

CYBERIZATION

CHAPTER 14

THE MAN-MACHINE

The zoo adventure was both a mixed bag and a colossal letdown. No real T-Rex? Seriously? They teased us with a hologram of a massive one lumbering around the lobby, but c'mon, that barely counts.

After getting back home, I've been messing around with my virtual image for the past two hours, contemplating what tweaks I might fancy before syncing them with my HD Coating. So far, I've locked down a more human-like face, adorned with a couple of aesthetic metallic streaks—totally unnecessary, functionality-wise, but hey, when has jewelry ever been about practicality? The black hair stayed but now boasts a cyan lightning effect, while the dark gray jacket endured a color crisis—cyan? No, red. Ugh—black. Yellow? Pink! Alright, cyan and black it is—and I ditched the pants and shoes.

Overall, my bare robotic frame now resembles something akin to a sleek, white, skintight spacesuit or armor, jazzed up with a cyan cropped jacket with a fair bit of black trimming. I must admit, it vibes with me way more. Now, if I opt to entertain Aviana's body mod recommendation and offer, it's back to the drawing board for my look. But something weird cropped up that I hadn't noticed before: I could actually *feel* my jacket and hair. It's got me wondering if there's some nanotech shenanigans going on with my Holographic Deception Coating.

I stared at myself, quite pleased, before a frown nudged at my expression. Making one last adjustment, I took a final look at my now black and white jacket, adorned with pink and cyan trimming. What can I say? I'm incredibly indecisive.

Just as I was about to alter the color of my jacket for the umpteenth time, a knock at the door interrupted my fashion crisis. With a resigned sigh, I ended my virtual editing session, allowing the effects to ripple over me. Despite the petite size of my apartment, the transformation was completed by the time I walked to the door.

As the door slid open, a scowl formed on my face.

My visitor—or perhaps more accurately, intruder—still bore an uncanny resemblance to a battered Terminator, a look that no longer seemed strikingly out of place. He, or maybe it (not sure if there's a human brain in there or not), was donned in a suit, crafted from a rough fiber—mushroom fiber, if I had to hazard a guess. Absent its blazer and with sleeves rolled up, it revealed not tattoos, but painted decals on his arms. The most unsettling feature was his face: flesh that looked as if it had been stretched tight and stapled onto his tarnished chrome cranium. A pair of pale-yellow eyes—or were they optics? Camera lenses?—gleamed ominously. Then, almost mockingly, there was the cigar, stubbornly clamped in his mouth. Because, of course, why not?

"You know, I'm surprised they still make those," I said, nodding towards the cigar clamped in the mouth of whom I had internally dubbed T-POS.

"Cigars crafted from various fungi are quite popular and rather effective at preventing mold growth within older metallic rigs," he stated, pausing to release a soft cough. "Now, Ms. Knight, I'm here as part of your parole. Would you mind inviting me inside?"

The "Ms. Knight" part caught me off guard, causing a momentary pause before I remembered that I was registered as Obsidia Knight. I shot T-POS another steely glare before reluctantly stepping aside, allowing the battered-looking machine entry. The last thing I needed was this intrusive entity all up in my business, especially considering my supposed new role as a hitman assassin. To my surprise, I found myself grappling with annoyance—wasn't that a negative emotion? At least there wasn't a flicker of panic to be found.

"What are these?" T-POS inquired, picking up one of my chips, an integral component for my virtual combat training simulations. These weren't as compact or potent as the grain-of-rice-sized chips I had used previously, yet they retained a notable utility.

However, before I could answer, Viri interjected, her voice emanating from nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. "Those are career training simulations," she declared.

The man-machine placed the chip back down, then posed another query. "What career choice have you settled on?"

Viri, articulate and somewhat deceptive in her reply, stated, "She is currently exploring several training options but has yet to find her specialty."

In reality, Viri was right, albeit slyly misleading.

I hadn't determined whether I preferred hand-to-hand combat, handguns, or sniping, and I was still trying to master gravity manipulation. I couldn't quite fling a person around, but smaller objects—like a stubborn apple—were within my realm of possibilities.

"Huh, I see," T-POS muttered, his skin stretched voice betraying no emotion. He gently set the chip back on the table. "Well, everything appears to be in order. I'll be visiting your three neighbors next. Remember, the corporation that released you offers housing and an allowance only for the initial six months. Subsequent to that, sustaining your living arrangements will fall to you."

I nodded, my arms folded, attempting to appear unfazed by his sterile candor.

"If affordability becomes an issue," he continued, "the government will present you with a choice: accept a package aboard one of the ARKs or consider enlistment in the military. Do note, opting for the military provides an immediate advancement into Officer ranking upon academy graduation. Naturally, this route will afford you additional training and opportunities post-completion of any contract you sign with them."

I rolled my eyes at his thinly veiled attempt at military recruitment. Not surprisingly, he noticed.

