



DANGER ZONE ONE

— IDOL ZONE —

“Here they are, live at Tranax Square Garden—” a booming, energetic voice escaped from massive speakers throughout the concert stadium, “—the hottest band in Pallad City...”

Before the announcer could finish, an audience of cheering teenagers had risen from their seats. A riotous blitz of excited screams, clapping hands, and stomping feet echoed across the packed venue.

“They're ready to set your world on fire,” the announcer continued, “the solid gold, total action, chromium global love attraction—Dream Machine!”

Aurie cheered until her voice cracked. She had spent weeks trying to score tickets for the Dream Machine concert. After devoting countless hours searching the Net, she ended up finding a scalper and paid three times the ticket price—still considering it a bargain. Though Dream Machine had only released their debut album a month ago, the band's fast-growing popularity already made getting a seat at one of their concerts nearly impossible.

The stage was engulfed in flashing multicolored lights, pyrotechnic bursts of confetti, and a thick cloud of fog. Several faint silhouettes could be seen in the smoke, sending Aurie and the rest of the crowd into a frenzy. A wind machine kicked in, causing the fog to disperse, revealing five girls in extravagant neon-colored mini-skirts and skin-tight tops, each with glowing pastel hair. They waved to the audience with one hand, illuminated microphones held in the other.

Synth-heavy instrumentals blared over the speakers and the five girls began to dance, moving across the stage with synchronized coordination and rhythm. They raised their microphones up and began to sing, voices flawless, every lyric pitch-perfect. Their dance moves became faster with rapid spins, sudden twirls, and an occasional flip that would put a seasoned acrobat to shame.

None of the girls appeared older than eighteen or nineteen, each possessing extraordinary beauty and well-endowed physiques. Only their eyes betrayed a hint of fault; eyes that, though vibrant and sparkling with energy, lacked any trace of human emotion. To Aurie and Dream Machine's ever-growing fanbase, it was no secret that these girls were something *different*. And for good reason.

Dream Machine was the world's first android idol group—five girls who would never age, or be

afflicted by sickness, exhaustion, and the pressures of stardom. Their pre-programmed voices would never sing off-key, their dance moves never out of sync, the endless jubilation towards their fans would never waver—no matter how many autographs they signed or meet-and-greets they attended. To a music industry beleaguered by the whims, demands, and limitations of their human talent, Dream Machine was perfection.

Aurie watched in awe as the idols commanded the stage, holding the audience rapt in their sway. Dream Machine's pulsating cyberpop beats and rhythmic choreography left Aurie mesmerized, infatuated by the five performers. Her eyes traced their every movement. The music relaxed her; the idol's voices provided a soothing warmth that caused her eyelids to become heavy. An overwhelming calm washed over her entire body. She felt at ease, yet strangely tired. Aurie smiled, her head bobbing forward. She welcomed the feeling, the static-like tingling of her skin and the sense of absolute peace.

* * *

Madison slammed her hand down on the interrogation table. “Don't feed me that nonsense! At least come up with a *decent* alibi.”

Seated behind the table, Aurie recoiled back, tears in her eyes. “Y-you have to believe me, I don't remember stealing any clothing or jewelry from Grendales.”

“You don't remember walking out of the store with these items?” Madison pointed at a dress and necklace on the table, then rolled her eyes. “We have eyewitness accounts from an employee and two customers—not to mention surveillance footage of you doing it!”

Aurie shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I'm telling you, I can't remember taking those... I've never stolen anything in my entire life.”

Madison turned away from the teenager and sighed. “Do you have a history of memory loss?”

“N-no,” Aurie replied sheepishly.

Reena stood at the other side of the interrogation room, a folder containing various electronic papers in her hand. It was painful to watch the teenager break down and cry. The girl seemed sincere enough. *Could it be that she really didn't remember?*

“What a great use of our time,” Madison groaned, making no attempt to hide her sarcasm. “The Special Crimes Unit handling simple theft...”

