

CYBERIZATION

CHAPTER 8

UNDERCITY

For two grueling days, that infernal apple mocked me. I'd taken a break from the simulation only once, purely to sleep; afterward, I was immediately back at it. During this time, it struck me that I hadn't eaten at all. It prompted the question, "What do I even eat, and how?" I set that thought aside for the moment. Instead, I unleashed my recently mastered force punch, propelling the apple high into the sky, hoping it might return within arm's reach. Predictably, it didn't. And, as always, my platform vanished, signaling yet another reset of that persistent apple.

Lifting my face from the floor, I drew in a deep breath and shouted, "Viri! Are you there?!"

I wasn't certain if she could interact with me within this simulation, but to my surprise, Viri began to materialize. This time, however, she appeared even more holographic than before. She was both blue and translucent, and notably, almost naked. But not entirely—she seemed to be adorned with black tape arranged in intricate line patterns across her body. The design felt familiar, yet I couldn't quite place it.

"How can I be of assistance?" she responded in a monotone voice. However, I might have been imagining it, but I thought I detected a twinkle in her eye—as if she was privy to some joke that I was oblivious to.

"Umm, yeah..." I said, my head tilting slightly as I took in her appearance. "Anyway, how do I get that stupid apple?" I asked, pointing at the infuriating fruit. Finally, swallowing my pride, I had resorted to seeking assistance.

"Data logs indicate you've been applying external force to the object," she responded as if that explanation made perfect sense.

And me? I'm just thinking, "*Say what now?*" "In plain English, please," I added.

"Try pulling at it," she stated. Though I might've been reading too much into it, I thought I detected a hint of disappointment in her tone.

"Pulling?" I mumbled to myself. "Just like a space wizard," I gasped, thrusting my hand toward the apple. Okay, let's be clear—I was still lying face-down on the floor, so don't go imagining some epic scene with a badass protagonist. Erase that image. Instead, picture a hot mess who's spent two days repeatedly faceplanting. While these two floating platforms kept resetting along with my injuries, my hair didn't get the same luxury. So, there I was, a frazzled woman sprawled on the ground, desperately reaching for an apple that's absurdly far away. Yup, I looked completely insane—and desperate!

Grinning (and making sure there was no drool), I whispered, “Do or do not. There is no try.” Channeling what I assumed to be some crazy intuitive programming that was wired into my brain, I visualized not hitting, smashing, pushing, or swatting the apple—rather, I envisioned pulling it toward me. Sure enough! The apple slowly glided in my direction. Only, I had one exasperating thought dominating my mind: “*Why didn’t I think of this?*” My conclusion, I’m suffering from some serious brain damage.

//: *FIRST TASK. COMPLETE.*

//: *COMBAT-TRAINING SIMULATION INITIALIZED.*

//: *SECOND TASK.*

//: *PUSH THE APPLE.*

The apple vanished from my grasp, but to my surprise (and immense relief), my platform stayed intact. However, I couldn’t resist shooting a prolonged, glare at the translucent AI that had “strongly hinted” the solution to my last challenge. Long before now, I’d had it with that freakin’ apple. Acting on impulse, I tried to swat it using my newfound gravity powers while standing up, and, of course, I crushed the darn thing. Predictably, that didn’t count as pushing. And there went my platform.

After landing in a manner that should’ve snapped my neck, I let out a frustrated scream. Halfway between picking myself up and being slouched over, I swatted at the apple as if I were backhanding an insistent flying pest. That simple motion sent the apple tumbling off its stand, rolling across the platform.

//: *SECOND TASK. COMPLETE.*

//: *COMBAT-TRAINING SIMULATION INITIALIZED.*

//: *THIRD TASK.*

//: *CRUSH THE APPLE.*

With a sigh, I easily crushed it.

//: *THIRD TASK. COMPLETE.*

//: *NEXT STAGE.*

The platform, bearing that godawful apple, slowly descended out of sight, much to my relief. But soon after, another platform appeared, almost half a football field away with nothing in between. “This doesn’t look good,” I groaned.

//: *FORTH TASK.*

//: *COMBAT-TRAINING SIMULATION INITIALIZED.*

//: *LAND ON THE PLATFORM.*

“Shit!”

After a few hours of “successfully” landing on nothing, I finally felt a rumble in my stomach. My vision snapped out of the simulation, returning me to the real world where I was comfortably nestled in my chair. Oddly, my stomach ached—a strange sensation, given that I wasn’t even sure what internal organs I possessed.

“Hey Viri! What is there for me to eat?” I called out into the empty space.

“Substance cubes are in your BioPreserver,” Viri responded, without bothering to materialize. I was torn between finding her invisible response annoying or surprisingly pleasant.

