

CYBERIZATION

CHAPTER 5

After slipping into my outfit—yes, it’s made from mushroom leather and synthetic spider silk, weird, right?—Viri arranged transportation for me. Although I was initially apprehensive about having an AI assistant—something I’d never admit in her presence—I found her surprisingly useful. As I stepped out of my cramped apartment, I entered a bustling inner courtyard teeming with life, sounds, and... holograms?

“Man, ads have gotten way more in-your-face, huh? And...” I paused, catching sight of a blue translucent woman dancing without any clothes on. “Is she seriously naked?”

Looking around, I realized every wall, nook, and even the air itself was jam-packed with ads. They totally covered up all the graffiti I saw last night. Guess these floating billboards must have some kind of ‘quiet hours’ or something, explaining why I didn’t see them when I got here. Makes me wonder what the spaceport looks like in the daytime.

Despite everything, the fashion I noticed on everyone felt strangely familiar. Even if the materials they were made from were odd—guess everything that’s old becomes new again, huh? The whole scene screamed futuristic ‘80s to me. And speaking of vibes, no one seemed to care much about modesty, despite the snow outside. Then again, we were all still inside this gigantic building.

What really caught my eye was how everyone’s body was sort of... android-ish? Sure, some hadn’t gone full-on robot, but a majority were sporting some kind of cybernetic add-on. Gazing over the balcony, I noticed some floors resembled a chaotic marketplace. Makeshift shops and food stalls were scattered all over the various levels, filling the air with a cacophony of scents and sounds.

“Move your carbon ass!” I heard someone shouting.

Quickly stepping to the side, I pressed my back against the wall. A man coated in chrome and covered in random decals sprinted past me. Four others were hot on his heels. Just as they were almost upon him, he used the balcony edge as a springboard, kicked against the wall, and flung himself back over the edge in a jaw-dropping parkour move.

Shocked, I leaned over the balcony to watch him free-fall nearly sixteen stories. I braced myself for the sickening impact, but just a few feet above the ground, he decelerated, landing as lightly as a feather, before darting off again.

The four pursuers cursed in unison. Three of them spun around and bolted for the elevator, while the fourth—a hulking brute—unleashed a guttural growl before taking a leap of faith over the balcony. My eyes were glued to the scene, eagerly anticipating another miraculous landing.

Only, it never happened.

There was a sickening crunch loud enough to echo up to my level. The brute had landed on some unlucky individual below, creating a shower of sparks, mechanical parts, and blood. Despite the horrifying impact and the shrieks of bystanders, the brute appeared unfazed. He plowed through the crowd, shoving aside screaming people as he charged off in the same direction the chrome man had fled.

“What the hell,” I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper. Yet, that was the extent of my horror. Emotionally, I was still rather numb to negative emotions.

With a shrug that felt oddly detached even for me, I headed toward the elevators. After a short wait, one arrived, and I stepped in. As I descended, I ignored the advertisements flashing and blaring around me. Instead, I found myself lost in self-analysis, pondering why I wasn’t more horrified by the chaos I’d just witnessed. I mean, I knew why—some software brain chip thingy was influencing my mind, leaving me emotionally numb, after all. But the feeling was uncannily familiar, like a side effect of some medication I’d been on. *Oh well.*

As I stepped out of the elevator, the crowd on the ground floor had swelled to an enormous size, making it impossible not to bump into people as I navigated through the colosseum-sized courtyard. Scratch that—it was at least four times the size of a colosseum, which got me wondering how massive this whole place must look from the outside. Anyway, after elbowing my way through the throng, I finally made it outdoors and into the snow. Surprisingly, I didn’t feel cold at all. Did I have some sort of internal heater for my brain and other organs? That is, if I even had other organs. It made me wonder—do brains even have nerves to feel temperature?

While lost in these thoughts, a taxi began its descent, landing smoothly in front of me. As the door swung open, I climbed in and quickly realized that, like every other vehicle I’d encountered so far, this one was automated. No driver, no steering wheel, no cockpit—just a sleek, driverless interior. The door closed behind me, and with a purring hum, the taxi lifted off the ground, ascending into the sky.

The blizzard-like conditions seemed to intensify as the taxi climbed higher, though that might have just been an illusion created by the motion. Peering through the window, I saw that the building I’d just left was truly massive—easily covering at least ten square blocks. The swirling snow was a relief, obscuring the shit ton of floating holographic advertisements. Although, oddly enough, there seemed to be fewer of them outside.

