

CHAPTER 1

Cay had to act quickly, as he only had a couple of hours before Limea's return. He'd made up his mind. Was it a mistake? Probably, but he couldn't pretend anymore. And he surely wouldn't wait for the fixers to come after him.

He packed a couple of charged batteries and a sample of solar fabric, some clothes, snacks and water. He made sure to enable alternative security measures that allowed him to access his encrypted private cloud without an implant. To do that, his fingerprint and a pass phrase said in his voice with the right intonation was required. He also had a copy of the most important things, including technical specs and documents related to his invention in a button of his smart jacket.

Cay looked around. Their home, a magical place that kept all troubles away, their common creative space. Even the plants he didn't feel quite comfortable around—all of that was soaked in memories and feelings, a projection of their connection.

He sighed and focused on the task at hand. There came the messy part. Cay injected a painkiller in his arm and took a small household laser already configured for his needs. It was very thin and precise, Cay had always admired its thoughtful design. He waited for the painkiller to kick in and steadied his hand. Took a deep breath. Okay.

He had practiced the exact movement he had to make multiple times with the laser off. The implant was a biotech that integrated with his flesh and was impossible to distinguish without special equipment. To get rid of it, Cay made an incision right at the base of his thumb, slid the laser down, slightly to the right and up again. He cut out a piece of flesh 2 centimeters long, 2 millimeters wide and 5 millimeters deep in a smooth, decisive motion. The laser cauterized the wound, so there was almost no blood, and the painkiller did its job well. Still, he had a strange feeling looking at his mutilated palm.

A citizen without an implant was technically disabled. He couldn't interact with any of the city's software and machinery, which meant he was unable to enter some of the buildings, participate in any transactions, use any means of communication or transportation. Even his home AI wouldn't listen to him. He couldn't use an ordinary passenger drone. But he also turned invisible. No one knew who he was or where he was. He disappeared from all the radars. He didn't exist anymore. He was no one. A blank canvas where anything could be painted. That was the tradeoff he was willing to take.

Of course, living without an implant was impossible in any city, and living outside the city was impossible by default. Cay wasn't stupid enough to try any of that. But there was a way to get a new implant accompanied by a new identity. The problem was, one couldn't come close to the people who did it with an actual implant. It was essential to

get rid of it before getting near the facility, otherwise he wouldn't be admitted. Maybe he would even be killed? Cay didn't know for sure. Anyway, this part was done. Now the trick was to actually get there.

He took the last glance at their apartment. Without his implant he was a stranger here. His home assistant didn't even detect his presence, probably considering him some kind of animal.

"Bye, Risa," Cay said anyway, but the AI ignored him.

He took two decisive steps and stopped suddenly at the door, then sat down right there, on the floor with his back to the wall. After leaving the apartment, he would never be able to come back here. He needed one last moment. His mind started racing through the familiar loop of explanations of what might be happening to him, and he gave in to it.

The first one was that he was in a simulation which felt like days on his subjective timescale, while in real time it only took minutes. Simulations that felt longer than a day had been illegal since the infamous series of lethal and insanity cases, but, of course, he might have wanted to try one anyway. Would he be able to find a way if he decided to have a go? Definitely. Would he choose a scenario like the one he was experiencing now? Hardly. But it could be a sim with a hidden or random script.

Normally, a person who wanted to experience something beyond their ordinary life, conquer a fear, work on a trauma or test themselves in a dangerous situation would go to one of the multiple simulation manufacturers. They had all types of plots from the most fantastical to the really mundane ones. They would interview a customer to find out about their expectations and possible problems and then offer over a dozen scenarios.

The customer would study them in detail and make adjustments if necessary. After everything was agreed on, a personalized sim would be prepared, the client would be put into stasis and their recent memories blocked to prevent them from remembering they were in a simulation. It would last up to five minutes in real time and up to one day on a subjective timescale.

Some people preferred not to block their memories, as knowing they were in a simulation allowed them to have superpowers or satisfy the fantasies they wouldn't dare to in real life. But there was a black market of sims offering those searching for adrenaline a wider range of more extreme and dangerous options. He might have decided to try those. He'd done that before. And hell, didn't he and Limea have fun on the outskirts of their consciousness.

