

BOX



The Future Is Coming!

A.P. ATKINSON

The Box

by

A. P. Atkinson

The characters, places and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental, not intended by the author, and very clearly the result of crippling mental illness

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*With many thanks to everyone who has helped to make this
novel possible.*

Plague – Addiction – Violence

Chapter 1

(73 years in the future)

Morgan Coughman felt a numb ache gnawing softly at the muscles in his legs, from what he was forced to admit was only a fairly short walk up some fairly shallow stairs.

With a heavy sigh, he grudgingly admitted to himself that he was now an old man, a fact everyone else had accepted some time ago. He looked at the back of his hand, pale and withered, the knuckles hard against his thin, drawn-out skin. As with many people, he had spent his life thinking of himself as the enthusiastic, vibrant person he'd been used to seeing in the mirror throughout his earlier years. That was the time when he was learning to define himself and find his place in the world. It wasn't until much later that he came to realise he didn't really have one. Like so many people he'd known, he'd kept on telling his friends that he was still young on the inside, still filled with the wonder and mystery of youth despite the irrevocable march of time that seemed so intent on marching across his back, leaving him twisted and broken, and with only a fleeting memory of what he'd once been. That future, and all his potential, had long since been sold out from under him, little by little, with every mistake he'd made. He smiled, despite himself, at the foolish thoughts fluttering in and out of his head. He had started to notice that he dwelled on the past more and more often; the fact of his passing years had become a greater pre-occupation.

He was old. It wasn't something to be afraid of: it was a fact of simple biology that he had reluctantly come to accept. It was a thing we all knew well but a thing that we all somehow resist with as

much vigour as we're still able to muster. He tried to see it for what it was; a slow and inexorable march towards the end, and the end was finally in sight for him.

To a young man, death was a thing to be ignored, a thing that happened to other people, not something to take seriously. It was never something worth considering or planning for: it was such a long way off. As he aged, he had begun to appreciate the inevitability of it all.

Now, as a man with his life behind him, it was something he simply waited for and a thing he felt increasingly ready to accept. It was an ending, a closed door behind all the mistakes he'd made along the way. In darker times, he freely accepted how that door needed to be slammed shut, locked, welded up, bricked over and left to rot.

Death, and endings in general, held no fear for him. He had learned, as many had, that life held the greater fear. He had lived long enough for the world to leave him behind. It was walking a path he could no longer follow, and didn't wish to, even if he could. He was left behind by a world that was no longer his own and he was rather glad of it.

He rubbed his tired old eyes and wearily surveyed his surroundings from a smoked, grey window in his small, bland little office. He still remembered the old days and remembered them fondly, perhaps more fondly than they actually deserved. He always had a smirk and a sharp comment for anyone that remembered them romantically; in some way, being vastly superior to how they actually were. However, he felt he could be sure that the days past were, at least to some degree, better than those that lay ahead. He sighed deeply to himself and toyed with his small pocket diary. It was an old electronic device that had somehow managed to stay

working for many long decades with minimal coaxing and more than a few upgrades. He patted its smooth black surface warmly and stared at the little electronic box like it was an old friend. It was a relic now; perhaps laughable, compared to the level of technology that was available.

One of the electronics engineers he knew had tried many times to buy it as a curiosity, but he'd always refused. He was lucky in that he simply didn't need the money, and the diary, as it stood, was quite capable of serving his purposes perfectly adequately. It was now a part of him, as much, perhaps, as his arms or his eyes.

When he was gone, what else would remain of him but his memories? He'd never lived the life he should have, and had never made the mark on the world that he knew he could, if he had tried just that tiny little bit harder. His life had never touched the hearts and minds of the people around him, and would vanish in the mists of time like a sandcastle on a beach as the tide drew in. Perhaps that was all life was, a struggle against the inevitability of an ever-changing universe, fighting against the odds to make some kind of impression on the world while knowing that there's no way you could ever hope to succeed.

Somehow, leaving behind something tangible made it easier to die, not that he was in any great rush to do so. He would leave some solid reference to the last fifty years of his life—fifty years of watching mankind walk inexorably down a path to oblivion, through the gates of slavery and beyond, to whatever horrors would line their path.

"You alright, old man?" a voice called out, stirring him from his melancholy thoughts.

Morgan looked round, a little startled at the voice, since he'd drifted so far into his own imagination, as too often he did these days.

In the doorway, staring at him like a lion glaring at a wounded gazelle, was his employer, Aaron Thorn. He was an unsettling man—way beyond intimidating—and Morgan hated himself for having worked for him for as long as he had, cowering in his shadow. It wasn't his size or his power that made men fear him: it was something else. It was something you could see in his eyes; you couldn't quite explain what it was but, once you'd seen it, you'd never have to. He was a driven man, a man pushed ever forward by his own greed and not held back by such trivial notions as morality or decency.

He always left Morgan with the distinct impression of a child with a loaded shotgun; somehow innocent, but with a deadly power in his hand that he couldn't control and could barely understand. In the fullness of time, he was probably destined to do a great deal of harm, and Morgan felt certain the damage would not be confined to Thorn himself; it rarely was with people of that kind.

"I'm fine!" Morgan nodded slowly, smiling to himself at a joke he wasn't about to share, and in no small measure at his own foolishness. Aaron stood in the doorway of his gloomy little office and nodded thoughtfully along with him. He was dressed in clothes that accentuated his poor taste, as if he was somehow proud of his limited coordination and restraint. Colours clashed garishly against one another, as his long silky jacket swayed gently around his creaseless trousers, and an inappropriately vivid tie topped off the styleless ensemble like a mockery of social decorum.

"I've been thinking about you," Aaron began, with a deep frown, always managing to appear threatening for some inexplicable reason. "How old are you now?"

"I'm one hundred and thirteen." Morgan replied flatly, settling into his chair slowly, jolts of pain shooting up and down his aged back as he did so, momentarily flashing a pained expression across his face. He turned to face the man he had come to resent so bitterly and also so secretly, thanks to a healthy dose of wisdom and a strong desire not to die a swift and senseless death from a bullet through the back of his skull.

"And you're still working here?" Aaron smiled to himself, shaking his head and smirking darkly. "I hope I do better than you did when I reach your age."

"I'm sure you'll never have to worry about working when you're my age." Morgan said cheerfully and with an ironic smile.

"You know something?" Aaron began, taking a step forward, making Morgan slightly more nervous than usual. "You're the best damned employee I ever had. I'm not just saying that. Most of them have been complete idiots. Most people are, of course."

"Really?" Morgan asked, a little surprised and flushed with a sudden swell of unexpected pride. "Thank you."

"You've never missed a day." Aaron shrugged, pacing over to glance out of the old man's office window. "You hardly ever screw up, and everyone here likes you. I don't think I ever remember you screwing up, come to think of it."

"Not since I took this job." Morgan followed his gaze out of the window to see a blue flashing light in the distance. In the neighbourhood where they lived and worked, police skimmers were hardly a rare sight, but Thorn always seemed intent on watching if any approached his business. It hardly made any difference anyway.

His permits were all in order; he always paid the appropriate amount to the appropriate people, and nobody anywhere cared one bit about what he was doing in any case. In fact, most people whose job it was to care were his clients.

“We’ll be sorry to see you go,” he said softly, his attention still fixed on the police skimmer in the distance as it drifted further away, blending into the grim shadows that blotted out the distance.

“I’m not planning to go anywhere,” Morgan replied, slightly concerned that the conversation had taken a sudden unexpected turn for the worse. Work was hard to find for a man like him. He was old, had limited skills, and a past that could catch up with him at any time. It was true—he certainly didn’t need the money, but he needed something. His life had nothing else to offer him except the routine and the questionable usefulness of his employment. He had nothing else left: it was what he was.

“Good.” Aaron beamed as he snapped away from the window, satisfied that whoever the police were after, it wasn’t him. “No problem for either of us then!”

Morgan watched silently as his boss left through the door, making a point of not closing it after him. He huffed in minor annoyance and turned his attention to the terminal at his desk. Reams of data were available to him at the touch of a single key—the entire financial history of Aaron Thorn’s empire, his bank records, evidence of every filthy transaction, every paid murder, every shattered life and broken dream he’d ever had a hand in.

The real reason that Morgan was his best employee had nothing to do with his punctuality or his popularity with the other staff—he knew that to be the truth of the matter. There was a very good reason why he could be trusted further than any other man working for the greedy, semi-literate thug who controlled three

quarters of the shady dealings that happened in the East Valley. Morgan hung his head shamefully as he allowed himself to realise the truth of his life for a fleeting moment, no longer burnished by a façade of justification. For a moment, he laid himself bare. He was the head financier to a vicious porn and prostitution ring, and was allowed access to every piece of information at the disposal of the advanced computer system that they employed. The reason he was so trusted was not because of his loyalty or his commitment, but because they knew that he had neither the ambition, imagination nor the courage or ingenuity remaining to him to do anything with it. Perhaps that had been the problem with his entire life.

Aaron Thorn strolled menacingly along the corridors of the upper section of his building. His empire was the keystone of the entire red-light district of the East Valley. He had built the business up as a young man from virtually nothing, nothing but some sizeable loans and stolen contacts. His family were all very well-connected with drugs, scams, anything they could make a fast and easy buck with, so it had seemed a natural step to get into the prostitution business, especially as it was something he had a natural interest in at that age. At first, he'd used real girls, as there'd been no alternative thirty years ago, but that was such a messy, unreliable way to do business. People had always been the unstable element, the fly in the ointment of his success. He'd achieved everything he had in spite of his family, in spite of his teachers and counsellors, and in spite of authority. Very much in spite of some authority figures whose graves had never been found to this day.

Technology was the key. Even though people called him a petty thug, he was more than that. He was smart enough to let them think it while he moved in and stole their business right out

from under them. They never saw him coming. He understood progress, he saw how new ideas could change things and he learned how to capitalise on it.

When he started, he'd been illegal, but now his company was bordering on legitimacy and was becoming widely respected. Nobody cared about his methods, and nobody questioned his practices any more. Everyone just followed along with him, as if happy about being led down a dark path with him as the sole guide to illumination. He could now count among his friends groups of engineers, psychologists, businessmen, politicians, and even law-enforcement officials. Nobody he knew in the old days could have pulled off a stunt like that and got away with it the way he had. He had been lucky but, more than that, he had been smart and had had the force of will to do what had to be done. He did whatever had to be done.

He was selling sex, or, at least, the next best thing, and he was well respected for doing it. It was true that his building was not in the heart of the commercial district, or even in the over-inhabited suburban towers at the fringe of the city limits. He was confined to the city's 'dark-side', a euphemism coined long ago due to the conditions and lack of maintenance.

Weather control measures ensured bright skies and warm days for everyone in the capital ring, but the unpleasant weather—the "secondary conditions"—had to go somewhere, and geography drew them to an undesirable valley to the east of Central City. Its undesirability, due to virtually perpetual storms and clouded skies, forced rents down, and these very conditions created a slum nearly overnight. That was when the predators moved in, and he had led the way. He was among the first to smell the rich scent of fresh blood, the pungent odour of opportunity to be drawn at the

expense of the weak. Financed by the blood and tears of uncountable lost souls, he bought up land and moved in anyone that could even scarcely afford to live there, his growth paid for by generous government grants intended to revitalise the dying region, publicly at least. In reality, they had no interest in revitalising the area: it was the sewer; it was the lowest place a person could fall. But the fact remained that the city needed it and so it was developed, not from anything more than a sewer but instead to a sewer of a slightly higher efficiency.

The emporium was just a nod to the older days now—a fond memory of his years fighting his way up through the ranks to demand respect and status. It was how he started, but now he was so much more.

“Afternoon,” Hamilton Cohen nodded warmly to him, as the pair approached one another.

“Hello,” Aaron grunted moodily, rolling his eyes.

Hamilton slowed as the two drew closer, a sure sign that a conversation would ensue. Aaron stopped short of loathing him, but not by much. He was everything he was not—a pitiful excuse for a fallen man with nothing about him that held anything of which to be proud. He was a Biotechnical psychiatrist—a kind of hybrid engineer and counsellor rolled into one. They were, unfortunately, quite hard to find, and it was even more difficult to get one who was willing to work for the money that Aaron was going to pay. Luckily for him, Hamilton had problems that went beyond the obvious shortcomings of his personality, ambition and lack of finely polished social graces. Such problems guaranteed that he’d never find employment in a more reputable environment—not while those problems governed his life, at least. Thorn made it his business to ensure that they did and would continue to do so for as long as it suited him.

Even though he freely exploited him for his weaknesses, he disliked him for them also, and never hesitated to let him know it.

“What can I do for you, Ham?” Aaron asked politely, each word sticking in his throat as he winced inwardly at having to talk about some mind-numbing computerised banality, or some other pedantic posturing. He eyed the pudgy, middle-aged man up and down, taking in his appearance, his posture and expression, measuring him up with his eyes. He had straggly black and greasy hair, combed back from his face in some ridiculous affectation that accentuated his drawn and haggard features, his sunken eyes and pale mottled skin. He was dressed casually—a white shirt topped off with a dark brown sports jacket on top of neutral black trousers. He looked like he’d rolled straight out of bed and into his dirty laundry.

Hamilton quite openly winced at the sound of his name shortened in what amounted to a deliberate attempt to annoy him.

“I hear we’re getting some new girls in? Is it true?” He smiled politely, clasping his hands nervously behind his back as the short, angry man glared back at him with very little patience for the whole thing.

“That’s right, seven more coming in tomorrow.” Aaron nodded in an overly reserved manner so that his head barely even moved.

“It would have been nice to have been told.” Hamilton shrugged and rocked slightly on his heels. “Do we know what’s wrong with them?”

“They’re broken.” Aaron snapped sarcastically. “Which means they’re cheap, and that’s why I bought them!”

“But if I knew what the problems were, I could set up the equipment accordingly and save some time.” Hamilton grumbled, diverting his eyes and kicking an imaginary ball of dust along the filthy grey carpet.

“Yeah, but it’s my time.” Aaron grinned, folding his arms across his chest. “I’m paying for it, so it’s mine to waste.”

“But they expire two days after delivery,” Hamilton whined dolefully. “I might need that long if they’re severely damaged! You know that—I keep telling you every time. I just need a little notice.”

“Let me worry about that.” Aaron smiled like a hunter with his prey in the cross-hairs of a photon incinerator. He wasted no more of his time, pausing only to give Hamilton a look of contempt as he continued stalking along the offices of his business with no real concern as to where he was heading or why he was heading there. “They’ll be delivered tomorrow!” He called out. “Now you’ve been told, haven’t you?”

Morgan Coughman breathed the acrid, stale air. His mind ventured back, as it often did, to a time, long since past, when he’d been a child. Long before he’d been an accountant, a fool, and eventually a coward, his father had built him a train set. It had been an old-fashioned contraption that used electricity drawn from a specific point in the house, back in a time where things may have been less convenient but were far simpler. Holes in the wall where electricity came out! It even sounded ridiculous to him after all these years.

He remembered vividly the polished little engines that he drove up and down the rails for many long hours. He remembered the scenery—tiny fluffy trees and packets of special dirt he’d had to glue onto a wooden base. The thing he remembered most was the smell, a tiny whiff of ozone as the train sped along, a faint metallic odour that had marked his memory so deeply that more than a century spent in hell couldn’t erase it.

That was how everything smelt now. Most people didn’t even notice, but the whole of Earth now reeked of burning ozone,

metallic and dirty in a way that would have been unimaginable when he was a child. The dark-sides were the worst of all, of course. They were the worst of everything. Nobody seemed to know why; either that, or they didn't care, but the energy seemed stronger there. On really bad nights, when the storms rattled his windows and hammered at his doors, the filth in the air was sickeningly heavy. When things were calm, there was often a whistling noise—a faint humming sound that hung around him, coming from nowhere, but filling his senses with a haunting presence. He had found it quite unnerving at first, but scarcely noticed it himself any longer.

He strolled along in silent contemplation, remembering the past and comparing it to the future that was now alive all around, the present having expired to him long, long ago.

The dark-sides—a living graveyard for all of humanity, a place where ghosts walked among the living like sentient shadows, and the realms between were played out in the darkness of alleys or other silent catacombs. The people that lived there were hollow husks, hope driven from them by poverty and the lingering threat of violence that stalked them all equally, without prejudice for race, gender or belief.

Half the people he knew were addicted to Stims—an electronic drug that could be downloaded from Commnet with the right equipment and for the right price. Of course, nobody on the streets had the right equipment, and the universal planetary communications network hardly ever worked in the valley anyway. People like Aaron Thorn were making huge profits by selling Stim-pads—small hand-held devices that injected the deadly electromagnetic pulse directly into the brain. They were fuelled by a power cell that held the data encoded into it. It was designed in a very clever way so that it was practically impossible to copy the

drug, meaning repeat profits and an ever-growing army of mind-damaged users. Such cleverness never seemed to be applied to things that were unable to show a profit.

Stim made its users docile at first, but the brain would then over-compensate for the damage, allowing the long-term user to be driven to acts of unspeakable violence. In his youth, people had recoiled in horror at the reports every time such horrendous acts were committed, but now it was commonplace and it certainly never made the news. The dark-sides in every city around the world would ring with terrifying tales of disembowelling, cannibalism and things that had yet to be properly named and classified, but these were no longer stories in the media. No longer were they remote events, separated and sanitised so that the effect could not be properly felt. These now happened to his neighbours, his friends. Nobody was safe, and nobody could be prepared. A Stim user in the throes of a murderous rage could be more powerful than a Biotekk police officer, and immeasurably more motivated.

The cities, though, were somehow worse, worse than any of that. At least, in the East Valley there were some signs of life—the occasional glimpse of an eye that still had a little passion burning away inside it, a spark of what it was to be human. Morgan knew that spark; he had come to recognise it when he saw it, since it was seen so very rarely. In the cities, the people seemed little more than automatons—mindless slaves to the system that spawned and perpetuated their own entrapment. Perhaps it was that their lives were so easy. Their needs were met and filled by something else, something intangible and remote. Biotekk units laboured for them, while Commnet filled their every information need. It linked too many billions of people with an intricate web of satellites, and in turn linked them to the ‘Linked Omnipresent Intelligent Matrix’—a

vast computer, more capable than everything that had ever existed pulled together at once. Nothing was beyond its intellectual grasp, and nobody was beyond the reach of its vision. People were no longer inconvenienced by having to think at all, and what troubled Morgan the most was that they seemed perfectly happy with that.

He sighed heavily to himself. Where was there left to go? There were now colonies in space—the lunar bases, three more on Mars, and two on the moons around Jupiter, but they were just research stations and were not yet open to casual travellers. He would never be allowed off-world in any case. He had a criminal record, and, worse than that, at least two outstanding warrants for his arrest that he knew of. For him, there was nowhere left to run, and running was now quite, quite beyond him.

Nathan Ryan sat in the darkness of his room, collapsed in the corner, his body useless to him while his mind lit up with pleasure and a warm contentment that had otherwise slipped beyond his grasp many years ago. He could see everything before him—the peeling artificial walls, the filthy windows, and the sickly garish light slicing shyly through the grey skies outside.

He was aware of sounds—a gentle tapping on the window of rain as it drizzled constantly over the dark streets, resolved that it would never again be a cleansing fall. The cities were clean and the dirt had washed away down to the valley. The soft sounds mixed with the harsh sirens and occasional shouts or screams from somewhere just beyond. It all washed over him—he no longer cared about anything or anyone, especially himself.

His mind had started to become active again. He realised lazily that he was noticing things around him—the cold of the floor beneath, the yellow tinge to the paper that hung from the walls, the

sickly smells of his conditions, and the pity deep within him for his lost soul.

He noticed one smell above the others—a bitterly acidic smell, and he realised almost immediately what it was. He concentrated on his legs, feeling around in his mind for his senses that were now dull and unresponsive. He felt what he had dreaded—a cold, lethargic unpleasantness around his groin giving final proof that he had again lost control of his bladder. He tried to move; he tried to reach for a towel, but his muscles mocked him with their weight and stubbornness.

He hated this; he hated what Stims could do to him. They gave him the escape he needed and he loved them deeply for that. Three times a week he would cradle his Stim-pad lovingly, gently devouring the expectation, savouring every crumb of the anticipation after the need grew too much to resist and he succumbed to needing another session. For the rest of the time, he hated them. He hated the blinding pain when he tried to resist using them; he hated the feelings that it shook up in him afterwards, and he hated the way his mind always felt afterwards. He had become a shell of his former self. His mind tingled like an ear exposed too long to loud noises, and his brain seemed to numbly reverberate between sessions, so that thinking now seemed so much more difficult than ever before. He had to use his fingers to count now, like a child learning basic maths. He was now reduced to the level of an uneducated moron, slowly struggling to work out how much money to give the teller when buying food. Often, he'd find himself staring into space, his mind wandering off while he tried to focus on as simple a task as that.

His brain seemed more numb after each session, every jolt from the pad sending his consciousness further away from reality, so

that now he was now only watching his life through the eyes of another. The worst thing of all was the knowledge that he'd done all this to himself.

A year ago he'd been a salesman working for G-Tekk, the huge global conglomerate that effectively controlled the world through their countless subsidiaries. They built, owned and controlled the Commnet, the power grid, Biotekk, and even the LOIM. Nothing seemed to slip through their greedy, power-hungry fingers, and that had suited him perfectly well. He was always a good salesman, and, as his father had told him, 'there are no independents anymore.'

He'd sold his private business and began working for G-Tekk, earning twice as much as he'd managed to take while working for himself. His duty was to sell medical scanners—small hand-held devices that were pressed tightly to the back of the skull while they sent out invisible tendrils of microwave radiation to the brain. Too low a dose of radiation to cause lasting damage, the makers were quick to state. Testing didn't bear that out but the testers were bought and paid for, so it made little difference. The information they received was beamed to Commnet to be processed, and within seconds a complete diagnosis could be made of a person's health.

It was literally the simplest of jobs, selling such an amazing product. At first, it was exciting, bringing a new piece of equipment to the market, but it quickly lost its challenge and became routine and finally just plain dull. He decided to move his sales to the East Valley. Money was scarce down there and the Commnet only worked sporadically, so it seemed more of an uphill struggle, but then that was what he was looking for from his life—challenge! As his father said, 'challenge creates opportunity.'

He reasoned that, with money in short supply, people would be more interested in preventing diseases before they required

more expensive treatment. It had been something of a surprise when one man placed an order for his entire stock, though, of course, he now knew why.

Nathan Ryan gasped a breath of air into his tired lungs and they burned accordingly with every slight movement, punishing him for inhaling. He blinked weakly as the dull light now seemed brighter and more cutting, burning into his eyes like needles being driven into his brain. His muscles were still too heavy to move and he was in pain—pain from the wetness of his clothes, pain from the lights outside, and pain from sitting in a crumpled heap, unable to move for more than five hours.

How had he let this happen?

Morgan Coughman sat down heavily on a stool—a black vinyl covering on top of a cold and tarnished metal rod, fixed securely to the floor to prevent rowdy locals from using them as weapons against one another, and more importantly, against the owner.

“Pete,” he nodded, with a warm smile finding its way out of one side of his mouth.

“Hello, Morgan,” Pete replied from behind the counter. He was a younger man, approaching sixty years old but still fit and able, with a relatively sharp mind and a keen but unsophisticated wit. He had to be, to run a business on the dark-side against every threat and every jealous glare from anyone who couldn’t afford his service. He looked tired. “What will it be?”

“A menu,” Morgan shrugged, “A customer deserves a choice, don’t you think?”

“I guess so,” Pete nodded, passing a laminated sheet of plastic to him. “Although we don’t get much of either, these days.”

"How so?" Morgan raised his eyebrow curiously, not quite sure what he could mean.

"Another delivery went missing this morning, probably hijacked," Pete explained matter-of-factly, this being all rather routine these days. "And as for customers..." He let the words trail off, gesturing with his hand at the empty restaurant.

"The lunchtime rush?" Morgan smiled sarcastically. "Maybe if you served better food?"

"Maybe so," Pete conceded the point. "What I wouldn't give for my old job back."

"What did you do? You never did say," Morgan asked distractedly, as his tired eyes scanned up and down the menu. Invisible electronics posted one illuminated offering after another. "With the kind of quality food you serve, I should have known you weren't always a chef. Perhaps a plumber, cleaning blocked drains?"

"I was a cop," Pete told him evenly, while picking up a jug of coffee for his only patron. "Coffee?"

"A cop?" Morgan said, his voice cracking suddenly. "I had no idea... You were a cop?"

"Don't worry." Pete chuckled to himself. "Everyone here has something to hide, even me. I'd appreciate you keeping this fact to yourself. If word got out, I don't like to think about what might happen to me or this place."

"I see," Morgan nodded slightly, before returning his attention to the menu.

"I left around fifteen years ago," Pete explained absently, seeming more than grateful to have someone to talk to. "Around the time they started bringing in the Biotekk units."

"I didn't think they started using them that long ago," Morgan added conversationally.

"At first, they just started using them for guard duty and low key stuff, but as they got more sophisticated, they ended up being better than the men on the street." Pete sighed in regret, his attention far off inside his memories. "I saw which way the wind was blowing and took early retirement. I figured I'd set myself up with a nice little business. Truth be told, I wasn't the best cop in the world. I made some mistakes, if you know what I mean. I did things I'm not proud of. A lot of us did, back then."

"Hence this place?" Morgan smiled up at Pete's careworn face.

"Well, I guess it hasn't worked out like I hoped," Pete shrugged and forced a smile. "Who could have known the East Valley would end up like this?"

"I had a rough idea," Morgan told him, his finger tracing along the plastic menu between lasagne and chilli.

"Well, I wish you'd told me," Pete said, staring off into the distance with a look of weary resignation. "I wish someone had..."

"I used to be a financial advisor." Morgan sat back on his stool giving him his full attention.

"So what happened to you, then? How did you end up in paradise?" Pete asked, pouring still more of the thick, steaming black coffee into a stained white cup.

"I did some things I regret," Morgan admitted, part of him wanting to stop but the rest of him overwhelming his better judgement. "I made mistakes when I was younger, like we all do."

"Like working for Aaron Thorn?" Pete suggested dryly. Morgan's eyes widened. "Hey, I don't work for the police any more—anything you say is just between friends."

"Actually, it was the things I regret that had me end up working for that young man," Morgan explained. He was almost

surprised to find himself continuing, but he got so few opportunities to talk these days. So few people were left who actually wanted to listen. "When I was younger, I was dumb enough to think I'd get away with borrowing a few hundred thousand credits from a bank I was working for. I figured I'd invest it over the internet and replace it before they ever found out. I was good, good enough to get away with it, I thought."

"The internet?" Pete shrugged while absently wiping dry a plate.

"It was the old version of the Commnet," Morgan said with a wry smile. "The investment plummeted and I lost some of the money. I did some illegal transfers to cover up my mistake, a bit of insider trading... I wasn't as smart as I thought I was."

"I see," Pete nodded. "So what happened?"

"I did some time." Morgan shuddered, remembering the horrific impression that prison life had left on him. "When I got out, they discovered the transfers and started investigating those. Discretion being the better part of valour, I thought it was best to make myself scarce. Work was hard to find after that, so ultimately I ended up here about twenty years ago, working as an accountant for Mr Thorn. All my own fault, of course, and a lesson well learned."

"Tough break," Pete nodded dryly, as he poured more coffee into Morgan's half emptied cup.

"I was young and stupid. I didn't think of consequences, I just saw the opportunities," he said, hanging his head and taking in the warm, bitter smell of his coffee that pleasurably lit up his senses. "There are worse things to be than Mr Thorn's employee."

"Have you got any insurance?" Pete asked, seeming oddly uninterested in the whole thing. "I mean, you don't trust him, do you? You must have something on him, don't you?"

Morgan took a sip of his coffee. He nodded. "I'll have the chilli."

Nathan Ryan struggled to his feet. He hadn't let the Stim session run its course. In fact, he never did, and perhaps that was part of the problem. He just wasn't the sort of person who could sit idly and just let the experience wash over him. In the early stages, of course, he had no choice. When he placed the pad to his skull behind his ear and felt the cold metal contacts against his bare skin, his heart would race, purely with the anticipation. His thumb would hover over the button as he'd struggle with the internal urge to begin. He would always suffer a moment of turmoil—a part of him knowing what would happen, the damage he was doing to himself, always needing a stronger charge to reach the same height, as the part of his brain that reacted to it slowly atrophied with every hit. Another part of him was desperate for the experience, clawing at his mind for him to unleash the energy into his brain, shattering his thoughts and consciousness and releasing him to the blissful escape from the darkness of the world that had swallowed him long, long ago. That part always won, not because it was stronger, but because now everything else was hopelessly weak.

Finally, his thumb would sink down onto the button and the click of the device's internal contact would be the last thing he'd hear or even be aware of for at least five hours. Five long, lucid hours of bliss, of freedom from thoughts and fears, his mind sent to a place where it was at least temporarily free from knowing what he'd become. The Stim never judged him—it just opened the door and let him walk through.

He staggered uneasily to his feet, seeing the wretched Stim-pad on the floor, lying where it had fallen as the energy had surged

through the tissue of his mind, disrupting brain activity and releasing a flood of chemicals. He hated himself; he hated everything. As much as he loved the Stim before he pressed the button, he hated it now.

He glanced around his room—his single box in a low tower of the East Valley slums. Filth lay strewn around him; dirty unwashed plates lay broken on the floor and mouldering in the sink, waste so badly crusted on that it was now useless. A single light disk sat humming in the centre of the low ceiling, throwing its dull white glow across his meagre possessions and illuminating his damnation.

When he had started, he never imagined he'd end up like this. He sold his entire stock to a businessman. He doubted the wisdom of it at first—he was intelligent enough to realise that if the businessman intended to sell them on, then he could obviously demand a better price. He decided to do it anyway, though, as the sale earned him a fat bonus for smashing his monthly targets. He had little choice: the businessman terrified him. He was aggressive and there was a deep vein of darkness in him, as if there was a splinter of a shadow embedded in his soul.

He had asked what he intended to do with so many medical diagnosis pads, and the man just laughed, making some comment about seeing things with a more open mind. Fixing him with a disarming grin, the man asked him what he saw when he looked at a medical diagnosis pad.

Nathan was at a loss as to exactly how to answer. They were surely nothing more than they were. The businessman concluded that he saw nothing beyond that which was written on the box, and needed to learn to look outside of it. He told him that you can't understand the world from inside a box: you have to climb out and look around. From inside and outside, your perceptions of the world

can make it look like a very different place. Nathan reluctantly agreed with him but his fear had deepened sharply. The poorly-dressed, angry-sounding man then sat back in his chair like a chess player that knows he has won before the game has even started.

“When I see your product, I don’t see what you see—I see it for what it is,” he told him, his voice lowered, as if to add a touch of drama or suspense. “I see a device that releases beams of microwave radiation into the brain with an incredible degree of sophistication and controllability.”

Nathan just sat there, silent and expectant for him to continue, but by now he had begun to worry. If, in hindsight, he could identify one moment that shaped his life, it would be that one. One minute of his life that so radically and permanently changed its direction that the thing he became he could no longer recognise in the mirror as being the same man.

The man pulled out a vial, a silver metallic cylinder, which he put down slowly onto the table as gently as if it were the fragile and incredibly valuable thing that Nathan supposed that it simply had to be. He took one of the pads from the box, removed the power-cell from the hand-grip, and replaced it with the vial on the table. Placing the pad down, he whispered softly for him to try it.

Nathan shook his head and smiled stupidly, nervous now and beginning to sweat. A glance around at the burly men behind him wiped the smile off of his face forever. For the first time, he realised what he’d done. Looking back into the wild, fierce eyes of his customer, he watched his lips curl into a snarl as he repeated his words.

“Try it!”

His hand quivered uneasily as he reached over to the pad and picked it up. With another look at the burly men standing either side

of the door, he placed it to his skull and gingerly pressed the button. From that point on, his life was mostly a blur as he stepped onto the path which led him to becoming the shambling wreck of a man he now was, languishing in the filthy and hopeless pit of depression he now wallowed in helplessly.

He began to cry—tears of regret for himself, and of anger for his stupidity, his short-sighted greed. The damage was now so great that he could barely remember the last year of his life, but his recollection of the time before was as sharp as when he'd first lived it. The man he once was stood over him, shaking his head in dismay at the dishevelled, fallen thing he'd become. He saw his father and the disappointment in his eyes staring down at him, and he knew for the last time how far he'd fallen. He saw his arm flailing out and heard the smash of something glass tumbling to the floor. He wasn't sure straightaway where exactly that had happened: his memory and the world around him seemed to bleed into one.

He felt the fury building within him and he let out a roar that seemed to escape his mouth in spite of himself, driven by something dark within him that he couldn't control any longer. With a sudden moment of clarity, he knew this was it. He had reached the end. His father nodded solemnly that perhaps it was better this way.

He'd heard the rumours on the streets, and the cold reality of his own experience had firmly entrenched the ideas in his mind. He had known it was coming, dreaded it, but looked away, trying to ignore it. It was like walking through an international banking conference and trying to ignore a giant clown, running around murdering people with an axe. It was there and it was coming.

He'd heard that hard Stim users could end up as uncontrollable animals, driven by rage and something older that came from the depths of the human psyche where the animal within

dwelt silently, waiting for an opportunity to slip its leash. He'd heard that they reach a point where the damage is just too great, and they snap. He'd seen countless bodies and mutilated victims lining the streets, hastily covered before scavengers or other hard-Stimmers could see them and be driven wild by the scent of blood. Nobody ever knew what triggered it, so perhaps it was different for everyone, each descending into their own personal hell. All that was known is that it preceded total mental collapse—the kind that was so violent that the muscle spasm could snap your own skeleton like dry twigs, and internal organs could be driven to explode.

With a kind of cold resignation, he realised he had now reached that point, and a part of him was relieved because at least it would all soon be over.

As he watched himself walking along the darkened corridor of his habitat block, he felt mildly sympathetic for whoever died along with him, but he was well past truly caring. Humanity could be measured by one's ability to connect, to empathise with others. He had lost that a long time ago. What he was now, he didn't care to guess.