The farther I got from the building, the more I realized its base was shaped like an upside-down pyramid, supporting a gargantuan megastructure above it. What I’d thought was ground level was actually elevated several stories higher than I had believed. As the taxi flew over rows upon rows of similarly designed buildings, I spotted city lights twinkling between the gaps in the base structure. It was as if there was an entire second city hidden below.

I felt a sense of relief as the taxi’s hum shifted, signaling the start of my descent. The building I was approaching was a stark contrast to the uniform, cookie-cutter structures I had left behind. It was both dazzling and awe-inspiring, with far fewer floating, translucent ads than I had been in my face everywhere else. The building itself looked pristine—mostly white with elegant black

trim and neon lights that seemed to reach toward the heavens. As I got closer, I realized I couldn't fully appreciate the scale and grandeur of the structure; it was simply too large to take in all at once.

What caught my attention were the numerous landing pads that seamlessly integrated into the building's architecture. It was toward one of these pads that my taxi was descending. The hum of the vehicle quickened in tempo, and before I knew it, the door slid open, signaling my arrival.

With a grin, I stepped out of the taxi, earlier tragedies forgotten. My mind had shifted to something far more pressing: shopping! "Time to snag some new accessories! I wonder how much of this so-called allowance I actually have," I muttered to myself. Strutting confidently toward the building's entrance, I tried my best to ignore the vertiginous edge of the platform.

As I approached the door, I was mesmerized by how it slid open in the middle, folding in on itself like some kind of crazy origami. Beyond it lay another courtyard—I was beginning to think they really had a thing for inner courtyards here, although, with a nuclear winter outside, who could blame them? As I stepped in, what appeared to be a gold-plated android, devoid of any human-like facial features, approached me.

"Ah, Miss Obsidia, I've been expecting you," it said, its voice tinged with a synthetic British accent that left no room for emotional nuance.

"You have?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

"Why, yes, of course," it replied, its head tilting in a way that seemed to indicate confusion, though it was hard to tell without facial features. "Your AI assistant scheduled this appointment," the robot clarified.

"Huh, I guess that makes sense," I mumbled, more to myself than to the robot before me. Although I considered the possibility that this golden entity could also contain a human brain, something about its mannerisms told me otherwise. And what struck me as even more odd was the distinct difference between its level of humanoid behavior and that of Viri. *Ah, whatever!*

"Would you be so kind as to follow me this way," the robot gestured with its hand, leading me further into the courtyard.

As I followed it in, I realized the space was less a courtyard and more an indoor park, complete with trees. Areas not adorned with greenery were bathed in pristine white. The setting was lined with storefronts that resembled a mall, albeit a far more luxurious and expensive-looking one. What caught my eye were the people leisurely walking about. Unlike the individuals I had seen earlier, these folks didn't have any noticeable cybernetic or robotic modifications. They looked like full-fleshed humans, enjoying what seemed like a casual Sunday stroll. But as I moved further into the space, I couldn't shake the feeling that some people were staring—maybe even glaring—at me. *Odd.*

The golden robot led me to a store that seemed somewhat secluded, set back from the main thoroughfare. Oddly enough, the store appeared to be less frequented than others, and its size was modest compared to the sprawling boutiques I'd passed earlier. It felt like a back alley within a

utopia—polished and elegant, yet somehow incongruent with its surroundings. The robot took its place behind a counter and turned to face me, looking as if it were ready to conduct business.

“Umm... What kind of cosmetic modifications do you offer? I’m particularly interested in some hair,” I began, pausing to glance down at my decidedly flat chest before continuing, “and perhaps some other...options?” My voice carried a subtle hint, indicating the other enhancements I had in mind for my two vouchers.

“Miss Obsidia, I’m afraid your benefactor has already made all the necessary purchases,” it announced, catching me off guard. “Today’s appointment is to apply those options.”

“W-What?” I stammered, my mind racing. While I doubted, I was some sort of covert assassin, it seemed like Sir Fuzzy was the likely culprit behind this, and I briefly entertained the idea of murdering him. But almost as quickly, the impulse faded. “Ugh, damn dulled emotions!” I grumbled, frustrated by my own lack of a stronger reaction.