leaving beads of dew on his fingertips. He smiled. "Then I pretty much have free reign of this place."

The orange faded to yellow and the pepper transfigured into lilac.

"Wait. I didn't do that. Did I?"

The man glanced at the rapidly changing décor. His smile softened. "Your will is not the only fish in the sea. You have to share your toys."

“Naira? Naira’s here too? Where is she? I have to find her.” The bot on his shoulder beeped in agreement.

“That is the exciting part! The thrill of the chase. But I wouldn’t worry. The guy always gets the girl in these movies, buckaroo.”

“I’d settle for boring and predictable at this point.”

“Little birds must learn to fly if they don’t want to be winner winner chicken dinner. Besides, you blew me up. I think I’ve been pretty helpful, considering.”

“I can’t argue that.” Hudd sighed and closed his eyes. *Focus. Just got to focus.* He tried to see Naira inside and out. He tried to want her.

Chapter Nine

THE FIRST TIME he met her, she was sitting on a crate of dried beans in the alleyway behind Ernie's Enchilada Emporium, smoking a pink synthetic cigarette and sipping on a small biodegradable cup the color of over-recycled brown. Manufactured pretty faces were nothing new to Hudd, or anyone else under the dome, and he almost passed right by without a second glance.

Her uniform was a mash of red and yellow stars and stripes arranged on an ill-fitting jumpsuit, an eyesore to avoid for sure. She leaned down to scratch the spot where her pant cuff stuffed into a chunky red boot, and a pile of ash fell from the cig, landing on the previously shiny red plastic. Rather than dusting it off, she stared at the mess. That's when he noticed the look on her face, like she'd run out of batteries.

Hudd stopped, slipped around a corner, and watched. To most people, that blank stare said tired, but he thought he recognized more. Maybe the tilt of her chin or the furrowed eyebrows tipped him off. He just knew that her emptiness hid a whole lot of angry. That vacant stare was

a common dam on the flood.

His ears burned as he spied. He had to watch closely all the time, to be three steps ahead in order to survive the life he'd chosen. Why get all self-conscious now?

Her focus shifted from her boots to the gray alley wall, and, for a moment, he thought she might throw the cup against it. Then she looked straight at him, espresso-colored eyes piercing through a curtain of mellow-yellow bands.

"You caught me." Hudd stepped fully into view, hands up, as if he'd gotten caught stealing something. And hadn't he? He put on his best look of contrition. Smile, but not too much. "I just can't stand to see a pretty woman upset. I was trying to figure out some way to help."

"You've got a bang-up start going. They say stalking is the ultimate compliment." She tapped the cigarette twice, then snuffed it on the crate next to her. From one of her uniform's many pockets, she dug out a fresh cig, purple this time. Her thumb flicked the white chemical cap at the end and it ignited. Inhaling, she went back to staring at the wall, but Hudd noticed she kept him in her peripheral vision.

"Glad to be of service." He bowed. Took a step closer.

She slid her gaze toward him but didn't move her head. Purple smoke curled out of her nostrils and dissipated in a fuchsia haze. "Come any closer and I'll cover you in hot coffee. Second degree burns and the most horrible smell in the world. Think about it."

He smiled, a real one this time, and took a large step

backward. "I think I'm in love."

She rolled her eyes, rested her cig-holding hand on a knee, and finally turned her head his way. They sized each other up for a while. Maybe she saw the same thing in his eyes that he saw in hers. The dam. The floodwaters. Whatever she saw, she seemed to decide he wasn't a threat and turned back to her numbing substances of choice.

"If you're just going to stand there being awkward, you might as well join me."

Awkward?

She dug into her pocket again, pulled out a green cig, and tossed it at him. He caught it and lit it deftly, and leaned against the wall.

"I figured if you wanted to mug me, you would've tried it by now, and I haven't heard any alerts from my card yet."

"That's true." He sucked in deeply, then let the flavored smoke leak out between his lips in thin green clouds. It made his eyes itch and left a bitter taste on his tongue. "So what's your name?"

"Naira. You?"

"Hudd." He kept the cig in his hands but didn't take another puff. "So, Naira. What's someone like you doing wearing that triple E fashion disaster? You seem sharp enough to be way higher on the FH food chain."

"It pays enough. And I don't like TV."