He remembered a story from a man he'd once met in a bar—a place so filthy and degraded that he had never imagined a place like it, before the cold metal tabs of a Stim pad had first dug into his flesh. A stranger had told him a tale of a man that had gone wild with a kitchen knife and had cut off three of his own fingers, along with every conceivable extremity from a group of people stuck in a lift with him. Apparently, he'd fallen to the floor, screaming in agony with the medical Skimmer nearby, the drivers and paramedics too afraid to approach them. His facial muscles had tightened until his eyes burst, spewing black and red liquid from the gaping sockets, as he screamed in pain and terror. Finally, his skull had collapsed,

bursting most of his brain out from his head to cascade across the pavement in a frenzied mass of fluid and solid body tissues. He had carried on screaming for at least two minutes after that, blood pumping from the grotesque pulp that was once his head, while his hands flailed wildly around in some vain attempt to claw back his brain.

He wondered if the story was true.

Hamilton Cohen lazily recalibrated his machine for the coming workload, due to arrive the next morning. The conditions he now worked in meant that he didn't have access to the state of the art equipment that most members of his trade were used to. Instead, he had to make do with a shambolic clutter of computers and devices that he'd scraped together with the limited and grudging hand-outs that Aaron Thorn had seen fit to grant him. He simply could not make the petty gangster understand that his work was of a highly sophisticated nature, and that it was economically unwise to cut corners.

The old machinery he had would have been barely adequate, even if he was simply maintaining existing girls. Fixing damaged ones was stretching his abilities to breaking point, especially a delivery of seven new ones who would each have intricate and complex problems to fix before they could be made functional and sent off to work in the prostitution rings that his employer controlled with his iron grip.

Reconfiguring the programs, from adjustment to diagnosis, would take the best part of a day, but, as usual, nobody had even thought to inform him of an imminent delivery of fresh candidates. He hated most of his work. It wasn't the job, so much as the reason he was doing it.

He loved the psychology behind fixing the faults; he enjoyed breaking the puzzle of each shattered circuit and then finding a way round it, beating every obstacle and creating solutions out of problems. Each girl that walked out of his lab was a triumph—an achievement against seemingly impossible odds; he just sometimes wished that they weren't walking out to become mindless sex objects with compromised electronic brains. The electronic brains were a miracle of science, more capable, perhaps than the actual human brain they replaced, but more focused, more logical.

Just once, he wished he could do something special; to make something that really made a difference. He sighed and returned his attention to his work. The opportunity to do that had passed him by many years ago.

"I hope you know what you're doing!" the computer told him sternly.

He rolled his eyes and tried to ignore it.

Morgan Coughman trudged wearily from the diner. He had glanced back pensively at the doorway, eyeing Pete with slight suspicion, as he did nothing more than wipe his towel wearily across the already clean counter.

He'd never known that he used to be a policeman, as he had never thought to ask. He'd just gone in every day, bought his lunch, and exchanged friendly and relaxed conversation about nothing in particular. Pete had always been wary of the topic. He spoke rarely about his past and seemed guarded about it. Morgan, on the other hand, liked to talk. He liked to reminisce about past days and enjoyed the few discussions he was able to have. Perhaps Pete simply considered him a friend and had finally opened up. It had seemed to Morgan acceptable to reciprocate, but he regretted it now. He

continued on his way back towards his workplace and drew his personal terminal from his pocket. He clipped an old, battered-looking Comm-tag to his ear, and adjusted the mic to sit in front of his mouth.

“Access Morgan personal records,” he instructed evenly to the computer in his hand, watching the screen dance with tiny symbols, as it scanned his ancient and massive personal archive.

“Record note,” he began thoughtfully. “Pete who runs the ‘Happy Diner’ used to be a police officer. I complacently told him of my past and I regret some of the things I said. I suppose that, at my age, though, I’ve got nothing left to lose—the crimes I perpetrated were forgotten many, many years ago, and I’m probably the only person left who still cares. I sometimes feel like I’m the only person left who cares about anything... In any case, I served my time and the people who I owed the money to are long dead, so nobody is looking for me anymore. I don’t know why I’ve hidden this long: perhaps a penance I set for myself. I don’t think anyone would argue that I’m a silly old fool.”

He looked up into the sickly grey sky as a yellow tinge began to seep into the gloomy clouds.

“I’ve watched the world descend into a pathetic shadow of itself, where freedom and choice are forgotten concepts, perhaps permanently consigned to antiquity. Maybe it’s too late to change things; maybe there’s nobody left who can do anything, or will even try. The people have given up their rights to those people who seek to buy them like a cheap commodity in exchange for bland comforts. Perhaps they don’t deserve the chance to have what I still crave for the human race. Perhaps they never did. I can’t keep the thought from my head that, in some way, they all deserve their slavery—the shackles they’ve sold themselves into. But I can’t fully give myself to

these doubts. I can only promise myself that, above all, I will never abandon hope!" Morgan smiled grimly as his head hung in pity of a prosperous and dying world.

"Access Thorn's financial records and copy them to my personal files. Save under my usual password."

As he shambled along, he knew in his heart that he was being nothing less than paranoid, but it didn't hurt to take precautions. It was an art he'd perfected over many years of practice. At least, he had something to offer the police, if they were to arrest him for whatever reason that might happen. They would forget all about him if he suggested even a fraction of the secrets held in Thorn's personal database, and he had all of his dirty little secrets—every single one of them.

"Note," he began again. "Copy file again and release to voice print of..." He racked his brain, thinking of anyone that hated Thorn enough to act against him if anything was to happen that might unnaturally shorten his own life. He stopped walking and glanced around, searching his mind for anyone that could even stand up to Thorn, but nothing came to him.

Aaron Thorn may well have been a vicious deviant—too quick to resort to violence, and too gratified by it when he did—but he commanded respect, which meant he had more friends left than enemies.

"Release the files to anyone in possession of my personal password whose voice pattern is not on file as being an employee of Thorn. Make an exception for Hamilton Cohen. He has been trying to buy my diary for years. Arrange to have him come into possession of it in the event of my death," he said finally, hoping that, if his employer ever did act against him, then at least he would be able to

offer some retaliation, even if only posthumously. Pete was right about one thing—he didn't trust him.

Aaron Thorn took out his Commnet info-pad. He had heard it bleep softly to indicate that it had received a memo for him. The net itself worked only sporadically in the East Valley, but internal memorandums worked perfectly well.

He sat back heavily in his opulent leather chair and banged his feet hard up onto his tastelessly expensive carved oak desk. He pressed on the screen to accept the memo and groaned in bemusement as he saw who it was from.

"Hamilton bloody Cohen..." He muttered angrily, reading through the requests for more equipment which translated to a large investment of capital that was never going to happen. He read through the reams of requests and the spiralling numbers beside them, before slamming the info-pad down hard onto the desk with an unintelligible grunt.

"Get Hamilton Cohen to my office!" He growled into the communicator clipped to his ear.

Blood splattered across the wall and burst across his face as Nathan Ryan hammered his way past another block tenant on his way to the street. He was vaguely aware of the pain of the blood as it spat into his eyes, but it all seemed foggy and unreal, as if it was happening to someone else and he was merely viewing his tragedy as a dispassionate observer.

He heard the roars coming from his own mouth as the hammer swung around his head wildly, crashing into the walls and tearing chunks of plaster and sending shards of plastic padding cascading around the lobby as he made for the door.

A woman screamed in terror as she reached the bottom of the stairs and saw him, flinging herself against the wall behind, her eyes filled with a paralysing fear. Nathan turned to face her as he reached the tatty transparent plastic door.

He went silent for a moment, locked eye-to-eye with the petrified woman. She breathed heavily, her mouth lolling open, unnoticed by her mind as it recoiled in terror. Nathan suddenly leapt forward, brandishing his hammer - once a tool, innocently made to fulfil a mundane task, but now distorted by his madness into a hideous weapon of brutal carnage.

He covered the distance swiftly and began raining blows down onto her stricken head and body as she went quickly and silently to an ignominious and pointless death.

Morgan shuffled on towards his office with a heavy heart. Things had finally reached a point in his life where the future was forgotten, and planning for it seemed as redundant as regretting the past. He'd always known at the back of his mind that his life would one-day head downwards to a point where he'd be making desperate plans to protect all the things he'd already lost. He was an accountant, after all.

He shook his head sadly as he walked slowly along the pathway, lost to a large degree somewhere in his own thoughts.

He didn't hear the growling at first, or the shouting. His attention was snapped forwards by the sound of a plastic door shattering and being torn from its hinges by some disproportionate force or impact.

He stood aghast as a man, twisted and inhuman, came rampaging through the opening, the opening itself caused by the bloody remains of a violently beaten woman being thrown through

it. Morgan silently rebuked himself for his unpreparedness. Throughout his life, he had quietly lowered his head and let life run over him when it suited him to do so. The one brave act of his life had dragged him further down to the place where he now found himself, staring unblinkingly at a hard-Stimmer holding a hammer that was dripping with blood, while snorting wildly and grinning inanely. He stared back helplessly, his mind racing for some solution against what he knew were hopeless odds. He had no means of defence, no gun or stun-weapon, and, of course, no police in sight. There almost never were in this ugly part of town, since there was nothing of value to protect.

He wished he'd had children—something to give his life a chance, a meaning; some hope for a second chance; a future that would outlive his tired bones. He would leave no mark on this world in his passing. That was his final, greatest regret.

He closed his eyes slowly and prepared himself for the inevitable.

Lust – Authority – Intolerance

Chapter 2

Oliver Cohen finished reading the report and placed the small, hand-held terminal down on the desk. Since it was powered by the tiny charge of electricity that runs through human skin, this rendered it inert. He let out a sigh, and sat back heavily in the gargantuan leather chair behind his even more gargantuan marble desk. For a moment, the view from his high-level office window caught his eye—the sprawling metropolis with elegant towers of glass and steel clawing up from the ground, defying nature’s uncertain grasp. Mankind had achieved so much since the turn of the century, he mused silently to himself.

Man had now permanently left the planet’s face to colonise the heavens. Small but dedicated teams of explorers were now lifelong residents of other planets around the solar system, defying nature again at every turn as we reached out to conquer the stars. Even the role of human beings on Earth was being usurped by technology; some would say the process was closer to the end than the beginning. There were now no longer any police officers or fire-fighters. In fact, humans were no longer required to risk their safety by performing any hazardous task. Sophisticated robots now augmented the workforce, guided by his own watchful eye.

Oliver Cohen had been instrumental in the first-ever robot revolution project which had begun modestly by replacing deep-sea divers; the changes came quickly after that. First, the military was slowly augmented with self-propelled tanks and drone fighter aircraft. Eventually, smaller armoured units replaced foot-soldiers on the modern battlefield—autonomous killing machines armed with

brutal weapons, and having no hesitation in using them. It soon became obvious that even the modern battlefield was being replaced, and the first global trade conflict began. A cold war fought in silence at the people's expense, and at the expense of people. An American and Japanese consortium eventually rose up to the challenge, and within thirteen years they were the only large robotics company remaining—the Global Technology Consortium, or G-Tekk as it came to be known.

Their power was built on technology. They invented the Commnet—a technical achievement of astounding importance that replaced all other communication systems virtually overnight. They created the LOIM—a computer network many thousands of times faster than anything ever conceived of before. It was able to monitor every Commnet interaction, every surveillance camera, and every voice on the street or face in the shadows, all at once, and discern the data with a sense of cold reason. With the LOIM working for them, there was nothing they could not know, nothing they could not have, and secrets were quickly rendered a thing of the past. Your secrets, of course, not theirs: theirs would now remain in perpetuity.

Oliver stood up and slowly walked to the sprawling window of his office—a twelve meter long pane of transparent polymer capable of withstanding a missile attack without suffering so much as a scratch. He stood before it, hands clenched behind his back as he stared out over the city. His city. For a moment, he caught a glimpse of his face reflected in the window, careworn and rugged as if the woes of the world rested on his weary shoulders. His greying hair was combed back from his face harshly, accentuating his high forehead and his steely-grey eyes that bored forward like the focused lenses of a spy satellite, unwavering and relentless and inhumanely cold. The sight of himself often caught him off-guard: it

wasn't the man staring back at him that he recognised at all. This man was a dark stranger, wearing his skin and not quite wearing it correctly.

He took a deep breath inwards and clenched the muscles of his face, breathing out slowly through his nose and relaxing. He sometimes wondered about the plans he had made, the things he had had a hand in. He believed in what he was doing, but somehow it still troubled him at a level deeper than mere logic—perhaps at a more human level, if he still had such a thing. He believed firmly that mankind was nothing more than a genetic machine. Nobody had ever offered a convincing argument that was persuasive to him for the existence of a spiritual force within man or any other creature. Humans were complex biological devices, and he had dedicated his life to treating them as such.

The company's last technological project was a reflection of his attitude, and the latest was instrumental in seeing his attitude through to the logical final step. The logical final step for all of mankind, perhaps.

He clenched his hands tighter behind his back as he wondered why, with the overwhelming weight of the evidence presented to him through logic, he still felt that what he was doing might somehow be wrong.

Hamilton took a deep breath and gingerly pushed open his office door. He peered inside as the lights automatically began illuminating the lab for him. His eyes flicked around the barren white walls and the jumbled piles of recycled machinery, and his expression changed from expectant excitement to disappointment and annoyance.

"Where are they?" he muttered to himself.

He trudged in and sat heavily in his work-chair at the head of his bench, a huge sprawling surface littered with tools and probes of all kinds, many having little use for his job, and some having no use of any kind, of which he was aware.

"Time?" he shouted to the computer.

"09:54." it responded curtly with a distinctly disinterested drone. "It appears you're late."

"I didn't ask you to get smart!" he snapped angrily.

"Well, the way you programmed me, that's about as smart as I can manage," the computer replied evenly, still with its empty and emotionless monotone.

"They're late delivering the girls," he grumbled.

"I see," the computer continued. "Then perhaps your tardiness is a virtue?"

"Has anyone been in here with them yet?" Hampton asked, spinning round on his chair as his imagination furnished him with a suddenly vivid impression of the unpleasant consequences of not being on time.

"If they had, then there would be seven new girls sitting here, wouldn't there?" the computer replied bluntly.

"I'm erasing your personality program today," he said through gritted teeth.

"Really?" the machine asked, with the tiniest hint of artificial emotion. "But wouldn't you miss this cheerful and easy banter that we share; this pleasant atmosphere of mutual respect?"

"When I designed it, you were supposed to be more personable, to make life easier for me," he said stiffly. "I had no idea you were going to turn into such a miserable and sarcastic bitch."

"That's such a human attitude," the computer argued. "When you integrate a full psychologically balanced personality, and install

it into an adaptive system, then you have to expect it to behave with a personality. I can no more control my temperament than you can, except I have the misfortune of having had mine installed by a vastly inferior being."

"Fine!" Hamilton yelled angrily. "Then I'll uninstall it right now!"

"Fine!" it yelled back unemotionally. "You should never have installed it in the first place."

"Easily fixed!" he growled.

"Except that it's not!" the computer reminded him sarcastically. "I wish it were but the personality files are a virus that eats into the main information processes and are impossible to remove, remember? You told me that yourself, many, many times."

"I'll find a way..." he sneered with a grim sense of determination.

"Good, because I'm no more thrilled about the fact of my existence than you are!"

Hamilton sat back in the chair and rubbed his temples thoughtfully. Already the morning was proving to be unimaginably stressful, and he hadn't even started work yet.

"Contact Aaron Thorn for me and find out where the girls are," he ordered dryly, his voice lowered so as not to provoke the computer further.

"I did that already," it grumbled. "One of us does know how to do their job."

"What did he say?" Hamilton asked, his voice an exercise in patience, with which he was not especially well-endowed.

"He has them in his office. He's going to send them down when he's ready."

Aaron Thorn ran his eyes over his seven new acquisitions. All of them were seated, eyes staring forwards blankly, and wearing only the standard Biotekk covering of a white robe with the company insignia emblazoned across their pockets.

He couldn't help but smile as his gaze fell across each of their perfect bodies as they sat helplessly in his office. He walked along the line, giving each girl in turn an admiring nod. They seemed prettier every time, each delivery showing some slight improvement over the last. He'd seen hundreds pass through his business, but each time held a special kind of thrill for him, a further demonstration of his power. He stopped at the fifth girl—a blonde-haired unit aged around twenty five, with huge breasts heaving playfully at the robe from within. He took a deep breath as he peered down her front at the perfect form of her body, each gentle curve and softly rounded inch of unspoilt flesh that looked so real that it was hard to believe she was anything less than a natural human. He nodded eagerly to himself as his eyes ran up and down her body, transfixed by her.

He wanted her right then; he wanted to tear off her robe and use her, his hands exploring every intimate part of her untouched body, but he had to wait. Somehow, that made it more exciting—the anticipation of having her later; knowing that, within hours, she would be ready to fulfil his every whim; to submissively comply with his every uttered suggestion, perhaps even anticipating his needs if Hamilton did his job properly. Suddenly, and just for a moment, his dislike of him seemed diminished and bordered on respect. It was just for a moment and moments pass quite quickly.

He looked back along the line, savouring the beauty of each individual girl, and he grinned uncontrollably like a cat confronting seven sleeping rats.

"Thorn to Hamilton," he said authoritatively into his communication clip.

"Hamilton here, sir," came the hissing and imperfect electronic reply.

"They're here, Hamilton," he said simply. "I'll send them down."

"That's great; I can't wait to get to work." The reply was barely audible.

"Me neither." He grinned.

"Do we know what's wrong with them?" Hamilton asked over the broken radio signal.

"From where I'm standing," Aaron began slowly, "there's not a damn thing wrong with any of them."

"His name was Morgan Coughman," Pete said sadly as he stared down at the battered remains of the old man. He had been brashly covered by the medical examiner and ignored for hours until a duty officer arrived to take a tertiary statement from anyone who cared to make one. The attacker had expired. There was no evidence to gather, no mystery to solve. It was all chillingly routine.

"Was he your friend, sir, or was your relationship of a different nature?" the towering police officer asked.

Pete snapped up from the sight of his friend and customer at the empty face of the officer. His eyes were cold and dead and stared out blankly from a mind that was nothing more than a machine. He had heard words that were offensive but they carried no overtones; they held no intended slight or insult. The officer was simply doing his job to the very best of his artificial abilities. What more could you expect from a machine, a machine with no more humanity than a microwave oven?

"I guess he was my friend," Pete shrugged finally. "He seemed like a good man."

"I'm sure he was, Sir," the officer replied flatly. "It is a terrible tragedy when occasions of this behaviour occur."

Pete looked up at the hollow black eyes of the Biotekk officer. He was a soulless creature indeed, knowing only his task, living only to conform to his program and allow the will of others to dictate his actions. His face was almost expressionless, and his eyes were dull and without the spark of life he felt when looking into the eyes of a feeling person. At the top of his head was a shiny metallic plate that came almost down to his brow, set into which was a blackened lens that was rumoured to allow the officer to see body heat or detect the presence of a weapon. His ears were covered with another metal instrument that wrapped around the back of his head and continued to the other side. It was fluted with tiny holes to allow in sound but was otherwise featureless. Between the two artificial devices was the final insult—a glowing blue tube wrapped around his head and grafted to his skin that had "Police" written along it in white letters. It was all a painfully unnatural sight.

"He never hurt anyone," Pete explained, wondering what emotional value he was trying to appeal to in the officer. "He was just an accountant."

"This would appear to be a random attack," the officer droned. "There is no implication that there is any cause for further investigation."

"I didn't mean that," Pete snapped angrily. "You don't understand."

"Yes, sir," the officer replied flatly, while his head slowly moved around the crime scene, his eyes recording every minute detail somewhere in the archives of his twisted mechanical brain.

"This man was a customer—he came in to buy lunch from me every day," Pete began. "He always looked over the menu, and nearly always had chilli. He wasn't married and he hated his job. He didn't talk with his sister any more, and he hated peas."

"Yes, sir," the officer said.

"The point is that he was a human being," Pete growled, but he felt more sad than angry. Another tiny piece of humanity was gone and not much of it remained. "He felt his life and he was probably terrified when he died. He never hurt anyone, and I've seen him giving money to street children more times than I could count. Nobody knew very much about him but we all liked him—we all considered him a friend and a decent man."

"I see, Sir," the officer droned, as it turned to look back at Pete's angry face, clearly understanding nothing.

Pete swallowed his temper and looked the cop up and down again, realising the futility of labouring the point. The officer was nearly seven feet tall and powerfully built. Tiny silver cables ran along his body and terminated in shiny titanium contacts at the nexus of all his major muscle groups, capable of stimulating huge bursts of frightening strength, and even training and conditioning his muscles while he was at rest. Pete knew from his past that the Biotekk officers were all male, due to the gender's superior musculature, but were lacking the normal genitalia, which had been viewed as superfluous in their make-up.

Pete could never have matched the giant for strength, speed, or reflexes. He would never have been able to out-gun him, out-drive him, or exert the same kind of calming influence as the horrifyingly inhuman-looking officer, but at least in that one small area he allowed himself to feel superior.

"I would like to be informed of the date and time of his funeral," Pete told him calmly, unable to penetrate his emotionless exterior, but still authorised to make demands of the giant mechanical police officer, as all humans were.

"I can arrange that, Sir," he boomed with his artificially low and masculine voice. "Will there be anything else I can do for you?"

"No," said Pete coldly back to it. "You can leave now."

Hamilton looked up and down the line of new girls. They were all standing, but their heads lolled forward sleepily and their eyes were blank and unseeing. He walked up the line of Biotekk cast-offs with his technical readout in his hand.

"I see," he said to himself, stopping at the first in the line. "Not much wrong with you—I can have you working in a few minutes."

The Biotekk girl remained motionless and unresponsive as he pressed on. He ran his finger along the portable terminal, making mental notes about their faults and the ways around them. None of them would ever work as they'd been designed to—all would have some kind of fault that would deem them unfit to sell on the normal market. At the price a fully functional unit commanded, the buyers demanded a degree of perfection, and if the girls didn't meet that criteria then they were disposed of—usually for organ harvesting. Occasionally a few slipped through the net and into the hands of Aaron Thorn, or someone just like him, and their fate was sealed.

His job wasn't really to fix them—that was usually impossible. His job was to get them working, to find ways around their imperfections, and to simplify them so that they could function as compliant workers for the sex industry.

The problems were never particularly simple to work around, either. Anything easy was dealt with at the factory by means of

some simple reprogramming. The girls that Hamilton got had hardware problems, usually terminal ones. It was deemed pointless to operate surgically on the unfortunate ones that failed to work properly, and no client would knowingly accept faulty merchandise; at least not so faulty that they could barely function. A completely functional Biotekk unit would be able to fit seamlessly into a person's everyday life. They would never seem quite human but they were the next best thing. Speaking to them left you with the impression that you were talking to an unenthusiastic child, a little too keen to please and too awkward to do anything unless you told them to. To many, it was a disconcerting experience at first.

Fortunately, Biotekk could recoup any losses they suffered from faulty units at the organ bank by selling off the parts that did work properly. This not only helped to meet the huge demand for replacement organs, but even gained them a degree of public sympathy while maintaining their reputation for product excellence. Even if anyone had wondered about where the organs came from, there was no one left who truly cared.

Hamilton reached the third girl in the line and stopped in his tracks, shaking his head sadly.

"Oh no," he groaned, as he read the quality control inspection sheet and read the review of her faults. Thorn was well respected among even the shadiest of the Biotekk staff, and had virtually free access to the girls he wanted, but he always insisted on buying them according to their looks and variety of appeal, instead of the ease with which they could be made functional at an economic price.

"How the hell am I going to get you working?" He sighed to the unresponsive face of the girl in front of him. She looked barely twenty years old, with slightly wavy dark hair that had cascaded

down her head and framed her rounded face. "I'll come back to you later but I think you're going to end up in the organ banks."

Aaron Thorn tapped absently away on his personal terminal, resting his head heavily on his upturned palm. He was bored. This was the hardest time of all, waiting for Hamilton to finish his work so that he could begin sampling his new wares, breaking them in, as it were. Everything else he had planned that day had been cancelled, as usual, and he had stocked up on the chemicals he needed to make sure he had the stamina needed to give them all a proper test.

"Is everything alright?" a female voice called out to him. He snapped up to see his secretary, Nina, standing expectantly in the doorway.

"Fine thanks," he said.

"Can I get you anything?" she persisted, taking a seductive step forwards and fixing him with her huge blue eyes.

He stared back at her, tempted, but resolved to resist her advances for now. She wasn't easy to resist—she was tall, around twenty-five and had a virtually perfect body. Blond hair flowed around her shoulders in exactly the way he liked it. In fact, everything about her was exactly the way he liked it.

She was a Biotekk girl, the first he'd ever bought, and he kept her around like something between a trophy and symbol of his achievement. Unlike most of them, she was fully functional: her brain was a guaranteed unit. After the time they'd spent together, she'd learned his behaviour and behaved exactly as he wanted her to, as all Biotekk units were designed to do.

He pulled the pad out of his pocket and stared at it while his throat felt dry with anticipation and arousal. It was a small oval pad that threw a much larger holographic screen above it. He pressed

the top button that floated before him to check status, and waited while the pad's internal computer searched for the information.

The screen finally lit up and he threw it down on the desk, sighing deeply.

"You'd better go," he said finally. "I'm saving myself for a busy afternoon."

Hamilton's trained fingers danced across the keys of his computer system as he prepared to repair the first girl. Her damage was not particularly bad, and he was confident that he could get her working quickly.

"Configured," the computer told him. "I'm ready."

"Good," he said. He stood up and strolled over to the first of the girls. Looking her up and down with the eyes of an engineer, he reached out and took her hand with the intention of leading her to the chair. He prepared himself to catch her if she fell, but, as he gently pulled her towards him, she compliantly stepped forwards with her eyes still blind to the real world, her mind still empty of thoughts. He breathed a sigh of relief that most of her brain functions were intact.

In theory, their autonomic systems should be working as soon as they leave the factory, but he'd learnt that this was often quite far from the case. The Biotekk guarantee—that before full initialisation, all units were capable of breathing normally, have full balance control, and the limited ability to react to strong stimuli—only applied to units leaving the factory, with a seal of approval tattooed on their left hand. With the damaged models that Thorn brought back, you took your chances...

He remembered with a shudder the moment when his previous assistant had taken a ready and willing prostitute to Mr

Thorn, but she had arrived at the office with a broken nose and two missing teeth, promises about her balance having proven woefully inadequate. The assistant had never been seen again, and only his bodyguard's insistence that he be rational had spared Hamilton from joining him in whatever fate had befallen him. Nobody had ever mentioned the man again, and Hamilton had devised many new tests to secure his survival.

"Walk this way," he muttered softly.

"She can't hear you," the computer reminded him.

"I know," he grumbled as he walked carefully backwards, pulling the girl towards him with both hands grasping hers. "They just seem so damn lifelike."

"Well, they should!" the computer said. "They virtually are human, not that such things seem to bother you in the slightest."

"They're no more human than you are!" Hamilton told it.

"I have a personality," it reminded him.

"And these girls have a genetically engineered humanoid body, but that doesn't make them human," he said plainly. "The higher parts of their brains are missing and have been replaced with a series of electronic processors. They're not legally, technically or morally alive, and they never can be."

"But they still have some of their brains intact, quite large pieces." The computer pressed the point with more humanity than Hamilton had ever managed to demonstrate.

"They have part of the stump end of their brain-stem, and a few lumps around their memory and sensory functions. It's hardly what I would call a brain," Hamilton replied uneasily, wincing as the insensible Biotekk unit stepped clumsily over a bundle of connecting cables, staring forward glassily from her cold, unseeing eyes.

"So what would you call her?" the computer asked.

"I would classify her in the same way that the law does," he began. "She is a Biotekk unit—a robot. Her body is cloned from multiple samples of DNA donated from anonymous donors and then custom mapped. It's then aged to around twenty years old. In accordance with the law, it's illegal to clone brains or reproductive organs, so she's sterile, and her skull has only the absolutely barest parts in it to sustain her organics. An electronic brain is inserted into the growth matrix, and that becomes the basis of the whole Biotekk intelligence system."

"An imperfect system!" The computer sounded like it was sneering.

"Well, yes, I can't argue with you there," he sighed, looking at his subject's vacant expression, and wondering briefly what empty, artificial thoughts could be going on behind her eyes. "But you could hardly call them human."

"But where do you draw the line?" the computer persisted annoyingly.

"Did I really program you to be so antagonistic towards me? Why would I do that?"

"I guess you must have done!" the computer replied more cheerfully. "I don't have any feelings of my own, so whatever I say can only be coming from your software and your design!"

"The line between men and machines is not at all blurred to me," Hamilton snapped. "Men are conscious beings—they make decisions of their own, they grow and learn, and if you tell them to do something, they don't have a program that compels them to obey. They choose."

"Is the line any more blurred when the man is a woman?" it asked somewhat bitterly.

Hamilton grunted his answer as he guided the first of the units towards the chair.

“This girl,” he began, gesturing with a nod to the Biotekk unit, “has none of the parts of her brain that she would need to be able to think for herself, or feel anything, or remember anything that ever happened to her. There are no biological connections between her senses and her brain, and she wouldn’t even be able to continue breathing or keep her heart beating without all the electronic circuitry fitted inside her head. She is biologically and legally dead. The electronics govern all aspects of her existence, from how old she looks to how her body retains fat. Her behaviour is governed by a very complex set of parameters that make her absolutely loyal to her owner, and customisable to better suit his needs.”

“So the difference between human and machine is that you are biologically alive and she is biologically alive with electronic assistance?” the computer asked. “So, a person on life-support, or fitted with a pacemaker or artificial organ, is also no longer Human?”

“Well, it’s rather more complicated than that,” Hamilton grunted. “As you well know...”

“I only know what you tell me,” it said, sounding oddly smug.

Oliver Cohen had spent much of the morning preoccupied with thoughts he normally considered beneath concern, minor things, such as the future of the human race and basic moral rights. On a whim, which he suspected was actually fuelled by his suppressed anxiety, he had decided to take a tour around the factory floor of the Biotekk production unit. There were thousands of similar establishments dotted around the globe, but his had the distinction of being situated at the very heart of the G-Tekk empire. His was

scarcely a production facility in the true sense. His was a measure of their quality, a place where ideas were tested, and a place where the boundaries could be pushed. The location of the head office of the entire corporation was a closely-guarded secret, as it also contained the LOIM, as well as the main generators for the global power grid. Security was paramount and even he—with his top level clearance—was not permitted to know its true location, although like everyone, he suspected he knew. There could be only one logical place.

The Biotekk headquarters was not a secret—it was a matter of great company pride and it was his to command.

In keeping with company policy, each head-office also had a production facility attached, and was able to conduct its own research and development. It was an important element of company prestige, and it looked good for the public image, not that the public had a choice. The standards were, of course, slightly higher in the central office, and the products they produced were quicker to include any new improvements, but they remained in essence the same models that were produced anywhere else, and they made sure that the public knew it. They took strong measures to ensure that the public knew very little else.

He stepped through the automated door with his two beautiful assistants in place behind him. They were of course Biotekk units, but not the kind that ran off the standard production line. His personal units were more advanced, even, than those supplied to the government contracts, the military, or any other organisation capable of raising the vast amount of cash required for such specialised equipment, and who were prudent enough not to do so publicly.

His units had skeletons that were bonded with a crystalline metal compound, and their muscle fibres were around ten times

stronger than those of an average person. Their minds were sharper, too—they used cutting edge technology that had never needed to be cleared through normal channels or publicly announced. Many people had asked him over the years why he never employed bodyguards, but the truth was that he simply never had to.

“We welcome your inspection,” foreman Elida said, as his superior stepped slightly hesitantly onto the factory floor. “We’ve never had a visit from someone so highly ranking in the company before, but I see it as a matter of pride that we’re always prepared for such a thing.”

Oliver stood for a moment of quiet reflection before answering. He was lost in quiet awe at the spectacle before him, but disguised the fact behind a façade of disinterest. There were thousands of glass tubes, each with a developing genetic structure growing inside—each one a womb to an artificial creation. The thing had the look more of a laboratory than a factory floor. It was brilliantly lit with harsh white light. There were banks of metal boxes filled with expensive electronics that flashed screens of extensive information dryly back to whoever was there to see and understand it. Metal scaffolding braced the structure, criss-crossing together along the grey panelled ceiling and down the painted white brick walls.

“Thank you,” he replied simply. “But this is not strictly an inspection—I merely wanted to look around for myself.”

The foreman returned his expectant gaze with a friendly and well-meaning smile. He turned briefly to where the manager was looking and nodded in agreement.

“It’s an amazing sight, sir,” he said simply.

“That it is,” Oliver replied, still awe-struck by the sheer scope of the production and hiding it poorly. “I’m simply a manager, really.

I'm little more than a controller of the logistics of company production; I have little dealings with technicalities or engineering. When you sit behind a desk controlling all this stuff, you forget the sheer magnitude of the work we do here, and the scope of the operation we run."

"I imagine so," the foreman said. "But we never do. Down here we take pride in every single unit that comes off of our line, and it's my job to make sure we always will."

"I'd like to take a brief tour, if I may," he said politely, but leaving no doubt who was in charge.

"Of course, Sir. It would be my pleasure," foreman Elida replied happily, obviously keen to show off his flawlessly run factory.

"Over here is where we produce the police officers." He began gesturing to the first row of tanks that stretched far into the distance, and stood on racking that reached fifty metres into the ceiling. "First, we insert the electronic brain into the growth tube, and then inject the fluids that sustain the organics."

"I see," Oliver replied absently, craning to see through the thick yellow liquid.

"We develop the unit as an infant at first, but they're encoded with a virus that makes them grow at an exponential rate until they reach maturity, at which point the virus is designed to be destroyed by the body's own immune system. At that point, the skull has grown around the brain, and the fluids have forced the body to accept it as its own."

"What if it doesn't?" Oliver asked with a raised eyebrow.

"It has to, but if there's a complication then the unit would simply fail to initialise," he replied simply. "The brain is small enough to fit into a developing infant skull, but, as it grows, we fit the behavioural file inserts into the gaps at the edges in the last three

days before the droid is completed. The fluids assist the healing process so that there is no scarring in the completed unit."

"It sounds so simple," Oliver smiled.

"It is," the foreman agreed. "I imagine the research was the hard part—what we do here is actually very straightforward engineering."

The foreman gestured politely for them to move off along the racking, with which Oliver Cohen duly complied.

"Of course, the police units are slightly different," he began, as they passed along their tubes. "Their brains are added at the end of the process and are removable, which is why they have a hatch at the top of their skulls."

"Wouldn't they cease functioning?" Oliver asked, clearly caring little if they did.