Was it really so simple? Reena thought to herself. There had been an unusually high number of incidents involving theft over the last month. Stranger still, all suspects had been teenagers, each with the same excuse—none could remember stealing anything. Due to their age, and all being first time offenders, most were slapped with a small fine, probation, or community service, but this was clearly becoming a city-wide epidemic. It was the reason the Special Crimes Unit had been called in to oversee a more thorough investigation.

“I-I'll pay for the items,” Aurie pleaded, “I promise!”

“Do you know how much that dress and necklace cost?” Madison asked, annoyance in her voice. “I hope you have a very *large* allowance...”

“Uh, Madison,” Reena flipped open the folder, removing a sheet of electronic paper, “looking all these cases over, I found something *really* weird. Every teenager accused of committing a theft had gone to a Dream Machine concert.”

Madison ran her fingers through her hair. “What about it? Most of them also ate at Burger World too. They're all teens—there's at least a dozen so-called connections we could find among them.”

Reena stepped forward, approaching Aurie. She smiled, trying to give the teenager at least some small sense of comfort. “Say, Aurie, Dream Machine's that android idol group, right?”

“Y-yes,” the girl stammered.

“Androids?” Madison repeated, surprised. “People actually *pay* to see that?”

Reena turned to her partner and nodded. “They've only been around for a month or so, but they've skyrocketed in popularity almost overnight.”

Madison shrugged. “Okay—so what? Where are you going with this?”

Reena's attention shifted back to the distressed teen. “I'm only familiar with *one* of Dream Machine's songs—the one they're always playing on NetRadio. It's called Hyper Gate, right?”

“That's right...” Aurie responded, head sunk low. “It's my favorite song from them.”

“Did they play it at the concert?”

Aurie opened her mouth to speak but, before uttering a word, she froze. She pressed her fingers against her temples, as if trying to dispel a headache.

“Are you okay?” Reena asked.

“Y-yeah,” Aurie replied, her voice wavering, “but I can't remember if they played Hyper Gate...”

“According to your statement, the concert was two nights ago,” Madison cut in, “how can you *not* remember?”

Reena walked around the table, placing a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder. “Take your time. Do you recall if they played the song during their encore? It's their hit song, they had to play it at some point.”

“I don't remember much of the concert,” Aurie admitted, speaking just above a whisper. “Only images—*hazy* images. There are certain parts I can't remember at all, and when I try to think about it, it feels so vague and distorted. I think I blacked out for part of the night...”

Reena could tell there was tangible fear in the girl's voice.

“You think you could've been drugged?” Madison asked, her attitude more subdued than a few moments ago.

The girl shook her head. “I don't know. I don't think so...”

“We're chasing shadows, Rookie,” Madison said, glaring at Reena. “Even if something *had* happened at the concert, how does it relate to her stealing from Grendales?”

Reena opened the folder, taking hold of another sheet of electronic paper. She looked over the text—it was one of the cases she had read earlier in the day. “Madison, another girl had claimed the same thing. She mentioned feeling tired at the concert—that she couldn't completely remember the entire performance, and that she may have fallen asleep during the show. She was arrested yesterday for stealing a purse at Chevons Boutiques.”

“Okay, that's odd,” Madison folded her arms, “but you need to give us more to go on than that...”

“All of these incidents involving theft happened twenty-four hours *after* each teenager went to a Dream Machine concert,” Reena explained. “Isn't that just a *little* strange?”

“Fine,” Madison exhaled. “It's a thin lead but, seeing how we're getting nowhere fast *here*, let's look into it.”

* * *

“This is beneath me,” Dr. Sero hissed, throwing his hands to the air. “It's a waste of my talent!” The gray-haired man paced back and forth in the cluttered laboratory, sidestepping tables stacked with machine parts, lighting equipment, and large speakers. He spun around, his long lab coat flapping behind him, eyes gazing with manic fury at the five android girls standing motionless, just feet away.