Limea occupied an essential chunk of his thoughts and was a part of most of his recent experiences. But could she just be a simulation's construct implanted into his memories for the sake of the plot? It was another illegal feature banned a couple of years ago, as it was responsible for mental disorders, depression and several suicides.

After emerging from the experience, people would deny something that felt so real could be just a construct of a sim. They wouldn't agree they could have loved someone who'd never existed in the first place. They'd break up with their partners, abandon their families and friends in search of a person who was to be found nowhere but in the virtual world. They were ready to give up their real lives for a simulation that suddenly made them so happy and complete.

The thought scared Cay, but he had to admit to himself that anything could happen on the sim black market. Deep in his heart he didn't believe it though, as he felt that the simulation wouldn't be able to create their intricate bond. It could make him feel love, but it wouldn't turn him into an antenna tuned to her frequencies. It was more than just chemistry easily recreated by technology. It was quantum entanglement on human level. A beautiful dance of their melanas' internal fire if one believed in melanas in the first place. Cay didn't, but he'd always appreciated the elegant beauty of the idea.

According to the legend, the first image caught by the eyes of a baby in the moment of birth formed a melana, the inner stem of a person that made them who they really were. It was the reason many mothers found beautiful and meaningful spots to give birth before science proved newborns couldn't see well enough to make out the environment. Many mothers would still do it, as science had always been incapable of changing people's beliefs if they were emotionally committed to the idea.

Anyway, what was between him and Limea couldn't be simulated. It was too unique, too deep, it reached the very bottom of his being and further. It glowed in the darkness like a billion dancing galaxies. It was a mystical experience that extended beyond the three known dimensions. It was rooted in his every cell.

On the other hand, Cay had questioned the reality of their relationship many times because it seemed too good to be true. He'd never experienced anything like this before, and he didn't know anyone who had. At times he thought that maybe he'd designed the whole thing for himself, because it was impossible for two people to connect in all those sophisticated ways.

What if it felt so unbelievably good precisely because it was constructed by a simulation? No wonder people lost their minds and didn't want to go back to their partners after that. Normal human relationship seemed a tasteless parody of the real thing. The thought threatened the fragile remains of confidence Cay was still holding on to. It was scary to lose Limea but knowing she had never really existed was terrifying. He inhaled deeply and moved on to the rest of the options he had.

Well, those options weren't optimistic either. If he really was in a simulation, it could have malfunctioned. Such things happened once in a while, especially with illegal ones, mainly because of viruses. It could get really unpleasant. Cay heard about a sim that put its user on an infinite loop, repeating a day of his life in every detail over and

over again. The sitter noticed unusual brain activity on the third minute of the simulation and decided to pull the user out, but by then he'd already had ten thousand four hundred twenty-two years five months and seventeen days of repetition in subjective time. The guy was too far gone by the time he got out. They said even the fixers couldn't make him better.

Some people got the scariest scenarios exploiting their inner weaknesses and fears. They often came out broken, mere shadows of who they used to be. Maybe that was happening to him. The good news was that it wasn't real. The bad news was that it could last for years of subjective time before someone noticed, and when they did, it could be too late.

Another option was that he'd lost his mind. It looked plausible, too. Being realistic, Cay's experiences with simulations and neuro-stimulations rather predisposed to it. He'd had his fun, and his brain might have eventually decided to avenge itself. He'd tried all kinds of sims, some of them illegal and not properly tested. Sometimes he forgot who he actually was inside of those sims and had to rediscover himself again after coming back. Together with Limea he took part in a group simulation where a common consciousness was formed by thirteen contributors. Those contributors weren't exactly the sanest people. Cay felt like parts of their minds remained somewhere inside his brain.

And with neuro-stimulations different parts of his brain were excited by electrical impulses changing his perception of reality. Sometimes he expanded beyond himself and merged with the Universe. Sometimes he went to another one to communicate with the creatures from out there. Sometimes he became something else, and often inexpressible things happened.