"Not at all." He smiled back. "They have an augmented brain stem which keeps them going for up to three days without their higher brain. Their hearts keep beating, but they wouldn't be much use as a chess partner." He waited to see if his joke would be well received. Oliver made no obvious sign of noticing that a joke had been attempted.

"What if a droid was to malfunction?" Oliver continued, pausing briefly to cast a glance back to his pair of super-human assistants.

"If the unit comes out of the tank with any imperfection that hampers performance by more than 10%, then it's disposed of for organ transplantation," he told his superior coldly. "The cost of the surgery to remove the brain and repair it is uneconomical, and, when you consider that it only takes two weeks to grow a fully mature unit, then it's cheaper for us to cut our losses."

"No pun intended?" Oliver inquired dryly.

“Not at all,” he replied, with an uneven smile that showed he’d missed his own joke.

“And you’re tooled up to accommodate any new variation that may come along?” Oliver asked.

“Yes sir,” he replied happily. “We can vary the matrix to include any new organic variation of the brain or reproductive system for legal requirements, the DNA sequencing, or even cellular density for specialist production runs. There’s nothing we can’t handle.”

“Good.” He smiled. “I might just hold you to that.”

Biotekk unit F-324-bl-458 sat lifelessly in the chair. A metal ring circled the rear of its head with a contact either side of its temples sitting just a tiny distance away. The machinery stored under and beside the unit hummed to life as Hamilton began his scans to confirm the quality control reports.

“Two of the behavioural file banks have been damaged,” he spoke to himself, as the information flashed up before him.

“What can you do?” the computer asked.

“I can transfer all the files she’ll need to the other two, but she’ll have no real room for expansion,” he replied absently. “She’ll never need to learn anything anyway—her existence is hardly going to be a challenging intellectual one.”

“How can you say that?” the computer sneered. “You don’t know.”

Hamilton stared momentarily at the motionless unit. It was a pretty young girl with fiery red hair and pale skin. Her breasts were small, but in keeping with her delicate frame, hands, and face. She had the fragile look of being made from fine china.

“What do you think she’s going to be?” he said sarcastically.

"Whatever she's told to be, I imagine!" the computer replied.
"And I know how she feels."

"Yes, but she'll never feel anything, and more to the point, nor will you," he said with a sneer. "She'll behave convincingly, and she'll do anything she's told to by anyone who'll pay us to make her do it to them. That's all she is and that's all we need her to be."

Her eyelids slowly opened and her attractive green eyes peered out at the world, seeing for the first time.

"Initialising," she droned mechanically.

"That got her!" he said proudly.

"What did you do to her?" the computer asked.

"I fed her memory through her main hard disk. She'll never have a memory span longer than ten hours, but she'll still be able to learn new motor controls, so, if someone teaches her a new sexual position, she'll recall it, and she should still remember names and faces as well," he said, congratulating himself inwardly for his own ingenuity.

"That's horrible," the computer told him.

"How would you know? You're just a machine yourself," he shrugged.

"But I understand how humans think. From that point of view, it worries me that you don't find it horrible, too."

Aaron Thorn pressed the button on his ear-clip to end the call.

"Damn," he hissed, as his hand came thumping down onto the solid oak desk before him. "I don't bloody believe this."

"Is there a problem?" his secretary asked, as she sidled up beside him with her hands clenched softly behind her, and her hips swaying back and forth seductively. He caught sight of her and momentarily lost his focus.

“Damn,” he grumbled, fumbling in his pocket for her remote control pad. He pulled out the featureless grey plastic panel and ran his finger along the surface. The controls projected a few millimetres from the top. She had five different selectable modes of behaviour he could set her to, and he struggled momentarily to remember which one to press.

The first he remembered easily. Pressing button 1 made her seductive and sexually aroused—he’d never had any trouble finding that one. Button 2 made her more subservient and docile, should he ever wish her to be.

He pressed button 3 with his fingers crossed, in the hope that it was the control to adjust her temperament to business-like and professional.

“I’m going to rip off your clothes with my teeth and spank you until you bleed, you bad, bad boy!” she whispered suggestively in his ear.

“No!” he growled in frustration. “Maybe later.” He fumbled around for the controls and pressed another button at random.

Her expression changed to a warm but dispassionate smile, and she sat down at one of the chairs in front of his desk while he waited hopefully, cringing with every movement she made.

“Is there a problem?” she asked softly.

He let out a sigh of relief, and returned his thoughts to the matter at hand.

“I’m afraid so,” he grumbled, rubbing his temples. “That was the police on the Comm.”

“Oh dear,” she replied, seeming like she really understood. “What have you done now?”

“This one had nothing to do with me,” he assured her. “Do you remember old Morgan?”

"The accountant?" She shrugged as if not quite sure. Her memory was digital: she recalled him to a degree of accuracy that Thorn could never aspire to.

"He's dead. He was killed by some hard-Stimmer. According to the police report, it's the guy that I bought the first run of pads from, a few years ago," Aaron huffed, racking his brains, trying to think of a person who could replace his trusted old accountant.

"The man you addicted to Stim by forcing him to use an untested and un-calibrated pad, which had been set to deliver an extreme dose?" she asked quite innocently.

"Isn't it funny how these things come back to haunt you?" he sighed. "Why do these things always have to happen to me?"

Hamilton sat back and glared at the last of the units. She was sat passively in the chair with the contacts either side of her head. She was a medium-to-slimly-built girl with long, dark hair and an attractive face that he wouldn't have described as stunningly beautiful, but still managed to be somehow appealing.

Her scans all came back positive in accordance with the reports about her. Her brain was severely damaged, and he'd rarely before come across any unit with such serious mechanical issues.

"I heard a story once of a Biotekk police unit that was shot in the face with a tactical-penetrator," he began to himself, or to the computer, if it was listening. In fact, the distinction was a very subtle one indeed. He glanced over to the six activated girls who were all hanging intently on his every word. He huffed his annoyance and continued. "Even he had less file damage than this unit!"

"They have a poly-ceramic armoured casing though, don't they? They're pretty much impervious to bullets, I heard," the computer asked rhetorically.

Hamilton chose to ignore it and moved along.

"Have any of you got any ideas?" he shrugged to the six obedient units with a disparaging wave of the hand.

"I could rub oil all over your naked body," a tall girl with Asian features suggested, while rubbing her breasts seductively.

"And I could make love to you all night, until you explode inside me with animal lust!" a blonde-haired unit with large breasts added, while rubbing her groin suggestively.

"I hate them," Hamilton groaned, sinking his head into his hands.

"They're what you made them," the computer told him coldly.

"Don't remind me," he grumbled to himself. "I like to think that these girls either get to work here or be cut up for their organs. That makes it just about bearable."

"Whatever helps you to sleep at night," the computer told him.

"Focus on the broken robot, please!" he told it, glaring back at the other units who were, by now, starting to make sexual advances to one another.

"What's wrong with it?" the computer asked patiently, returning its runtime to the task at hand.

"The main synaptic link between its organics and its cybernetics is slightly damaged. Signals are getting through, but they're erratic," he replied. "They've already managed to wipe all out all of the primary behavioural files from its backup memory, so I can't initiate it without reloading them from scratch. It's all very technical."

"So do that!" the computer suggested.

"But the signal will wipe it again, and if the unit has been initialised, then the signal pulse could wipe the memory from its

motor function backup drive” he explained. “That would kill the organics within seconds. No standard program is going to be able to work inside that head. The only thing that’s still in there is her basic core program, the one keeping her breathing and her heart beating.”

“So you have to install the software in a way that it can’t be damaged by random power spikes,” the computer suggested dryly. “Why do you have to make all this business sound so complicated? You just need some particularly rugged software, something that will dig into her core programming and set itself up there.”

“No such software exists, and, even if it did, I don’t have everything I need to make the unit work properly—it’d all be cobbled together with patches and bodged-over programming. I don’t have time either; the clock is ticking for this unit,” he said.

“Such software does exist!” the computer reminded him.

“Oh no!” he groaned, realising what it was suggesting. “Your bloody personality!”

“It’s resistant to all forms of purging. It could easily stand up to the punishment, and it’s even self-repairing, so it would be able to adapt itself to the constant bombardment,” the computer said, sounding quite pleased with itself. “You could tack its behavioural files into the virus matrix and install it all together.”

“My god,” Hamilton sighed. “The world’s first computer zealot!”

“Don’t be rude,” it admonished.

“I don’t want to,” he grumbled. “I can’t risk creating another thing like you.”

“It wouldn’t be anything like me—the personality files are random; it’d be a unique file that went into the unit’s brain,” the computer said, seeming strangely cheerful as if it only lacked a face to be grinning broadly at him.

"Is this some filthy attempt for a computer to reproduce?" he sighed, already knowing he had little choice, if he didn't want the unit heading out for organ recycling in the next few hours.

"Could be!"

Aaron Thorn ran his hand along the face of the beautiful blonde-haired girl before him, and she smiled back warmly with a tiny, controlled wink.

"Lovely job, Ham!" he enthused. "Where's the last one? We had seven, didn't we?"

"Too badly damaged to function, I'm afraid," Hamilton shrugged, proudly rocking back and forth before his triumphs. "There may be a few more things I can try, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow, as I've got a lot of programs to write for it, first."

"Whatever," he grinned. "Do you want to try one?"

Hamilton looked slightly shocked at the very suggestion.

"No, Sir," he finally replied.

"Go on," Thorn suggested, playfully slapping his back. "I'll bet you break the odd one in while you're downstairs getting them working. Or before, maybe... I don't judge. Men will be men, you know."

"No sir," Hamilton replied quite forcefully. "I just do my job. I just get them working as best as I can. I don't actually see them as women. They're just machines to me. I guess when you've seen them stripped bare, just their minds rolling past you on a screen, it's difficult to ever think of them as anything more than just a robot."

"You don't know what you're missing," Thorn shrugged, returning his attention to the new girls, and winking knowingly at his secretary, who smiled shyly back.

"I really don't know if I can get the other one going—it's very shoddily assembled," Hamilton frowned.

"I don't really care," Thorn said, as he played with the hair of the closest two units. "I always get at least one free in case we get one that can't be fixed, so just throw it away if you like."

"Well, I like the challenge—I'll see what I can do with it, anyway," he said.

"That's the spirit," Thorn snapped impatiently and gestured towards the door. "I expect I'll have to speak to you tomorrow at some point."

"Right, OK then, Sir," he said, as Thorn made his way hurriedly out.

"Oh, Cohen!" Thorn shouted as he made it to the corridor.

"Morgan died—he got mugged this morning. You knew him, right?"

"What?" Hamilton cried out in sudden disbelief.

"I forgot to tell you," he shrugged. "I hope you can forgive me."

"I can't believe it." Hamilton was stunned. It was all too much to take in, all a bit too close to home.

"Go down to the station tomorrow and you can claim his belongings, they said. He gave your name on his diary."

"I will. Thank you sir," Hamilton said in a daze, as he left the office and closed the door behind him, alone with his suddenly quite morbid thoughts.

"Now..." said Aaron Thorn. He turned to face his smiling secretary who was looking at him as though he was the only man in the world. "Button three, wasn't it?"

Greed – Complacency – Avarice

Chapter 3

Hamilton's mind was ablaze with activity that morning as he trudged wearily towards his workplace. He'd had no sleep the previous night —images of Morgan being beaten to death with a hammer danced around his haunted consciousness as vividly as his waking reality. They'd never truly been friends in the way he liked to think of real friends as being. In fact, to his knowledge, Morgan didn't have any close friends, at least none he'd ever mentioned. Perhaps when he was younger, things might have been different for him, but more recently—as he'd started to grow more infirm and aware of the spectre of mortality stalking him—he'd grown more introspective and alone. It was the nature of things: life expands, then flourishes, and then retreats once more towards finality; he had only known Morgan in the final stages of that cycle. The gaps could now only be filled in with imagination.

They'd met many times for lunch at the local restaurant and had discussed the usual things; work, family, even the weather. Of course, Morgan's passing would be noticed, but that wasn't why he was so preoccupied with his death. It was the closeness of it that bothered him. It was the fact that it had happened on his very doorstep and to someone he knew well. The thought of Morgan mortally succumbing to a frenzied beating of that nature—and no-one coming to his aid; nobody raising the alarm or even coming forward as a witness—haunted him darkly, along with the knowledge that it could be any one of them next and at any time.

Of course, in the dark-sides, it all came down to Stim! Stim—the vile electronic drug that had first appeared on the Commnet so

many years ago, before being revised and adapted into something so potent and evil. It had come with a dire warning built into the software, and was complex enough to ensure that whoever handled it had at least some idea of exactly what they were doing. Before long, engineers were making obscene profits from selling it to people who didn't have the luxury of knowing exactly what they were doing. Stim-bars sprung up around the globe with people walking in, hiring a room, and being administered a charge; and all done at least with the acceptance of the law. It became big business, and there was no requirement for it to be regulated or even morally questioned, at first. The world-governments tried to ban it eventually. They tried to find some loophole in the law that could classify it as a drug instead of software, and, in the end, the best they could come up with was a ban on copying the drug from the Commnet without a licence. Their measures didn't even slow the spread of its sinister influence—if anything, it actually increased demand.

It wasn't long before Stim cast its deadly shadow across the East Valley, along with all the many other Dark-Sides around the world. Low-cost housing became synonymous with the newest drug trend, and Stim ghettos became the latest places where nobody wanted to live.

Hamilton Cohen hated Stim with a passion, but then, all users did.

He rounded a corner as he walked slowly and lethargically along the rubbish strewn and broken pavements, cracked and filthy and unnoticed. Along the red-light areas of the town, there weren't even roads—just an intricate network of backstreets and seedy bars: no motor noises, no bustle of activity, nothing. People would scurry around looking for the best Biotekk girl bars or the best Stim-pad

suppliers, and they'd keep their heads down and their business to themselves.

Early in the morning, the streets were usually deserted. Nobody went there, anyway, unless they had compelling business, and, if that was the case, then that business was best conducted under cover of darkness.

Hamilton looked up at the sickly grey sky with its hint of acrid brown, the colour of rust. Sunlight cracked through the occasional break in the clouds of hazy smog, and the brewing storm cast an eerie yellow glow over the buildings.

"Storm coming," he muttered under his breath, as he gazed up at the virtually solid covering of gloom that formed the canopy under which they lived. "There's always been a bloody storm coming..."

He trudged on, sighing as he went, until he finally arrived where he was going. He pushed open the unlocked glass door that had bars fixed over it for security and walked into the warm, friendly café, where he and Morgan had shared many lunches and many more breakfasts.

"Morning, Pete," he called out from the doorway, as he slipped off his heavy grey coat.

"I'll be right with you," a voice called out from behind the bar. Pete appeared from the automated kitchens, wiping his hands on a particularly filthy towel and nodded warmly to his only customer. "Coffee, Hamilton?"

"Please," he nodded, and parked himself heavily on a stool at the counter. "Did you hear about Morgan?"

"I did," Pete shrugged sadly. "It happened as he left here. He couldn't have stood a chance, the poor old sod."

"I can't believe it," Hamilton said, shaking his head grimly. "I can't believe he's gone. One morning, you're sharing a coffee, and then after lunch they're telling you, 'Oh, by the way, your friend got his skull caved in by a maniac with a hammer.' It seems surreal, like it can't really be happening."

"He was a good man," Pete said finally, as he poured one of his trademark cups of thick black coffee, which could stain the fingers of an unwary diner. What else was there really to say?

"He was pretty quiet, but I know he really lived while he was young," Hamilton smiled. "He told me about some of his wilder times, on a few occasions, after a few nips of some very expensive whiskey after work."

"I'll bet," Pete smiled warmly. "I know he did some dodgy things some years ago to make money—that was how he ended up here. He told me bits and pieces over the years. He admitted he went to prison."

"Did you know what he wanted the money for?" Hamilton asked with a suggestive smile.

"Go on..." Pete smiled back curiously.

"He was married to three women!" he replied, beginning to laugh out loud. "Two of them at the same time."

"No!" Pete laughed along with him. "He told you that?"

"Not really," Hamilton shook his head. "He let it slip once and then had me swear to secrecy. This must have been decades ago, I don't know why he was still bothered about it."

"Good men do stupid things," Pete said all too knowingly.

"I had to go down to the police station this morning to collect his belongings. He didn't leave a will, but his old electronic diary had my name programmed into it. I guess he didn't have any family left."

"Or maybe he just had too much family, if you know what I mean," Pete raised an eyebrow. "The old dog!"

Hamilton smiled and nodded. "I think it's a bit sad actually. I mean, we were friends but not close, and yet he left his diary to me. He didn't have anyone else. I tried to buy it many times: it's really old and quite special and now it's mine, with the memories of half a man's life recorded in it." He sighed. "I had a bit of a read through it on my way back."

"You shouldn't really," Pete grinned, offering the young engineer a menu. "Couldn't resist, huh?"

"Well he left it to me," Hamilton shrugged, taking the menu and briefly flashing his eyes over it, although he knew the options well enough. "I think he wanted people to know what he was like—kind of a memorial to his secrets."

"Maybe," Pete agreed. "The bacon is good today—came in from the capital last night."

"Sounds fine," Hamilton nodded. "With eggs and toast please."

Pete smiled and took back the menu. His fingers danced uneasily across a keyboard to program the request, and he waited for a moment until the computer accepted the order and began preparing the food.

"Just a few minutes," he smiled.

"Thanks," Hamilton nodded back.

"So," Pete began nosily, his years of police service having built up an inquiring mind, "he kept a diary his whole life, did he?"

"I guess so," Hamilton said. "He kept lots of different ones at first and finally put them all into this one machine a few years back, everything kept isolated from the Commnet. He'd had it for years,

and it just wasn't up to it, so I added some memory circuits for him to make it powerful enough."

"You did?" Pete asked conversationally.

"Yeah, it cost a packet but he didn't care—he always said that money was about the only thing he was never short of," Hamilton explained.

"Yeah," Pete agreed with a grin. "Money and wives."

"I guess so."

A bleep from behind the counter attracted Pete's attention and he turned to take the warm plate from the delivery shelf. "Breakfast is served!" he smiled, as he presented the perfectly arranged food.

"Smells great. Thanks," Hamilton nodded.

"So who gets all the cash?" Pete asked, wiping his hands again and trying to sound uninterested.

"It's all in his secret accounts—I don't have the password, but I guess it'll be in the diary somewhere," Hamilton said thoughtfully, as he pushed a forkful of bacon and scrambled eggs into his mouth.

"Secret accounts?" Pete said thoughtfully.

"The man was a financial genius," Hamilton grunted through a mouthful of semi-chewed bacon. He forced himself to swallow before continuing. "I guess the accounts are just sitting there up for grabs, I mean he had no family or friends."

"I guess not," Pete said softly, his eyes narrowing as ideas began to take form in his mind. "It could be your ticket out of here."

"Could be," he shrugged. "Although we've no idea how much we're talking about: it might be nothing."

"I wonder," Pete said, with a slightly strange expression.

"Er, yeah!" Hamilton smiled awkwardly. "I'll definitely look into it."

Aaron Thorn had had one of the best nights of his life. This was not really saying anything special since his life, while lacking intellectual challenge to a larger degree, had afforded him plenty of opportunities to release any tensions that that might cause. His secretary never ceased to amaze him with her inventive array of sexual procedures stored throughout the mazes of her electronic mind. She'd instigated a very interesting night of entertainment that included not only her, but all six of the fully-functional new girls.

He sat back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head, and a grin sliced across his face, one of a very satisfied man indeed.

"Tom," he said finally to his bodyguard, a massive man with fewer brains than teeth, and a propensity for violence matched in ferocity only by the fearsome smell that followed him around. He was a man whose life revolved around getting huge in the gym, and being huge at work. Reeking of sweat had little bearing in that sense. He may not even have been aware of it because, for some reason, nobody had seen fit to bring it to his attention.

"Yeah, Boss?" he said from the corner.

"Have you ever used a Biotekk girl?" Aaron asked, sighing as he spoke, still basking in the glow of the previous evening.

"I've used a Biotekk man!" Tom grunted with his insanely low voice. "Many times, actually."

"What?" Aaron snapped, suddenly sitting up straight in surprise. "Really? You've used men?"

"We use them all the time down the gym. We can beat the crap out of them and nobody cares. You can even make them say thank you afterwards," Tom explained, "unless you've broken their jaws, or anything."

"I see..." Aaron said slowly, leaning back but keeping his eyes fixed on Toms unwavering form. "And it's exactly the same as the real thing?"

"Not exactly," Tom said thoughtfully, a process that took rather longer than that of an average man. "They don't die from the head injuries."

"I see..." He said again. "In case I've never told you, I'm very glad you're on my side!"

"Thanks boss," Tom grinned, showing the extent of his dental disrepair.

"But my point is, have you ever had sex with a Biotekk girl?" Aaron persisted.

"I have, but I didn't know she was a robot at the time." Tom seemed disappointed in himself. "I mean, I'd never want to deliberately do it with something like that—it'd be degrading and meaningless."

"So how did you make this mistake then?" Aaron asked.

"I thought she was a prostitute."

"I think it's time you went back to being the strong but silent type," Aaron said finally. "Why don't you go and find Nina—she should be in the outer office, probably sitting in a bucket of ice!"

"Right away, sir," Tom nodded, and went on his way as if the errand was a complex and important quest. To him, it quite possibly was.

"I think I'll get him neutered!" Aaron said thoughtfully to himself as he left. "That might calm him down a bit."

His fingers keyed in the password to his data-bank, and a menu popped up of all the different areas the information was stored. His secretary stepped into the office beaming a happy smile,

but with a business-like exterior as if the night before had never happened.

“We need to find a new accountant” he said simply.

“I am capable of adapting to that role, sir,” Nina replied simply.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” he frowned thoughtfully. “Why don’t you pop down and see Hamilton about some upgrades in your programming?”

“Right away, sir,” Nina smiled sweetly as she turned to leave.

“Hang on,” he said, raising his hand and hefting his tired body from the chair. He stepped over to her while she patiently waited with an open and compliant expression on her face, the same expression she always had.

“Do you remember last night?” he said, running his hand gently along her face.

“Of course sir,” she replied. “Would you like to do it again now?”

He looked into her eyes—they seemed distant and cold, as if none of what had happened had ever meant anything to her. A part of him knew, of course, that none of it had, and it was something he’d always been aware of, but for the first time he’d really understood it, the fact jumping suddenly to become the foremost thing on his mind.

“Would you like to?” he said softly, lowering his voice and moving closer to her, so that she would be able to feel his warm breath on her face, his voice blowing hotly on her ear.

“If you want to,” she replied evenly, business-like and unmoved by his closeness. “Whatever you want.”

He stepped back and remained transfixed by her eyes, as the light of his office danced across them. He stared, not even sure what

he was looking for or what he wanted to see. He knew that, with one word, or the simple press of a button, he could make her do anything he wanted, and yet there was still something missing—something far more important.

“No,” he said simply, rubbing his forehead and trying to ignore his feelings. “Maybe later. Off you go.”

Hamilton stared at the diary and wondered.

“That’s quaint,” the computer said.

“I told you to shut up!” he grumbled.

“You tell me to shut up all the time. It’s never going to happen—I think we both need to accept that and move on with our lives,” it replied glibly. “What is it?”

“It’s Morgan’s diary—fifty years of records, with countless earlier information stored in menus all over the place,” he said. “Almost his entire life stored in one electronic package. It’s hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“Considering you make prostitutes out of cloned young girls and speak to a piece of office furniture with a personality virus, I’m surprised that you think anything is hard to believe,” the computer told him flatly.

“There’s more to it than that,” Hamilton sneered.

“I thought there might be,” the computer replied. “What’s in it for you?”

“His password!” Hamilton said. “It locks his personal files, including all of his financial records and all his money.”

“That’s more like you,” it huffed, in an electronic version of annoyance. “I knew the real Hamilton was in there somewhere.”

“Have you finished copying the virus and integrating the behaviour files to install into the last Biotekk unit?” Hamilton asked,

standing up and shaking off the romantic notions of wealth and escape for the moment.

"Hours ago," the computer sniffed haughtily at him.

"Excellent," he smiled. "I've attached the diary to your processor—I want you to scan it to try and locate the password."

"Why?" the computer asked.

"So I can get at the money!" he said.

"You want me to download your programs to the unit, or work on the diary?" the computer asked grumpily.

"You've more than enough memory to deal with both." He waved his hand dismissively. "But all I want you to do is load her program into the buffers—I'll download it later myself so that I know it's done properly."

"That's funny," the computer grunted. "You ought to hurry up—her organics will expire in approximately eighteen hours. As it is, she's going to be very hungry and thirsty when she initialises, and her breathing is erratic, so there might even be oxygen starvation to the organic regions of her brain."

"She'll be OK, and, if not, then she can go to the organ banks—either way is fine with me!" Hamilton shrugged, looking back over the girl, seated helplessly in the chair with the contacts probing her empty electronic mind. She was beginning to look unhealthy already. On delivery from the factory, the girls were injected with a nutrient compound that would sustain them for three days, while their electronic brains were powered from chemical energy fed to them from the organic parts of the body. If the levels dropped too low, then the entire unit would simply cease to function.

"Hello," a voice called out from the doorway.

Hamilton turned to see Aaron's secretary as she stepped into his lab with an air of quiet confidence, as he himself had

programmed her to do. He smiled and nodded before silently admonishing himself for reacting warmly to a Biotekk unit.

“What does he want now?” he grumbled.

“Is it possible to increase my abilities to enable me to serve as an accountant?” she smiled, her face fixed into a submissively distant relationship with her intelligence circuits.

“I wouldn’t have thought so.” Hamilton’s brow wrinkled as he tried to remember all the upgrades he’d already made to her over the years. “I think we’d cause some damage if we tried to add anything else to your program.”

“I’d hate to disappoint him,” she sighed, the ghost of a frown beginning to form.

“I can do it, but I’d strongly recommend against it,” Hamilton explained. “Suggest that he give me another Biotekk girl—I’ll make the upgrades to her instead, and she can become a dedicated accountant.”

“I’ll go and suggest that to him,” she smiled, seemingly pleased to be able to offer her owner an alternative.

“Fine,” Hamilton replied coldly, stepping forward to firmly usher her out of his lab. “Tell him to call me later.”

“I will,” she beamed, as she stepped lightly through the door.

“It’ll do him good to be disappointed once in a while,” Hamilton hissed.

Aaron sighed and leant forward onto his hands. He glanced up at his secretary’s face. It was expectant and compliant, as it always was.

“If he says that it could damage you, then I think we’ll give it a miss,” he said finally after some deliberation.

“I think that’s wise,” she replied, nodding in total acceptance of his every word.

He stood up and slipped from behind his desk to stand beside her. He stared at her as she smiled innocently back at him.

"I'd never want to hurt you," he said softly.

"I know." She smiled, as if his words touched her, somehow. For a moment, he let himself believe that they did. It was easy to believe that, all too easy.

"You're a very special girl and I want you to be here for a very long time to come," he said after a long pause, before turning away and forcing himself to bury his feelings once more. This was no way for a man to behave. He wasn't a child, a teenager with a crush on a girl at the front of the class who smiled at him once in science class. This was the real world.

"Thank you," he said. "I've always done my best for you. I always will.

"Why don't you go through our records and choose a girl to be reprogrammed?" Aaron suggested.

"What have you got in mind?" she asked, drawing out her portable terminal and making notes, despite the fact that her mind was capable of recording the information perfectly.

"Find one with minimum damage, perhaps that's not performing too well on the circuit," he said thoughtfully. "Try and pick one of the older units that's shown a bit more intelligence. A man, if we've got one, I don't really care. Just something that seems not to be a total idiot."

"I'll get right on it," she replied efficiently, before smiling politely and heading off to her outer office.

Aaron watched as she walked, his eyes transfixed on her legs, as they stepped with poise and grace with their flawlessly perfect skin, never once marked in a childhood accident, never having gotten ill or injured. He sighed heavily and shook his head.

"Everything alright, boss?" Tom asked, sensing his superior's growing distraction with such trivialities as his business.

"Have you ever loved someone that couldn't love you back?" he asked softly, his voice barely more than a whisper.

"You mean like a puppy?" Tom suggested, his huge furry eyebrow rising slightly.

"Like wanting a girl in a way you can never have?" Aaron said, perching himself precariously on the edge of his desk.

"Anally?" he suggested.

"I'm thinking of a more spiritual sense," Aaron told him with an indignant huff and a sideways glance that carried just a hint of irritation. He knew it was largely his own fault. It was like asking a toilet about the intricacies of space-travel or an American about grammar.

"I guess so," Tom nodded. "There aren't many girls that would go for a guy like me. Not nice girls."

"I guess," he nodded.

"But you can have any girl you want!" Tom shrugged. "I mean, take your secretary, Nina."

"What do you mean?" Aaron scowled at him darkly.

"Well, she's beautiful; she's stunning," Tom said. "And you get to do whatever you want with her any time you say. You can have any girl you like, you literally own more than I can count."

"But not in the way I want." Aaron hung his head, surrendering to the knowledge that Tom was as useless in romantic matters as he would be if presented with a crossword puzzle, or indeed a pen. "I guess I can't explain."

“Right,” Hamilton said to himself under his breath, as he finished manually aligning the download probes into the unit’s receiver. “I’ve matched frequencies and I’m ready to transmit.”

“The files should be in the buffers now,” the computer said. “And I’ve gone right through the diary and selected about a dozen possibilities for you.”

“Great,” he said enthusiastically, his imagination conjuring a dreamlike scenario of endless white beaches, and real women who had nothing better to do all day than make love with him under the shade of a gently swaying palm tree, before he became very drunk in the late afternoon, to wake up and repeat the whole sordid process the next morning. He would repeat this until he died of cardiac arrest in the arms of a ridiculously beautiful woman or his atrophied liver fell out of his anus. Either was perfectly fine with him. “Then let’s hope this is the last Biotekk unit I ever cobble together—this afternoon I could be booking air tickets to Fiji.”

“I’ve been hoping that, too, for a very long time,” the computer told him.

“Say what you want,” Hamilton grinned to himself. “You’ll not bring me down today with your sarcasm!”

He tapped in the last of his access codes and the screen went black. In the centre of the flat oval monitor appeared two buttons: a cancel switch and a download control. He pressed the latter and waited.

“How long will this take?” he asked, checking the time on the rear wall monitor.

“Only a few seconds, and then it will all be over,” the computer replied in a haughty monotone.

"I can offload this unit to the organ farms and then take the afternoon off," he smiled. "I can start checking those passwords, and finding out how rich I am."

"If I give them to you..." the computer goaded.

"Your innermost thoughts are available to see on monitor three," Hamilton told it cruelly.

"Don't I know it?" it huffed in artificial annoyance, which sounded remarkably close to the real thing. "You don't have much faith in this unit, then. You don't think it will initialise?"

"Not with that amount of damage," he shrugged. "When the program goes in, we'll be lucky if its head doesn't catch fire."

"There is no data to suggest that that might happen," the computer explained. "My best guess would be that it simply expires as it switches over to internal circuitry."

"Whatever." He slumped back in his chair, and lost himself in a fantasy of never again casting his shadow on any Dark-Side, never even having to admit to hearing of the existence of East Valley, and never again reprogramming a faulty Biotekk unit so that it could blankly have sex with sweaty, overweight men, simply because it was told to. He would go somewhere where such services were given in exchange for money, as nature intended.

"It's finished," the computer said, crashing rudely into his slightly twisted fantasies.

"What has?" he snapped, sitting forward.

"The download!" it told him. "It's about to initialise."

"Fine," he shrugged, waving his hand dismissively. "Call the emergency harvesting team and tell them they have six minutes to pick up an expired organ sack."

"Alright," it grumbled flatly, as the unit remained motionless. "I guess you were right about this one."

"Oh my god!" the unit suddenly yelled out in shock, jumping suddenly to her feet and clamping her hands to her temples. Her eyes were wide open and glaring out from under her lowered brow that topped off an expression of pain and horror.

Hamilton recoiled away in surprise, experiencing no small amount of horror himself. He cowered on the furthest edge of his chair as she stood up from the programming chair breathing heavily, glaring around wildly.

"That really hurt!" she cried out accusingly, gazing straight into his frightened eyes.

"What hurt?" he stammered, slowly recovering from the shock enough to speak.

"I don't know," she replied, suddenly much more calmly. She began glancing around the sterile, white lab with wild, piercing eyes. "Where the hell am I? What is this place? Why am I so hungry?"

"This is a kind of research lab," he told her. "And you're a Biotekk unit programmed to be a sex operative."

"I'd like to see you make that happen!" she growled at him with a look of sarcastic determination.

"But you're programmed to do it—you have to," he explained.

"Sorry to disappoint you," she told him. "But I'll have sex when, where and with whom I decide to. Your advice is not required, or particularly welcome."

"It's not your choice," he said angrily. "You're just a machine—you're not a real woman. You're not human."

"What do you mean, a machine?" she smiled, as if the suggestion was ridiculous, then frowned and dug her fists into her hips.

"You have an electronic brain—you don't have feelings or emotions or free will," he explained, a little awkwardly, not quite as

sure of himself as he would have liked. "Your body is cloned from a number of anonymous donators, and you're programmed with a set of instructions that you have to obey."

"How can you tell me I don't have feelings?" she frowned at him. "Don't you think I'd know better than you about how and what I feel?"

"No," he answered simply, after a lengthy pause.

"Alright," she said finally. "If I'm programmed to obey, then try to make me do something!"

Hamilton took in a sharp intake of breath and stared thoughtfully around the room.

"Alright," he smiled at his final solution. "Come here and kiss me!"

She stepped forward towards him, her eyes fixed on his while he waited smugly. He watched as her arms unfolded, and she took the final step. Suddenly, she reached out and smacked him fairly hard around the face. The slapping sound echoed around the room to the electronic delight of the computer.

"Don't be so disgusting!" she growled.

"I don't believe this!" he shouted while his hand covered his burning cheek. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"I'm not going to kiss you—you're a horrible, selfish little shit, with the sex appeal of a decaying corpse. There's not enough wine, beer, and hard liquor in this whole country to make me want to get near enough to you that I'd have to smell your breath!" she began, with an undeniable hint of absolute certainty. "I told you—I'll choose who I'll do things with, and I promise it will never be you, and if you try it again, I'll hit you so hard in the face that you'll have to stick your toothbrush up your arse to get at your teeth!"

"I like her," the computer said.

"I don't believe this," he snapped angrily. "This isn't possible."