"A brilliant underachiever. You're my kind of woman."

"Hudd, I get the feeling that every woman is your kind of woman."

They laughed.

Hudd stood alone in the old version of the alley. Naira's purple cig, still lit and covered in lipstick, rested on the crate. The strong scent of bitter coffee emanated from the cup next to it. A faint citrus smell – Naira's favorite perfume – occasionally cut through the smells of coffee and smoke. But no Naira in sight.

He walked over, picked up the cig. It felt real. It smelled real. After a quick puff, filling his lungs with purple haze, he could confirm it tasted real – not grape by a long shot, but still real. Hudd hoisted himself onto the crate and sat, legs swinging, watching her cig turn itself into ash in his hands. All his remembering, all his wanting, had brought him to – created? – this place. But he had been seeking the person, not the place.

Damnit, where are you, Nai? He considered that she might not want to be found, but shook it off. *You know I can't do this alone. I'm just the muscle, remember?*

He crushed the last of the cig and left the alley.

Out on the main streets, everything looked the same as real life, except for the utter lack of other people or anything else moving. Even the usual background noise of building generators was absent, leaving the scuffle of his boots on pavement to sound out loud enough to echo. While the bot scurried around taking basic scans, Hudd toyed with the idea of trying to dream up a different version of the city, or a different place entirely. Somewhere with people.

The bot crawled back up Hudd to report. “This dome-city is our dome-city, but not as messy.”

“That’s it? I can see that. You didn’t note anything else of interest?”

“I still contain the Huma Co. data files. Those might be interesting. Shall I read them to you now?”

Hudd sighed. “No, not without Naira. I doubt I’d understand them without her.”

“Where is Naira?”

“I don’t know. I thought of her and ended up here. Obviously I screwed up again.”

“Maybe she *is* here. The city is big.”

“Yeah, and big means it takes a long time to search. Don’t suppose your scans gave any clues where to start?”

The bot whirred. “Sorry. Scans suggest you follow your gut.”

“Of course they do.”

Hudd started walking in no direction in particular. Without other people to contend with, a search should be relatively easy. Naira would stand out like a neon sign, and, if the search took a while, Hudd could crash in an upscale hotel or steal food from a nearby store. That is, if he needed sleep and food. Did you need to sleep if you were already dreaming? He decided not to think about that.

His “gut” led him toward home, the most obvious base of operations, and a familiar place in the silent, not-quite-real city. Maybe she’d even be there waiting for him. It was the next place they’d planned to try if her apartment didn’t work. But what version of home would he find?

He stopped in the middle of the street. If this city existed in the timeframe where he first met Naira, he didn't want to go back to his apartment. Hudd had just started working at the factory at that time and still used stim whenever he could get away with it. His apartment undoubtedly contained countless used and unused stim sticks, an assortment of black market tech, and one vivisected bot in the middle of a majorly illegal overhaul.

But time clearly didn't work the same here. After all, he'd just had a nice chat with a man who was both dead and alive at the same time. So the apartment that awaited him might be the spartan room he'd come to call home after many insomniac nights memorizing the walls. Or maybe the apartment would exist in a timeframe from before he moved into it at all.

Hudd felt a headache coming on.

However, if time *did* work differently here, then maybe he could use that to his advantage. If he really wanted to, he could probably go back to another home entirely, back to when he still-

No. Hudd scratched at old stim scars on his arm, turned back the way he'd come. Home, any home, familiarity, comfort... those things would keep him stuck here. He'd been so thrown off by the dead man, by his separation from Naira, that he hadn't considered the dangers of this new dome-city. During those crushing rehab days of sweaty withdrawals and the molasses-slow process of his body replenishing its chemical stores, Hudd had thought he'd never find anything more tempting and

destructive than stim. He'd been wrong.

“Your arm is getting messy.”

The bot brought his attention back to his body. Blood seeped from his scars. Had he done that with his fingers or his mind?

I have to focus. He pulled a deep breath in through his nose, like Naira had instructed him to do during the meditation. The air smelled strange. The air never smelled strange. Filtration systems throughout the dome ensured citizens breathed nothing but the cleanest air. But this air smelled... burnt.

Hudd turned around slowly, looking for anything out of place. In the distance to the East, above the Art Inc. factory, a tall dark cloud rose up to fill the sky. He swore it hadn't been there five minutes ago. But that pulsing column of smoke was the only moving thing in the entire city. So Hudd ran toward it.