With clenched fists Dr. Sero silently condemned his creations. He detested that his genius had been twisted and squandered to create something as pitiful as an idol group. He had especially grown to despise the name *Dream Machine*—a constant reminder that his *own* dreams and ambitions had been tainted. With invidious spite he looked away from the five artificial abominations, each one in sleep

mode—unaware that they were targets of their creator's contempt. Dr. Sero had built the androids with his own hands, and now he wanted nothing more than to *dismantle* them.

“Busy at work?”

Dr. Sero turned to the source of the voice, the source that also fueled his ever-growing hate. He watched as Dann Karson walked down the laboratory stairs and approached with a smug grin.

“You know, Sero,” Karson made a playful gesture to brush some imaginary dust off his business suit, “you should really clean up a little in here. The dust's liable to get into the equipment.”

Under his breath, Dr. Ratham Sero cursed the young man, wishing him to fall dead on the spot. “What are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be upstairs, counting your money?”

“I'm just checking to see how my financial investments are doing,” Karson replied, walking up to the idols. “Will they be ready for tomorrow night's concert?”

“I grow weary of this nonsense,” Dr. Sero scoffed. “Years of scientific research thrown to the wayside for some childish musical group!”

“Dr. Sero,” Karson began, his tone calm and relaxed, “without me, you'd be on the street corner selling light bulbs. Your precious scientific establishment not only discredited you, they practically *exiled* you from the community, and left you to rot—or have you forgotten?”

Sero grit his teeth in response. Karson's words brought back painful memories of years past. His work on TSD—Total Synaptic Direction—had been met with harsh criticism from his colleagues, followed by outcries that he had breached all manner of moral ethics. They claimed his research was merely an advanced form of hypnotic mind control, and a dangerous one at that.

“Haven't I given you *every* resource you've asked for?” Karson straightened his neck tie. “Your friends in the scientific community may not have approved of you working on human test subjects, but did *I* ever call your methods into question?”

“It was the only way I could properly test my work!” Dr. Sero snapped.

“You don't have to explain to me,” Karson replied with a calculating smirk. “After all, I'm the *only* one who could see the potential in your continued TSD research. That's why I funded your work.”

“Don't spew your honey-coated drivel to me,” Dr. Sero stomped across the lab, making his frustration evident. “You had me build these insipid machines, and for what? So you could start some banal attraction for teenaged halfwits? My work should be elevated to heights undreamed of, and yet here we are building automatons for meager gain.”

“I admit, starting an independent record label and initiating this little idol group *isn't* my ultimate goal,” Karson explained, “it's just a means to an end.”

“I've designed these androids,” Sero barked, “incorporated my TSD system into their voices, into their music—I've even incorporated hypertrance suggestion into their dance moves, and into the lighting systems, and through the speakers...”

“I'm aware of your contributions, doctor.”

“...but for what purpose, Karson? So a handful of teenagers can go and randomly steal from department stores? How does that benefit my work? How does that benefit *us*? I can give these audiences *any* hypnotic suggestion, and petty *thievery* is the best your vacuous mind can conjure up!”

Karson sighed. “You're not seeing the larger picture. The TSD system—the ability to hypnotize *anyone*, deprive them of their own free will and have them carry out *any* task—has limitless military applications. Let's not forget private sector interest as well. Do you think these tests have been for show? I have military contractors, private security firms, international clients, and megacorps observing our work. Each audience member we've hypnotized has been monitored and the results sent to these interested buyers. Needless to say, they have been *very* satisfied with your work.”

“Finally, they see the value of my efforts—my aspirations have been validated!” Dr. Sero staggered to a table, hunching over it with widening eyes. Then he froze. His heart beating with newfound intensity. His gaze rose to Karson. “Wait—why didn't you share this information with me sooner? Were you trying to hide it from me? You were planning to steal my TSD system and claim it

as your own, weren't you?"

"Don't be such a paranoid old fool," Karson countered, waving his hand in dismissal. "We've been at this for little over a month—I had no guarantees your system would even work. I've only approached buyers within the last week. My plan was to tell you tonight."

"Why tonight?" Dr. Sero asked, not entirely believing the man's words.