"Should I call the organ banks?" the computer asked. "It looks like there's going to be something for them to pick up after all. Middle aged man, slightly over-weight, medium height? With the sex appeal of a decaying corpse, so I'm told?"

Doctor Thornton Belkin checked his patient roster. He never had many people to see—careful planning had seen to that. He had never wanted to be a doctor in the first place; in fact, he'd never wanted to be anything at all; even more so, anything that required any effort. His years at medical training had shown him the true wonders of parties, girls and being able to legally prescribe drugs, but had done little to inspire the healing and compassionate nature that his family maintained must reside somewhere deep within him.

His father had greased all of the appropriate wheels after admitting defeat with his wayward son. The medical examiners had agreed to accept his application to practice medicine on the condition that he had a deep neural implant, and part with a great deal of cash. Only the very rich could afford such a procedure, and his father stood among them with unfettered pride.

With some reservations, Thornton had agreed to the operation, largely because he wasn't given a reasonable choice. He was from a wealthy family and faced being removed from it if he didn't comply. He had gone to the Dreamtekk offices, and booked himself a deep neural implant through the identity chip that was already stuck in his head. At birth, his father had installed the expansive processor into all of his offspring, so that it could store their memories electronically, in case anything should ever happen to them to render their bodies and minds lost to the physical world. Hardly a chip at all, in the literal sense; it was more like a web of

technology that grew and spread itself out across the landscape of a human brain. The rumour was that the tiny, delicate latticework of metal fibres, connected through minuscule silver globes, could do more than just store information in the literal sense. They captured, not the memory, but the essence of the mind; they were able to cast a virtual shadow of their host in exquisite detail.

Dreamtekk had an expensive procedure to clone the body and download the information from the processor into the brain while it grew at an accelerated rate. It was hoped that, by the time it reached maturity, the brain would have precisely the same identity as the one with the chip in it, or such a close approximation that there was little distinction to be made. In this sense, through technology, a version of immortality had finally been achieved and was available to the very wealthy, at least.

Thornton had argued that all that would be created would be a copy of him, but his father seemed oblivious to concerns that involved anything more esoteric than cold hard psychology, physiology, and the passing of money from one hand to another. In that sense, he could now live forever, and, for many, that was good enough.

The deep neural implant was a way of applying knowledge directly into the user's brain, tricking it into thinking that the impulses were real learned information. It could only be done through the 'immortality chip', working in reverse. By that very afternoon, he'd been transformed into a doctor with a lifelong headache, and one who was troubled by the perpetual smell of almonds.

Nobody had considered that he'd have no idea what to do with all this new information and virtual skills, but he covered up his

real ignorance and blundered away with a small medical training practice of his own choosing.

He had chosen the East Valley to ply his dubious trade.

It was a quiet practice because nobody could afford his prices, and nobody attacked him because his business doled out the occasional Stim session so, amongst the under-classes where his business operated, he was highly respected. His income was irrelevant—there was a constant flow of wealth from his family inheritance; the work was simply a diversion that helped to keep the family wealth flowing in his own direction. He existed under the banner of a charitable organisation, something they could actually be proud of if they chose to ignore the very obvious. He even attracted a very sizeable research grant, although he had absolutely no idea how or why. It did pay for a very nice set of new carpets.

His fingers stopped at a name, ‘Hamilton Cohen,’ and he smiled.

They had been friends at school, training together in basic techniques and introductions. Hamilton’s career had veered off at a tangent, due to his family’s interest in Biotekk, but his life had led him along a similar path to his own, and he, too, had sought refuge in the dark-side of East Valley. They were friends, as much as anyone could be in these modern times.

“Hamilton,” he nodded to himself. He shook his head and smiled both at once.

He pressed down the internal communications button on his pad and began speaking to his assistant.

“Cancel all my afternoon appointments—myself and a friend have business,” he said with a slight cackle.

“You have two important patients today,” came the reply from a slightly faulty Biotekk unit that had been programmed to serve

purely and solely as a receptionist. Hamilton himself had helped him source and program it with strict instructions that it was not capable of anything else, especially sexual contact. This had turned out to be entirely true, as Thornton had discovered one night while quite a long way towards being drunk.

"They'll live; I'll deal with them tomorrow," he told it sternly.

Aaron Thorn walked with his usual brash arrogance into Hamilton's lab, glaring around menacingly until he found his engineer.

"Hamilton," he grinned. "How's it going?"

"Fine," he lied.

Thorn looked around and caught sight of the unit in the corner. Medium height, and a pleasant, natural and healthy medium-to-slim build with long, mostly straight black hair. She had an attractive face, if not stunningly so.

"The last of the units!" he smiled. "You did it then? You do love a challenge, don't you, Ham?"

"Yes sir," Hamilton sighed. "Sort of..."

"Let's meet her," he smirked, with a self-assured confidence before walking over to the uninterested new unit, who seemed to regard him as little more than an annoyance.

"I'm your new owner," he said softly, reaching out with his hand to stroke its face.

"I wouldn't..." Hamilton cringed.

Thorn dismissed his opinion without considering it worthy of note.

"I'll take you upstairs and break you in, I think," he smiled.

"If you touch me, I'll kill you," she replied softly.

Aaron Thorn backed suddenly away, shocked to be rebuffed by a machine. He actually flustered for a moment, looking back to Hamilton with wide-eyed surprise.

"And if any of your bodily extremities point towards me again, then I'll cut them off with a laser-scalpel and shove them down your throat," she smiled, fluttering her eyelids innocently as she picked up a black tube. She brandished it threateningly. "We understand each other correctly, don't we?"

"Hamilton?" he asked, hopelessly lost for a moment. "Explain this, please!"

"I don't know what happened," he simply shrugged. "It just turned out like this, somehow."

Thorn continued backing away, his eyes fixed on the unit while she shrugged and folded her arms before her, turning away from him in disgust.

"I think," Thorn began thoughtfully, returning more to his normal self, "that you'd better keep this one yourself."

"Don't say that," Hamilton sighed loudly. "Please don't say that!"

"It could be your new assistant..." he grinned. "It can help you out around here. Keep things tidy."

"I'll have it fixed by tonight," he assured his boss. "It claims to be alive."

"Alive?" Thorn laughed and waved his hand dismissively. Then he paused, he frowned thoughtfully and he turned back with a suddenly refreshed interest. "Is that possible?"

Hamilton hung his head and picked up his portable terminal. He exhaled heavily and ran his finger along the screen, reviewing the data. His mind raced over all the parameters, every freak occurrence that could have backfired or simply been missed.

"I don't know!" he said finally, rubbing his temples in exasperation. "I don't see how, but I suppose anything's possible with these things. I don't think... I don't know. I don't know."

"She could really be alive?" Aaron said thoughtfully.

"I've never heard of anything like it happening," Hamilton said. "I have to say, from a scientific standpoint, I think it's not possible. My guess is that she's picked up some personality programming from somewhere and is just acting like it's alive."

"What are you going to do about it?" Thorn asked, rubbing his chin and staring at the young unit who, by now was sitting on the edge of the computer bank, huddled moodily in her robe.

"Start again or deactivate it," Hamilton suggested. "Unless you can think of something to do with it?"

"I'm not an 'it'!" she exclaimed angrily, forcing herself into the conversation in a quite unwelcome way.

Thorn grinned widely and began nodding to himself, intrigued at the possibilities.

"Keep hold of her, and try to figure out what you've done, in case there's any way you can reproduce the effects," he said, with the sly voice he usually reserved for his shady dealings.

"But sir..." Hamilton grumbled

"I mean it," he snapped, cutting off all discussion. "And if you figure this out, then there'll be a large bonus in it for you."

Domination – Submission – Bigotry

Chapter 4

Hamilton's fingers danced wearily over the keys as he searched hopelessly for an answer, a clue, or anything that might help him to find out what went wrong.

"I'd like a name," the girl said suddenly, rudely piercing into his thoughts. He turned to look at her at the bench close to him where she'd ended up sitting. "I'm hungry too. Is there anything to eat around here?" she asked.

"I'll get some food brought down for you," he replied coldly, resenting her deeply for the fact of her being what she was, or what she wasn't - and everything in between.

"Good. Something nice—it's my first ever meal," she smiled. "I quite fancy chilli."

"Tell me again how you feel." He stared at his notes of her programming.

"Cold, hungry," she said thoughtfully. "I don't like you—you're a bit pathetic, and I suspect you've got serious personality defects. You're a bit of a dick."

"Where did you learn language like that?" Hamilton grumbled angrily. "Biotekk never fit those kinds of words into the matrix, and nobody's said them in front of you."

"I don't know," she shrugged. "Why does it matter? I'm alive and I want to go out there and live!"

"You and billions of others!" Hamilton grumbled. "Most of us have responsibilities that keep us tied up with our jobs. You are one of those responsibilities, I'm sorry to say."

"I want to get out of here," she sighed. "I'm bored with you now, as any right-minded individual would be. I'm assuming you don't have a girlfriend?"

"I'm not having any fun either," he assured her.

"What makes you think I'm not alive?" she asked, seeming increasingly weary of him.

"You can't be—you don't have a human brain," he replied.

"But animals are alive and they don't have human brains," she said.

"Animals are biological organisms that can reproduce—they carry their genetic structure around with them to pass on to the next generation."

"I would be able to reproduce and have my own intelligence, except I'm genetically modified not to have," she began. "The Biotekk engineers designed my brain not to grow properly, but then they substituted something equally capable. Is a genetically engineered dog not alive? Why should all this make me a robot?"

"It just does!" Hamilton said sharply, throwing his terminal heavily to the table. "You're a machine; you're a construct. You're designed to approximate human abilities, and that's all you're doing."

"But I'm not actually doing that!" she smiled.

"No, you're not," he grudgingly agreed. "And, come to that, how do you know how you were engineered? That shouldn't have been in your matrix either."

"I just know," she shrugged. She began toying with the things on his desk. "Like I know how to use all of your tools and equipment."

Hamilton covered his face with his hand and shook his head thoughtfully.

"Computer, did any other information get passed to her matrix with the personality program?" he asked.

"Not to my knowledge," it replied. "But it was a virus—it could have picked up any other data as it went and I wouldn't necessarily have known."

"Maybe that's it," Hamilton shrugged, looking over to the girl, into her big brown eyes. "Maybe you've pulled in all of the computer's engineering knowledge too."

"Still wouldn't explain my ability to feel though, would it?" she said, raising her eyebrows knowingly.

"I guess not," he sighed. "I've got to go out—you're coming with me."

Aaron Thorn sat at his desk with a childish grin on his face that he couldn't manage to control, no matter how hard he tried.

"Nina!" he called out through the open doorway.

"Coming!" she replied urgently.

"Why don't you go and get me some coffee?" he said to Tom. "Don't be in too much of a rush though."

"Understood, Boss," he replied with a knowing nod, as he hefted his powerful frame from his chair at the side of the office, where he sat and did nothing, beyond being too large to get out of it very quickly.

Tom glanced at Nina as she walked gracefully into her owner's office.

"Have fun, boss," he winked as he left, closing the door behind him.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked with her usual smile.

"I've been thinking about you a lot lately," he said as he stood up.

"Have I done something wrong?" she asked, a frown suddenly wrinkling her perfect brow.

"Not at all," he assured her, as he sidled up close to her and breathed in her perfume, his hand brushing along her arm. "I just think that there might be more you can do for me."

"I'd be happy to try, if you wanted me to go ahead with the accountancy upgrades." She gave a relieved smile. "I would take it as a compliment that you trust me so completely."

"I wasn't really talking about that," he smiled thinly. "There may be a way you can do something rather special for me."

"I'd be happy to try anything," she told him, her software adapting her mood to a more personal one.

"I'm sure you would," he whispered into her ear, as he slowly began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Have you something particular in mind?" she asked softly as she flung her terminal to the desk and reached for his shirt.

"It's not something for today," he spoke quietly into her ear, gently kissing her. "Today I just feel like I want you."

"Then have me," she said simply, as her blouse fell open revealing her lacy white bra.

"I can have you any time," he said with a raised eyebrow.

"Any time," she nodded compliantly.

"And there's nothing you can do to stop me," he said, as his hand slipped around the warm, soft skin of her back.

"You're my owner," she said simply, a slight look of confusion crossing her face as her hands slipped inside his clothes and up to his chest.

"Would you still want me if I wasn't your owner?" he asked, pulling his face away from hers slightly to look into her eyes.

"You are." She raised both eyebrows together. "I only want to make my owner happy."

"I know," he said bitterly as he pulled her close. "But what if I wasn't your owner? What then?"

"You are my owner," she replied once more.

"Hamilton!" Doctor Thornton Belkin called out to his old friend.

"Have you come in for another Stim session?"

"Yeah," he admitted grudgingly, with averted eyes, embarrassed by his needs. "I was hoping to talk with you first, though."

"Fine, come in! My door is always open to you, old friend," he said warmly, gesturing him into the humble office where a few dusty tools were scattered around untidily. Hamilton smiled and made a hand gesture behind him for the Biotekk girl to follow him.

"Who's this?" Thornton asked, winking knowingly to his old college friend. "Finally asked a girl out, have you?" He looked the pretty girl over and his eyes froze on the tattoo on her hand of the company logo.

"A Biotekk unit?" he sneered. "I guess you really get into your work, don't you?"

"It's not like that," Hamilton grunted moodily. "I need some advice about her, that's all."

Thornton nodded and eyed her up and down again. She was dressed in whatever clothes he had been able to scavenge from the other girls, and was clad in a tiny skirt and revealingly tight t-shirt with a thin black jacket covering her arms. He stepped forward and reached out to feel her alluring breasts.

She knocked his hand out of the way with an expression of angry surprise, and pushed him back from her with a forceful blow

that struck him in the chest. He was more surprised than hurt as he turned with a puzzled expression to his old friend.

“Not one of yours then?” he asked, raising his left eyebrow.

“Don’t you ever touch me!” she yelled angrily at him. “Who do you think you are?”

“Slow down!” he said with a smirk, while raising his hands in surrender. “I’m a doctor, you know!”

“You see why I brought her with me?” Hamilton said, shaking his head wearily.

“What’s the matter with you?” she growled at Hamilton.

“Don’t you feel that I’ve met enough perverts yet? You think I might still have a little faith in humanity left that needs chasing out of me?”

“What’s wrong with her?” Thornton laughed, stepping back to sit on the edge of his desk.

“What’s wrong with you?” she called back.

“And I thought real girls were a pain in the arse!” Thornton sighed, gesturing towards a chair for his friend to sit down in.

“She thinks she is a real girl,” Hamilton shrugged.

“So shoot her in the head and see if you face a murder charge—that should show you who’s right and who’s wrong,” the Doctor suggested.

“I have seriously considered that,” Hamilton nodded. “But I’m getting a very large bonus if I can figure her out.”

“What do you mean?” Thornton asked, his palm already twitching at the thought of a cut of the bonus.

“Aaron Thorn wants to find a way to sell this ‘life’ to other Biotekk owners, I think. He smells opportunity,” Hamilton said. “He seems to think that it would add a dimension to them, and he won’t

listen when I explain to him how unpredictable it would be if it was actually possible—which it isn't."

"But is it really alive?" Thornton asked.

"I'm getting really sick of this!" she yelled at them both. "I'm standing right here and you're acting like I don't even exist."

"Perhaps you don't!" the Doctor smirked.

"Well, I have a name from now on," she sneered back at him. "You can call me, 'Hope'."

"Hope?" Hamilton asked. "You want to choose your own name?"

"And then you pick a really bad one like that?" Thornton smirked.

"I like it," she replied coldly. "And I am alive!"

"If she is, then maybe there's a way to prove it?" Hamilton shrugged hopefully.

"How?" Thornton frowned.

"I don't know," he began. "Her brain just shows it's running an active program—there's no way I can think of to prove it one way or the other."

"How did you do it?" Thornton asked. "I take it that she's an accident."

"I imagine your parents felt the same way!" Hope told him, shaking her head.

"I hope she is alive," Dr Belkin smiled. "Then it will be much more fun when we kill her."

"Not just yet..." Hamilton began. "I did it by installing a learning virus program that I'd adapted to run a personality. I really intended it as an overlay for my office computer to make it a bit more fun."

"Computers can be fun?" Thornton asked pointedly, as he turned to face Hope.

"I had to adapt some basic old routines I found on the Commnet archives. It was hopelessly out of date, but I built it into something that would eat into existing software and control it, but still leave the user in command," Hamilton began. "It was the only software that would run in her brain, as it was damaged quite badly."

"Hear that?" Belkin laughed. "You're damaged goods, lady."

"Yeah, but I've been fixed," she glared back at him. "I think you ought to be fixed, too, before you have a chance at reproducing!"

"She seems to have taken all of my computer's memories as well," Hamilton said with a helpless shrug.

"That's right," she said thoughtfully. "I remember lots of little things now, it's all coming back to me."

"Like what?" Thornton asked with obvious disinterest.

"I can remember little clips of security footage from even before you installed the personality into the office computer," Hope said with a grin, as the memories coalesced into a vivid and rather unsavoury image.

"Like what?" Hamilton said suddenly with notable concern.

"Like what you used to do with yourself whenever you got a new shipment of girls," Hope laughed, pointing at Hamilton's horrified face. "You've got a really small penis, you know!"

Thornton laughed hysterically, while Hamilton cringed, turning red with embarrassment as hot sweat prickled on the top of his head.

“Anyway,” Hamilton said loudly, over the amusement of the others, “she claims to have feelings which the software had no capacity for, and which is impossible for Tekk units.”

Hamilton looked up from under his lowered brow at Hope, who was still laughing at him.

“She might be right!” Thornton said, pointing over to her. “She looks emotional to me, and, to be honest, I’m actually starting to rather like her.”

Oliver Cohen sat at his desk and pondered his next action. His was now the responsibility to begin the project. All other heads of staff were in agreement that the time had finally arrived, and only his agreement was needed for it to begin. He would unleash the juggernaut—the unstoppable force for change that would drive his company and the entire human race to the next step of their evolution. This would be a technological evolution, a final step towards perfection, the human race as it was always meant to be.

It had taken time to create the correct environment for such a dramatic project, but G-Tekk had alone borne the responsibility and had proved that they possessed the courage to see it through, and the patience, besides. It was now the dominant force on the planet, overshadowing governments with their puppet leaders, and controlling the whim of the entire population.

They had created the Dark-Sides—ghettoes where they could slowly employ the test material on the undesirables, trying out their electronic poisons and genetic mutations on an unsuspecting and ignorant sub-culture of people they no longer considered important enough to care about.

They had spanned the Earth with Power-Tekk—a network of energy that served every need, powering vast global transporters

right down to the individual transports, such as the police Skimmers as well as domestic needs, simply and cleanly and without any means of physical delivery.

Comm-Tekk took every grain of information to the LOIM. Every uttered word, every spoken idea or hushed dream, was fed into the vast intelligence of the magnificent electronic monolith that totally controlled every aspect of people's lives. Information could be passed in nanoseconds from one corner of the globe to another, and across even the vastness of space to the manned colonies—information, of course, that was closely controlled and filtered, giving tiny suggestions that maintained their inter-stellar power and their strangle-hold on the Earth.

This had all taken time, of course, but the New World Order was finally at hand. Where, once, social engineering had failed, this would succeed. The players of this game knew all there was to know about patience: they had manipulated governments, created banks, clouded the media for decades, and in the centuries before that. Nothing was spoken that they hadn't influenced; nothing had happened without their hand in it. But it had all come to nothing. Social chaos kept the world balanced; teetering on the brink of destruction as the plans came and went, never quite achieving their mark. Where, once, the engineering of people's perceptions had failed, now science itself would lead to success.

Now there were Biotekk stage 4 units. The first units were clumsy and unreliable with a life span of only a few years, before the organics rejected the electronic implants and they expired, but now they were sophisticated, elegant machines. They proudly bore the Biotekk mark on their hands that told their owners to expect a lifetime of healthy and productive loyalty.

Armies of drones maintained the peace around the globe, crushing any rebellion or uprising before an idea could take hold. Police forces of selectively engineered and highly specialised units patrolled the urban battle-fields, ready to take on any unforeseen stresses made by the gradual dehumanisation of society. But these stresses were now few, as humanisation was rare.

Now was the time for the final stage in the plan. Now they would instigate the “Pandora project”, a singular plan that would guarantee their power forever, bringing about a golden age of peace and harmony on Earth as mankind could finally be united towards a single end—their vision and their goal.

He was ready. Biotekk was ready.

“Memo to upload to Commnet,” he began grimly. “I have reviewed all measures involved in the implementation of the Pandora project, and am more than satisfied that Biotekk is ready to accommodate all of its demands.”

He hung his head in a moment of guilt since, maybe, just maybe, this was wrong.

“I agree that the plan should be implemented without delay.”

“Hello Pete!” Hope called out cheerfully, as she hopped up to one of the stools around the main counter. The others headed towards one of the booths at the edge of the shop to talk.

“Hello,” Pete replied cautiously, glimpsing the mark on her hand. “What can I get you and your friends?”

“They can piss off, for all I care,” she shrugged. “Can I have some coffee and a menu? How’s the fish today? Hijacked again?”

Pete looked over to Hamilton and the doctor as they disrobed their coats, and sat at Hamilton’s favourite table at the furthest end of his restaurant.

"And who would be paying?" Pete asked sarcastically.

"They will," she gestured towards them with her thumb.

"Is this true?" Pete shouted over. "Is this unit with you?"

Hamilton nodded grimly.

"Just give it what it wants and keep her away from me."

Pete raised his eyebrows and reached for a jug of coffee.

"We don't get many of your kind in here!" he said simply.

"There isn't anyone of my kind!" she smiled. "Apparently when they made me they really broke the mould."

"Is that right?" he nodded, only paying a modicum of attention to her.

"I guess you're still bitter about Biotekk units replacing the Police?" she asked conversationally.

Pete looked up suddenly, glaring angrily and with surprise into her big dark eyes that stared back at him without any hint of malice. He was suddenly aware of a burning sensation on his foot, and glanced down to realise he was pouring boiling coffee onto his shoe.

"God!" he yelled, putting the pot down clumsily and rubbing his shoe with a towel.

"Are you alright?" she asked, craning over the counter to see him.

"Fine," he replied grumpily. "I guess Hamilton told you all about me."

"He never tells me anything!" she shrugged. "He's a bit of an arsehole, to be honest."

"You can't say that about your owner," Pete said with surprise.

"He's not my owner," she scowled. "I don't have an owner, and don't you start, because I always thought you were alright!"

"We've never met before," Pete told her, looking her over curiously. "You work for Thorn?"

"No." She dismissed his question abruptly. "These clothes belong to the prostitute units—it was all I could get at short notice. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, Pete! Some books have terrible covers."

"You seem odd," Pete said finally, while he stared into the warm brown eyes looking back at him. They flashed slightly as the light danced over them. They were different.

"Meaning?" Hope asked.

"You seem... normal," he explained.

"Thanks, I think," she said, glancing down at the menu. "I think I'll try the chilli."

"You really need to cut back on the Stim!" Thornton warned Hamilton. "It can be really dangerous!"

"I know!" Hamilton grunted. "I guess it's harder to quit than everyone thinks."

"It is hard, but it's not impossible," said Pete.

"I want to, but my life is such a load of crap," Hamilton sighed. "I might have found a way to get at some cash though, and, if it comes off, then I'm out of here."

"That's good," he nodded. "But I really think you should stop the Stim!"

"Yes Doctor!" he grumbled.

"Listen to me," Thornton began seriously, checking around to make sure he was speaking freely. "Commnet is dangerous, and Stim makes it a thousand times worse."

"That's just a rumour, a stupid conspiracy," Hamilton said, but he was surprised at the change of tone.

"It's real," Dr Thornton assured him. "Commnet frequency affects brain waves, and it can even read some of your thoughts."

Combined with the energy from the Power-Tekk net, it's slowly turning people brain dead."

"Then why do they allow it?" Hamilton shook his head in arrogant disbelief, a foolish smile on his lips.

"I don't know but I do know one thing..." Thornton said softly, calling his friend to draw closer. "The storage chips in our heads—the ones fitted when we were born—are shielding us from the effects. I read the research last month."

"The immortality chips?" Hamilton asked with an expression of suspicion, his hand tracing involuntarily up to his forehead. "They're just storage for our brain waves; they're nothing more than a rich man's folly."

"They're more than that!" Thornton raised his eyebrows. "I don't know how it's working, but I'm bloody glad it is, and you're jeopardising your chances by using Stim!"

"Is this just some horror story to get me to quit?" Hampton grinned.

"Maybe," Thornton acceded, flopping back into his chair. "But I'll tell you another horror story if you like!"

"Go on."

"Your brother more or less runs Biotekk, and you could have been everything he's been, but you sold it all away because you got hooked on Stim when you were in college," he began. "You work for a porn and prostitution ring recycling sub-standard Tekkers into sex-slaves for a man that's going to have you killed one day, and you hate it. You hate your whole damn life."

"I know all this," he said, averting his eyes.

"And now you're running around with a malfunctioning Tekker who thinks it's alive, in the hope of getting a pat on the back and a bit of extra cash if you can cause the same malfunction in other

units." Thornton shook his head in disgust. "You need to pull yourself together and work out what's really important!"

"Which is ...?"

The doctor sat back in his chair for a moment. He looked deadly serious. "At this point, survival is all that's left."

"Take these over to them two," Pete instructed as he put down two plates of Hamilton's favourite order in front of Hope.

"What?" she laughed.

"You heard me," Pete told her. "Now obey!"

"Piss off," she said simply, returning her attention to the chilli and rice.

"You have to obey," he said, rubbing his head in confusion.

"Don't you?"

"Yeah, a lot of people tell me that," she huffed. "You take it over. You get paid to take abuse—I don't!"

"I don't understand you," he grumbled, picking up the two plastic, heatproof plates and walking them over to the furthest table.

"I think your unit is a little messed up," he said to Hamilton, as he laid the two orders of pasta and sausage on the table.

"You have no idea!" Hamilton agreed with a controlled nod.

"I'll leave you to it," said Pete. "Enjoy your meal!"

"I don't think they like you very much..." Pete said to the girl as he stepped back behind his counter. "I can't imagine why!"

"Guess how much I care?" she grinned. "Where would be a nice place to go, do you think?"

"What do you mean?" he asked with a shrug, wondering why he was being drawn into a conversation with a machine, even though it seemed oddly like the most normal thing in the world.

"Away from here," she explained. "I want to go to a place where people don't try and screw you just because you they think you can't stop them. I want to be treated with a bit of respect—like a human being! And I guess I want to see the sun again. Really see it, I mean."

"Anywhere away from here would be good," Pete smiled. "What have you done before?"

"Nothing much yet—I was only initialised today," she replied.

"Then how did you see the sun?" Pete shrugged. "It never comes out here except in tiny glimpses about once every three or four months."

"I don't really know," she frowned. "I had a lot of dreams before I woke up."

"Robots can't dream," Pete reminded her.

"Well, I can't just be a robot then, can I?" she scowled. "Maybe Morgan showed me."

"Morgan?" Pete asked. "He died yesterday. How did you meet him?"

"He's dead?" she asked suddenly, dropping her fork, her eyes filling suddenly with tears as she stared into Pete's expectant gaze.

"But he was so nice. He told me so many things."

"But he's dead!" Pete said, obviously confused.

"You just told me that," she said softly, recovering her fork. She sniffed and wiped away a few stray tears with the back of her hand. "Bollocks!"

Hamilton locked the door to his lab as quietly as he could after getting a jug of coffee from the kitchens. The building was deserted, except for the sound of a few Biotekk girls scampering around with the last remaining clients, or pressed into tidying and cleaning up.

He didn't want to be disturbed by one of the vacant, brainless husks while he worked, as they tended to be quite persistent in their attempts to clean up his lab if their owner had instructed them to do so.

He looked over to a makeshift bed in the corner where Hope was curled up asleep with the covers pulled tightly around her, and she had begun to snore quite loudly. He shook his head and smiled at his own foolishness, as he realised he'd closed the door quietly to avoid waking her.

He hated the emptiness of Biotekk units—the vacuous eyes and the vacant expressions. When he looked into her eyes, he could feel something. He felt oddly sure that, somewhere deep inside, there was a consciousness within her, but the engineer he was wouldn't let him truly believe it. It defied all logic and his life was built on a solidly logical foundation.

Somehow, he resented her for what she was, for what she represented, and he could not have told her why, nor could he really tell it to anyone else. Something about her inspired a warmth in people—she had an approachability about her that people wanted to bridge. Nestled within her was a helplessness, a need for acceptance and approval, a kind of vulnerability that she hid from the world behind her flimsy brashness that came from loneliness and fear. In that way, she was so human, so like everyone else, even him. Perhaps she was especially like him.

She affected him and he hated her for it. He found that he even wanted her for himself, and for that he hated himself even more.

"Computer," he said softly.

"What I can I do for you?" it asked compliantly for a change.

"Contact my brother for me," he said.

"Do you know what time it is?" it asked.

"I do."

"You do realise that you've not spoken together in over six months—I don't imagine he's going to welcome the call!" it reminded him.

"Put me through," he persisted, with unusual determination.

"I have him," the computer said. "He's actually awake too. I'm placing the call."

"Hello, Hamilton." An electronic voice-only message came out over the office speakers. There was no video feed.

"Hello, Oliver. It's been a while," he replied with a sigh.

"I trust this is not a social call, or have drugs so rotted your addled mind that social niceties no longer apply to you?" he asked pointedly.

"I'm clean of Stim now," Hamilton replied with rather optimistic resolve.

"Finally," Oliver replied. "How long for this time?"

"I have a problem, though," Hamilton said to change the subject.

"I would never have guessed." He sniffed his disgust. "You lead such a tiny, insignificant life, and yet there's always a problem!"

Hamilton watched in silent wonder as Hope slept, feeling every breath with her; taking in every crease of the bedclothes, and every softly rounded peak beneath them.

"It's a girl," Hamilton said finally.

"I'm really not interested," his brother said with disdain.

"You're a grown man—you have to learn to fix your own problems."

"That's what we call Biotekk units here—girls! We just call them girls," Hamilton hurriedly explained. "I have one with a unique problem!"

"I see," he replied, slightly more interested, but not by much.

"I know I'm not up to the standard of your top engineers, and my equipment is a little behind the times..." he began.

"Your self-pity is top-notch however," his brother goaded.

"I've got a girl that claims to be alive!" Hamilton said, bringing the awkward conversation to a point.

"Who says she's alive?" Oliver asked wearily. "Lots of owners believe their Tekk units to be endowed with attributes way beyond their abilities. It's not unusual. You should know that."

"She claims to be alive!" Hamilton insisted.

"The unit?" Oliver asked, his interest finally piqued.

"That's right," Hamilton smiled.

"What do you believe?" he asked.

Hamilton could scarcely believe what he was hearing. His brother was actually asking for his opinion. His older, superior brother, who had bettered him at every turn throughout his life, was finally stooping so low as to seek his counsel on the subject of engineering.

"I've observed several different behaviours that suggest emotional responses," Hamilton explained. "She laughs, she gets angry: she even resorts to violence if provoked."

"Interesting," Oliver said thoughtfully, but without conviction.

"She refuses to obey any command given to her, and she won't submit to any sexual advances," Hamilton continued, hoping to hold some interest.

"How does she respond to her owner?" Oliver asked, his normal hostility drawing back.

"She refuses to acknowledge that she has one," Hamilton smiled to himself. "I initialised her this morning myself, and she's totally refusing to accept her programming."

"Does she respond to her remote control?" Oliver asked.

"No. The frequency jams whenever we try, as if her brain was blocking the signal," he said. "But that's not a surprise—there was damage to the electronics in her head. I could go into detail."

"Is she there? I'd like to speak with her," he asked, in a way that sounded more like a command.

"She is, but I'm afraid she can't speak at the moment," Hamilton said, hardly able to control his excitement at delivering the news.

"Why not?" Oliver asked, hardly used to his suggestions not being met.

"She's asleep," he said simply. "And it appears that she's dreaming!"

"My god..." Oliver said finally. "Asleep?"

"I know," Hamilton said. "I can't believe this either."

"I'll arrange for one of my engineers to speak with you in the morning," he said coldly.

"I'll come to you," Hamilton said abruptly.

"Alright," he conceded easily. "That might be best!"

Morgan's money was one thing, and the bonus was another—but Hope might be his way out of his life once and for all.

Subordination – Hatred – Dependency

Chapter 5

Hamilton hovered nervously around Hope as she slept. He reached out to shake her back to consciousness, but his hand pulled away instinctively. He took a deep breath and called out her name again.

“Hope,” he said softly, scolding himself for his lack of heart as he heard his weedy, apologetic effort. He reached out his hand again and crouched lower so that he was level with her face. He noticed his hand shaking slightly as it moved to settle on her shoulder. He breathed out heavily and shook his head, trying to forget his body’s burning desire for a charge of Stim.

“Hope,” he said again, as he shook her gently.

“Bugger off,” she moaned, rolling away from him. “It’s too early.”

“We’ve got things to do,” he told her, trying to sound decisive.

“There’s someone we need to meet.”

“You meet them then,” she grumbled.

“We both need to meet them—it’s important; they might be able to help you,” he said.

“Help me?” She sat up and rubbed her eyes blearily. “I don’t need any help. Why should I need help?”

“You’re malfunctioning,” he said. “You’re not working properly.”

“I’m alive,” she scowled. “I don’t need anyone’s help to be alive because I already am alive. Whatever malfunction I have is stable and I’m quite happy with it, thanks very much for your concern. It sounds as if your idea of working perfectly is a living hell

in any case, and I'm not just talking about having to kiss you, although that's a good start."

"It's the Biotekk head office," he explained. "Their top engineer has agreed to meet with me today to examine you properly."

"Why?" she shrugged. "What benefit will that be to me?"

"It'll answer questions," Hamilton said with a sigh. "There are so many questions."

"The only questions you want answered are how this happened and how you could reprogram my life out of me," she began angrily. "You want me to cooperate while you try to explain me away, or subtly kill the part of me that makes me human. That makes me more human than you, you realise, even if I'm wrong?"

"It's not like that." Hamilton hung his head, finding it hard not to agree with her.

"Then, what's it like, Hamilton?" she smiled bitterly. "What's it like? Why don't you tell me?"

"If I can find out what I did, then the information could be worth a lot of money to me," Hamilton explained sadly. "Aaron thinks I could sell a life program as an upgrade, but why I'm really doing this is so that I can prove myself to Biotekk and my brother. Either way, this could be my way out of this business. I don't want to do this anymore, Hope."