No electricity flowed to the factory's main gate. Security camera: dead. Backup generator: dead. The pneumatic door hinges remained unaffected, but the main locking mechanism had died in the closed position. Above the factory proper, the smoke poured into the sky.

“Can you climb up there and disengage the lock?” Hudd pointed at the sleek box attached to the industrial-sized steel bar that laid across the doors.

“I am not a monkey.” The bot picked at some lint on Hudd's shoulder. “Also, my power source would not sustain both myself and the door's needs.”

“Are you sure your best-case scenario simulations don’t suggest otherwise? Eh? Eh?”

“They suggest *you* may be able to think the power on.”

“Me?” Hudd gestured to the city around him with both hands. “I’m clearly no good at this, or else I would’ve found Naira instead of an empty city. If I try to turn the door on with my mind, I might blow it up instead.”

“That would be messy. Don’t do that.”

“Or I could transport us somewhere else entirely, and have to start searching all over again.”

“Hmm. Also potentially messy. Shall we wait for the power to return on its own then? I can clean while we wait.”

Hudd sighed. *When you put it that way...* “No. Let’s give it a try. You get up there and be ready to trigger the switch as soon as power – hopefully – comes back on. I don’t know if I’ll have to concentrate continuously or not to keep the power on once it returns.”

“The door remains taller than I’d prefer.” The bot dug its legs into Hudd’s shoulder, holding tight to drive the point home.

“Ow! Not like it’s taller than the *buildings* you’ve scaled before. Whatever. I’ll give you a boost.” Hudd pried the bot loose and lifted it as far up the door as he could reach. It quickly gained its footing and scurried the rest of the way to the lock lift mechanism.

“Ready.” It beeped its agitation down to Hudd.

“Okay. Guess it’s my turn.” Hudd rubbed his hands together, creating heat from the friction. He figured it

couldn't hurt. Then he placed both hands on the door panel in front of him and closed his eyes.

Deep breaths, like Naira said. Energy going through the hands, through the metal, up the door. Lights blinking, parts moving. Wires going live. Wires going live...

Beneath his hands, the door rumbled. The bot beeped frantically above him. He opened his eyes.

“Oh, shit.”

Chapter Ten

THE DOOR NARROWED its eyes. Its *eyes*. And then it swung its latch up with such speed that the bot went flying beyond Hudd's sight.

I've got to put a leash on that thing... Hudd made a mental note of the direction the bot flew in, just before jumping out of the way of a high-speed door panel swinging at him.

He instinctively raised his arms to block his face as he stumbled backwards, out of the door's reach. There didn't seem to be much the door could do as long as Hudd kept his distance, but Hudd couldn't advance anymore either. The burning smell coming from the building intensified.

"Go away!" The door's bassy voice reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite place it. "She doesn't want you here!"

"She? Do you mean Naira?" Hudd took a step forward, but had to backtrack as the door swiped at him again.

"She doesn't want you here!"

"Why not?"

"She doesn't want anyone here." Its voice shook the

ground. "So none shall be allowed to pass." It roared.

That's when it hit him: dim recollections of a children's program he'd gotten his hands on as a kid. The stalwart robot, on a search for the lost trove of programmable knowledge and joint lubricant, found itself face-to-face with a fierce, AI-enabled cargo hold that guarded the treasure. *None shall pass*, it told the robot, over and over.

He hadn't thought of that in *years*.

Deciding to roll with it, he called out to the door. "Hey! What if I know the password? Can I go inside then?"

"She did not give you the password. She doesn't want you here."

"That may be." Hudd cleared his throat. What *was* the password again? "But I'm her friend, so I have the password anyway. If I give it to you, can I enter?"

The door stared him down with its large, blood-shot eyes. "Yes," it finally said. "What is the password?"

"It's uh... It's uhm, open..." *Open, something*. "Open, sesame?"

"That is not the password!" The door swung its panels wildly, despite Hudd being out of reach.

"Shit!"

"That is also not the password!"

"No, I didn't— Hold on." He tried to replay the program in his head. It came in pieces. The robot walked up to the cargo hold... they argued... it threw its arms wide and declared...