"Because tonight we need to prepare the androids and equipment for tomorrow's big show," Karson responded, his smile growing. "So far, we've limited ourselves to only hypnotizing *less* than one percent of the audience. We have around four to eight test subjects per concert—that changes tomorrow. I want the *entire* audience exposed to the TSD system."

"Are you mad?" Dr. Sero blurted out. "What are we going to do with thousands of hypnotized subjects?"

"I want a riot as soon as they leave the concert," Karson demanded. "Have them take to the streets and let them go wild."

"What will *that* possibly serve?"

"It's the ultimate example of what the TSD is capable of. If we can manage that, there won't be a client who *wouldn't* pay top dollar for your system. We can name our price. Think of it—the near infinite uses for the TSD. Corporations can command public interest to earn unimaginable profits, countries can utilize it as a means of control over their own citizens, terrorists could instill civil unrest among the masses, black budget organizations could have armies of hypnotized assassins with zero memory of who employed them."

"Yes, it's brilliant!" Dr. Sero eagerly stepped forward, grabbing one of the nearest speakers. "I must get to work, there isn't a *moment* to lose. Tomorrow they'll finally see just what my TSD system can do!"

* * *

The Crypt was the lowest sublevel in the Pallad City Police Department, and also the coldest—a necessity to prevent the department's Central Mainframe and various network terminals from overheating. Madison shivered as she stood behind Cherie's chair. "What's the verdict?"

"Well, let's just say, a lot more interesting than I thought." The pink-haired Cyber Crimes specialist hammered away at her keyboard. Four monitors were playing footage of various Dream Machine concerts while their song, Hyper Gate, played through several speakers.

"And that means...?" Madison tilted her head, awaiting a more detailed answer.

"This is really a job better suited for our resident techie—but since Irene has the day off," Cherie's rapid fingers continued over the keyboard, "I'll give you the best I've got."

Madison watched as Cherie struck a button and a darkened overhead monitor flickered to life, showing a digital graph with curving horizontal lines. "What's this?"

"Various wavelengths taken from Dream Machine's music," Cherie explained. "They're measured in frequencies and how the human ear perceives them. I'm no expert, but based on what I'm seeing—this music *isn't* entirely normal."

"You've got my attention. Keep going."

Cherie pointed at the monitor. "For instance, the frequencies found in Hyper Gate aren't in *any* other song I've analyzed. So I took that data and ran it through numerous directories on the Net. The closest match I could find was from a scientific study conducted decades ago about subliminal auditory messages."

"Subliminal?"

"The study looked at methods of hypnosis via music, but the results were inconclusive. It seemed

sound alone *wouldn't* cause a subject to undergo hypnotic induction. That said, the study claimed sound *combined* with visual stimuli could *potentially* alter a person's state of mind. There was a scientist named Dr. Ratham Sero who proposed something called TSD—Total Synaptic Direction—which used lights and sound to achieve an advanced form of hypnosis. I couldn't find any evidence if he ever got it to work.”

Madison's attention turned to the monitors showcasing the Dream Machine concert. “The stage lights—could *they* be acting with the music?”

“Not only the lights,” Cherie added, “but also the idols' dance moves could act as a hypnotic catalyst.”

Madison shook her head. “It seems so far-fetched.”

“But not impossible.”

“Yeah, then why were only so *few* people affected? Wouldn't the *entire* audience be exposed to the music and visuals?”

Cherie held a finger under her chin, giving Madison's question some thought. She recalled what she had read in the auditory study results. Her eyes turned to a screen displaying the Dream Machine concert. “Wait a sec—”

“What is it?”

Leaping out of her chair, Cherie pointed to the screen. “See those tiny green flashes coming from the overhead stage lights? They look like laser pointers.”

“I see them,” Madison nodded.

“What if just one or two of them had a *specific* lens on it—and it was only directed at a handful of members in the audience. Between the sound and visuals, that light could be the final trigger—that's why only a few concert goers enter a state of hypnosis, because it's *not* meant to target the entire crowd!”