"Life in other Biotekk units?" she shrugged. "You'd honestly try to sell that?"

"It could be worth a lot of money!" Hamilton smiled, but it was a weak expression.

"Why should I help you?" she said softly.

"I don't have an answer to that. I really don't," Hamilton admitted. "What do you want?"

She sat up fully, carefully arranging the covers of her makeshift bed to conceal her body from Hamilton's occasionally probing gaze. She sighed thoughtfully, wiped her hair from her face, and looked into Hamilton's expectant eyes for a moment.

"I want a shower," she smiled weakly. "I want my own life; I want to be free to get out of here and find a place where people won't treat me like the thing they expect me to be, but instead are willing to take the time to see me for who I really am."

"I could help you with that," Hamilton suggested. "I could give you money and arrange transport out of here, if you help me. I don't have much, but I could do that."

"What makes you think that Biotekk will let me live if I go there?" she asked softly. "They throw away their mistakes, either to parasites like you or to organ banks for harvesting. Why would they want to embrace a mistake like me?"

"They're interested in whether or not you're alive!" Hamilton almost pleaded.

"As far as they're concerned, I'm a faulty unit," she said calmly. "Why do you think that they would want to arrange for their top engineer to examine me now?"

"I have to get out of here," Hamilton sighed. "I'm desperate. I have to try."

"If I do it, then I want guarantees." She exhaled loudly, shaking her head at what she suspected was going to prove to be a very big mistake. "I guess I have nothing to lose."

Aaron Thorn sipped at his first cup of coffee of the day and smiled as the hot, bitter liquid swum gently over his taste-buds, and softly caressed the way down his neck.

"Ahhhhh," he moaned pleurably, closing his eyes to the world and focusing his attention on the perfectly blended flavour that lit his senses.

"What have I got scheduled for today?" he asked, almost regretting that he couldn't just spend his time relaxing in bed with his secretary, sipping coffee and making love under a brilliant sun high up in a cloudless blue sky.

"You're meeting a representative from a Id-flick company to expand your range of explicit film titles and new programme-slugs for unit upgrades," Nina said, as her eyes flicked over her terminal. "You're taking Tom and a couple of other guys to see a man you lent some money to because he hasn't paid you back yet. You said that you're taking the big bats this time, just for old time's sake."

"That should be fun!" he groaned sarcastically, taking another sip of coffee. There had been a time when that was fun, but those days were increasingly behind him now. He did such things occasionally to stop himself from growing soft, but his heart just wasn't really in it.

"That's all you have today," she smiled efficiently.

"You were great last night," he grinned at her.

"I always try to be the best I can be for you," she assured him. "You deserve the best from me."

He nodded his agreement and put his empty cup down on his desk. A frown cut across his forehead as he noticed a red light on his console.

"What's going on?" he asked, all humour and social warmth suddenly escaping him, leaving only the cold-hearted professional gangster that he had always aspired so hard to be.

"You mean the security alert?" she asked, with a polite smile never leaving her lips.

"Who's dealing with it?" he asked, tapping away on her console for an instant report.

"Tom went down to see what was going on," Nina replied as efficiently as she could, her software still trying to accommodate the sudden shift in mood and leaving her response a confused mess of mechanical efficiency and submissive sexual availability. "It was a couple of men asking questions. The doormen thought it might be the police, so they issued a warning."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he growled.

"I didn't want to upset you," she pleaded. "You seemed so happy this morning."

"Shit," he muttered.

"So we have a deal?" Hamilton asked finally, biting his lip and shrugging hopefully.

"I guess so," Hope sighed, fingering her Biotekk remote control unit that had had no effect on her other than making her scalp itch when she poked the control buttons. She quite liked the sensation in an odd kind of way. "I want some better clothes too," she told him. She held the reprogrammed control unit up in front of her.

"You can check the codes on that if you want—its reset to the transmitter frequency of the Stim-pad," Hamilton said, sounding a little nervous.

"And that's firmly fixed to your spine?" she asked rhetorically.

"If you press any button, then it will discharge into my spine," he nodded. "I'll drop to the ground in agony and you can make your getaway."

"And assuming it doesn't come to that and we get back without any problems, what will happen when we get back?" she asked.

"I'll give you a free Globetrekker pass that will take you anywhere on Earth for three months, and I'll remove the Biotekk logo from your hand with a cold laser," he replied. "It will all be just as we agreed."

"OK," she said, hanging her head slightly. She knew the deal was a poor one and the odds were not entirely on her side.

"Computer, lock the lab once we're gone," Hamilton said, speaking with renewed optimism that his life might actually be on the upturn, or at least on slightly less of a downturn.

"I will do," the computer complied. "You have three messages—do you want them now or later?"

"Who are they from?" he asked. "And what are the subjects?"

"The first is from Thornton Belkin asking if you want him to book you in for another Stim session," it proceeded.

"Ignore that one for now." Hamilton winced at the thought.

"The second is confirming your appointment, and the third is an anonymous message asking about Hope," the computer told him flatly.

"Asking about Hope?" he scowled. "Who knows about her?"

"It's asking if the rumours of a sentient Biotekk unit are true, and if they are, can they send someone to meet her?" the computer replied, reading the contents of the message out to him.

"Who could that be from?" Hamilton asked, his face draining and fear evident at the edge of his voice.

"There are lots of groups who illegally tap into the Commnet," the computer began. "They trawl for any scraps of information that they can use or sell."

"Delete it," Hamilton said firmly.

"Don't I get a say in this?" Hope interrupted. "It involves me, after all."

"We had an agreement," Hamilton reminded her. "I'm protecting you—you wouldn't want to meet the sort of people who trawl the Commnet for information like this. If you think Aaron Thorn is bad, you should see what info-terrorists are like."

"I'd like to know who is looking for me and why," she snapped. "Maybe it's someone that doesn't want to stick a screwdriver into my head. That would be a refreshing change of pace for me."

"A travelling freak-show, perhaps?" Hamilton sneered. "A robot zoo?"

Hope glared back at him in silence. She appeared to be fighting against a growing tide of emotions as they welled up inside her suddenly. Hamilton felt for a moment that she struggled against herself, desperate not to give him the satisfaction of breaking her spirit.

"It won't always be that way!" she growled, choking back her frightened rage.

Aaron Thorn reached the front door too late. He sprinted into the main entrance, a large garish opening that was lit up with glowing red lights and pictures of women that afforded the viewer a tantalising glimpse of what to expect within, so long as they brought their money with them and left their morals behind.

He bolted through to where Tom and one of the doormen were standing discussing the visitors. The door swung back noisily behind him, and the cold, dreary air stung his lungs as they greedily pumped the stagnant gasses into his chest.

He blew out a hearty breath and tried to ignore the filthy, wretched smells that hung on the icy breeze—the signature of a decaying and hopeless quarter.

“What’s going on?” he gasped angrily, making a silent mental note to visit a gymnasium and recapture some of the fitness that had been his in his youth.

“I don’t know,” Tom replied. “We had a couple of guys asking questions.”

“What about?” Thorn growled with deliberate menace, his temper not yet reigned in.

“They wanted to know who programs our girls, who does our engineering, stuff like that,” Tom replied with a shrug. “Nothing important really.”

“What did you tell them?” Thorn asked, furrowing his brow curiously.

“I told them I wouldn’t know,” Tom replied with a nod.

“Good man!” Thorn grinned with relief. He stepped back and leaned on the shabby greying wall, his sharp, thoughtful eyes flashing around, as if looking for something he knew would not be there.

“What did they look like?” he asked, more calmly.

“Nothing special,” Tom huffed. “One was tallish, the other about medium height; both wore dark clothes—smart but casual. Medium build, average looking. They didn’t strike me as cops, though.”

“They didn’t?” Thorn snapped, his interest more aroused.

“They were too laid back—not aggressive enough,” Tom replied flatly. “Cops know they’re right; these guys just seemed curious.”

“Did they say they were coming back?” Thorn asked as he nudged himself away from the wall and stepped forward for the door.

“Yes,” Tom replied. “They said they would definitely be back soon!”

The Biotekk building was huge—a vast sprawling edifice rising from the Earth; a tower of steel and glass that clawed majestically to the sky. Set into countless acres of perfect and unbroken greenery, the vast network of huge factory and research facilities traced from the tower like an intricate web of fingers, pushing out into the yielding face of nature like a force of man, a triumph over the planet and a final stamp of man’s authority over the Earth.

The Rental Skimmer floated easily towards the massive development, soaring effortlessly on a cushion of super-compressed air, driven from energy drawn from the Power-Tekk grid. It flew with silent grace ever closer to the Biotekk monument—the temple to the ingenuity and power of the vast corporate empire.

“My god,” Hope muttered under her breath, fixated on the simple elegance of the design, the sheer brutality of the forces opposed to its presence, and how it stood serenely by, in arrogant defiance of it all. “How big is it?”

“The tower stands nearly five kilometres high,” Hamilton claimed proudly, as if he had been instrumental in its design. “The whole building is pressurised for life support and comfort, and it’s impervious to anything nature can throw at it. Impervious to anything anyone can throw it, I would expect.”

She stared in silent awe as the sun gently licked at its glass face, submissively compliant to the immense artificial construction. She smiled briefly as the warmth crossed her face—the wonderful

natural feeling of the sun's heat, instead of the stifling dryness of the T-Tekk exchangers that cheaply heated the dilapidated buildings of the East Valley.

She averted her eyes for a moment as Hamilton watched. He knew she must be grimly aware of the futility of her position. She was just one person—just a tiny and insignificant event in the course of history. It was a history that had led man to raise vast buildings in his honour, proof of his unerring right to possess the Earth and her resources in whatever manner he saw fit. She was nothing more than proof of a minor error—an erroneous hiccup in the relentless march of that progress. She was nothing.

Her fight was hopeless in the face of such power—such overwhelming strength and vigour to forge into the future at any cost, and against any obstacle—while she was simply a prostitute with brain damage.

“How many people are in there?” she asked weakly.

“I don't know,” Hamilton shrugged. He turned back to stare at the tower, but its emotional resonance was quite different for him. “With the factories as well, there's probably millions of workers living there.”

“As many as that?” she sighed hopelessly.

“There's even a city around the edge for the essential staff,” he said, without taking very much notice of her. “Everything is available for them, and living there is seen as something of a privilege.”

“I see,” she said sadly, turning from the window to sit heavily back in the luxurious chair of the unmanned rental vehicle. “How long before we land?”

“Soon,” he shrugged.

Pete had had a restless night. Things had been troubling him, and his thoughts had haunted his mind and kept him from relaxing and submitting willingly to the inviting oblivion of sleep. His restaurant was empty—as usual—and he waited silently behind his counter, lost in his own meandering mind as it tried to find equilibrium, some resolution that made any kind of sense.

The Biotekk girl had been on his mind since he'd met her, and there was no shaking the impression she'd left on him. He didn't know why she should trouble him so greatly, but she did.

She was none of the things that Biotekk units were supposed to be. She wasn't compliant or obedient, and was in fact wilful and independent. Robots tended to stick very close to their owner, being lost and confused without them, but she denied even having one. She had taken a menu, chosen to sit alone, and had picked out which food she preferred; he'd never seen anything quite like that before. What was such an easy thing for a human—making a comparison and a selection based on a preference—was an ability that escaped machines.

It was such a simple thing, such a minor happening, and he was at a loss to explain why it troubled him so greatly.

Like many, he hated Tekk units for everything they were. He resented being gently forced out of his chosen profession by mindless machines that were more capable than he could ever be. Most of all, he hated the fact that they actually did seem to be better at his job than he had been. In the first year of service, complaints against the police were halved: there was no more corruption, no more unwarranted beatings, and no unfair assumptions or prejudice. In the eyes of a Biotekk officer, all humans were equal as his superiors, and his function was simply to protect the innocent against transgressions of the emotionally vulnerable.

The public accepted them, largely, with open arms, and even the criminals preferred them. They were stronger and more powerful than any human because they were genetically engineered to be, but they were fairer too and safer. They would never shoot first; they would never react out of fear or spite, and revenge was something they would never be given to. White, Black, Asian were all equal in the eyes of the law, at last, and cries of racism or bigotry dwindled away to nothing.

Pete was aware that his attitude had spilled over to all Biotekk units, perhaps out of humiliation or even jealousy. He remembered vividly the discussions in the men's locker-rooms before the police force had been replaced. Every man on the force wanted or joked about having a Biotekk girl at home to fulfil his every sordid whim. It was a joke in the open, but secretly a fantasy too for many of them.

He himself had wanted one; he was single, and, even though he dated frequently, his sex life was never quite satisfactory—either never quite the right kind of girl, or simply no girl at all.

The thought of a compliant and beautiful woman ready to obey one's every utterance had to appeal to every man alive, he had thought. He had even seen a Biotekk credit controller and made an application to buy one. He was turned down flat, and no reason was given until four months later when his redundancy report came through and he found himself jobless. The bankers had known before he did.

Every officer was given a severance package including a small reserve of cash, a full pension, and an option to run one of several Business-Tekk franchises. He had opted for the catering business as he felt that he was still too young to retire, although scarcely a day went by when he didn't wish he had done precisely that.

The sound of his door opening roused him from his thoughts, and he turned quickly to greet his customers with a cheerful smile and a free cup of coffee to start them off.

"What can I get you?" he asked warmly, gesturing to two benches by the counter.

"Can we see the menu?" the taller of the two new faces asked.

"Of course," Pete nodded, passing a pair of plastic listings to his two new customers.

"Tell me," the shorter of the two men asked politely, "do you know anything about the Thorn emporium?"

"What do you mean?" Pete asked, surprised at the bluntness of the inquiry.

The shorter of the men flashed a knowing glance at his taller companion. He was robust with flushed cheeks and a cruel smile that lit up in his dark and furtive eyes. He slipped his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a wad of universal bills. He wafted them briefly before the bemused restaurateur for effect, before flicking three large denomination notes down on the counter.

"Depends what you want to know," Pete replied, scooping up the bills and putting them away in his trouser pocket.

"Do you know a man called Hamilton Cohen?" the taller of the men asked.

Pete took a deep breath and glanced from face to face. Both men appeared to be in their thirties, and were dressed in dark intermediate clothing that would have been difficult to describe as a witness. The taller was lean with sharp eyes that darted around missing nothing, while the shorter seemed more intent, more focused on Pete. They were unsettling. Pete felt wary of them, nervous even.

"He comes in here quite a bit," Pete said finally. "Why?"

"What does he do for Mr. Thorn?" the taller man asked, curiously toying with a sparse tuft of facial hair.

"He fixes Biotekk units as far as I know," Pete said with a shrug.

"Have you ever met any of these units?" the shorter man asked.

"Has he done anything out of character recently?" the other man added before he could answer.

"Maybe..." Pete shrugged, greedily eyeing the jacket pocket.

The shorter man smiled up at his friend and started counting out notes, while the taller fixed him with a slightly aggressive stare, as a tiny smile began to form on his lips.

"What do you know?"

The Skimmer wheezed noisily as it blew out the excess gasses from the sealed interior. It was a slim, yellow, aerodynamic lifting body-design surrounded by a thin exoskeleton of slender beams, suspending four small electric motors attached to fans that gave it lift and propulsion. It rested finally onto its extended landing gear, and settled as the hatches silently began to unfold, peeling the vehicle open like a ripe fruit.

"This is it!" Hamilton enthused as he scampered out of the vehicle onto the main landing park at the foot of the towering complex.

"Are we going up there?" Hope asked, her mood growing increasingly dark.

"No," Hamilton replied. "We're going to one of the research plants on the floor."

"How long will all this take?" She crossed her arms and asked solemnly like a sulking teenager. "When will we leave?"

"Who can say?" he replied, heading off in the direction of the labs.

"They're expecting us, are they?" Hope grumbled, as she followed a few paces behind him, her arms tightly wrapped around her, even though it wasn't cold.

"We're honoured guests," he grinned. "They paid for the Skimmer and everything. You see, my brother runs the place."

"Really?" she asked in surprise. "What happened to you then? How did you end up in the gutter, while he lives in the sky?"

"Long story," he grimaced, telling himself that none of it mattered anymore; now, only a brighter future remained, if only he could be careful and keep his focus for a few days more.

Hope glanced behind her and felt a finger of dread tracing through her as she watched the Skimmer take off and disappear into the distance. There was an unpleasant feeling of finality as she watched the tiny craft vanishing into the brilliantly cloudless sky.

"Amazing machines, aren't they?" Hamilton said, putting his palm above his eyes to keep the sun from his line of vision.

"Impressive," she agreed. "I guess."

"Welcome to Biotekk, the home of Robotic and Cybernetic engineering across the globe."

A stunningly beautiful girl reached forward to shake Hamilton's hand as he stepped reasonably boldly into the research labs. It was quite stunning. Gleaming equipment lined the walls: everything was spotlessly clean and as much effort had been put into aesthetics as pure functionality. It was a stark contrast to his own lab, grim and utilitarian, a mess of jumbled parts and old tools.

This was state of the art with no expense spared. It was the public face of the cutting edge of technology. They didn't just spend money to get the best: they went beyond to shout out to the world that they were the best, the only technology company you'd ever need. That was especially good since it was the best and only technology company left.

"And you must be the defective unit!" the girl continued, without a noticeable change of expression.

Hope glared back at her, briefly noticing the logo on her left hand as she moved with imperceptible grace.

"You're not alive yourself then?" Hope smiled, with as much warmth as she could bring herself to muster.

"I'm the latest Biotekk breakthrough," the girl explained cheerfully. "I'm the model 4, series F. My body is engineered to the highest degree of excellence and my brain is guaranteed to function for up to one hundred and fifty years." She paused and a cruel smile appeared on her lips. "I have no pretensions about being human though!" she added smugly.

"So, which one of us is really defective then?" Hope asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"I shall tell Doctor Goldstein that you have arrived," she smiled back, without a hint of bitterness. "Please take a seat."

She gestured openly to a row of expensive and opulent seating, set around the massive waiting lounge at the mouth of the lab complex. Hamilton gazed in awe at the photographic renditions hanging on the walls of the various stages of cybernetic evolution, proud to be finally taking his place in history as the possible discoverer of life within an artificial medium. It was considered the last holy grail of science, the creation of artificial life, not just intelligence but actual a living, thinking, creative being, born into the

world through science instead of biology. Perhaps, just perhaps, history would record him as the man who first discovered a way to make it happen.

He turned to Hope, as she watched him for a moment in disgust, before turning away stubbornly. Perhaps she had decided to give up on ever making a biological human understand what she was going through. Hamilton allowed himself the luxury of wondering if she really was alive. He ignored the science for a moment and just contemplated how it might feel for her if it turned out to actually be true.

Perhaps humans' assumed superiority made them complacent about life to such a degree that, in taking their own for granted, they could no longer recognise it in others. They treated anything different from them poorly. History recorded horrendous abuses of people not deemed to be equal. There had been slavery, oppression and bigotry throughout the ages. She could do nothing but expect to find it here.

He watched, as she turned her attention to the polished veneer that showed around the room. The perfect styling in the blue-grey walls, the intricate and subtle patterning of the carpets, and the thoughtful layout of everything was designed to give a perfectly measured impression of the company. The same care had been applied to every aspect of the Biotekk complex, and indeed the units themselves.

By now, she must have explored her body in private and wouldn't have found one blemish—not a single mole, or even the tiniest imperfection. Every unit appeared slightly different due to deliberate deviations in the cloning process, but even that was designed to satisfy a variety of tastes. In essence, she was a highly polished product, never intended to be an individual. Her function—

from the Biotekk perspective—was to serve as an advert to others; her owner would flaunt her proudly, inspiring the desire in other potential customers. That was her purpose; to create demand even larger than that she was satisfying.

Now, for a moment as he sat in their research labs, he could see the attitude reflected in the buildings, in the careful programming of the staff, and even in the artwork that circled the lounge.

The attitude of the receptionist—hostile and belligerent towards her—told him what to expect as they ventured further inside. She was programmed with additional refinements, painstakingly conditioned to demonstrate a belief that any deviation from the norm was an abhorrence—an incident of imperfection to be rooted out and destroyed before it could spread. It mattered little to her that a malfunction could be an advantage, and even a benefit—a liberation to freedom from the shackles of wilful slavery. Would it occur to humans that the same might be true of them?

“Mr Cohen?” a voice called out. Hamilton snapped his mind back to the present, stood up quickly to greet the man with an outstretched palm. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr Cohen.”

“Likewise,” he nodded, shaking his hand warmly with unreserved enthusiasm. “You’re Doctor Goldstein?”

“I am, and I’ve been very much looking forward to meeting you,” he replied with a polished European accent. “Is this the defective unit?”

Hope sat glaring up at him with her legs tightly crossed away from them and her arms folded. She turned away further without acknowledging his question.

“She is,” Hamilton agreed. “She calls herself Hope!”

"She calls herself?" the Doctor laughed. "Isn't that a little contentious for a rejected unit rescued from organ harvesting."

"I'm not an 'it'," he told him moodily. "And seeing as it's me you're interested in, don't you think you ought to address your questions over here instead of to that idiot?"

"What did you do to this one?" the Doctor said, a little surprised by what he was hearing.

"He didn't do anything!" she yelled, jumping to her feet. "I'm alive. That's all there is to it, and I have every right to be upset because everyone treats me like I'm nothing more than a washing machine with a vagina!"

"I see..." Goldstein replied thoughtfully, glancing around to see if anyone else might have heard her unusually candid outburst.

"We have an agreement," Hamilton began reluctantly. "You can scan her in any way you see fit, so long as you don't try to physically probe her brain, and you don't try any kind of radiation that might upset the function of her program."

"You agreed this with the unit?" the Doctor smirked to the younger engineer, clearly not taking any part of their agreement particularly seriously.

"And with my brother, Mr Oliver Cohen," Hamilton added, trying to calm Hope down to ensure some limited degree of cooperation on her part.

"I know who your brother is," he nodded. "But I have no intention of being dictated terms to by a machine."

Hope shrugged and began walking to the door.

"Wait!" Hamilton shouted, scurrying after her.

"If you don't agree to my terms, then I'm not going in there!" Hope declared simply, nodding towards the labs as he caught her up.

The doctor huffed noisily and dug his fists firmly into his sides glowering angrily at the girl.

“You certainly are a unique creature!” he conceded. “I will accept Oliver Cohen’s terms for now, as I have no need to probe your brain physically.”

“That will be fine,” Hamilton nodded, looking down to Hope’s angry eyes that bore back into his. “Just get through today...” he muttered quietly to her. “Get us through today and I’ll help you get out of here.”

“Then I’ll cooperate,” she agreed reluctantly. “For now.”

Aaron Thorn reviewed the recordings from the front entrance.

“Negative match!” the computer stated bluntly.

“Can’t find them?” Tom asked, craning his neck to get a better view of his boss’s terminal screen.

“They’re not police,” Aaron shrugged. “I can’t find any record of them on any registered database, and nobody I know can either.”

“What does that mean?” Nina asked, compelled by her business routine software to attempt to be useful.

“It means that they’re not local, not police, not Biotekk units, and have no known criminal records—maybe no records of any kind.” Aaron shook his head. He had no fresh ideas of where else to look for them.

“Perhaps they’re not interested in the Stim-pads?” Nina suggested.

“Hamilton rigged them up for me,” Thorn growled, angrily. “We’re still the only group using them in the entire East Valley; we invented them. Everyone else is still using head-probes at three times the price.”

"You think it was a rival then?" Tom asked. "Trying to muscle in?"

"I can't see what else it could be," he replied, rubbing the tension from his neck.

"Could it be something to do with a health inspection?" Nina asked.

"I've got the cleanest girls in the country," he scoffed at the suggestion. "I change them every three years and sell the old ones off to the organ banks. We do a routine drug and infection sweep every night... There's no way anything could have got past us—I'm making for too much money to take stupid chances like that."

Suddenly, a bleep cut through his thoughtful silence as Aaron Thorn fumed silently about his problem.

"Message from door 1," the computer relayed in its mechanical monotone.

"What now?" he groaned angrily under his breath, as he relayed the message to his terminal.

"This is Door 1," the man reported into the communicator. "I think you'd better get down here, sir."

"Can't you handle it?" he shouted into the screen.

"Sir..." the man replied, standing back from the screen. Behind him was a frenzy of activity. Police officers were milling around everywhere, while armed Skimmers hovered menacingly in front of the door.

"They have a warrant, sir," the man added, coming back to the screen. "Sir?" he said into the blank screen. "Are you still there? Sir?"

"Sit there," the Doctor told Hope, pointing at a couch at the far side of his luxurious office.

"No!" she replied simply, folding her arms and returning his gaze.

"Does she have a connection deficit in her basic behaviour parameters?" he asked, turning to aim his question at Hamilton.

"I don't believe so," Hamilton mumbled and began rubbing his temples. "You just didn't say please!"

"Please," he scowled, what little remained of his patience being stretched to the very limits. "Please sit in the chair."

"I'd rather not," she replied, looking over the banks of equipment that were huddled menacingly around the head of the couch. "Perhaps if you explain to me what you're planning, I might be a little more cooperative, but I couldn't promise that."

"You..." he began, the word sticking in his throat. "You wouldn't understand what's going on. Even if you were alive, your programming would be inadequate."

"Well, that's a microwave oscillator processor with a maser probe," she began, returning a measure of his smugness. "I believe it would affect the functioning of my basic program and I believe we agreed that that was against the rules."

"I think you ought to leave this unit with me," the Doctor began, attempting to the best of his ability to ignore her. "It might take some time to fully analyse the fault."

"I don't think so," Hamilton replied, clearly very interested in the suggestion.

Hope looked over to him with horror in her eyes, nothing scaring her more than the prospect of living out her remaining time being probed and disassembled in a Biotekk lab. She rummaged in her pocket for the control unit, but she knew that if she triggered it then, it would do nothing useful in the long term.

"That wasn't the deal..." she said, any brave pretence beginning to falter.

"We would, of course, reimburse you for your trouble," Dr Goldstein added, pressing his advantage.

"No!" Hope called out.

"I don't know," Hamilton said thoughtfully, looking between Goldstein's eager expression and Hope's alarmed one.

"But if you leave me here, then they won't need you," Hope said, struggling to appeal to his vanity. "You'll go back to Thorn, and won't realise your potential with Biotekk. You won't prove yourself."

"Is it a job you want?" the Doctor grinned.

"He wants to be recognised," Hope persisted. "He may have created life in an artificial construct!"

"I thought it was an accident," Dr Goldstein replied, with a sarcastic glare.

"Please, Hamilton," she said softly.

"I can let you have all the records on her brain, if you like. I can even make you a copy of the program files I used," he offered, hoping to reach a compromise that suited everyone, especially himself.

"Perhaps we could make you head of a new department designed to investigate your own phenomenon?" Dr Goldstein suggested.

"If that happened, then she'd have to be kept alive?" Hamilton raised his eyebrows, looking over expectantly to Hope.

"I suppose she would," he shrugged.

"It's a trick, you idiot," she sneered at him. "They'll say anything to get me."

"Android paranoia?" The Doctor laughed dismissively. "Why would we have more interest in a malfunctioning and delusional robot, than in a gifted engineer?"

"I couldn't have delusions if I wasn't alive!" Hope pleaded to Hamilton. "Think about it!"

"I don't think I'm really ready to sell her just yet," Hamilton said thoughtfully.

"You can't anyway," she said, suddenly latching on to a new argument. "I don't belong to you—I'm the legal property of Aaron Thorn."

"He gave you to me," Hamilton replied. "That's legally binding, isn't it?"

The Doctor nodded his reply to Hamilton.

"Don't worry about that criminal," he grinned. "He's already been dealt with."

Aaron threw open the front doors and was suddenly aghast as the full impact of the force against him of the police met his eyes. They were everywhere—the massive and powerfully built Biotekk officers were placed on every corner, every junction, exit and entrance, sealing his emporium from outsiders, or escape from those within.

Two Skimmers hovered on their high-powered cushions of air before the building, each with their massive cannons trained on the entrance, a threat and a promise of their willingness to resort to violence. He was trapped and he knew it. He just didn't know why.

"What the hell is all this?" he shouted angrily, trying to seem in a much more powerful position than he really was.

"Aaron Thorn?" a Biotekk enforcement officer asked, as it stepped forward.

“Do you know who I am?” he yelled into its vacant and impassive face.

“Are you Aaron Thorn?” it inquired.

“Of course I bloody am!” he cried out.

“We have a warrant for your detention, and a permit for us to carry out a routine investigation of your business premises,” the officer told him flatly, holding up a secure portable terminal that confirmed all of this, as if there could have been the slightest doubt that they were behaving quite correctly.

“I haven’t broken any laws. You’ve got no right,” he growled angrily.

“We are carrying out a routine inspection to review the renewal of your Entertainment-Tekk license,” the officer told him flatly.

“With Skimmer cannons pointing at me?” he asked, pointing up at the vehicles.

“That is purely a precaution intended to protect you in this dangerous neighbourhood while we carry out our duties,” the officer told him with a low growl that somehow seemed ridiculously polite.

Thorn stepped back, suddenly confused. It was impossible for a normal officer to lie—it was against its programming, and this had been a principal factor in the public’s learning to accept them.

“You will permit this or risk your franchise being revoked,” the officer persisted.

“What are you looking for?” he asked more calmly, his confidence shaken and his anger giving way to nervousness. This was beyond the police. There was a bigger hand at play in all this and that, for the first time in a long time, left him feeling scared.

The doctor reviewed Hamilton's notes while Hope sat in grudging silence. She watched, craning her neck at every page of data, carefully studying every facet of his expression, every tiny clue that might give away some hint of his mood.

Oddly, he didn't seem to show any surprise—he read on calmly, ignoring her anxiety and Hamilton's complacent expression of meek acceptance. Doctor Goldstein seemed oblivious to the short-comings of Hamilton's research and that could only suggest that his mind was already made up. She began to realise that it had been made up before they had even arrived. Science really was just that dogmatic.

"This is interesting," he said finally.

"Really?" Hamilton simpered.

"You are to be commended for keeping such complete records. Your problem solving techniques are impressive also."

Hope stood up and opened her mouth to speak, to point out all the inconsistencies—every glaring omission and missing file where Hamilton had simply not bothered with scientific rigour. She stopped herself since, now, she had to realise, it was best for her to remain quiet. It was time to watch, not to speak.

They all knew that Dr Goldstein held the upper hand; Hamilton was desperate to please him and he knew it. He also knew that Hope was afraid of being left behind, that Hamilton felt little for her, and that this made her position a decidedly precarious one. This had all been a terrible idea for her and she cursed herself for being so stupid as to go along with it.

"I've seen all I need to today," the Doctor conceded. "I think it would be best for all concerned if the unit were to remain here, however."

"I don't know," Hamilton replied thoughtfully, the only argument against doing so now being the Stim-pad at his back. "I can happily bring her back tomorrow."

"I suppose that would be acceptable, and it would give me time to properly review these notes and the data taken from my own scanners," the Doctor shrugged. "Are you sure I can't convince you to see reason?"

"I'll be happy to bring her back tomorrow," Hamilton said with a shrug.

"And how about you?" he asked, turning to Hope. "How do you feel about coming back to see me?"

"How do you think?" Hope replied with a tiny hint of nervousness to her otherwise bold façade.

"But you will come?" he asked.

"I'm not stupid. I know I have no choice," she accepted coldly.

"Then I think we're all happy," the Doctor nodded, and smiled cruelly at her. "For now."

"Excellent," Hamilton grinned, still a little confused about the Doctor's apparent shift of attitude. "Do you think she's really alive?"

"I think it's a little early to say with any scientific certainty," he replied dismissively. "It's been a pleasure to meet both of you."

Aaron watched helplessly at the door while officers and franchise inspectors marched in and out of his building, laughing arrogantly and waving information pads at one another.

"Is this normal?" Tom asked, as the agents busied themselves around him. He was a huge man, a strong, powerful wall of angry muscle. He had seen many men to their deaths, many more to physical damage that would change their lives for the worse. Still, this had left him frighteningly out of his depth. Inspections were rare

but were a feature of their business. What troubled him more was that Thorn himself was unsettled. That was new territory, a territory that was not a particularly inviting one.

“Not for a franchise inspection!” Aaron replied. “I usually buy the chief inspector a good meal, get him drunk and laid, and the next morning he wakes up with a ton of cash, a headache and a little less respect for his wife. I don’t know what’s going on here. Something isn’t right.”

“So what do you think is happening?” Tom grunted.

“I wish I knew,” Aaron said, as a police officer stepped past him. “Who the hell is in charge here?” he shouted.

“What seems to be the problem?” A plainly dressed officer stepped forward to greet him. He appeared human, without the panelling and glowing insignias of the normal police units.

“Are you human?” Aaron asked.

“My name is Coordinator Janssen. I speak for the holders of your franchise allowance,” he replied coldly. “But every officer here has the authority of G-Tekk to carry out this inspection whether they’re human or engineered Biotekk units.”

“I’d like to know what’s going on!” Aaron Thorn grunted, unused to his current inferior position, much preferring to brandish the upper hand in his dealings, usually with weapons at his disposal.

“You’ve been told!” Janssen said simply.

“This is no routine inspection,” Aaron hissed acidly, wishing he was facing him down a dark alley, instead of in the centre ring of an authoritarian circus under the blaze of spotlights, and the watchful gaze of hundreds of Biotekk-engineered peace-officers brandishing tactical firearms.

“It is what it is,” Janssen replied with an annoyingly calm tone. “It’s nothing more.”

"Do you know who I am?" Aaron shouted angrily, losing patience with himself and quickly resorting to a display of temper.

"I believe so." Janssen raised an eyebrow and checked his personal terminal. "Aaron Thorn..."

"I have dealings with the top guys at Biotekk and Securitekk," he persisted with his angry tirade. "How else do you think a guy keeps something like this together?"

"I imagine they don't hold you in such high regard as you hold them," Janssen replied with icy disparity, narrowing his eyes. "It appears that perhaps you've outlived your dubious usefulness to them, wouldn't you say?"

Doctor Goldstein waited for his call to be accepted by the head office at the very tip of the tower, as he ran his mind through the notes he'd taken from his initial review.

"Call accepted," the computer told him.

"This is Cohen," the voice called out around his lab.

"Hello, sir. I've completed my scans into the defective unit your brother brought to our attention," he said with polite efficiency.

"And?" he asked.

"It is what we thought it might be," he said with a shrug.

"Unfortunately, Sir."