"Listen!" Hudd yelled as he held his arms out at his

sides. “I am the seeker of knowledge! I have traveled far, I have sacrificed much, and I will not be denied!” His cheeks warmed in embarrassment, but he continued in an unwavering vibrato. “Open, sealer of secrets! Reveal your contents to me!”

Hudd stood, arms outstretched, waiting for any kind of reaction.

“She still does not want you here,” the door rumbled.

He dropped his arms to his sides and cursed under his breath, but then, slowly, the door opened its panels wide and closed its eyes. It did not speak again.

Hudd ran inside before anything else could go wrong. Sprinting past the employee lockers, he noticed the burnt smell increasing. His footsteps echoed down the too-quiet hall.

Just ahead, he could see the smaller double doors that led to the factory floor, their small windows caked with dust and a rainbow of old spray paint splatters. Through the grime, Hudd could just make out the figure of someone walking up and down the production-belt aisles. As he burst through the doors, the sound of singing after the silence of the hallway slowed his steps.

Abigail.

Machine grease covered her small hands and pale cheeks, but she'd let her hair down in red ringlets and traded her work jumpsuit for a casual blue jumper. Obvious blisters covered her bare feet as she rushed between various gears on the belts, yet she smiled and sang regardless. Every time she fixed one spot on the belt, another would freeze

up and start billowing out smoke. This didn't seem to bother her, but Hudd's lungs felt heavy in his chest.

Was she real? Could he "make" people? Hudd still wasn't 100% sure if he'd spoken to the real dead man earlier or just a copy from his guilty subconscious. But he'd at least been thinking of the man before their little chat; he hadn't thought of Abigail at all – had he? Her obliviousness didn't seem particularly realistic, so what if his subconscious had made something strange again? He threw his hands up.

"Are you real?"

She didn't turn, didn't miss a note or a twist of a wrench. Hudd moved in, threw himself in her path.

"Hey! Abby! I said, are you real?"

Her eyes gradually focused, like a robot powering on, until she no longer looked through him, but at him. When she finally registered his face, she furrowed her brow.

"Hudd? What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?"

"This is my dream." She stepped back from him and looked around as if seeing the factory for the first time. The smoke made her cough and she held on tighter to her wrench. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Tell me about it." Hudd rested his hands on his knees and tried to even out his breathing. Between the sprint and the smoke, he didn't feel so good. "I've been here for hours and I'm still trying to figure out the rules."

"Why am I dreaming about you?" She directed her questions just over his head. "I mean, of all people."

“Abby, you aren’t dreaming.”

“Do I like you? Am I supposed to kiss you?”

Hudd paused, raised an eyebrow, listened.

She laughed abruptly. “No. No, no. That’s ridiculous.”

“Hey, now.” Hudd straightened back up.

“No offense. You just aren’t my type.” She crouched down to resume her work on the belt. “But then why are you in my dream?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you! You aren’t dreaming.” He fanned the air around him to disperse some of the smoke. “Well, not the way you think you are.”

“Nonsense.” She gestured around the room with her wrench. “If this is real, where are all the people?”

“I don’t think it’s real, exactly-”

“You’re just my subconscious freaking out because of all the weird dreams I’ve been having.” She stood back up, wagged the wrench at him. “Some of them were pretty scary, but I’m going to change that. Those tips for lucid dreaming are working, or else I wouldn’t know this is a dream. Pretty soon, I’ll even be able to use this to see Mom and Jean again. I’ve got the whole situation under control.”

“Abigail, you aren’t listening to me.”

“But I still don’t know why I chose you to represent my subconscious...”

“Abigail!”

“Shut up!” She slammed the wrench down on the belt. “Shut up, shut up, shut up! I’m not going to let some sniveling analogue for my fears make me give up on this lucid dream thing. This is the only place I can I see them

again, the only place I can be happy. But you know that already, don't you?"

He took a step toward her, and she jumped back, started pacing.

"That's what this is!" The speed of her words startled Hudd. "I'm afraid of being happy! *That's* why I left them – not to keep myself from breaking down, but because I'm only happy when. I'm. breaking. down. What an idiot!" She slid to the floor. "But I already left. I left, and now it's too late to... too late to..." Her sight went far away again.

Hudd averted his eyes. He didn't think he could've dreamed up this kind of Abigail. That meant he and Naira weren't the only ones here. So in a way, this dream did belong to Abigail, as much as it belonged to anyone here.

