

CYBERIZATION

CHAPTER 7

COMBAT-TRAINING CHIP 1.0

I returned to my humble, somewhat pathetic walk-in apartment, still baffled by everything that had happened. My journey back after getting modded had been remarkably uneventful, a welcome respite given the last twenty-four hours. Still, I was a bit down, trying to figure out how to use the appearance scanner that C3-POS mentioned as a way to expand my wardrobe and hairstyle options. To be honest, I didn't care much about a fake holographic augmentation, but I wasn't a fan of this bald look—though I must say, I think I was pulling it off.

While reflecting on my interactions with C3-POS, thoughts of T-POS and Robo-Punk also came to mind. *“I should probably start taking the time to learn people’s names instead of just assigning them nicknames,”* I pondered as the door slid shut behind me. But just as quickly, I dismissed that ridiculous notion.

“Hello, Obsidia,” Viri materialized before me. “I trust you’re satisfied with your recent appointment?”

I grunted as I went to sit down on my couch, only to find it missing. “Umm... Viri, where’s my couch?” I asked.

“Ah, every feature and amenity within your personal space is designed for multi-use and multi-generational living,” my AI assistant Viri stated, as if channeling a real estate agent.

“Multi-generational?”

“Designed to last,” was Viri’s quick and simple reply. The answer felt almost too human, but my thoughts quickly returned to the wall.

I found myself wondering where the couch would emerge from, as there were no visible gaps for such a thing to appear. Just as I was about to ask, the couch slid seamlessly out of the wall. It was odd, almost as if the surface layer of the wall was peeling away to form it. However, considering everything I’d experienced since yesterday, this was the least bizarre event. I spun on my heels and plopped my robo-ass down, pleasantly surprised to find that the seat molded to my shape, even though it looked like dark gray concrete.

“Hey, Viri?” I called out, leaning into the couch as it gradually morphed into a high-back chair, still conforming to my every curve. “I was given three... training chips,” I hesitated, avoiding the term ‘combat-training simulation chips’ that C3-POS had used. “How do I use them?” I finished.

“I can more than happy assist you with that,” Viri responded. “Now activating.”

“No—I didn’t mean—!” I tried to shout, not wanting to initiate it just yet, but my words were cut off as everything went black.

//: *COMBAT-TRAINING SIMULATION INITIALIZED.*

Suddenly, I found myself standing on a polished black platform, illuminated by neon lights that traced its edges. Above me, dark storm clouds roiled, threaded with ribbons of persistent lightning. Another platform began to rise in front of me, revealing a waist-high stand holding a single apple. Confused, I tilted my head and glanced around to see if anyone else was witnessing this bizarre scene, but I was alone.

//: *FIRST TASK.*

//: *RETRIEVE THE APPLE.*

“What in the Tron batshit is this?” I muttered, but received no response.

Hesitantly, I took a step forward and found nothing amiss—well, aside from the fact that I was suddenly in some sort of virtual reality, being told to retrieve an apple as part of my combat training. I took another step, then another, and soon I was confidently marching toward the second platform, prepared to claim my apple. Just as my foot touched the platform, it vanished. I let out a blood-curdling scream as I plummeted into the void below.

With a jarring impact, the air was knocked out of me. Clutching my stomach, I was surprised to feel soft flesh. Gasping, I looked at my hand and realized I was fully human again. In fact, everything felt more vivid and real in this virtual space than it had in the actual world with my cybernetic rig. That’s when I noticed I was back on the original platform, the apple still taunting me from its position on the other platform.

Struggling to my feet, I let out a long, agonizing groan. Now considerably more cautious than before my fall, I approached the edge of my platform. Wanting to test the waters, I extended my foot to tap the other platform. Sure enough, the moment I did, it vanished—along with the one I was standing on!

I hit my starting point with another hard thud, so jarring that I could have sworn I tasted blood. Groaning, I got onto all fours and glared at that infuriating apple. Throwing caution to the wind, I charged forward, letting out a war cry. As I took my final step at the edge of my platform, I leapt into the air, aiming for that elusive apple, ready to grasp victory in my hand. At least, that was the plan. In reality, I didn’t even come close. I doubt I made it a quarter of the way across the other platform before I plummeted through the void, the platform having vanished beneath me.