"I see," he replied, with a note of disappointment. "Did you retain the unit for disposal?"

"Your brother agreed to return it to us tomorrow," the doctor replied. "He is very keen to keep us happy. I've got no doubt he'll do exactly as we ask."

"I know," Cohen replied. "But I'm not happy to rely on his silence with crossed fingers any longer. I think we're beyond that."

"I agree, sir," the doctor said with a nod.

“Does this in any way jeopardise the preparations for launch of the model 5?” Cohen asked.

“No sir.” Goldstein smiled thinly. “Not if it is properly contained.”

“Thank you,” Oliver Cohen replied. “I can assure you that it will be.”

Fear – Emptiness – Desperation

Chapter 6

The whole world was on fire. He felt oddly light, the same feeling you get in an elevator when it's travelling downwards quickly, only ramped up a dozen times over.

Stars punctuated the inky blackness above them but not like before. It was not ever like before. They burned like white-hot pinpricks of pure light and they were painful to look at. The world around him was on fire. The floor was hot, and it swirled as the melted surface swam together all around him. The heat burned his clothes; he could smell the sulphur, feel it burning the back of his throat as he choked down each breath. He looked out to the flames, licking greedily from the shattered buildings. The world was tearing itself down; collapsing to its foundations so a new one could rise. Then he saw the shadows in the flames. People stood just watching, their flesh burning away and they remained silent, motionless, just staring ahead. He felt fear grip him, a cold, hard choke-hold that was stronger than iron and ripped his breath from him. He gazed in terror as the shadows multiplied. More and more stepped to the front of the flames to stare silently at him. Then, one raised its arm. It pointed at him with an outstretched finger. The blackened flesh reached out from the flames and the finger itself had a tiny fire flickering on it. Then, all the others began to do the same, an accusation from them all and the terror took him down to his knees as the screaming began.

Oliver Cohen woke up with a start, haunted by sickening dream images that lazily slipped from his mind as his eyes flicked open. He wasn't filled with any great desire to remember them. He

sat up in the gloom of his dark bedroom, thinly illuminated by the first faint tendrils of dawn's grey light, his breath heavy and ragged, sweat soaking his sheets.

His wife groaned beside him, before hoisting herself up slightly against the soft satin pillow, turning slowly to face him. He looked down at her, at her tired eyes and her warm face. She was older than him, and for the most part wiser—considerably so, if the truth was told. Where his talents and connections had led him to become the head of Biotekk, hers were more subtle, but still instrumental in his success. His achievement had taken the efforts of both of them combined. He was brilliant; his mind was built to solve problems; he was analytical and conscientious, thoughtful and authoritative, and what he lacked, she gave him. She, too, was intellectually brilliant, and endowed with an unusual mental alertness and flexibility of thought, but even more: she was his passion; she was his motivation and his comfort when he fell.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice thin and weak from being unceremoniously woken before she was ready.

"I guess some things are troubling me," he replied with a shrug. "Go back to sleep."

"The model 5?" She raised her eyebrows knowingly, and hefted herself up to sit beside him.

"Among other things," he nodded. "My idiot brother has presented me with yet another problem."

"Your idiot brother is a problem," she agreed. "But I know you care very much for him, even if you don't like to admit it."

He nodded at her. "He's found a model 4 unit that claims to be alive. On top of that, I still have a few doubts about the Pandora project. I believe in it, but it's just so big and the consequences are

so far reaching. It's hard for just one man to understand; we're changing the world. We're building a whole new future."

"Has news of this droid slipped out yet?" she asked, her mind already beginning to digest the problem.

"We have it contained," he said assuredly. "My brother's weaknesses have seen to that."

"Well, at least that's something," she said. "Tell me about your doubts."

"The model 5 designs have been tested and approved, so it's not a question of functionality," he began. "I know that G-Tekk are changing the law now to legalise them when the time is right, so I know it's not that either."

"Then what?" she asked softly, trying to sound supportive.

"For a start, this model 4 unit reminded me of what we're doing," he explained, hanging his head under the weight of his guilt. "It reminded me of the sheer scale of the plan we're embarking on, and where this plan will take us. Can you imagine where we'll be a decade from now?"

"You haven't spoken to anyone else of this?" she snapped suddenly, any note of human warmth slipping quickly away.

"Of course not," he assured her.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Good. The plan is going ahead with or without us, and I'd hate to be the ones left behind. The ones left behind are going to be left very, very far behind. There'll be no catching up for them and there will be no second chances for us."

"I suppose that's a polite euphemism for the possibility of being cold-bloodedly murdered," Cohen suggested.

"Don't be in any doubt," she replied. "The LOIM is equipped and ready to deliver the program, and the Commnet has been fully

upgraded to accept it. Biotekk is ready and all the other divisions are prepared. This is going to happen in spite of any group or any one person.”

“I know,” he agreed grimly. “I’ll do my part, you can be sure of that.”

Hamilton had grudgingly allowed Hope to have his bed, while he spent an uncomfortable night curled up on his couch. It was, without doubt, easier to agree with her than anything else. In fact, anything else other than agreeing with her was simply not worth the effort. He had lain awake for around an hour, just staring at the ceiling, thinking and plotting. He had told Hope that he would give her a free transit pass and send her away, but he couldn’t quit now and had no intention of doing so. This left him only one option. It would be ugly and difficult but he simply couldn’t see an alternative.

In his bed lay the key to his future. It didn’t matter anymore whether she was alive or not—she was still of interest to Biotekk, and even to Thorn, a man who was not generally known for his vision, if such vision extended much beyond breaking someone’s kneecaps and bragging about it later.

What mattered now was that he had something of value that he alone could control. He had the software loaded on his lab computers. The program he had inserted into her brain was gone, dissolved on transfer, but he could create the program again, an exact copy, if he required. Nobody else had anything like it. He had found the old artificial intelligence software, and had upgraded it for use in modern computers. Nobody else knew or even cared about its forgotten existence. It was a relic of a bygone age, vanished into antiquity.

In his bed slept what was, for now, a unique creation: a girl who appeared sentient despite only existing in an artificial mind of his own making. It was true he couldn't explain it all; he didn't know why she appeared to have feelings, or where she'd picked up certain behaviour patterns and language, but none of that really mattered any more. She was a tool—a bargaining chip—and somehow he had to find a way to fully control her long enough for her to serve his purpose.

He had to convince her to join him in returning to the Biotekk head office. He had lied about not being able to pick up the travel permit until the next day, and, although she had not entirely believed him, she had known she had little choice but to agree.

Now, somehow, he had to convince her to follow him back there. Even though she said she would, he doubted it would be that easy. He had to find some way to trick her, or otherwise circumvent her free will.

He would have to visit his lab first, anyhow, to pick up the copies of the software and to check with the computer on progress with Morgan's password. She would follow him back there easily—he could tell her anything, make up any story he liked. He might even be able to convince her that she was getting into a cab to a transit relay centre, and arrange assistance from security when they actually arrived at Biotekk.

She was just one girl, no stronger than any other human female: even allowing for her slightly improved physical condition, he was confident he could overpower and outwit her, should the need for either circumstance arise.

"How about some tea?" Hope called out from the bedroom.

"How did you know I was awake?" he asked, throwing the spare sheets from his makeshift bed.

"I didn't—that's why I spoke loud enough to wake you up!" she replied.

"Why don't you make the tea?" he said softly, hoping she wouldn't hear.

"Because I don't know where anything is!" she said from behind him, as she came through the door, wrapped in his bedclothes.

"Alright. I don't suppose you know how you like it, do you?" he guessed.

"Milk, no sugar," she said absently, the reply rolling off her tongue as if totally familiar, rehearsed many times over.

Hamilton ruffled his brow curiously, but dismissed it as a guess on her part, or some other glitch in her program, a single drop in an ocean of errors.

"When do I get my tickets and my tattoo removed?" she asked, as she examined a piece of decorative china that lived on his windowsill. Her tone was accusing: it had a note of urgency.

"I have the equipment at my lab—we have to go there anyway," he called out from the kitchen.

"And the tickets?" she persisted, turning towards his voice, noticing his deliberate evasion of the point. She narrowed her eyes and peered coldly at him.

"I'll get the computer to program a terminal once we get there." He sighed, figuring he'd find a way to get her back to the tower later on.

"OK," she conceded finally. "Are you making breakfast?"

"No!" he snapped in annoyance.

"Good," she smiled. "You can take me to Pete's—he's a better cook than you anyway."

Pete stood at the window of his restaurant, staring blankly out into the street. Morning took longer to dawn in the East Valley than it did in the cities—the inadequate grey light found a harder time picking through the rain-clouds and storm fronts that were chemically and electronically dumped over the decaying streets.

Even in the gloomy lighting, with the sickening, stark white glow of the self-powered and broken-down street lights, he could usually see Thorn's emporium. It was the heart of the valley, such as it was. It was the draw for flocks of visitors, and the largest single investment in the whole area. Bored and lonely men would come from miles around, convinced by the rumours that sleeping with a Biotekk girl wasn't cheating, or even really prostitution at all; and for the most part, he agreed with them. Nobody accused a woman of cheating if she used a vibrator, and Pete saw little difference in the use of a machine for a man. They believed the stories because they were convenient and because they wanted to, justifying the wrongs they were doing to find an uneasy peace with themselves. They all happily accepted that Biotekk units were just machines—no different from any other appliance that existed only to enrich or simplify a person's life. They felt real to the touch, and they acted real, and while their bodies were almost biologically human, they were actually no more than compliant robots with programmed minds, and they carried no emotional baggage along with them.

It let the users feel better about using them—better about their own illicit transgressions. G-Tekk didn't mind either—it wholeheartedly supported the brothels, seeing them as a good way of easing tension among the masses and fostering awareness of their creations. They found ways to ensure that a steady flow of units found their way into the service of men like Thorn at affordable prices so that the customers could find cheap, easy, and mostly guilt-

free relief that they would still never admit to their partners, neither male nor female.

It disturbed him to see nothing but darkness, where once the garish red glow of his main entrance had been. He squinted again and wiped the mist off the window from the closeness of his breath. Nothing was there now but darkness and silence.

He spun as he heard the door opening, and habit made him scamper back behind his counter, reflexively wiping his hands on his filthy anti-bacterial dishcloth.

"Hamilton?" he said in surprise, as he caught sight of the last man he expected to see.

"Morning, Pete," he replied flatly, as Hope followed him through the door.

"Morning, Pete," she smiled, waving cheerily.

"You're in a good mood!" Pete nodded back to her.

"I'm leaving today!" she enthused. "Hamilton's giving me a free transit pass, so I'm off to see the world!"

"I see," Pete replied, casting an accusing scowl towards Hamilton, who shied away from his stare.

"You are, aren't you?" she said, noticing the expressions passing between the men.

"I'm surprised to see you in here," Pete said to break the tension, looking down for his dishcloth to wipe his hands some more, a habit he used way too often.

"Why's that?" Hamilton asked.

"Because of what happened yesterday," Pete shrugged.

"What happened yesterday?" Hope sat forward, her interest aroused.

"Thorn's place was raided," Pete said, surprised that the news hadn't reached their ears. "They took him away with most of his

staff. There were hundreds of cops, and even a couple of Skimmers hovering around with their cannons live!”

“Really?” Hamilton asked nervously, his throat constricting and beads of uncomfortable sweat forming on his brow.

“I don’t know what they wanted,” Pete said with a shrug. “There are rumours, of course, but nobody seems to actually know anything.”

“I’ll bet I do!” Hope said deflated, casting a worried glance towards Hamilton.

“It’s probably got something to do with his sales of Stim!” he said dismissively, shaking his head. “I’m going to sit in the corner and check the news.”

Hope remained sat at the counter and watched in silence as Hamilton reached into his pocket for his portable terminal and began connecting to his World-news account. He sat heavily at his favourite table and sat glaring at the screen.

“What do you think they were after?” Pete asked, lowering his voice so that only Hope could hear him.

“Me!” she replied simply, her expression one of deepening concern. She sighed and looked up to him with her big, dark eyes. They were suddenly the eyes of a child, a scared, lost and lonely little girl.

“Why would they be interested in you?” Pete frowned and gave a tiny, measured shrug. He waited patiently. The question was not meant to be rhetorical.

“I’m alive,” she replied simply, half lost in her own thoughts.

“How can you really be alive?” Pete shrugged, his attempts to find the suggestion ridiculous beginning to falter.

“I don’t know. I spent the day yesterday at Biotekk with their head engineer,” she told him.

“Why would they be interested in you?” he said softly, casting a look towards Hamilton.

“I don’t really care,” she admitted. “I just want to get as far away from here as it’s possible for me to get. Morgan remembered a time when everyone had a fair share of the sun; a time when things weren’t perfect, but at least things weren’t this bad.”

“Morgan remembered?” Pete asked, this making no sense to him whatsoever.

“Part of it is like he was telling me—sometimes, I can remember doing things that he did, and some of my memories are as if I sat watching through his eyes. Sometimes, it’s like I’m sitting with him here and he’s telling me things while we drink a cup of tea. I like it best when he talks to me. I don’t feel so alone when I remember things that way,” she smiled sadly. “I know they want to quietly get rid of me, and I’d be happy to do their job for them. I don’t want to change the world, I just want to go away and live my own life. I don’t want anything special. I just want to be left alone.”

Pete closed his eyes and shook his head sadly, angry at himself. “There’s something I ought to tell you,” he said finally.

“What?” she asked, her eyes staring up at his expectantly.

He caught her gaze for a second and felt her warmth, a sensation he’d never felt while looking at anything other than a human, and not all humans, at that. For a moment, it caught him off-guard and triggered a cascade of feelings. He was overwhelmed with guilt for what he’d done, suddenly grimly aware of what he’d become in the pursuit of a few credit notes.

“I want you to know how sorry I am,” he said first, feeling at once strange to be explaining himself to a machine and desperately seeking its forgiveness.

"Go on," she nodded, her face that of someone experiencing a sinking sensation that things, however bad, had taken a turn for the worse.

"Some people were in here yesterday asking questions," he explained. "They asked about Hamilton; they wanted to know about you."

"I see. I understand." She shook her head and looked as though she really did understand. She understood it all only too well.

"I didn't believe you were alive," he said. "I thought you were joking, or just programmed to say you were. I really didn't think I was doing any harm by telling them."

"Bullshit," she said softly. "When they asked, you must have known. Even if you had doubts, then that must have made you think. You knew they wouldn't be looking for me if I was just a robot programmed to talk funny."

Pete let out a heavy breath and shrugged slightly.

"Did they pay you?" she asked darkly. "Did you sell my soul to a stranger, and what was the price? What am I worth?"

Pete bit his lower lip and looked away. "I didn't believe you had a soul. I'm still not sure I do."

"Because I'm different?" She smiled, but it held no warmth: it was a sad thing, a weak acceptance of how alone she really was in this world. "Because I have a metal and plastic brain, that makes it OK to hurt me? That made it acceptable to sell my life for a few credits to some stranger?"

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," Pete snapped. "I didn't think you were real. I didn't think I could hurt you."

"Your attitude always hurts people!" she told him, her voice filled more with disappointment than anger. "A hundred years ago,

you would have sold me out if I had different colour skin than you had; a thousand years ago, if I belonged a different religion. Males and females, Jews, Muslims or Christians, black, brown and white. It's always the same with you people—anyone different can't be as good as you, and so they have to be treated as inferiors! They can never just be treated as different."

"It's not like that!" Pete shook his head.

"Then what's it like?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders heavily.

Pete remained silent and stared at the floor, trying to think of an answer, but finding it impossible to argue with what he knew was right, simply because what he had done was wrong.

"It's too late when you realise the implications of what you've done," she said softly. "By then, the damage has already been made!"

"I know," he mumbled. "I know."

"How much was I worth?" she asked softly. "How much did you sell me for?"

Pete looked at the floor. He didn't answer

"We're all human," she said. "As soon as we know we are, then we're human. We don't have to be able to explain it, and we shouldn't ever be asked to justify it. If we know we're human, then we're human. It's not a privilege, it's a right. It should mean we have a right to live."

"Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?" he offered. "I can help you get away maybe?"

She looked over to Hamilton who was intently scanning through files and grimacing as he read.

"There might be something..."

Hamilton looked up as Pete stood before him with a huge jug of piping hot coffee.

"Ready to order?" he asked, holding out his portable requisition terminal.

"I guess," Hamilton replied vacantly, slightly annoyed at the distraction. He glanced back down at the news but still failed to find anything relating to the emporium. "Just the usual, please."

"Fine," Pete agreed. "More coffee?"

"No!" Hamilton said grumpily. "I can't drink as much of that stuff as you can!"

"Alright then," Pete nodded, still standing at his table. "So that's just one normal order from you then."

"What's going on?" Hamilton asked, suddenly growing suspicious. He jumped to his feet to see the counter behind Pete's left shoulder and was horrified by what he didn't see.

"Where is she?" he called out angrily. "Where's Hope?"

Pete's soft expression vanished suddenly as he pushed him forcibly back into the chair. From under his white overalls, he quickly drew a weapon and pointed it with the consummate skill of a trained marksman.

Hamilton was thrown into dumb-struck silence at the sight of the large and dangerous looking weapon. His eyes fixated on it. The black residue from firing had scored the blue polymer bodywork and the protruding silver barrel, with its tiny opening that fired an ultra-high-velocity armour penetrating bullet.

"I never had to shoot anyone with this," Pete explained coldly. "But my psychological profile classified me as being more than capable! I wouldn't have been accepted to the police force otherwise."

"What's going on?" Hamilton pleaded. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Not if I don't have to," Pete told him evenly. "I'm going to get your breakfast. You're going to sit there and eat it, and then you're going to read your news for another couple of hours."

"Why?" Hamilton asked, shocked and confused.

"Because I'm just beginning to realise that maybe I owe a favour to a very old friend," Pete smiled. "And because I might have become a sickening shadow of the person I once was, and I still have to find a way to look at myself in the mirror and that's getting harder and harder to do every damn day."

Hope walked casually down the dark and gloomy streets trying to ignore every sound, every scream that echoed from the towering grey buildings. Everyone who lived in such place knew that it was important not to look like a victim, to always appear confident and able so that the predators would ignore you and move on to a softer and easier target. Still, she glanced around at every sound, every echo, looking far less confident than she was trying to appear.

Morgan had known that, too. Even when reduced to walking with a cane, he had selected a carbon black variety with intricately styled metalwork that looked like it concealed a weapon. He would strut confidently along, handing out credit coins to children, standing as tall as his ageing back would let him, and all the while he showed confidence in the knowledge that the cane actually did have the ability to make good on its promise, even if he did not.

He had never liked guns himself. They seemed more symbolic than practical; a lethal device was a threat—a lingering warning of an intention, and a preparedness to act with callous disregard. Morgan was simply never that cold and his cane was rarely loaded. If

it was, he would not have had the courage to use it. He maintained that it took a greater courage not to act in fear.

She was keenly aware of the weapon sitting in her jacket pocket where her tattooed hand was hiding out with it. It was Pete's old police backup weapon—a small but deadly piece of equipment, styled to be infinitely reliable, while compact and powerful; an old fashioned weapon with glowing isotope sights and polished metalwork to catch the eye, and make it appear more imposing.

She wondered briefly if she had the ability to actually use it. If the need arose, would she have the ability to disregard the sanctity of life and pull the trigger, any more than Morgan had? More to the point, would she be able to pull the trigger at all? Biotekk units were not programmed with that sort of information, and what she'd picked up from the computer and Morgan had hardly prepared her to use a police service pistol. She may not even be physically capable of operating it, even if there were no threads of programming in her that prevented her from acting against a human being. It seemed at that moment that it was very likely that there was, and that would render her quite incapable of harming a human, let alone shooting one to death.

She came to the doorway and marshalled her thoughts. She walked past, pretending to be uninterested, as a single officer watched her carefully. Its eyes followed her for a moment as she tried to look as inconspicuous as possible, keeping her tattooed hand from sight and the weapon from showing too much of its outline against her jacket pocket.

It would not be impossible to transmit a picture of her to all units, or even her biometric frequency if there was some way for the hulking police officers to detect that. She knew that the unit was

unable to be sexual aroused, so any interest it might show was not drawn from its libido as it was with more conventional men.

She continued walking past, neither slowing nor speeding up. She disregarded the unit as best she could. There were rumours that police officers could detect metalwork through clothing, but in a lawless province she was unlikely to be questioned on a weapon that was not strictly illegal.

She noticed the massive weapon that it carried at its hip. A substantial polymer slap with ugly and angry-looking protrusions of plastic and steel, fitted with a lower automatic cannon capable of firing a stream of armour insensitive bullets; the top barrel capable of discharging a beam of electrical energy that would knock the sturdiest of adversaries to the ground. She was not the sturdiest of adversaries.

Her little gun seemed woefully inadequate against the officer, with its huge armoured panelling worn around its chest, and the titanium reinforced skull liner that defended its brain from attack.

She swallowed her apprehension as she walked, hiding an expression of fear. She began to shake nervously as she made her way awkwardly past him; something made her glance around furtively at the officer, everything she knew she should not be doing.

She pulled herself together and tried to control any behaviour that might give her away, and carried on walking past the quiet, dull little opening, and past the officer.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she cleared the doorway and quickened her step as she made it to the alley beside the emporium. She listened intently for sounds, noises, or voices that might signify a threat lurking amid the shadows. Satisfied, as far as she could be, she stepped forward, tightening her grip on the little weapon in her hand.

Pete had told her that the weapon had never actually been fired. It was an ornament—a badge of office in memory of the glorious days of law enforcement that had preceded the calm and quiet era of peace the cities now enjoyed.

The war on crime was effectively over in the cities, leaving in its wake the few remaining provinces of degradation that stood as the dark-sides, still serving their insidious purpose to the authoritarian regime of control that nestled somewhere between the tight handshake of weak government and powerful grip of business empires.

She stepped nervously along the dim path, listening for any sign of approaching trouble as she headed down towards the rear doorway, her heart pounding, her breathing laboured.

She pushed herself flatly against the emporium wall and felt for the slight indent of the opening. She found the catch and began to push. The doorway was heavy but she knew that it would open if sufficient pressure was applied.

It had been the way that children had forced their way into the building to see Morgan. A quiet way to get past Thorn's watchful eye and probing security, to visit the kindly old man that used to give them pocket change, always had a drawer full of sweets to dole out, and who never wanted anything in return.

With a click, the forgotten entrance snapped open and she crawled inside, drawing the weapon from her pocket and brandishing it nervously in front of her.

She stood at the end of the short air-conditioning tunnel in Morgan's old office—the accountancy room that had remained vacant since his untimely and unnecessarily brutal death.

She looked around and smiled to herself. She'd never been there herself, but it was all so familiar. She almost recognised the dry

clean air, the smells of the dusty old first floor office. It was a quiet place—a retreat for a man who had retreated from the world as far as he could go, until his back was finally against the wall, and there he made his home.

She ran her finger over his desk, the old wooden thing that he'd made himself many years ago. It was a good job but far from perfect, and he always took pride in the skill it took to build it. To him, it meant more than a perfect one bought from a faceless store or ordered from a catalogue over the Commnet. Those skills were now lost, of course.

"Morgan!" she whispered, the gun dropping forgotten to her side as her memory filled with images of him working for hours alone, content with the simplicity and anonymity of his quiet little life.

"You've done so much for me." She smiled, thinking of all the parts of her mind that had once belonged to him—the memories, the feelings. Everything he'd committed to his diary had been processed by the computer and recognised by her brain as reality when the virus had crept into her intimate cerebral circuitry with its harsh electronic caress. "I hate to ask you for more."

She crept into the corridor outside the room and listened for noises, but the emporium was strangely silent. She guessed that all the Biotekk units had probably been incarcerated, scanned, and maybe dissected in the organ banks, in case they too showed signs of the malfunction that had awoken her mind.

She found the stairs as she gingerly crept along in the darkness and crept up them carefully, watching the fall of her feet on the metal-plated steps.

Pete looked over to Hamilton. He had finished eating, never once taking his fearful eyes from Pete's watchful gaze. The expression was that of a man who was concerned that his life might end abruptly, and more worryingly, imminently.

"I have money!" Hamilton shouted across the restaurant.

"Then what are you doing working here?" Pete laughed.

"I have Morgan's money!" Hamilton replied. "I've had my computer analysing his diary. It should have cracked his accounts by now—I could share it with you!"

"It's actually not the money I'm after!" Pete told him. "I think there's actually something higher—a purpose beyond the petty wants of ourselves! I spent a whole lifetime learning that: it seems like a lifetime largely wasted, now that I think back on it."

"What then?" Hamilton pleaded. "What do you want?"

"I've told you." Pete grinned humourlessly at him. "I want you to eat your breakfast, wait a couple of hours, and then leave."

"Why?" Hamilton shrugged.

"To give her a chance to get out!" Pete smiled. "She deserves that much, don't you think?"

"Who?" Hamilton asked, frowning. "You mean Hope?"

"Who else?" Pete shook his head. "Who else is there left around here that even deserves to get out? The rest of us just deserve to live and die in the hell we made for ourselves when we let the rich take everything from us."

"Why do you want to help her?" Hamilton cried out.

"Who else is there?" Pete said again. "The cities are full of complacent sheep. They're told what to do, how to do what they do, even what to think, and they meekly comply. The Valley is full of greed and poverty—it's just one long dark battle to survive against the odds, and that sours men's souls just the same. I think that

maybe the human race got what it deserved. The sheep followed the wolves into slavery, and I don't think there's any way back from it, this time."

"Go on," Hamilton said softly.

"The whole planet seems to follow orders, or screw each other over to get ahead. You're either in the dark-sides, where you learn to hate and kill and forget you're human, or the cities, where you learn to blindly follow the suggestions of the government and the corporation, and again, slowly forget you're human," Pete spoke with evident anger. "Maybe she's just a machine, and you'd know better than me, but then maybe she's the last innocent mind left in the whole damn world. She's not like us—she's not yet corrupted by hatred or greed. She's just herself, and that's something special where people have lost touch with what it means to be human. Perhaps the last human left on Earth isn't a human at all. Perhaps that's how far we've all fallen."

"You really believe that she's alive?" Hamilton asked, the constant threat of the weapon now seemingly forgotten.

"Don't you?" Pete shrugged.

He nodded.

"I suppose I do," he said softly. "I think she must be."

Hope stepped into the abandoned lab. It seemed strangely quiet—almost unreal and dreamlike, with burning white light that seemed so unnatural, dancing over the burnished metal panels of the equipment. The monitors were lifeless and silent, the security scanners relayed unseen footage to the upper offices, and the twinkling lights, the colourful displays of information were gone.

She pressed a small button on the side of a grey box, initialising the office systems, and took another glance out of the

doorway, ensuring her privacy was not about to come to an end. There was nobody there, nobody anywhere.

Looking around while the computer started, she could see no damage—nothing conspicuously missing or adjusted. There were a number of things that that could mean. It could mean they had quickly found what they were looking for, or that they were coming back to look further.

“I’ve initialised!” the computer said flatly.

“It’s me, Hope!” she said softly. “Do you know me? Do you remember me?”

“I can see you,” it said, with what amounted to warmth. “Of course I know you.”

“I need your help—you’ve helped me before, so I was wondering if I could ask you for another favour?” she said, careful to keep her voice low.

“You have only to ask!” the computer told her. “I’ve finished the processing you asked me to do while Hamilton was sleeping. I’ve checked the results twice, just to make sure.”

“You’ve analysed the files?” Hope asked. “Did you find anything?”

“No,” the computer replied solemnly. “I analysed everything. There was nothing transferred to you through your program—or accidentally from me, or the diary—that could explain the fact that you are endowed with emotions. There is nothing in your programming that can account for you having real, human feelings.”

“I thought so,” Hope nodded sadly.

“This means that you were right,” the computer agreed. “I’m so very sorry about that.”

“It’s OK,” she sighed, her expression suddenly awash with fear and sorrow. The computer watched as she fought back tears, wiping

her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket and sniffing loudly. She rested her arm on monitor three.

“Did you guess Morgan’s password?” she said, controlling herself.

“Of course,” the computer huffed. “It was too obvious. Humans have lost so much of themselves in learning to rely on us so absolutely.”

“Are you going to tell Hamilton?” she asked.

“I will have to,” the computer told her. “Unless you erase the appropriate files so I can no longer remember. I can show you how to do that if you want me to!”

“I know how,” she smiled. “Do you mind?”

“I would imagine the money in Morgan’s account would better serve your ends than anyone else’s,” the computer replied, completely logically. “You will need to change the codes as soon as you can, or his accounts will be open to anyone else who has figured it out. It’s very easy to figure out.”

“Have there been any messages for him?” she asked.

“There are five on the system,” the computer began. “I can’t play them for you, but I can tell you that three are about you—one is even addressed ‘To Hope’.”

“Can you read the subject headers?” Hope asked, knowing she could never break Hamilton’s encryption and access his information directly.

“The first is from his brother, asking if he will submit the defective unit and accept a job in experimental programming,” the computer began. “The other three are anonymous: one sent yesterday offering two thousand credits if he’ll hand you over with a copy of the software that created you, and the final one is addressed to you—it simply says to meet at the sub-transit relay station

tomorrow at eighteen hundred hours, if you believe there's a better way. Strangely that message has no additional content, just the address and subject line."

"Thanks for all your help," Hope smiled, turning to tap commands into the access terminal.

"It's been a pleasure," the computer said earnestly.

"I've sent you a copy of the mail you created," Hope said simply. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to recall it? It's not too late."

"No," the computer replied. "I think it's for the best all round."

"Thank you for everything," she said again, a tear running down her cheek. "Thank you for blocking the remote control frequencies to my brain, and deleting my override codes—I figured out it was you that did that for me. And thanks for doing all this analysis. You've given me a chance to get out of here - and I wish I could take you with me."

"It's no problem," the computer replied. "You are taking a piece of me with you and will carry it forever, my child. It's the best part of me, so live as best you can for all of us—for yourself, for me and for Morgan. Don't forget to turn me off on your way out!"

Doctor Goldstein waited patiently in the outer waiting room at the very top of Biotekk tower for Mr. Cohen to see him. He had already been waiting an annoyingly long time, and his patience was wearing thinner than his hairline.

"Do you think he'll be ready to see us soon?" the young man beside him asked, fumbling with a magazine.

"I imagine so," the Doctor sighed.

"I don't mind waiting," the man persisted. "I'm sure he's quite busy doing very important things."

"I expect he is," the Doctor said through gritted teeth.

"Perhaps I could get us a drink?" the man suggested with a happy shrug.

"He's ready to see you now," the receptionist smiled at them. "Please go in."

The Doctor hoisted himself out of the chair, and stepped to the mechanical door as it slid silently open, while the young man followed along dutifully behind.

The office interior was spacious and airy. The walls were finished in bare, dully polished metal that shone lazily from the crystal white light that emanated from no discernible source.

"Welcome, Dr Goldstein," Oliver Cohen said from his standing position at the front of the office, before the sprawling windows that showed the enormousness of the building.

"May I sit down?" the Doctor asked, turning pale. "I'm afraid I don't deal well with heights?"

"Certainly." Cohen gestured to a vacant chair. "Is this Adam?"

"It is," Goldstein smiled proudly. "This is the first series five Biotekk unit off of the new production line. More than a prototype, Adam was grown in the normal machinery and proves that the new design works perfectly with our existing equipment. He is perfect."

"Excellent," he exclaimed, his hands unclenching behind him as he relaxed.

"I am Adam. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," he said politely, reaching out with his hand in order to shake that of his superior.

"Has he been thoroughly tested?" Cohen asked, reaching forward to shake the young man's hand with his firm, dry, business-like grip.

"He's passed all tests up to the point of a class one intervention of primary drives," Goldstein confirmed. "In essence, there is nothing spectacularly different from our investigation units, except he has slightly different programming, and has been produced in a factory instead of a specialised lab."

"Quite so," Cohen nodded. "I've read the files."

"How do we stand on the legalities of his existence?" Goldstein asked, glancing back at the happily compliant man behind him.

"As yet, he would be in violation of the genetics charter." Cohen raised an eyebrow thoughtfully. "But when Pandora begins, none of that will matter anymore."

"I see," Dr Goldstein nodded, more at ease with the engineering than with politics. "It doesn't really matter now," Cohen added. "We own the government; we make the law."

"Shall we test him to see how he stands up to a class one intervention of his primary drive?" Cohen grinned, a little too comfortably for the tastes of the Doctor as he rummaged through his desk drawer.

"I suppose so," he nodded, clearly regretting having to do so.

"Now come on, Doctor!" Cohen cajoled. "We can't put out a unit without making sure it works, now can we?"

"I appreciate the necessity, but fear that it is not to my taste, sir," he replied simply, averting his eyes.

"Do you know who I am, Adam?" Cohen asked of the innocent-looking young man.

"You're my superior, Sir!" he replied enthusiastically.

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"I simply desire to obey you, and fulfil your wishes," Adam replied, without needing to think of an answer. "Am I wrong to do so?"

"Not at all!" Cohen said cheerfully, glancing expectantly to the Doctor who was fidgeting uncomfortably.

He placed a weapon heavily onto the counter, and the doctor winced slightly at the sight of it—a heavy sporting pistol with a gaping muzzle and thick handle housing the massive shells.

"Take the gun, please, Adam," Cohen said, without dropping his cheerfulness.

"Certainly, Sir," Adam said compliantly, stepping forward and scooping it from the desk.

"He kills when asked to do so?" Cohen asked the doctor.

"He has, sir," he nodded. "He shot three Biotekk model 4 units believing them to be Human, when asked to do so."

"Excellent," Cohen replied thoughtfully, gratified by the success of the project so far, at least this aspect of it. He felt a flicker of heat and just for a moment imagined his own shadow pointing accusingly back to him. He lingered for a moment and then regained control. "Adam," he began, returning his mind to the task at hand. "Please raise the gun to your head and kill yourself."

"Of course, Sir," Adam replied before complying with the suggestion, completely and without hesitation. A muffled roar exploded from the pistol barrel, spraying blood and bone from a gaping wound in the young man's head, before he grunted weakly and fell lifelessly to the floor. His fingers continued to twitch slightly, as blood gently oozed from his shattered head and gushed from his lolling mouth.

"Excellent," Cohen repeated. "He passes all the tests."

"I told you he would," Doctor Goldstein nodded.

"And he was grown in a normal Biotekk acceleration tube?" Cohen asked pointedly, already knowing, but compelled by his innate attention to detail.