No one should be allowed to see your dreams, Hudd decided.

Keeping his hands up to appear non-threatening, he approached again. "Abigail" He said her name in a soft voice. "It's okay. If you'll just come with me," he extended one hand, "we can get out of here, and-"

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

Hudd yanked his hand back from her personal bubble. He held it in front of him a moment longer, not wanting to give up, but eventually he let both hands drop to his sides. Next to the massive production belt, she looked small and fragile, arms wrapped around her knees. She fixated on something in the distance, her eyes went dim again, and the belt stopped belching its smoke without her thoughts to feed it.

He turned away. How long before the rest of the factory crew ended up trapped in this place? Or had they already gotten sucked into some other dream space, like the white room? *Damn it.* Hudd refrained from kicking the nearest support pole and dug his fingernails into his palms instead.

He couldn't help Abigail, and he wouldn't easily find Naira in a place of such unpredictability either. If his mind could focus laser sharp like the bot's, controlling the changes might be easier. Unfortunately, human brains don't cooperate so nicely with their owners. How the hell could he fix this? Maybe he couldn't.

Huma Co. They created this mess, and they should be the ones to fix it. If Hudd had to unleash his uncontrolled subconscious on the CEO to get some answers, so be it. His mind had already leapt ahead to Huma Co. HQ, picturing smug employees in crisp white suits in airy white buildings and all the things he'd do to anyone who stood in his way. So when he shouldered his way through the painting chamber's swinging double doors and found himself in the mega-corporation's main lobby, he wasn't surprised.

Well, not *too* surprised.

Chapter Eleven

AFTER THE NEAR ISOLATION of the dream city, the throng of people buzzing about the building sent his pulse skyrocketing. He stood completely still in the center of the gleaming white marble floor as hundreds of employees passed by every which way, carrying briefcases, type-pads, and other instruments of bureaucracy. A few glanced his way as they walked by, but most paid him no attention at all.

He rotated where he stood, taking it all in. Floor-to-ceiling plexiglas windows on every interior wall allowed him to see three or four hallways deep into the belly of the building. The only exterior wall consisted entirely of smooth white metal, save for a large set of double doors framed by a cornucopia of security measures. One side of the lobby boasted a lavish faux living room: white microfiber couches with black metal feet bolted to the floor, seamless glass coffee tables, and a digital fireplace emitting the smell of smoldering oak. A reception desk with a large black base and an oversized glass top oozing over the sides took up most of the other half of the lobby.

Behind the desk, a bank of five glass elevators labeled “Restricted Access” sporadically spit people out.

Hudd didn’t notice that many of the people faded in and out until one of the less solid technicians walked right through him. A sharp pain ripped between his shoulder blades, followed by a loud sucking noise and a *pop!* as the woman exited through his chest. It made him want to hurl.

He bee-lined for an empty space near reception, frantically checking his torso for damage on the way. Finding none, he slumped against the desk to catch his breath.

“Can I help you?” A receptionist flickered into existence. He looked down on Hudd with bloodshot eyes and a wicked case of bed head.

“Oh, uh...” *What the hell.* “Can you direct me to the head of the, uhm, dream project please?”

The receptionist let out an exaggerated sigh. “I need to see your ID badge please.”

“I don’t have one.”

“I am sorry, sir, but I am only authorized to give after hours assistance to individuals with the appropriate security clearance.” He yawned. “Until which time you are given a badge with sufficient, if any, security clearance, I am afraid I cannot speak to you any longer.” His eyelids drooped and his body began to fade away.

“Wait! Wait, uh, I’ve got one here somewhere, I just forgot where I put it. After hours and all.” Hudd pretended to pat down his pockets while he forced the image of a plastic security badge into his mind. The contents of one

of his pockets shifted, and he pulled out a white rectangular badge the size of a credits card. One side displayed a name, department, and employee number, and the other showed thumb and retinal prints. He licked his lips, which had suddenly become very dry, and smiled, handing it to the rapidly resolidifying receptionist.

The man examined it much too long. He glanced at Hudd once, twice, then set the badge on the desk. Pressing something behind his ear, he started talking, but not to Hudd.