All of those influenced who he was. And even though Cay was mostly pleased with their impact, he also realized they gradually erased an imprint of normality he might have once had. Maybe it wasn't that bad. It hadn't been until this strange time anyway.

Cay shook his head. He'd been through these options before. What he was going through was too weird to be real, but there were no definitive signs that it wasn't. He was in a sort of a limbo where he didn't trust himself, questioned and doubted everything but couldn't do anything because he just wasn't sure about any of it. However, what happened several days before made him finally take the radical steps he was taking.

He and Limea were together in their living room. Cay was looking into her eyes. They were still beautiful, but the emerald fire of nature, the portal to other worlds was replaced by still water of a lake. Cay felt he could reach the bottom of it. Observing her physical beauty that still pleased the eye, he knew that the most alluring and fascinating part of her was gone.

Could she be some kind of an elaborate machine, Cay thought? What would he find inside if he cut her open, he wondered? He glanced at a knife she'd brought from the kitchen to cut fruit.

For a moment, he considered doing it, almost sure he'd see short-circuiting wires instead of blood. His hand even twitched a bit in the direction of the knife. He backed out appalled by the thought. He had to go out of the room to hide his terror and calm his trembling hands. The thought that he could actually hurt the woman he loved was unbearable. Cay couldn't just sit still and wait for the disaster to happen.

Could the woman he loved have been replaced by someone or something that looked exactly like her? He didn't think so. There was no way that he knew of. Yet, this was how it felt.

Whatever it was, he had to do something. If it was a simulation, he either had to find a way to unlock its subsequent levels or just do something to stay sane until he could be pulled out of it. If it wasn't, he had to get away from the people who managed to replace his bonding partner with an intricate and persuasive copy and find out what had happened to her. If he was insane, he had to get away from Limea before he hurt her and end up in the fixers' hands. He'd made a decision. It was wrong for so many reasons. It was right for so many others.

It was time to say goodbye to their home. Cay got up and looked around one last time. So many memories and emotions he had to leave behind. He glanced at the sim-set and recalled something. There was one more thing he had to take with him. He stepped on the treadmill, slipped the glasses on and entered his virtual storage unit. There, on the left, behind the door with all the things that held sentimental value for him was Limea's wedding gift.

It was a virtual project she'd made. From a distance, it looked like a painting of his eyes. They were alive, gleaming with emotions, thoughts and questions. There was childish curiosity and bewilderment, courage and strength, intelligence and kindness, understanding and acceptance, care and love, ambition and confidence, knowledge and vulnerability, happiness and uncertainty. There were many desires that drove him, excitement, bursting energy, but also some tranquility and peace in the very corners.

Cay felt that in this painting Limea managed to capture his inner world, the stem that lay beneath all the external layers. He never stopped being amazed at how well she knew him.

As he came closer, more details emerged, and the painting began to move and change. He could see the Universe gleaming behind the eyes. It became more evident with every step he took and began to flow from the eyes and fill the space around him until he was wrapped and lost in it. There were supernova explosions and galaxies

whirling around black holes, pulsars shooting their beams across the Universe, gas clouds enshrouding newly born stars and planets orbiting their suns.

He could choose one and take a closer look at it. Some were teeming with life, wild or technologically advanced, others were dead and empty, some destroyed by cosmic bombardments or their past inhabitants. He could also take a step back and see the bigger picture: galaxies binding into groups, clusters, superclusters and finally luminous filaments, the cosmic web of energy and life floating in the void. Expanding into infinity, which had always fascinated and startled him.

This was how Limea saw him. He had to take it with him. This had to stay when he became a new person. He copied it to the memory button of his smart jacket.

Before leaving his life behind, he habitually looked in the mirror. His grey eyes seemed darker than in the artwork he'd just seen. There were dark circles below them, and a couple of lines between his eyebrows. His brown hair was a slight mess as always. It was probably time to get it cut. He forgot to shave, so stubble was growing on his cheeks. His brown smart jacket was old, but it was his favorite one. A yellow T-shirt with an image of an alien asking for water was a reference to a movie he and Limea loved, a gift from her.

As the door closed behind him, Cay didn't look back.