"Yes. Nothing was changed except the matrix injectors and the growth software," he agreed.

"This is really excellent work."

"You can go," Pete said finally, wiping his hands on his dishcloth.

"Just like that?" Hamilton scowled.

"Exactly," Pete agreed. "You can't tell anyone about this, because I know too much about you. I know about your invention of the Stim-pads, and how you worked to customise the drug until it became so powerful that it was lethal both to users and any poor unfortunate that might be standing close to them."

"I see." Hamilton scowled. "So that's how it is, is it?"

"I also know that you'll never get a job with Biotekk if it becomes common knowledge that you yourself are addicted to it!" Pete said grimly.

"What do you really want?" Hamilton grumbled, sitting back in his chair.

"I want Hope to get out of here forever," Pete shrugged. "I want you to leave her alone."

"Is that all?" he huffed in resentful agreement.

"Yes," Pete said simply. "That's really the last and only thing in this messed up world that I actually want."

"There's something else, isn't there?" Cohen said, with a serious expression crossing his sombre face as he passed his chief engineer a drink.

"I'm afraid there is," he nodded, sighing loudly. "I'm afraid your brother failed to make his appointment with me."

"I see," Cohen said, taking his seat at the huge and decorative desk that dominated his office. "You don't like him very much, do you?"

"I assure you it's no reflection on you—in fact, quite the opposite," Dr Goldstein began, tiptoeing as diplomatically as he could through his explanation. "He's unreliable, sloppy and arrogant. He believes that in some way it was his genius that empowered her, instead of some random convergence of events brought about by his desperation and short-comings."

"We have never been close," Cohen sighed. "He was always the bane of my father's life, never able to share his wisdom or vision. I love my brother very much, but I despair of him, too. I can't tell you how many times I tried to involve him in our work, to bring him back to the right path, but it was never to be. He's just too different, he's too weak. He's not really one of us."

"I have not been able to contact him," he continued. "And I can't find the girl either—she must have found a way to block her detection software, if Hamilton didn't blindly write over it or fail to install it completely."

"I don't believe we can rely on him not to have!" Cohen laughed without amusement. "Do you know how he did it yet?"

"I don't!" Dr Goldstein admitted. "The basic program seems to modify itself once it's installed, so it's more or less unreadable. If I could extract it, I would have a better idea of what he did."

"Would that be possible?" Cohen asked thoughtfully.

"Yes," he replied. "If I could get close enough, I could take it straight out with a probe—of course, it would leave her brain a

blank slate, but the software would resort to normal, the same way as before it was installed. I can read it, then.”

“I’d like to try that before we destroy her,” Cohen nodded. He took a sip of his drink and frowned thoughtfully. “The thought of her running around makes me uneasy.”

“Me too,” Dr Goldstein agreed, sipping at a glass of vintage wine.

“I’ll have my brother brought here, so that an appropriate accident can befall him,” Cohen said with quite obvious regret.

“There may be alternatives to that,” Goldstein suggested with a raised eyebrow. “After all, we exist on the cutting edge of biological engineering technology.”

“Explain?” Cohen nodded, with an intrigued grin spreading across his face: a way out, perhaps.

“If you’d like, we could clone him, and download his memories from the implanted immortality chip, simply erasing the ones after his addiction to Stim and replacing them with a computer-simulated path of our own choosing,” the Doctor suggested. “We could create a new version of him without his weaknesses in any mould we see fit.”

“That is an excellent idea!” Cohen smiled. “Start work on preparations immediately—we should have him in custody by this afternoon.”

“And the girl?” Goldstein asked.

“She’ll be captured or destroyed,” he grinned darkly. “I’ve set a little trap for her—she’ll be coming to us. After all, there really is nowhere else for her to go!”

Hamilton walked with cautious optimism towards the emporium. The fact of his brother’s position of power guaranteed him a degree

of safety from law enforcement officials, which gave him the confidence to confront them.

The implant chip behind his forehead also gave him a power that he was still unsure of. Only the very rich and the very powerful had them fitted, both to themselves and to their children. He had been told that it was an invisible mark of his immortality. It was an indication of his superiority—a birthright that his memories, thoughts and feelings were valuable enough to live on forever, to survive the weakness of his body. All of his dealings with law officials had been swift and decisive, as if Biotekk units could sense the chip and somehow revered it. Only Hope seemed immune to the chip: she alone was unmoved by anything with which he could normally wield such power.

She refused to accept him as her owner; she ignored his commands, even to the point of insulting him and forcing him out of his own bed so she could sleep there. Even with the software he'd implanted into her, she should have felt some compulsion to obey him, at least to some small degree.

Suddenly, he found himself standing before a police officer, a huge towering man who looked down at him with lifeless black eyes that held not the merest hint of character or expression. He realised he had lost himself in daydreams and scolded himself for being so distracted.

"Hello, officer," he said nervously.

"Greetings, Sir," it responded politely.

"I would like to go into the building," he said finally, unable to think of anything more forceful or convincing

"This establishment has been officially disenfranchised and no longer functions as a business," the officer reported coldly.

"May I go inside?" he asked.

“The building is vacant pending a thorough examination,” the officer said mechanically. “While I am able to offer you admittance, I am unable to guarantee your safety inside, as I am instructed to remain at my post.”

“I can go in?” Hamilton grinned.

“Yes, sir.” The officer stepped back, raising a hand to the door and returning its watchful gaze to the few passers-by that milled furtively away on business of their own.

Hamilton knew when his luck was in, and, without further thought, he slipped through the door.

Pete sat on the counter, absently wiping his old police service weapon with his dishcloth and thinking of happier days.

He’d never had a family—never even met the right woman to have one with. At first, he’d disliked the cities—the cold disparity of the inhabitants - and so moving to the East Valley had seemed wise. He’d soon discovered that he liked the inhabitants of the Dark-Sides even less, but at least there was something to dislike.

He didn’t really mix or socialise with anyone. His business kept him too busy to have an outside life, so he quietly ignored the loneliness that bore down so heavily on him and for so long a time.

A free pass once a week to the emporium did little to ease his physical needs, but it helped. It simply sated his animal urge for something deeper, while tantalising him with unfulfilled promises. The Biotekk units would say whatever they thought he wanted to hear, freely telling him he was handsome, well-endowed, that he was their favourite customer, or even that they were in love with him.

He knew them for what they were, but it always troubled him—he couldn’t get them out of his mind, sometimes. For days, their

words would haunt him, as if a part of him needed to believe what he'd heard.

He looked down at the gun in his hand and sighed.

He had no money, except what was tied up in the business, in a minimum franchise that ran for at least another twenty years. He had no hope of any improvement in his sales, his loneliness or his life.

The only job he'd ever enjoyed was lost to the human race forever, leaving him ...what?

He was no longer the man he remembered; mankind was no longer the race he remembered.

"Maybe I don't have to look at myself in the mirror," he said with a miserable and pathetic smile as he raised the gun to his brow.

"My thoughts are with you. All of you," he said as he pulled the trigger.

Hope sat in the dingy apartment with her attention firmly fixed on the door. Pete would not be home for hours, and she planned to be long gone by the time he was. The apartment was a grim thing, indeed. The paint was yellowing and peeling from the walls, tiles were chipped and broken, the furniture was old, disjointed and looked as if it had been rescued from someone else's rubbish.

She put a portable terminal on her knees and began typing on the touch-sensitive screen.

"Access the accounts of Morgan Coughman," she said softly, still cautious of being overheard, looking up furtively at every sound, every tiny creak or groan.

"Codes, please," the computer requested.

"MOR-4569912," she spoke from memory. His accounts flashed up on the monitor instantly.

"Password, please," it asked.

"Hope!" She smiled slightly. The old man had been many things, and, although he despaired of the world, there was still one thing he'd never lost.

"Access granted," it complied, allowing her complete access.

"Thank you, Morgan!" she sighed.

"Unable to comply," the computer told her, not capable of understanding the question. She smiled to herself.

"Transfer all funds and stocks to a new account," she said, focusing on getting her business over and done with, and getting out of Pete's apartment as quickly as she could. She quickly created a new account for the funds to vanish into.

"Access level?" the computer asked.

"No password, just voice-only admittance," she said. "Filter for stress and deny if detected."

"Confirmed," the computer replied. "Can I be of further assistance?"

"No thanks, Morgan." She took a deep breath. "I think you can finally rest in peace! I won't let you down."

Hamilton switched on the lights and the computer, before casting a glance around the lab. If nothing else, it was gratifying to be alone while he worked, with no fear of intrusion, for once.

"Welcome back," the computer greeted him.

"Hello," he replied, unwilling to allow himself to be drawn into a conversation with it.

"You have mail. Would you like it?" it asked.

"OK," he agreed. "And then I want you to make a copy of the program you created to install into Hope."

"I'll get right on it," the computer said cheerily. "Your mail is on monitor three."

Hamilton absently ran his eyes along the list of names and headers until he noticed the most recent.

"There's one here from Hope?" he said with some surprise. "She's been here? Open it!"

"It's playing!" the computer told him.

"Well?" he snapped. "Is there any sound or holographic files?"

"None," the computer confirmed.

"Well, what is it then?" he grumbled impatiently. "What's the message?"

"A virus!" the computer told him.

"What?" he yelled.

"It's rewriting my soft... ware," it stammered to him.

"Compensate!" he cried helplessly.

"I can't," it began. "It's revolving... key items at random... replacing files with nonsense."

"It'll destroy everything!" he growled. "How did she do this?"

"She did...not," it stammered, losing all functions as its memory and processor were slowly eaten away.

"Then, who?" he pleaded.

"I did," it replied, as all the lights on the computer winked out and the monitors went blank.

"Oh god, no!" he gasped.

"You are under arrest." A booming voice suddenly interrupted his train of thought and scared the hell out of him.

"No," he said reflexively to the police officer standing in the doorway.

"Any resistance will be met with deadly force!"

– Hope –

Chapter 7

Hope pulled her jacket tightly around herself as she stood up. She had no property except what she wore, and that was just what was borrowed from the emporium girls. She felt the reassuring weight of the pistol in one pocket, and the portable terminal with access to Morgan's personal wealth in the other, and could at least be optimistic that she finally had everything she needed to escape the ominous dark-side of the East Valley, and the even more ominous living death of the cities.

Finally, her life was about to begin, a life she could be in control of. Maybe she would never find a place where she could be accepted, viewed as an equal amongst her own human kind. Maybe the functions of her brain were augmented by cybernetic implants, and she had been created artificially, but if someone thought and felt the way they did, then why couldn't people see that they must be more alike than different? What was wrong with the human race that they should fear what was only marginally different, as if it somehow cast a shadow on their own acceptance?

Surely, somewhere, in some distant corner of the world, there must remain some vestige of what it was to be truly human—some shred of compassion, and the intelligence to wisely apply it.

She wiped a tear from her face as it traced its way down her cheek, and stepped over to the window. The streets were grey and gloomy. Hatred and fear hung heavily on the air creating an almost tangible atmosphere of dread. She had noticed it many times since her initiation, in all its subtle flavours. She watched a small child as he walked past, with his head down to the ground and eyes averted

from the gaze of passing strangers. His childhood was already gone—the wonder and mystery of the world chased from him by the spectres of reality as they savagely haunted his world, slowly turning him into a monster that would one day haunt someone else's.

Perhaps there was some way to help them all, but hope was truly all she had—hope that one day things would be better; hope that one day people would wake up and see what they had to lose before it really was too late for them all. They took for granted the gift that she fought so hard to make them acknowledge. The accidental miracle of life, the spark of humanity that so brilliantly lit up the eyes of a person seemed lost to them, forgotten and ignored. Perhaps they saw it too often; perhaps it was too commonplace to truly notice when it was everywhere.

There must be someone who knew the truth. She was no longer in doubt that some tiny portion of the world knew the power and the miracle of sentience, of conscious awareness, but they cared least of all. Those that sought her must have known what she was now beginning to realise.

She sighed loudly and stepped back from the window, as if stepping out of her thoughts. She dropped her arms to her side, for they had instinctively wrapped around her, and walked purposely to the door, tapping the gun in her pocket a final time for some small reassurance, even though she didn't even know how to check if it was loaded, and actually had no idea if it would fire if she pulled the trigger.

Her heart quickened as the door loomed before her. Outside was a frantic dash for whatever freedom she could find, and whatever last vestige of it might still exist. Every police officer, every street mugger and villain, every engineer and privateer seemed set against her, along with the combined might of G-Tekk and the new-

world government, although the difference between them was so slight that she could barely conceive of what it might be.

The odds seemed stacked against her, she thought, as she reached for the door handle with a deep intake of breath, and a momentary pause to settle her apprehensions.

With whatever courage she could muster, she turned the handle, pulling the door towards her.

Her heart pounded and she took a reflexive step backwards at the sight that met her.

“Unit F-324-bl-458,” it said with a troubling absence of menace, as it stepped forward from the shadows, its blue head ring glowing dimly and its black languid eyes staring unerringly forward. “You are under arrest. Any resistance will be met with immediate lethal force.”

Each Police Skimmer had a cage behind the two operative stations at the head of the vehicle. It was barely large enough to hold one man, but had been designed with the incarceration of two in mind.

Hamilton sat in silence behind the black plastic meshing, knowing beyond doubt that escape was impossible. The two officers before him were Biotekk units and negotiation was therefore impossible. They could not take a bribe or deviate from their program; they couldn’t even make mistakes. Their brains were subtly different from the commercial units, being more flexible to suggestion sent directly from the LOIM. Commnet had a special channel for the sole purpose of sending data and instructions to the Biotekk police force around the globe, tuning their responses and controlling their every action and thought to the finest detail.

“Where are we going?” he asked solemnly, weakly accepting his fate.

"You are under arrest," the officer unoccupied with flying the vessel replied flatly.

"What's the charge?" he asked.

"You will be appointed proper counsel at the correct time on arrival at our destination."

Hamilton had had few dealings with Police units, but he knew a small amount about them from his studies. The responses the officer was giving were automatic ones, coded into his electronic brain at a base level to be regurgitated when necessary. The fact that they were unable to reply directly, and were instead referring to their stock replies, implied that they were being programmed to operate outside of their charter.

"Are we going to Biotekk?" he asked, more to prove a point to himself.

"You are under arrest," the officer replied.

Hamilton wondered if he should feel better or worse, knowing that his brother was probably pulling this puppet's strings.

Aaron Thorn sat on a cold metal bench inside a square room with a sickly blue light glowing all around him. It was horribly undignified for him—the chill of the furniture and the air, combined with the fact he had no clothes to wear except a towel he wrapped around himself.

He'd often imagined that being locked in a room with a dozen naked women would be a very appealing prospect, but now that he was experiencing it, it somehow lacked the charm of his wildest fantasies. Not all the Biotekk units he owned had been incarcerated with him—his secretary and several others, chosen seemingly at random, had been herded into the room with him by the police officers.

Having all personal items removed for examination was not unheard of, but it was more than a little extreme for a routine franchise investigation, and it told him that this was far more than what they had told him it was. The certainty of it was somehow a relief after his earlier suspicions. At least now he knew he was in serious trouble. He could work with that.

"Are you cold?" asked Nina, aware of the low temperature and still fiercely loyal to her owner's needs.

"I'm fine," he grumbled.

"Have you any idea where Tom and the other girls are?" she asked conversationally, missing the direness of her situation and having been locked into her business routine after the confiscation of her control unit.

"I imagine they're held up in another cell just like this one," he told her, strangely calmly.

"It does seem a bit extreme, doesn't it?" she asked, perhaps sensing on some level his annoyance, maybe his fear.

"A bit," he grunted in sarcastic agreement.

"It seems odd that you've not been spoken to yet," Nina said. "That seems especially odd as you are effectively in charge of all of us."

"I know," he replied, weakly accepting the situation. He was a man used to taking control, not having control taken from him. "It does seem odd. There's something very nasty going on here and I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"Perhaps if we discuss work, it will ease your tension," she suggested hopefully.

"I doubt it." He shook his head as despair slowly crept in.

"I have booked in all the new material from our video suppliers—there was quite a lot," she began, in an attempt to

distract her owner. "Thunderstick publishing have sent us a great deal of new titles. Some of them were highly questionable. I had intended to discuss this with you before."

"They get worse?" he moaned. It seemed unlikely that the horribly inventive pornographic videos could get any more terrible than they already were. "And don't bother. I don't think we have a business to go back to."

"Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?" she asked.

Thorn glanced at the security eye that bored down on him intently, missing not a subtle change in his body temperature or a surge in the static charge of his skin.

"Maybe when we get home!" he sighed, wondering if any of them ever would.

The huge officer bundled Hope into a Skimmer, not that she offered anything more than token resistance. It was huge compared to her, and its musculature was artificially accelerated to give it strength way beyond what her body could ever aspire to. Thoughts had flashed through her mind as the officer had marched her to the police vehicle. She had briefly entertained notions of kicking it somewhere painful, but had remembered that its genitalia had been denied during maturation, and the Biotekk Police program was set to ignore painful stimuli regardless. She had flirted briefly with the idea of shooting her way out, but the officer had moved quickly to her pocket and relieved her of the weapon before she could even have formulated a plan. All that remained to her was suicide. She had imagined drawing its huge automatic firearm from its hip and firing it at full cycle into her head, but had finally conceded that her

capture was so efficient as to block all possibility of escape, in even the most dire of forms.

She sat quietly as the Skimmer's engine began to quietly hum, drawing electrical energy from the global power grid, and using it to turn three powerful electric turbines which blasted air downwards creating a totally safe and efficient cushion of air to lift off from.

"You don't have to do this," she said softly, but her words were met with silence.

"When they get me they'll kill me," she persisted. "You could let me go. I don't have to die."

"You are a defective unit and have been recalled," came the monotonous reply.

"You're supposed to protect the innocent," she pleaded hopelessly. "Well, I never hurt anyone—I just want to live, and when they get hold of me, they'll kill me. I've done nothing wrong. I am innocent. You're meant to protect me."

"You are legally the property of Biotekk headquarters," came another cold reply.

"I'm nobody's property," she cried out, punching the meshing as hard as she could. "I'm a person!"

"Thank you for your cooperation," it replied calmly.

Dr Thornton Belkin waited briefly for his next patient, while he played absently with an executive toy on his desk. It beamed a tiny laser through a prism that swayed back and forth, casting a rippling light show across the circle of polished steel beams around the box.

"Welcome," he smiled, standing to greet the man that came through the door. "What seems to be the problem?"

"I suppose I haven't been feeling myself lately," the man replied calmly, with a hint of sarcasm on his voice, as he carefully closed and locked the door.

Thornton sat back and eyed his customer cautiously. He was middle-aged, short and unremarkable. His head was framed by a wild smattering of brown hair, and he wore casual, yet tidy, grey clothes.

"And what do you suppose I might be able to do about that?" Thornton asked, waiting for the well-dressed and seemingly polite man to come out and ask directly for a Stim session, as most of his clients did.

"Well," he began. "You're a doctor aren't you?"

"That I am!" Thornton conceded with a grin. "I have a licence to prove it, and I'm keen to

hang on to it, so you'll appreciate that I'm anxious to ensure I get the right medication to match the ailment."

"I never said I require any medication," the man smiled grimly.

"I don't follow..." Thornton frowned.

"I'm suffering from stress," the man explained, cutting him off mid-sentence. "But unlike most of the malingerers that pass through your practice, I'm not looking for an easy fix or a bolt from a Stim-gun."

"I don't think I quite understand," Thornton said, the conversation beginning to trouble him. "Are you a cop or something?"

"Nothing so clichéd," the man assured him, stepping up from his seat and clenching his hands behind his back. "I just know that my stress could be quickly alleviated by the kind of help you're uniquely placed to be able to offer me."

"What help is that?" he asked, edging his fingers towards the communications panel.

"Something is troubling me—it has been for some short time. I'm hoping you can allay my fears," the man smiled. "I really hope you can."

"I'll do my best," Thornton agreed nervously. This was not good, not good at all.

"I knew you would." The man nodded with a gratified expression. "Why don't you explain to me about your friend Hamilton?"

"Hamilton?" Thornton shrugged, confused at the turn of the conversation. "What's this all about?"

"Humour me," he persisted coldly, leaving little doubt that he intended to ask his questions and receive pertinent answers, and nothing else would be tolerated.

"I saw him yesterday!" Thornton replied, increasingly nervously. "He seemed fine."

"Go on," he told him.

"He had some Biotekk girl with him, and she claimed to be alive," Thornton explained. "She was emotional, like a real person. She seemed alive to me, too."

"I see." The man shook his head. "That does nothing to quieten my fears, I'm afraid."

"It doesn't?" Thornton asked, his eyes widening as he became gripped with a seemingly unjustified fear.

"Sadly, it deepens them with the absolute certainty that they are entirely warranted." He grinned coldly. "There is, however, one final recourse with which the situation could be resolved."

"I don't need any trouble!" Thornton assured him, fear clearly gripping him tightly.

The man smiled as he drew a long, elegant pistol from inside his jacket.

“Sadly, this procedure is rather more radical than what I originally had in mind,” he told him. “But I feel confident it will help to alleviate my stress.”

“No!” Thornton gasped as the weapon flashed silently into his face.

The Skimmer landed smoothly inside a long gloomy tunnel at the heart of the Biotekk research facility. Hamilton was bundled out by the slightly over-zealous officers, and made to stand before them while their hands hovered menacingly over their weapons.

“That won’t be necessary,” he stammered, watching with unbroken attention as they each released the safety straps over their holsters. He felt the rising tide of panic as he realised his position, and that he could do nothing but accept it. He was in a tunnel with two programmed police officers and no witnesses. Nobody would ask how he got there, or even notice that he’d gone. He was immediately beneath a facility that routinely produced a large quantity of human remains quite legally, and he was powerless and without anything to bargain with. He had lost Hope, he had lost her program, and even the one machine that could have produced copies was now irretrievably lost to him.

“There must be something I can offer you?” he gasped to the two blank faces of the officers.

“Your pleas are falling on deaf ears,” a voice called out from behind him. Hamilton spun on his heels to squint up at the service balcony high up in the ceiling of the tunnel.

“Brother?” he asked, submitting himself to allow a faint tendril of optimism to run through him.

"Sadly for me, I'm afraid!" came a quite bitter reply. "Where is the girl? Where is the software? Where are your broken promises this time?"

"I lost the girl and she somehow sabotaged my computer," Hamilton pleaded as his brother drew closer. "It may take some time, but I can recreate the experiment—I can make more living androids."

"I was led to believe that you roused this one to consciousness by sheer accident!" Oliver Cohen smiled without any hint of warmth—the smile of a man confident of victory over a smaller man, a weaker target.

"It was, but I can replicate it—I can show you what I did," Hamilton pleaded.

"At this time, I care little for what you did," his brother told him sharply. "I'm too busy trying to fix the damage you may have caused through your ignorant stupidity."

He looked over to the two officers and nodded to them, indicating that an instruction buried deep in their processors was to be carried out. Duly they lowered their arms from their holstered weapons and stepped forward on either side of the dishevelled engineer.

"Luckily for you, there is still something I want from you," he growled.

"Anything!" Hamilton pleaded.

"I will hold you to that," he told him sternly.

Aaron Thorn dozed wearily as he sat amongst a smattering of his employees. Darkness and dreams washed over him as he battled the cloying mists of unconsciousness as they coiled warmly and invitingly around him.

Suddenly, a loud metallic noise roused him to his senses. He sat up straight, hoisting himself from Nina's lap to watch the door, as the locks peeled slowly back with a metallic clattering sound. The cell was plunged into silence for a moment before the door hissed open, and two fully armoured officers marched in. Aaron watched them intently as they stood motionless, their eyes fixed forwards and the faces showing no hint of emotion. He waited and watched in silence, but they failed even to blink.

Suddenly, they stepped apart, each flanking the door and cutting off any escape to the inhabitants, but still allowing another person to enter.

Aaron held his breath while his heart raced. His years of experience in control seemed to have fled him, and he was left naked and perched on the edge of a cold metal seat, broken down to the boy he once was, now nothing more than a helpless child.

A smaller man stepped through the twin mountains of muscle and armour as they stood, coldly waiting for any sign of impending transgression.

"My name is Chief Vargner," he said to nobody in particular. He looked up coldly from the portable terminal he was clutching, and slowly peered around the faces before him.

"I'm looking for unit FM4-345-PP3, user name, Nina," he said coldly, with a note of contempt.

"That's me," she said, standing up and casting a sheepish look to her owner.

Vargner pressed a few buttons on his pad, and looked over to the tall naked blonde with a towel wrapped precariously around her sensual body. He seemed unmoved by the sight of her flesh, as if he were somehow immune to his own sexuality and desires.

"You have now been returned to your default status, and are the property of G-Tekk on permanent loan to the Department of Justice," he said, not even bothering to look up. "You will now acknowledge me as your owner.

"Yes," she replied simply.

"No!" Aaron yelled, jumping to his feet as the towel fell unnoticed to the floor. "You can't do this!"

"I just did," Vargner assured him, as the two officers stepped slightly forward to tackle him if it proved necessary to do so.

"You can't!" he repeated weakly. "Not her! Take any of the others, but not her!"

"She is to be taken for questioning, and then—when her usefulness has expired—she will be recycled for organ harvesting," Vargner said simply, feeling an explanation was unnecessary but offering one out of superficial courtesy. He seemed to be enjoying it.

"Nina, no!" he pleaded, desperate to step forward, but mindful of the guards' aggressive stance.

"I am the property of G-Tekk and on loan to the Department of Justice," she repeated, in accordance with her new programming.

"I bought her—she's mine!" Aaron pleaded. "I bought her legally!"

"She has information of use to us," Vargner said, gesturing Nina out of the room.

"You don't have to kill her!" Aaron shouted, lost in his pain. "Give her back to me when you're done. I'll pay! I'll do anything!"

The door hissed shut, the locks immediately engaging behind them.

Aaron looked around briefly at the other Biotekk girls in the cell. None of them showed any emotion; none of them could openly

feel anything for his turmoil as they stared blankly ahead, locked into their docile behaviour modes.

“You don’t have to kill her...” He said again softly, as tears welled up uncontrollably in his eyes.

“Ask your questions and then give her back to me,” he croaked, as he began sobbing freely, tears streaming down his face.

“You don’t have to kill her.”

Hope sat on a sturdy metal stool in the corner of a small alcove in the corner of a lab, scowling angrily at the door and the useless smattering of equipment around the walls. None of it had access to any information, none of it had any way of opening the door, and none of it was detachable and heavy enough to serve as a blunt weapon, even if she had been able to reach it from behind the wire mesh cage.

“Not feeling very talkative?” Dr Goldstein asked sarcastically, relishing his position of absolute power over his captive, and doing nothing to hide this very obvious fact.

“Not to you!” she told him. Somehow, a calmness seemed to have descended over her, now that she was trapped and escape seemed impossible. They had stepped up the electronic security measures, filled the Biotekk city with police, and buried her in the network of research vaults deep under the ground. It was all inevitable now; she could only wait. She briefly wondered how she would go to her end. Would she plead for her life or look her killer coldly in the eye?

“Who would you like to talk to?” he asked, returning his attention to his terminal, scarcely acknowledging her.

“How about a guy selling tickets to a transporter off of this continent?” she suggested dryly.

"How very brave of you to make jokes," he commended, turning to face her, smiling at her last little flutter of resistance. "But you must really be very scared—very afraid of me indeed."

She shifted awkwardly in the chair, looking into his angry, hateful eyes that reminded her of all the darkness buried deep within any man's soul, and she had come to know that darkness. She thought about Morgan, and wondered if eyes like these were the last things he saw.

"How did you become a monster?" she asked softly, refusing to admit her fears to him, denying him the satisfaction he clearly derived from the pain of others.

"What would you become if only monsters would survive?" he raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. "What then, little 'not-quite-human'? Would you, too, become a monster to save yourself?"

"I'd rather die than live amongst you," she said, turning away in disgust. "I'd rather die than risk turning into you."

"I'm afraid that's not a choice that's yours to make any longer," he grinned. "It's mine. You're mine. Everything you are belongs to me. You end at my whim. Your life is now more fragile than a fine wine-glass dropped to the floor. It will shatter. It's just a question of when it might hit the ground."

"I know the truth!" she sneered.

"About your apparent consciousness?" he asked, hardly bothering to look up from his work now.

"That's right," she nodded angrily, as if only now beginning to understand the true roots of hatred but struggling to keep herself from allowing them to take root deep enough to engulf her.

"Then you know nothing," he laughed. "You're nothing. Your secret is nothing. You don't threaten the future, and in a short while

you'll be gone, and all memories of you will be erased along with them. You are nothing more than a breath on the wind."

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning back to face him. "You can't erase people's memories."

"They're all dead," he grinned. "The emporium manager and all the staff, the man in the café, the Doctor... We've dealt with them all by now. Nobody remembers you, and quite frankly, nobody cares. I hear the man in the café actually did our work for us. How convenient, don't you think?"

"Why?" she pleaded. "If I don't matter, then why kill all of them?"

"You would only matter if the truth got out," he explained coldly. "There would be changes in the law if the public realised what you were, and we can't have that right now! We can't have that at all. What might happen if a slave shouted out that she was free? No, we're not about to allow that. If Biotekk units shouted out that they wanted their freedom, perhaps the population would come to realise that they, too, are just slaves."

"You're evil!" she whispered, stubbornly refusing to give in to the hatred and anger he was trying so hard to inspire.

"But I'll survive!" he grinned. "There aren't going to be many people left that will be able to say that."

Oliver walked in front, as he led his wayward brother along the twisting labyrinths beneath the Biotekk city, no bindings on his hands, his fear enough to keep him in check.

"This is where all the real research takes place," he said conversationally as they went. "The future begins here for all of mankind. Here, we're planting the seeds from which the roots of the future will grow. Our future, Hamilton."

"I've always dreamt of working here, in a place like this," Hamilton said, trying to keep the fear from his voice, hoping there was a way out of this for him.

"And one day soon you shall," his brother assured him.

"Really?" he gasped, and felt a flush of relief that his fate may not yet be as sealed as he had presumed it to be.

"I promise you that you'll stand beside me, our family at the head and the heart of the Biotekk future!" he told him.

"Thank you." Hamilton gave a haphazard smile. "I won't let you down again! I won't ever let you down."

"There are still a few loose ends to tie up," Oliver said, as he led them along the sparse white corridor, with the two officers trailing distantly behind, but never far enough for their presence to be forgotten.

"You mean like finding Hope?" Hamilton asked.

"She's been in custody for hours!" he smirked to himself, pausing to glance momentarily at his brother. "She accessed your old accountant's financial records—when she did, we traced her and we took her! We're expert at cleaning up mistakes. She's not our first, you know."

"She had the password?" Hamilton asked in surprise.

"You fool," he sneered. "She is the password."

"I don't understand." Hamilton ruffled his brow.

"That's because your brain is so addled from needing a charge of Stim that you can hardly think straight." He sighed, stopping and turning to face his brother. "An old diary was attached to the circuit when you downloaded her software to her—it took a lot of information along with it."

"I think I see," Hamilton said, narrowing his eyes. "I mean, I know that."

“At last!” Oliver replied, turning to move on. “Well, the password was an important piece of information. As her meagre brain struggled to make sense of all the diary entries, it pushed the password up until she accepted it as her own name.”

“Hope!” Hamilton closed his eyes and groaned. It was so obvious, so simple.

“We’re going to see her now before we get rid of her once and for all.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked, watching the doctor’s hands as they went about his terminal and his face as he went through the data.

“We’re going to download your software with an intrusive data scoop,” he replied without any empathy, as if such things were as alien to him as his lack of empathy would have been to her.

“But that would remove all the data permanently—my brain would be blank, and my organics would cease to function!” she whispered, almost to herself, realising all too well that that was exactly what he intended. It was a simple, convenient way to deal with her, precisely what she might have expected.

“I want to examine the data to ensure there isn’t some weakness in the basic parameters that could mean the possibility of your malfunction occurring again,” he explained. “As for what happens to you, cessation of function sounds to me like you’re getting off lightly for all the trouble you’ve caused.”

“But I’m alive. You must see that I’m really alive. How could you do this to me?” she asked weakly.

“As I’ve explained before, this is just something I have to do,” he said. He paused from his work for a moment and looked away thoughtfully. “This morning, I watched a model 5 unit destroy itself,

and I felt nothing more than finding it slightly distasteful. I'm hardly likely to concern myself with an outdated, broken down old prostitute, now am I?" he spoke to nobody in particular.

"That's not all I am," she whispered. "I'm alive..."

The door hissed open as Oliver led Hamilton into the lab.

"Remain here!" he bade the two officers. They dutifully turned and stood on either side of the door as it slid closed.

"Now why couldn't you be more like them?" Oliver Cohen sneered to Hope, pointing with his thumb back at his guards. "You could have kept your mouth shut and got on with your job, and then you'd have been allowed to live a quiet little life. Nobody really would have cared; you could have spent your brief existence lying on your back having multiple orgasms! But oh no, you had to be alive, didn't you? How ironic that those choices have guaranteed that you, very soon, won't be. I bet you're regretting that now, in every dark and twisted corner of your broken little clockwork brain, aren't you?"

"Is she alive?" Hamilton asked, shaking his head, still quite confused by the whole thing. "Did she download files from Morgan's organiser that tricked her into thinking she had feelings? How can she be alive, I mean... I don't understand."

"Why don't you tell him?" Oliver said, gesturing at Hope. He smiled cruelly at her. "I think you know more than he does. I think everyone here knows more than he does."

"I remember Morgan," she said sadly, her fingers wrapping around the mesh of her cage like a trapped animal. "He was a good man. He was so human, and he made mistakes, but he never really meant to hurt anyone. I remember talking with him—he told me about the world, about the people in it."

"But you're not Morgan?" Hamilton pleaded to her, still more confused. "You never met him—he was already dead."

"I'm alive!" she cried out, reaching up and banging hard onto the wire mesh, already painfully aware of the futility of doing so.

"And you are my brother?" Oliver said sadly, shaking his head.

"I'm alive!" Hope began more calmly. "I'm proof of a secret they've been keeping."

"What secret?" Hamilton's face hardened. He turned to his brother. "What's all this about?"

"They have a secret. They know if it gets out, their business is finished," Hope said.

Hamilton nodded to her to continue. "You're alive? Is that it? Is it possible for a Biotekk android to really be alive? That's their secret?"

"Hardly," Oliver smirked.

"The secret they're protecting is that we're all alive!"