Madison leaned in, taking a closer look at the screen. “But why? Who profits from making teenagers commit petty theft?”

“The only way to *really* find out what's going on,” Cherie lamented, “is to examine those android idols, along with the speakers and lights.”

Madison was quiet for a brief moment, thinking over Cherie's words. “I guess that's just what I'll have to do...”

* * *

Madison and Reena, both dressed in casual t-shirts and shorts, followed the crowd backstage. Stage crew and tech assistants moved with swift purpose as they prepared for the impending concert.

“I'm Lara, your backstage guide!” The jubilant young woman lead a group of thirty VIP guests down a hallway. “Follow me and I'll take you to our exclusive pre-show area. We have complimentary Dream Machine shirts, posters, and an exclusive photobook for every VIP attendee.”

A girl, no more than the age of sixteen, raised her arm. “I have a question, when can we meet the idols? I thought we'd get to talk to them?”

“You'll get to meet each of them after the show,” Lara replied. “A special meet-and-greet is planned where they'll sign autographs and take photos with their biggest fans.”

Biggest fans, my ass, Madison scoffed to herself. *More like the wealthy fans who could pay top dollar for these stupid backstage passes.*

“Gee, Madison,” Reena whispered, “the Chief was really upset about us going undercover.”

“I'm not surprised,” Madison responded, voice low. “These VIP tickets cost a small fortune through a scalper, and the department had to front the cash. I just hope it was worth it...”

“Hey,” another teenager in the crowd spoke up, “where are the idols now?”

“They're downstairs preparing for the show,” Lara answered.

As the group continued walking down the hallway, Madison seized her partner by the arm and led her through the nearest doorway marked 'exit'. They were quick enough so that no one witnessed their departure from the crowd. Entering a stairwell, Madison hurried down the steps, the Rookie in pursuit.

“We're going to be in big trouble if someone spots us,” Reena warned.

“I'll take my chances,” Madison replied.

* * *

Twenty minutes of exploring numerous rooms, hallways, and maintenance corridors had left Madison agitated.

“This stadium's lower levels are like one giant maze,” Madison complained, “and we're no closer to finding where they keep those androids.”

“The concert starts in forty minutes,” Reena said, flustered. “Think we'll find them before then?”

From the corner of Madison's eye something had caught her attention. She hurried over to a metal door—the *only* door with an electronic lock on it. She tried the handle, but it wouldn't turn. “We haven't found a single sealed door in the entire sublevel—except for *this* one.”

“Yeah, but no getting in there without knowing the passcode,” Reena sighed.

“Don't be so sure,” Madison raised her wrist, bringing her I.DAC communicator bracelet just inches away from the lock. She tapped a button on the communicator and a sudden *click* told her that the lock mechanism had been bypassed.

“Whoa, I didn't know our I.DACs could do that,” Reena said, eyes wide.

“Maybe you would have, if you *read* the manual,” Madison snapped, pushing the door open.

They entered into a laboratory filled with assorted machinery, tools, and concert equipment. No one appeared to be around—no one *human*, anyway.

“Found them!” Reena gasped, pointing to the five android idols near the far side of the room.

Madison's interest diverted to a nearby computer terminal. She struck a button on the keyboard and an array of files blinked to life on the screen. One folder was titled *TSD System*. Quickly, Madison accessed the folder icon.

“Anything interesting?” Reena asked.

“Total Synaptic Direction,” Madison read aloud, “this was the proposed hypnosis program Cherie had mentioned. It's all true—someone's using these idols to hypnotize people!”

“What the devil are you doing in here?!”

Madison and Reena turned to the source of the panicked voice. Two men stood at the entrance to the room. One was an older gray-haired man in a lab coat, the other was a smarmy-looking type, dressed in a business suit.

The older man turned to his associate. “Who are these people, Karson? Are they the buyers you spoke of?”

“No—” Karson responded with noticeable concern, “—I don't know *who* they are, but they certainly don't belong here!”