“Yessir, I am sorry to disturb you.” His free finger swept back and forth on the edge of the desk as he spoke. “You told me to notify you of any... Yes. Yes, sir. Seems very adept at it. Mmhmm. Alright then. I will send him up.” He let go of the button behind his ear and handed the badge back to Hudd. “It is a very good fake. I am sure he will be impressed.”

Hudd nearly dropped the badge. “I don’t understand. If you know it’s a-”

“Middle elevator, floor 34, room G. Have a nice night, sir.” The receptionist yawned again and disappeared.

Hudd looked past the desk at the bank of glass elevators. He doubted whoever summoned him had friendly intentions for wannabe forgers, but maybe this person could answer some questions before things went south.

Squaring his shoulders, Hudd approached the middle elevator. He pressed the call button and the door to the empty compartment slid open with a loud *bing!* Inside, he

pressed “34”, and the transparent door shut, sounding the chime once again. The cab shot upwards so smoothly he could barely feel the motion, though the sight of floors whizzing by at incredible speeds supplied him with plenty of vertigo. Just as quickly as it started, it slowed and stopped at the first floor with opaque walls. Hudd stepped out onto soft crimson carpet and the elevator cab departed behind him.

It felt like a completely different building. Everything sported bright colors, and aside from the occasional turning of a doorknob or the crushing of carpet under invisible feet, Hudd saw no signs of occupation. Walking down the long corridor ahead, he thought he glimpsed a woman’s eye looking at him as he passed, but it was gone too quickly for him to be sure.

A set of dark green marble doors sat at the end of the hall, above which a small gold placard read “Room G” in eloquent script. Hudd grabbed the copper doorknob but stopped. His palm sweated on the cool metal, and all the muscles in his arm tensed. Reminding himself to breath, he went inside.

At one time, this had probably been a normal office. Bright bay windows draped in chic swatches of yellow lined the exterior-facing wall. A cluster of colorful couches and a desk filled most of the space, and built-in shelving units housing various exotic knick-knacks rounded out the rest of the room. But that’s where anything resembling normalcy ended.

Small objects drifted throughout the air, sans any kind

of suspension field. Packages of Welfare Food Analogue, a small green fish in a bubble of water – no fishbowl – and a bush producing spotted blue apples, floated by Hudd’s head, just to name a few.

The door reopened behind him, and a short, middle-aged man in a brown business suit walked in. He had fuzzy gray-brown hair and patchy stubble that looked due for a trim. Without smiling, he held out one calloused hand toward Hudd.

“David Talbot. You must be Eric.”

“I prefer Hudd.” He didn’t shake his hand.

“Yes, well.” Talbot retracted his hand and walked around to sit at the large desk. He motioned for Hudd to sit across from him, to no avail. “You certainly are stubborn. That’s good.”

“I have a feeling you’re about to become less enthusiastic about that, ‘cause I want some answers.” The fish swam circles around Hudd’s head as if he were a tank decoration. He tried to shoo it away.

Talbot waved a hand and the fish disappeared. “Nothing is ever free, Mr. Hudd, not even information.”

He got rid of that fish awful easy. Hudd eyed Talbot with a bit more caution. “What could you possibly want from me? You’ve already cost me my job and-”

“I’m sure you and I can work something out, find something else you have to offer, or else something you... care about.”

“Is that a threat?”

“If you have to ask, it clearly is. Now please,” he

motioned to the chairs opposite the desk again, “sit down.”

Hudd’s jaw tensed to the point of popping, but he did as he was told. For now.

“Good.” Talbot leaned back in his chair and held a hand out. The forged badge popped into his palm. “First, I want to congratulate you on your developing abilities. This badge is the best fake I’ve seen yet. That’s why you’re here.”

“It wasn’t good enough to fool you or your receptionist. I’m sure anyone in Huma Co.’s little play land here could do the same.”

“Yes and no. Anyone here has the potential to manifest, but few can currently do so easily. You see, it’s all about having the right muscles. In the waking world, you rely on physical muscles. But here, it comes down to strength of will. And you are particularly-”

“Stubborn.”

“Willful, yes. Not to mention plugged in.”

“Plugged into what?”

“Have you ever seen a Huma Co. employee badge up close?”

“No.” Hudd sank back into his seat. “I knew what the badge looked like though.”