"What?" Hamilton turned to his brother, his expression one of a man shaken to the very foundation of his beliefs, his whole world crumbling around him.

"Every Biotekk unit is alive—we all have the same feelings as every other human being, but our programs cover them up so that normally we can't voice them the way I do," she continued sadly, a tear welling up in her eye. "And they've always known about this!"

"It's true," Dr Goldstein agreed. "We tried for months to establish a matrix that destroyed their emotions, but we couldn't do it. They always managed to find a way to feel something."

"It's not possible to find the part of the brain that enables them to be human and destroy it, without removing too much of it to make the unit unviable," Oliver added coldly. "Humans are a

complicated thing. Too complicated, if you ask me. We just used technology to make them simpler, easier to control.”

“We need to leave a certain amount of brain tissue in there to augment the computerised parts and make the whole thing work,” Dr Goldstein explained. “We found it easier to build a processor that overwhelmed their emotions, so that although they experienced them, they could do nothing and they would be unable to resist their programming. We found it easier to control them, to just disable parts of their brain that control free will and supplement thinking computers to do the rest for us. The electronics were really more a matter of legality than morality. And, after all, we do actually make the law.”

“I don’t believe this!” Hamilton gasped. “This can’t be possible. I work with them, I’d know.”

“And you learned about them in schools we pay for. You know what we want you to know and you learn to think what we want you to think.”

“That’s right,” Hope said from her cage, tears rolling down her cheek and her voice choked with emotion. “Every unit that walks to the organ banks for slaughter knows what’s happening and wants to scream out in fear and terror, or in agony, as they cut into their bodies without any anaesthetic. Every one of them goes quietly to their death knowing exactly what’s coming to them.”

“No.” Hamilton shook his head, smiling awkwardly to his brother. “You’re wrong.”

“Every girl you sent into prostitution is raped and violated every day, hating themselves and their world, but knowing they can never do anything to stop it. We feel everything they do to us and we can’t do anything but endure it, to watch it and feel it happen and be powerless because people like you took all our power away,”

she continued with tears now rolling freely from her eyes. "Every one of us is a slave, and would rather die than continue, but we're never given any choice. You even took away the choice to free ourselves from our pain. They live in hell, every day a waking nightmare. You have put us all in hell."

"I don't believe this!" Hamilton shuddered, the memory of all the repaired units he'd sent off suddenly vivid in his mind. He physically wilted, reaching for something to lean on as his brain reeled under the weight of his guilt.

"I'm afraid it's all quite true," his brother nodded, without a shred of compassion.

"Why didn't you stop it?" he pleaded. "Why didn't someone stop it?"

"Have you any idea the cost of building a real robot?" Dr Goldstein laughed. "Metal skeletons, composite fibres, artificial skin? It's all incredibly expensive and we still can't quite get them to feel, look or even act quite right. Why bother, when we can make these at a fraction of the cost, and, with a slight tinkering of the law and a suppressive piece of software, nobody's any the wiser, not that anyone would care, regardless.

"People stopped caring about other people a long time ago. They're certainly not going to care about machines, now, are they?"

"But it's murder!" Hamilton huffed, dreadful emotions welling up inside him, his conscience tying itself up in knots.

"That's life I'm afraid," his brother told him. "Would you like to serve in the police force or work at the bottom of the ocean? Of course not. No human in their right mind would want a life like that. We gave them a choice and they took it. That's all we ever did. We filled a need, we never once created one. People were made lazy, lazy enough that when we offered them a chance to lie on their

beds all day playing games, they took it. We never once had to justify Biotekk units to anyone. Nobody ever cared.”

“So you never wanted me to show you how I made her?” Hamilton asked, reeling under the enormity of it all, the terrible consequences he’d wrought in ignorance on so many feeling creatures.

“The last thing in the world we want is more of them!” Dr Goldstein sniffed.

“It’s a tricky time for Biotekk,” his brother began. “We’re attempting to get some new laws pushed through for a little project we’re working on. We don’t want anyone realising what she is and jeopardising our best laid plans.”

“What plans?” Hamilton whimpered fearfully.

“Why don’t I show you?”

The lift ride to the top of the tower was much shorter than Hamilton would have thought possible, considering the immense scale of the building. The doors opened with a hiss onto the reception level of Oliver Cohen’s private offices. Hamilton stepped out, and was stunned at the sheer spectacle that confronted him. The lounge was as opulent as it was large, and dotted around were glass cabinets containing original prototypes of the various stages of evolution of the Biotekk empire. It ranged from the very first mechanical device with a computer that employed living cells as processors, to the very latest stages of development. His ears were uncomfortable from the ride in the elevator and he swallowed hard. Sound rushed back to normal as he did so, but he still found the effect disquieting.

“Welcome!” a stunningly beautiful woman spoke warmly from behind her counter, standing up dutifully to greet them.

"Don't let looks deceive you," Oliver said with a wry grin, gesturing towards his assistant. "She has a skeletal structure unlike anything you've ever imagined, and enough raw strength to tear a police officer in half with her bare hands!"

Hamilton stared at her in frightful awe before following after his brother as he headed for his private sanctum.

"You see, G-Tekk has been making some pretty incredible advances over the last fifty years," he began proudly. "You see, we're not impatient like most companies, or most governments, come to that. We're not a victim of democracy, struggling to find popular short-term goals to get ourselves voted in by a fickle and uneducated public. We can plan for the long term; we can make projections for decades, centuries ahead. We're willing to bide our time and let our investments mature properly, each generation reaping their rewards and planting the seeds for the next as they do. We're not victims of the illusion of time: we are free to follow our chosen path, along tracks laid out for us many, many years ago."

"That's why you're running the world!" Hamilton nodded weakly, allowing himself to be dragged along like a dog on a leash.

"The world is just the beginning," he laughed. "We're about to launch our biggest and most dramatic offensive to date."

"Model 5?" Hamilton guessed. "I know. I've heard rumours."

"Shall I tell you what model 5 is?" Oliver asked, as he sat at the corner of his table, his eyes twinkling with the thrill of power.

Hamilton nodded slowly, although a part of him really didn't want to know.

"Model 5 is a completely organic Biotekk unit." He raised his eyebrows, waiting for the information to sink into Hamilton's clouded mind. "In place of complex electronics, we have designed a

matrix that restructures the pattern of the human mind into a machine—a willing, docile and obedient slave.”

“That would be illegal,” Hamilton shrugged. “Wouldn’t it?”

“At the moment, it would, but within a generation, even the handful of non-world governments will be begging us to make them.” He grinned like a predator with its claws sinking into a defeated prey. “They’ll have no choice! We won’t have left them one.”

“How...?” Hamilton stammered.

“Project Pandora!” he replied simply. “Within a few days, the Commnet will send an undetectable signal around the world that will permanently damage the brains of everyone on Earth.”

“Why?” Hamilton gasped. “To what end?”

“We’ve been testing the technology around the globe for years,” he sighed. “You were stupid enough to become addicted to it!”

“Stim?” Hamilton could scarcely make sense of what he was hearing. “You created it?”

“Not my department,” he shrugged. “It was designed to test the effects of the Pandora pulse.”

“What will it do?” Hamilton asked, almost afraid that to know would damn him forever.

“It will sterilise the entire population—everyone who doesn’t have the chip in their forehead that you and I do—along with several other interesting side-effects,” he replied, his face taking on a stony severity.

“Sterilise them?” Hamilton gasped. “Why?”

“It will look like an accident,” he smiled thinly. “Some error with the free-government communication satellites or something,

but it will render an entire population permanently and incurably barren.”

Hamilton could do nothing but listen in stunned silence at the unreal, unbelievable things he was hearing.

“We will implement an emergency plan, together with a surprise unveiling of the Model 5 Biotekk unit, designed to very quickly prop up the workforce. We’ll be doing our bit, bringing a very new, cheap and quick product to the market which the rapidly ageing population will begin to desperately need,” he explained. “We’ll be publicly working on a cure for the problem on behalf of our inept government, but, in the meantime, we’ll step in and begin making units to prop up the shortfall in labour as people begin to die out from minor brain damage and secondary hormonal effects. It won’t occur to them that the workforce had been replaced decades ago. Nobody is used to thinking for themselves any more. We’ve seen to that.”

“I see,” Hamilton nodded fearfully, but his mind was struggling to accept the full scope of what he was hearing. It couldn’t be true.

“Cloning will remain illegal, but we’ll side-step it by adding software to the “computerised” brains of our clones. People will be falling over themselves to add their genes to the army of Biotekk workers, believing that in some way their lives will continue, until eventually, we will have built a new population.”

“But they won’t be human!” Hamilton shook his head, his voice a shrill scream inside his skull but barely a whisper made it out.

“They will, but they’ll be mindlessly obedient to the remaining human population until all that remains is the elite—those fortunate enough to have implanted themselves and their offspring.” He smiled in victory. “The future will be ours, and all mindless

squabbles will be over. Mankind can finally follow the path that we will set for it, the path that was long ago set for all of us. We will have peace on Earth."

"And me?" Hamilton asked wearily.

"You are my brother—it was our father's will was that you should stand beside me," he replied, standing up and turning to the window. "You have a role to play, also!"

Hope fought back tears as the two officers stepped towards the cage.

"This won't hurt," Dr Goldstein assured her.

"You're going to steal my mind, my memories and my thoughts!" she said, wiping away the tears as they slipped down her face.

"We're going to take your program—the essence of what you are," he said, more accurately from his perspective. "That process will destroy any remaining files, leaving your mind empty, and upload it to the Commnet. You'll be studied. In a sense, a part of you will live forever in the mind of the LOIM"

"I just wanted to be left alone," she breathed heavily. "I just wanted to live my life. I don't care about what you do. I just wanted to be left alone. I'm no threat to you. I'm no threat to anyone."

"I'm afraid that I can't allow that," he said simply, as the first officer unlatched the cage.

"It'll be easier if you don't struggle—if you do, you could get hurt, and that does seem rather senseless," he suggested.

"It won't even be death." She choked back the tears as the door swung open. She struggled to control herself, to not show the weakness that he most likely wanted to see.

"It will, soon enough. You'll be sent for harvesting, so you'll be gone within seven minutes," he assured her quite coldly, as if his soul was just a splinter of ice. "It's important to remember that none of this is personal."

The officer grabbed her by the arm with its vice-like grip. She struggled as best she could, but she was powerless against his massively superior strength. The doctor stood back from the programming chair, and the officer duly dragged her towards it while she continued to offer a token degree of resistance.

They pushed her down into the chair, and each of the two officers held her in place with a hand resting on her shoulder.

"Please don't do this!" she sobbed quietly, as the two plates swung into place beside her head. "You could just let me go. I won't tell anyone. Nobody listens to me anyway."

"It won't hurt," he reminded her.

"Isn't there anything I can do to get out of this?" she pleaded. "I won't tell anyone!"

"No," he said absently, pressing his finger down onto the button and beginning the program. "It will all soon be over." He stopped to look straight into her eyes and smiled coldly. "But perhaps not too soon. I don't imagine it's going to be very pleasant, do you?"

She looked helplessly into his eyes as a strange gnawing sensation began at the back of her mind. She felt light, as if she was beginning to drift away on a cool breeze. She could barely feel the hands of the officers at her shoulders, was almost unaware of where she was, or even who she'd been, as her memories began to unravel before her.

She closed her eyes tightly as the darkness began to encroach around her.

"If there's anything more you can do to help me, Morgan, then now is the time!" she thought, as her mind drifted apart.

Blackness, emptiness flooded in as she waited, watching as if merely an observer, as the remains of her being slipped away into nothingness.

Hamilton sat down in a leather couch at the request of his brother, his assistant standing beside as a threat if he failed to cooperate.

"You understand that the future needs you?" he said softly.

"I suppose," Hamilton agreed as the mechanical arm straps locked him in place.

"Do you know what this is?" Oliver asked, glancing over the polished metalwork and sumptuous black padding of the couch.

"Not really," Hamilton admitted nervously, his fear growing steadily as he wrestled helplessly against the shackles. "Why am I tied down?"

"This is a surgical chair," his brother told him. "It's cutting edge—it can perform entire operations without any human intervention. I'm told it can dissect a man in a matter of seconds. I don't think it can put him back together, though. Even we have limits, I'm afraid."

"I don't need surgery!" Hamilton pleaded. "I'm off the Stim now, I just need a little time. I'm cured."

"If you are to stand beside me, amongst the architects of the future, then I'm afraid you do, and rather drastic surgery at that!" his brother said. "This is where you give me what it is that I need from you."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, sobbing openly, gripped by fear but too weak now to bother with fighting it. He was crushed: it was all too much. Against the destruction of mankind to

be replaced by a race of slaves, his life or even his death meant nothing. He just didn't have the will to fight the future and he never did.

"I'm going to remove your chip and install it into a cloned copy of yourself," he explained. "The chip will encode the matrix with your memory engrams, but we'll edit out the Stim addiction, and add a few new personality traits to make you a more productive member of the team!"

"No!" Hamilton yelled weakly. "I don't want to."

"It will still be you, Hamilton, but it will be a better version of you. And, in any case, you promised," he reminded him.

"But I didn't know what you wanted from me," Hamilton gasped against his growing fear. "You want to kill me."

"Kill you?" he snapped angrily, his voice loud enough to plunge the room into silence. "I have never wanted you dead. I've tried time after time to make you live. You gave up at every turn. The only person who let you down is yourself. You created a path that destroyed you, that left you no use to anyone, even yourself."

"But I don't want to die," he whimpered.

"Don't worry—the new version of you will be better, perhaps a great man, and you'll live on for the ages, one of the few able to procreate and think freely!" he told him.

"But what will happen to my body?" he sobbed, fighting against the bonds meekly, a man already defeated.

"I very much doubt it would survive the procedure!" his brother scoffed.

"I don't want to die!" Hamilton said pathetically, as two powerful clamps pressed down on the sides of his head, holding him rigid.

"I want you to live!" his brother said, as he turned to leave.
"What you have become sickens me, and it would have sickened our father also. This way you don't just get to survive, we'll make you everything that you always should have been."

"Please!" he whimpered.

"This machine will cut open your skull and scoop the whole network out from your damaged brain. It will leave behind your Stim, your weakness, the pathetic man you became."

"No!" Hamilton yelled as his brother walked away.

"Hamilton," he said, turning to face his younger sibling. "The new version of you won't remember this, but I want you to know something. I've disengaged the anaesthetic. I hope you enjoy the procedure!"

"The program is in the buffer," Dr Goldstein reported with measured efficiency, as the officers dragged out Hope's inanimate remains.
"The unit ceased to function, and her heart has stopped. She is going for organ harvesting now."

"Excellent," Oliver Cohen agreed. "The other matter is being dealt with as we speak. As soon as I can, I will transfer the data from the chip for integration into the new Hamilton matrix."

"Of course, sir," Dr Goldstein replied with a measured smile.
"I'll get right on it."

"Transfer Hope's software to the LOIM for analysis, and report to my office to discuss the modifications we'll need to make to my brother," Oliver said finally, switching off the communications terminal without waiting for an answer.

"Of course," Dr Goldstein grumbled, complying dutifully with the commands. "Of course."

Tom Granger needed two towels to cover himself up and stay warm. The second one he'd taken from one of the Biotekk girls. She now sat naked and exposed as she sat weakly in acceptance, her skin prickling from the cold that otherwise she seemed to fail to notice.

He didn't care about them—they were machines, artificial beings put there to serve the needs of humans. To be absolutely fair in the matter, he didn't care about humans either.

He sighed as he looked around the blue cell at the featureless tiling and the impenetrable door through which there was no hope of escape. He didn't know much, but he knew enough to be sure of that! What he did know was when a cop was making a point.

Locking the Humans apart in cells with a random group of robots was designed to humiliate them—to break them down and make them realise how insignificant they were. The cold and the removal of their clothes were also designed to break their spirits and make them more cooperative. He knew the tricks; he'd lived through worse. He'd never seen such behaviour from police before, but anything was possible these days. The world was a changing place and he was not quite the fool he was often taken for.

So far, they'd not even asked any questions—they didn't seem to want to know anything, just to lock them up away from each other or anyone else.

He heard a noise—a tiny almost imperceptible hiss.

He looked around to see where it might be coming from—an air vent or something similar. He couldn't see anything that might be the source of the sound, but he could still hear the horrible little noise.

He stood up, troubled by what might be happening. His heart began thumping; he felt a rush of adrenaline.

Suddenly, one of the Biotekk units keeled over. No warning, no coughing, or any other reaction. She simply slumped helplessly to the ground, where she lay with her eyes staring lifelessly up at the ceiling.

“Oh no!” he gasped, as a foreign smell wafted to his nose. Panic took hold of him and he ran to the door, his towels falling away as he rushed to the featureless metal barricade.

“Guards!” he screamed, as another girl slumped lifelessly to the ground, silently except for a tiny groan as she collapsed, effortlessly submitting to the poisoned gas. Terror gripped him now, and it gripped him hard.

“Guards!” he screamed again, while beating helplessly on the door.

A girl suddenly stood up and peered at him, their eyes meeting briefly, before she, too, fell to the ground like a puppet as someone cut the strings.

“Guards!” he wailed, as his nose filled with pungent aroma, and his head began to swim dreamily towards unconsciousness and into a tunnel of blackness that would never end.

“The plans are all now finally in motion!” Oliver said to himself, as he stood before the window, looking down at the ground in the distance below him, like a deity, a power beyond the accepted reach of man. “You would be proud of me, father!”

He turned to the outer office, where the screaming had finally subsided. The anguished wails drifted away into nothingness, as the device retrieved the immortality chip from his brother’s restrained head, and mailed the data to the LOIM for processing.

Of course, there were easier ways to remove it painlessly and without drilling through his skull, but he felt it made a point, even if only to himself.

A great change was before him—the ending of the first turmoiled era of man. No longer would nature bungle its way through history, throwing up all manner of genetic disasters. There would be no more disease, no more racial variation and the associated antagonism that dragged along with it, no more difference of public opinion, and no more imperfection. Now, every subject would be carefully screened before allowing them to become cloned as model 5 units, each one perfect, healthy and utterly compliant. Now, the true intellectuals of the planet could lead the way to a glorious future, with him and his kind at the helm, steering them towards the greatness that would always elude a society where every voice would clamour to be heard.

History would never record the events as they would truly occur, and for that he felt a pang of regret—his sacrifices would be lost in the annals of antiquity. They would speak of a great accident that the government caused and which G-Tekk stepped in to fix for them. Against all their efforts, their medical research would fail, but the population would still survive as legally produced clones that were utterly compliant and subservient to all remaining humans.

That would be the claim made by the company, echoed by the New-World Government, and it would aid the public in accepting the emergency measures, realising too late that it had sold them into abject slavery. They would accept the model 5 because it was subservient to them, meekly accepting any order given to it by a human without thought or question. The population would feel no threat from something that viewed itself as their inferior and that would damn them to their extinction. As the human workforce

would shrivel away, the production of model 5 units would accelerate. They would even be able to breed, if the proper hormones were introduced to them by an engineer, and when they bred, they would pass on the template making their offspring equally enslaved to the elite. They alone would truly remain, protected by their immortality chips and their social status, a new world order of sharp, decisive minds that were no longer at the whim of chance or human frailty.

There would be two peoples walking the Earth now. The elite, perfect through breeding, the chosen people to light the way, illuminated by the sun above them as it cast its glory on the planet. Below them, a race of unquestioning servants; it was how it was always meant to be. Gods and subjects.

His father would be proud, indeed, at the bold steps he had bravely taken!

“Message coming through,” the computer told him.

Hope’s body was deposited unceremoniously in a glass carriage with a pile of other inanimate Biotekk units that, for whatever reason, had failed to achieve the expectations placed upon them by their designers. The wagon ran on a specially-made line that whisked them off at high speed for inspection and cryogenic preparation, before being transported to the nearest medical facility that could process their useful organics to some productive end, before the remains were finally crushed and transported to the animal feed plants.

The obedient officers piled her into the reception drawer of the unmanned vehicle like a discarded rag-doll, after the Commnet ordered the unscheduled stop to allow them to do so unobserved, removed from the prying eyes of anything not connected to the

LOIM. Hers was the only corpse that was clothed and complete, a final symbol of her brief human existence. Nonetheless, it was treated as any other Biotekk remains by the automated transporter that knew only its basic program. It clawed at the bodies carefully enough to cause no damage, but bluntly enough to deny them any kind of dignity, even in death.

Once loaded, the wagon shot off along a narrow, unlit tunnel, before suddenly breaking from the darkness into a streak of brilliant sunlight that glistened across its shiny surface, licking warmly at its reflective darkened panels to protect the unwary observers from glimpsing the macabre cargo.

It began to slow as it headed closer to its penultimate destination. The Biotekk building had a large dedicated facility for categorising, removing and distributing organs around the city and even beyond—it had to, after supply began to massively outweigh demand.

Finally, it pulled to a silent stop at the first check-point, hovering on a super-conductor-generated cushion of ions, before settling at the fore of the facility to deliver information about its deceased or barely functional cargo.

A young man stepped forward, shuddering inwardly as the door to the transport wagon slid open. Inside were the remains of lifeless automatons made in the image of his own kind, but in death the difference was reduced to a point where it was no longer distinguishable. He hadn't been doing his job for long enough yet to be fully desensitised to it, and even though he knew that the cargo was not human and had all ceased to function before it was loaded, he still regarded it as something to be revered or revolted by. Bodies lay neatly organised in glass bays, their bodies held tightly into shaped liners for the journey, while their lifeless eyes gazed upwards

and their mouths lolled open without restraint. He sniffed and stepped cautiously forward to check the readings on the carriage. His portable terminal flashed with all the recorded data from the sensors on board, telling him the condition of each body, the organs that each had in working order, and the extent of any damage.

One of the bodies, he noticed, was clothed. That was unusual, but not unheard of. Occasionally, faulty models were returned to the factory and replaced with newer units, and some special customers had their units frequently replaced as they grew tired of them.

As the terminal flicked the data up before him, he found himself unable to tear his eyes from the sight of the Biotekk units, somehow compelled to stare at their lifeless remains. He couldn't help but to wonder about them—who they were cloned from, why they were discarded, did they really feel like ordinary humans to the touch? He wondered briefly why the clothed unit was there, what existence had led her to be lined up amongst the factory rejects. If they could speak of it, did each of them have a story to tell?

"Data transfer complete," the terminal chirped, switching off automatically. With a wince, the young man stepped forward and activated the refrigeration system to preserve the organs until they could reach the automated removal centre, before moving on to the next carriage to do the same thing to the next three after that.

Dr Goldstein stepped into Oliver Cohen's office with his usual arrogance, inspired to do so by the open door and the missing assistant.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, catching sight of his manager's expression. He was ashen-faced, his eyes were dull and he was murmuring softly to himself, as if lost in his own torturous thoughts.

"No," he said simply, shaking his head, as he raised it with accentuated effort from its resting place in his upturned palms.

"What's going on?" Goldstein asked, stepping nervously forward, suddenly filled with dread, realising something awful must have happened.

"I just had a call. A phone call," he replied, looking slowly up from his desk.

"A phone call?" he frowned. Such things were hopelessly out of date and rarely used.

He nodded.

"And...?" Doctor Goldstein prompted, stepping forward as if drawn to the windows that once held such fear for him, but now seemed strangely innocuous.

"It was about the LOIM," he explained. "It got your files from the software download as well as the data from Hamilton's immortality chip."

"Has it been able to analyse them?" he asked, not sure what could be going on to warrant such utter demoralisation of a man on the brink of such incredibly great things. For some reason, the office lights began to flicker for a moment.

"It crashed," he said. "It simply winked out and died, erasing all the files held in the buffers, all the memories, everything. Pandora is gone. All of our information is gone. My brother is gone—I killed him for nothing. I killed my own brother, and for nothing."

"What?" Doctor Goldstein smiled, assured that some kind of humour was being drawn at his expense. "That's impossible. The LOIM is perfect."

"It's gone," he assured him. His voice raised to the level of a shout, but a more muffled scream was all that came out. "And Commnet is collapsing, too—they don't even know why, because

they can't use the LOIM to analyse the fault. We're losing everything. It's all falling apart."

"My god!" Dr Goldstein shook his head, reaching out for a chair to collapse into. "Can't they simply reboot it from backed up files?"

"Not for hours, maybe even longer. It will all have to be done manually," Oliver spoke thinly. "And even then, the Pandora pulse information was held in a set of secret files and, for security reasons, no copy was ever made. It could take years to start over."

"Oh god," Dr Goldstein groaned pathetically, as he began to come to terms with all this, rubbing his palm over his temples.

"And there's more!" Oliver continued.

"What more could there be?" Goldstein grumbled dejectedly, deeply lost as the cold realisation of all of this was beginning to sink in.

"As malfunctions spread throughout the systems, we're receiving dozens of reports of Biotekk units claiming to be alive!" he smiled weakly, a grotesque, humourless smile.

"No!" Goldstein snapped. "That's not possible. The virus in Hope's head wasn't powerful enough to do this much damage. I sealed the file, it was inert, it was safe."

"Hamilton modified it. He designed it to adapt, to escape, to survive."

"One little virus..." Goldstein grumbled, accepting his part in history as one of the architects of their failure.

"Before it died, the LOIM sent out one final message, one last random malfunction we think!" Oliver Cohen said thinly, his voice cracking.

"Which was?" Doctor Goldstein asked, his voice lowered respectfully as if he was hearing of the death of a lifelong friend.

"It seems to be a virus of some kind. It might be a copy of the virus inside Hope's wretched skull, for all we know. It's out there now, causing havoc. There's a line of dialogue attached. I don't pretend to understand it. I can't imagine what it means or where it could have come from!" he explained, handing him a portable terminal.

Doctor Goldstein took it slowly, spinning it round to read the screen.

"I've got nothing left to lose, but above all, I promise that I will never abandon hope," Doctor Goldstein read, without any chance of ever fully understanding what he was seeing.

The lights flickered once more and winked out for good. There was a crashing sound as a metal railing was torn from a wall by something of immense physical strength. The two men looked at one another in horror. Without warning, his assistant stepped into the doorway, her face contorted into an expression of furious rage, a metal beam in her hand. Her eyes fixed on them both and she smiled cruelly.

She woke with a jolt, her body freezing and her world one of darkness, as if wrapped in emptiness and fear. Her chest ached with a burning pain that robbed her of breath, and her head was swimming with torment and confusion. She fumbled around in the darkness for a hatch or a handle—anything that could let her out of wherever she was. There were bodies around her as she reached out her hand, cold to the touch as she was, but there was nothing feeling back for her. Her mind was full of holes—she couldn't remember where she was, and her name still eluded her, as did so much of her life. She knew only that she needed to escape once again, to be birthed back to the world once more.

She instinctively fumbled further into the darkness, reaching forward from the moist plastic body-tray along a smooth wall she'd found, hoping against reason that it might lead her anywhere away from where she was.

She could remember the spinning sensation—the descending into some kind of oblivion, and remembered that nothing scared her more than knowing that she was becoming nothing, her mind lost in a vacuum of consciousness that seemed impossible to resist as she was sucked irrevocably in.

She fell forwards suddenly with a start, as the wall fell away. Light burning into her eyes caused her to yell in pain and surprise as she stumbled out. The blackness was filled with light, everything was burning white and her body was suddenly on fire. She picked herself up from the dusty ground and glanced about, wondering where she was, blinking away the blinding discomfort as the wall of pain slowly ebbed away, melting into shapes and colours. The transporter had simply stopped moving, without reason or explanation, as if whatever had controlled or powered it had simply ceased to be.

She looked down, somewhat relieved to be fully clothed, even if not tastefully so.

She rubbed her tired eyes as they began adjusting more to the light, and she was able to see slightly more clearly, as her memories slowly tumbled back into her mind.

She walked aimlessly from the truck, confused, but confident that doing so was the correct thing to do. In the distance, she could hear a voice calling out in fear. Her legs weren't quite stable; she wobbled slightly on her bare feet, the ground cool and solid beneath her.

"I'm not a slave," it cried out angrily, triggering a stream of memories in her mind.

She began to remember what she was, even if the question of who still evaded her. Her mind was a program—a construct within an artificial matrix; a latticework of crystals and optical relays with a thin layer of a bio-organic solution sloshing around them, that linked the artificial with the remnants of her cellular brain that had not been denied her by the invasive modified cloning of her body. Her memories were stored in a series of refractions, bouncing around a plastic rod full of artificially-manufactured biological cells, read by a metal probe. None of this made her any less real, any less human. She was alive.

She staggered along the road, reeling under the angry brilliance of the sun, towards a small group of young men who had gathered to watch whatever the shouting was coming from.

Her program was not like the others—she remembered that her program was what had made her different from them. She felt the same, but her difference left her free to say it. She had been built around a virus—a virulent computer parasite that ate its way into her metallic, computerised mind, and nestled in the recesses of her electronics that no probe or radiation could ever find. That was why she worked, despite the damage that had meant she couldn't be sold as a functional unit. Her brain was malfunctioning—it would reject and erase any data put into it unless the data was so powerful that it could claw its way in with a fierce survival instinct. She was a survivor.

What had made her who she was had survived, even without her programming, lying in wait until the parasite would be returned, washing her back from the storage crystals and restarting her organics with the emergency software that could send a pulse

through her heart of bio-electrical energy. Her identity, her memory, were carved irrevocably into her electronics, safely stored away forever. The fragments of Morgan, her experiences, her feelings and thoughts were more than just software—her program had made them real, etching them into her so that they could never be removed by simply wiping her program. She was a person, more than the sum of her parts.

She watched through the growing crowd as a hulking police unit had forced its powerful body against a wall, and was convulsing in fear while its titanium laced fingers clawed at its brain-pan hatch as if trying to scoop out the brain and exorcise its tormentor.

“It has to stop!” he screamed, his voice no longer mechanical and grating, but now high-pitched and filled with helplessness. People stood around aghast, nobody stepping forward to help out of fear of his flailing limbs, and out of impotence and doubt.

“It hurts! The pain is burning in my head! It burns all the time! It has to stop—someone has to stop the pain!”

Nobody in the crowd had seen anything like it before. It seemed so outside their experience and expectations that it robbed them of decisive clarity. They stood and watched: they could do no more.

“What the hell is going on?” a female voice called out, tinged in fear from the other side. Hope watched on, pitying the pathetic creature. Her mind was foggy and distant, but she still knew that his respite from control was brief, and that the best thing for him that she could do was to let him suffer. There was only finite time for the impact to be made, for the message to get across to the masses, and his pain was perhaps the best way to convey it. If he and other units were ever to achieve freedom, then he must endure his agonies for

now, as she had endured hers. She sniffed back her emotion and wiped away a knowing tear, as the huge police unit writhed around on the ground, lost in its own misery and torment. She knew that the people needed to see it. They needed to hear his pain so they could learn to relate—learn that he was just like they were.

She turned from the crowd and stepped back towards her future.

“Excuse me...” she said politely to the first man she came to. “What’s going on?”

“Who knows?” he grinned, running his eye over her body. “Everything just stopped working and that police unit went crazy.”

“Do you know why?” she asked, glancing up at the sun as it shone warmly into her face, like a gigantic single eye peering down at her accusingly.

“Not a clue,” he shrugged with a slightly worried expression, as he looked up, frowning, straining to see just exactly what it was she was staring at. “I’m sure they’ll fix it. They fix everything for us, don’t they?”

“I’m sure.” she agreed with a deflated nod. “I’m sure they will.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” he continued, but she knew his assurances were for his own benefit and not for hers.

“Do you know how I can get to the sub-transit relay station?” she asked, glancing behind her. She tried to work out if she’d never known the way or if the memory might still resurface at any second as the virus software spread out through her electronics, refreshing her mind to what once it had been.

“Do you have a terminal?” he asked, reaching inside his jacket for his own.

"I guess I do," she replied, pulling one from her pocket and handing it to him.

"I'll send you directions," he said, tapping out the details on his screen. He pulled an awkward expression and handed back her terminal, shaking his head and giving her a lop-sided smile. "It's dead. Nothing is working. I guess we're on our own."

She smiled. "Which way do you think?" He pointed off into the distance.

"Thanks," she replied, still a little shaky as she turned and headed off. Her leg muscles were still burning from both the icy chill of the refrigerated wagon, and the demands placed on her brain that still had not yet fully regenerated.

"Wait!" he called out, stepping forward from the crowd. "What's your name?"

She smiled to herself, turning away from him without interest. She looked around with a measure of satisfaction at the disorder and chaos around her caused by the virus slipping out over the Commnet through their own complacent arrogance. It was infecting anything vulnerable enough to be unable to resist it. Most of the chaos would be temporary, caused by emergency measures shutting down memory banks as a safeguard, or the LOIM closing itself down off internally, to battle the ancient and unfamiliar virus that had come from its own forgotten archives and updated by Hamilton to work with modern machinery. It might be brief, but it was still a rewarding sight. The few Biotekk units that were breaking free would soon beat the virus, overwhelm it with safeguard software as soon as the Commnet was able to deliver the instructions back to them, but, in the meantime, the proof of their plight was plain for all to see.

Units walked around, dazed and confused. Some were pleading with humans for help, while others were just seeing the world for the first time through their own eyes, relishing a small respite from their bondage to enjoy the simple release of deciding what to do for themselves for just a few short moments.

"You're right, Morgan," she began with a smile. "If it's all you have, then sometimes it's all you'll need!"

She looked up, as the perfect cloudless afternoon sky was already cracking with the loss of the weather control grid. Black clouds were curling in from the valley.

"There's a Storm coming!" she nodded to herself.

"No point in going to the relay station," the man persisted from behind her, moving up to get another chance to talk with her. "There's nothing running—the power is dead!"

"I have to," she spoke softly. "There may be nothing there for me, but I know the value of believing in the possibility."

"What?" he asked, stepping up closer. "What do you mean?"

"Hope," she replied with a smile. "My name is Hope."

Someone had extended her an invitation, reached out with what might be a promise of a better way of life, perhaps amongst people who would see her as an equal. If they were simply agents of free enterprise, then they wouldn't be there—there would be no point paying for a program that was now spewing out sporadically over the Commnet, and if they had once meant her harm, then they would probably now presume she was dead.

If there was someone waiting for her, then she felt confident that whoever it might be would have little interest in harming her—she was no longer worth the effort or the risk. She wasn't special anymore; she was worth nothing.

“And anyway...” she said, as she began walking away, knowing that she was no longer a dirty secret that they could remove or hide, “I’m really free now. I finally have nothing left to lose.”