Landing with a loud crunch, I was sure I had broken my nose. But as quickly as the pain surged through me, it disappeared. To my relief, a quick touch confirmed my nose was fine. As I remained on the ground, knees pulled under me and hunched over, patting my face for reassurance, I really took notice of the ground beneath me. The polished black surface was like glass, and in it, I saw a reflection gazing back up at me.

She had long black hair, almond-shaped eyes, a narrow nose, soft full lips, and high cheekbones. She appeared to be a blend of various ethnic backgrounds—perhaps a mix of European, East Asian, and South American. Her ghostly white complexion made it hard to determine for sure. Dressed in a black, skin-tight rubber suit adorned with neon lights, she seemed like something out of a sci-fi film from my time.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Clearly, someone in the future has a soft spot for twentieth-century pop culture," I snickered to myself.

Watching her mimic my movements with uncanny precision was unsettling. I knew this was my reflection, but I didn't recognize her at all. Sure, many of her features were similar to the ones I had chosen for myself, but I hadn't picked those with this specific reflection in mind—or had I?

For the first time since awakening, I found myself contemplating what I might have lost, and in that brief moment, a twinge of sadness washed over me.

Taking a deep sigh, I suppressed my emotions, surprised to even feel them in this place. Up until now, my emotional range had felt somewhat muted—I'd only experienced a dull sensation when I thought I should be upset or depressed. Pushing these feelings aside, I rose to my feet, redirecting my frustration away from my thoughts and focusing it squarely on that infuriating apple.

I lost track of how long I'd been at it, and the number of times I'd fallen was too many to count. There I was, pacing the perimeter of my floating platform, my mind in overdrive as I tried to solve the infuriating riddle of that apple. I'd tried everything—looking skyward, walking forward with my eyes closed, you name it. At one point, one of my landings even resulted in me doing the splits, which, let me tell you, virtual me is not built for that. To sum it up, I was completely stumped—and the soreness in my groin and thighs showed no signs of letting up unlike all my other injuries. Probably psychological.

"Let's see, what mods did I get?" I mused aloud, tapping my chin in thought. "A new shell or body casing, that crazy translucent coating, shielding... Oh, and the combat chips." My eyes widened. "Weaponry!" I blurted out, suddenly excited. "That's it—gravity manipulation!" I continued, eyeing the apple with renewed interest.

Stepping back from the edge, I did a few warm-up jumps. I shook out my hands and arms, stretching my neck from side to side. With a grin, I sprinted toward the edge, leapt into the air, and struck a pose like everyone's favorite iron-clad superhero—as if I were about to rocket off into the sky. Gravity manipulation sounded a lot like flying to me, and I assumed the activation would be intuitive, given the absence of any visible switches on my body. I was wrong—so, so, wrong. Activation wasn't intuitive at all. I crashed face-first into my polished, starting point, looking every bit like a pretzel as my legs hung up and behind me.

"That's it!" I shouted at the sky. "I don't know how I'm supposed to get that," I said, thrusting my hand behind me toward the apple for emphasis. As I did, I heard a clatter followed by a thud. Turning my head, I noticed the apple and its stand had fallen over, the apple continuing to roll further away from me.

I looked down at my palm, a sly grin forming on my face. “I’m not an iron-clad superhero. I’m a space wizard,” I declared, thrusting my hand toward the apple. To my amazement, it was as if an invisible force smacked the apple, sending it sailing over the edge of the opposite platform. My smile quickly turned into a frown, however, as my platform vanished beneath me, sending me plummeting down until I crash-landed back at my starting point.

“Ow!” I shouted skyward. “This is getting old,” I continued, secretly hoping that no one else was within earshot to answer or bear witness. The relentless cycle of awkward falls was certainly not a spectacle I wanted to share.

Experimenting with a different approach, I made a swiping motion with my hand, as if trying to bat the apple toward me. Unfortunately, I struck the apple with such force that I might as well have hit a home run. My prize for this unintended feat? A faceplant back at square one! Needless to say, my time in this twisted, sadistic simulation was accompanied by a chorus of groans and complaints.

Lying there, consumed by frustration and rage, I reached out and slapped the ground with all my might. A thunderous boom echoed through the space, and both the apple and its stand on the opposite platform seemed to collapse under an unimaginable gravitational force. Cautiously, I lifted my hand, half-expecting to implode under my newfound power. As I stared at my palm in disbelief, my platform vanished beneath me.