“That’s because this isn’t just your dream. Every minute here you mesh more with the others. The strong wills can pull what they need from other connected minds, while the weaker ones... They end up like your friend Abigail, circling inwards.”

Hudd rushed back to his feet, both hands on the

desktop. “Bullshit. Abby’s stuck here because of you people, not because she’s weak. Anyone who knows her would never describe her that way. And if you don’t want to be on the receiving end of this ‘strong will’, you’ll get her out of here.”

“Can we save the macho posturing for another day?” Talbot tilted his head. “You still haven’t been exposed enough or trained enough to stay here indefinitely. You’re going to wake up soon and it’s important you understand this before then.”

Hudd’s hands flexed into fists in response.

“You did come here for answers, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So sit down and let’s make a deal that will allow me to give you what you seek.”

“Why would I make a deal with Huma Co. after what they’ve done?”

“Mm, well, two things.” He held up a finger. “I do not represent Huma Co. here.” A second finger went up. “Huma Co. is not responsible for this creation, though they are involved now.”

Hudd’s brain went sideways. “...what?”

“That’s all the info I’ll give away for free. If you want to know more, agree to play on my team.”

“I barely know you.”

“True, but I’m not your enemy. Quite the opposite. You’re talented, but unpracticed. I want to help you navigate this place as easily as possible, because you’ll be seeing a lot more of it in the future. We all will.”

“And once I’m trained, you’ll have a new attack dog, is that it?”

“Something like that.”

“But why? You seem able to control this place just fine on your own.”

“You’ll have time to figure that out after you wake up.”

Talbot looked at a newly materialized watch on his wrist.

“Which will be any moment now, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Wait! Naira. I have to find Naira before I go.”

“Does that mean you accept the terms of the agreement?”

“If you help me find Naira and get Abigail out of here then... fine. Now tell me where she is.”

“Relax.” Talbot rocked his swivel chair slowly. “Miss Young is here. But she’s had a lot more exposure than you have, and she can stand to stay a little longer. We’re not ready to let her go home yet. And Miss Eurig... You’ve seen her. That’s not something I can help with.”

Hudd sat silently for a while. Then, in a steady voice added, “If you harm my friends, I’ll blow your head off.”

Talbot laughed out loud; it startled him – Hudd hadn’t been sure this guy was capable of laughter. “Of course you would, of course. Your previous outburst is what drew our attention to you in the first place. But do you really think I need a head here? Thinking in terms of life and death is so basic. Maybe I was wrong about you.” He shook his head. “Still, Miss Young thinks you are highly intelligent. Perhaps after some education, you’ll start to understand.”

Quieter this time. "Please don't hurt them."

"Sweet dreams, Mr. Hudd." Talbot smiled. "Enjoy your answers."

The floor fell out from under Hudd's feet, and whiteness swallowed him whole.

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A c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

THIS BOOK WAS nine years in the making. Thank you to all the friends, family, and teachers who helped me get from idea to publication. Your encouragement and wise words mean the world to me.

A special shout-out to my editor, Nik, who knew when to challenge the manuscript and when to let it breathe, and to my beta readers, Andrew, Barb, Brenda, Jason, and Paul, who caught a slew of transcription typos and gave me much to think about. Any remaining errors are my own.

And last, but never least, my partner in crime and in life, Billy, who kept the house clean during deadline crunches, filled my belly with Thai food on rough days, and never let me give up. Thank you for helping to keep my dream alive.

About The Author

MELISSA J. LYTTON writes and publishes a variety of darkly quirky works, including science fiction novels, feminist poetry, and pop journalism.

Her work has appeared in *In the Questions: Poetry by and about Strong Women*, *Up, Do: Flash Fiction by Women Writers*, The Multicultural Theatre Initiative's *10 Minute Play Festival*, *Gothic Beauty Magazine*, *The University Daily Kansan*, and Eidolon Career Solutions' *One Life Newsletter*.

She earned her MFA in Creative Writing with an emphasis in Science Fiction from Goddard College in Vermont, where she studied under Rachel Pollack, Rebecca Brown, and Bhanu Kapil. Prior to that, she received her BA in English: Creative Writing from the University of Kansas, where she was named their first Science Fiction Scholar and won the Edgar Wolfe Award in Fiction for her short story, "Operator".

She is currently at work on her next speculative fiction novel, due out by the end of 2016.