"And what if neither option appeals to me?" I pressed, eyebrow arching challengingly.

T-POS paused, his optics locking onto mine with chilling, mechanized precision. “Should you fail to secure the means to sustain yourself,” he began, his voice a monotonous drone, “you will be designated an illegal citizen. Arrest and deportation to one of the ARKs will ensue, irrespective of your preferences.”

He turned, methodically making his way toward the door, his message delivered, his smoke-filled presence still lingering heavily in the room. As he walked out of my apartment, he paused momentarily, glancing back over his shoulder.

“If you do decide to pursue the military option, please don't hesitate to contact me. And do know, two of your neighbors have decided to take up the offer,” T-POS stated, just before the door seamlessly slid shut behind him.

“Which two?” I pondered aloud.

With a heavy sigh, I returned to my training simulations. However, not before indulging in a few more rounds of editing my appearance. Ultimately, I retained my last look. The subsequent two weeks breezed by, as I holed up in my room, relentlessly engaging in training. T-POS made two additional visits during this time, each consisting of a brief look around, a couple of inconsequential questions, his recruitment spiel, and a swift exit. When not training, I subsisted on a sugar-cube-sized nutrient block. Without an organic body, my dietary needs were minimal, and since my battery pack never required recharging, I dedicated my energy back into combat training.

I managed to discern which neighbors had enlisted in the military: Silica and Orin. Evidently, securing employment was more arduous than anticipated, predominantly because nearly everything was automated, delegated either to physical robots or software. Thus, work felt more akin to obtaining corporate sponsorship than traditional employment. Aviana, however, had found sponsorship as a doll, a sex doll to be precise. Apparently, no matter the era in human history, sex work remained ever-present.

Considering not only Earth but also colonies throughout our solar system were grappling with severe overcrowding, a person could swiftly be classified as an illegal citizen if they failed to secure sponsorship, enlist in the military, or evade deportation. The latter involved having one's brain extracted and implanted aboard one of the Artificially Rendered Kosmos or ARK ships that orbited Jupiter, confining them to a virtual reality existence.

Though humans—more accurately, human-created AI—had mastered faster-than-light travel, our dependency on AI had engendered a refusal from alien factions in space to allow human colonization beyond our borders. This predicament was evidently fueling the military's recruitment drive.

War was on the horizon, and a deeply unsettling conversation with Viri had me grappling with the stark realities of my options as an assassin. My task seemed ludicrously binary on the surface: either assassinate the alien delegation and ignite an interspecies war, or target the predominant leader championing for human reliance upon AI, and our cutting-edge technology with cyberization.

I found myself tethered to indecision. On one hand, I was wholeheartedly in favor of embracing our technological advancements and defiantly confronting the aliens. Yet, a nagging thought lingered: would assassinating the aliens inadvertently bolster sympathy for them among humans and catalyze a burgeoning anti-cyberization faction? It was plausible. The aliens would undoubtedly retaliate, propelling us into the war for which humanity was bracing.

Conversely, extinguishing the life of the pro-AI and cyberization leader might avert an extraterrestrial war, but it could also ignite a civil war, sparking conflict amongst ourselves.

Both paths were paved with uncertainty and potential chaos—shitty options, if I were to put it bluntly. I could, theoretically, abstain from action altogether, choosing instead the refuge of military enlistment or surrendering to a virtual existence within the ARKs. But an inexplicable emotion churned within me: despite the daunting and morally ambiguous options before me, a part of me was oddly... excited about the task at hand.

However, a vexing question lingered incessantly in my thoughts: why was I, of all people, bestowed with such consequential choices? My past was a fragmented mosaic, a cryptic puzzle devoid of coherent images or meaningful connections. Scattered memories flittered in and out of my consciousness, yet none provided insights into who I had been before the frigid embrace of preservation encased my brain upon death.

Even more perplexing was my inability to discern who my true benefactor was in this complex web of machinations. My handler, Robo-Punk—or Jaxt, as he was technically named—was my immediate contact, yet intuition suggested he was hardly the puppeteer orchestrating these events from the shadows.

Perhaps my relentless commitment to training was a subconscious method to insulate my mind from these bewildering uncertainties, a way to fixate my focus on tangible progress and improvement amidst a sea of enigmatic questions.

Now, here I was, ensconced within my virtual training ground, enveloped by an abyss of darkness. The sky above brooded, churning with dark, electrifying clouds that intermittently ripped apart with veins of vivid lightning. Below, a sleek, inky surface stretched infinitely, flawlessly reflecting my image back toward me as if peering into a shadowy parallel universe. Strewn all around me lay the virtual corpses of those I'd vanquished in training, a morbid testament to relentless practice and simulated death. Yet, amidst this desolate and grim tableau, I clutched a vibrant red apple in my hand.

“I’m ready!”