Madison reached behind her back, grabbing the holstered Krado handgun from underneath her t-shirt. She aimed the firearm at the two men. “Nobody move, this is the PCPD—you're under arrest!”

“The police!?” Karson gasped, turning to the man beside him. “Use the androids, Dr. Sero! Use them now!”

Dr. Sero yelled at the five motionless idols. “TSD units, attack the intruders!”

“What the—” Madison was caught off guard as the five androids leapt into motion. One swung a

fist but Madison ducked, just missing contact with the blow. Another android cartwheeled forward, its leg slamming into the officer's chest.

"Madison!" Reena yelled, watching as her partner crashed into a nearby table.

"Stay back," Madison ordered, gasping for air. A third idol charged at her.

"Get her gun!" Dr. Sero screamed. "Then *kill* her!"

Madison sidestepped the idol's incoming attack, leaned in close and pressed the barrel of her Krado against the android's temple. She squeezed the trigger. The idol's head exploded into a burst of white synthetic blood and mechanical fragments. The machine convulsed, then toppled over.

"What have you done?!" Dr. Sero wept. "That automaton was a technological masterwork!"

"You can always make more," Karson hissed. "If our operation here gets exposed, we're *both* finished!"

Another idol lunged for Madison, but she shoved the gun barrel into the android's mouth and fired. The bullet hollowed out the rear of the android's skull. The unit staggered to the side, white liquid dripping from its twitching eyes. It dropped to the floor as the three remaining units continued their advance.

Madison went to aim, but the nearest android struck the Krado out of her hand. The weapon clattered to the floor, well out of reach. Madison spun around, launching a high kick. Her boot connected hard against the side of an android's skull—immediately *twisting* the artificial idol's head around one hundred and eighty degrees.

The automaton let out an inhuman wail and fell to its knees. A moment later it was face first on the ground, body twitching.

Lucky these things aren't combat androids, Madison told herself. *They clearly weren't made to be roughed up*. The next idol reached for her but she stepped back and grabbed it by the wrist. Using its own momentum, Madison launched the android sideways—directly into the computer terminal.

The idol smashed into the screen, sparks surged from the surrounding industrial-grade wires, sending electrical currents coursing through the unit's body.

Another down! Just one to— Madison's train of thought was interrupted as the last android's hands wrapped around her throat. She tried to wrench free from the idol's grip, but it was no use. She could barely breathe, her vision fading fast—

"Hold on, Madison!" Reena cried out, slamming a speaker over the android's skull. The artificial idol's head caved in from the impact. It crumpled to the floor, deactivated.

"Nice work," Madison gasped, trying to catch her breath. She turned to the two men standing nearby, both wide-eyed and completely motionless. "You two wanna go next?"

Both shook their heads, arms raised in surrender.

* * *

"That's great," Reena cheered, "we managed to clear those teenagers of all charges!"

Madison followed her partner to a table in the police station cafeteria. "Yeah, and now the *actual* perpetrators are behind bars."

Reena frowned. "It's a shame about Dream Machine, though. I really liked that song of theirs—Hyper Gate."

"Eh, I always hated idol groups," Madison muttered, sticking a fork in her salad. "It's *worse* when they're not even human..."

"I don't know," Reena said, "I think android idols could be kind of neat."

Madison groaned. "It's not like they even write their own music. What's the point?"

"Hold on, what do you think of this..." Reena pulled out her NetPhone, tapped the screen and

turned the device over to her partner.

“Ugh, can't I eat in peace?” With reluctance, Madison viewed the device. A concert video was playing, showcasing the holographic image of a female singer. A cyberpop tune escaped the NetPhone's speakers.

“That's Divex, she's the latest holo-performer,” Reena said. “She's a fourth generation artificial intelligence that debuted last week. Isn't her music catchy?”

Madison winced, touching the side of her head. “Uhh...”

Reena's eyes widened. She glanced at the NetPhone screen and then back to Madison, who appeared to be in visible pain. “A-are you getting a headache? No way—do you think Divex's using some kind of hypnosis too?!”

“No!” Madison shot back. “I just think this music stinks!”

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