“BioPreserver? You mean like a fridge?” I surveyed my sad little apartment. It wasn’t too shabby when the holographic environment was active, but I hadn’t asked Viri to reactivate it since she’d showcased that enchanted forest scene. Right now, the dominant feature was the upright coffin—err, charging bed. The more I looked at it, the more I sided with Silica’s view on it. I vowed to steer clear unless I absolutely needed a recharge.

“Fridge? Oh, you mean a refrigerator. That term isn’t widely used anymore,” Viri’s voice echoed from no discernible source.

A soft click drew my attention, and I spotted a section of the wall revealing itself—about the size of a personal safe. Cold mist tumbled out, pooling onto the floor, reminiscent of dry ice effects. I approached and realized the compartment was perfectly chest-high. Pulling the door further open, I was greeted by a small food pyramid that seemed to be made from what resembled brown sugar cubes.

“Is that seriously all there is to eat?” I asked with a grimace.

“Without an organic body and organs, you only need sustenance for your brain,” she replied. “A single cube provides all the necessary minerals, proteins, and enzymes your brain requires for three days,” Viri elaborated.

“No organs? Then why does it feel like my stomach’s twisting with hunger?”

“Sensory implants stimulate that part of your brain to signal when you should consume sustenance, emulating the most natural sensation possible. The feeling in your abdomen offers a sense of familiarity; analyses have indicated that this contributes positively to a subject’s mental well-being.”

I narrowed my eyes at her explanation, processing her words. “So, it’s all just in my head,” I mused, mostly talking to myself.

“That is correct,” Viri affirmed.

Sighing, I asked, “So, I only need to eat one of these cubes?”

“That is correct.”

“And do I even have a stomach to process them?”

“No, the digestion occurs at the back of your throat,” Viri explained, leaving me flabbergasted.

“The back of my...” I paused, my expression one of incredulity, “throat?”

“Yes. Given your design as an advanced military-grade infiltration model, you don’t possess an organic digestive system in your abdominal area. However, the nanites in your frame can shift to mimic the appearance of digestion. Still, any organic material you ingest will need to be expelled later.”

“So, I can mimic eating regular food, but I’ll have to crap it out later,” I mused aloud. “Can I taste it?”

“Negative. Analysis indicates that humans generally prefer not to taste the expelling process,” Viri responded. “However, that feature can be added if you desire.”

“No, no!” I interjected. “That wasn’t what I was getting at.” Taking a breath, I clarified, “Can I still taste food when I eat it?”

“Yes, tastebuds are integrated into all cybernetic models. They serve multiple purposes, from mental well-being to strategic analysis,” Viri elaborated.

Offering a casual shrug, I popped a cube into my mouth and was taken aback. It tasted remarkably like a Turkish Delight. Closing the fridge, or BioPreserver, I faced a choice: dive back into the simulation or head out and explore? With a grin, I declared, “Time to explore!”

Sated from the tiny cube, I tossed a casual farewell wave to my apartment—or rather, to Viri, even though she wasn’t visible. With that, I stepped out of my shit hole and into the thrumming megastructure. As my door zipped shut, a hunched figure ambled by, hands shoved deep into his pockets, mumbling what sounded like curses. His full robotic design bore a resemblance to mine, making me wonder if he was one of the other two Silica had spoken of... probably Orin, if I’m not mistaken. Though, I was certain none of the others had military-grade rigs—lucky me. However, his demeanor screamed “leave me the fuck alone”, so I did. Yet, I couldn’t ignore the envy that flared up when I noticed the shimmering fiber optic glow within his spiky green hair.

//: SUBJECT’S FAÇADE RENDERING COMPLETE.

I blinked, startled. “What?”

Orin, I’m certain of it, turned to glare at me. “I wasn’t fucking talking to you.” With a huff and a growl, he moved on, never straightening from his hunched posture, hands still snug in his pockets.

Shaking off that awkward encounter, I pushed forward. My real interest was the undercity I’d glimpsed during my flyover before getting modded. It might be a risky venture, but curiosity had its grip on me. With some practice in gravity manipulation under my belt, I felt prepared enough. The concept was bizarre, yet it seemed to share principles with the tech behind flying cars and spaceships. Intriguingly, it even produced a similar purring sound whenever I used it.

Stepping into the elevator, I hesitated over the touch screen buttons. They might have been projections, but I couldn’t be sure, a lot of the holograms were just too realistic while others were

totally obvious. Nevertheless, I slid my finger past the zero, hoping these negatives would lead me to the undercity and not just underground. When I reached negative seventy at the bottom, I pressed it.

I gazed out the elevator window, watching floor after floor ascend as I plunged deeper. The inner courtyard level zipped by like all the others, plunging me into a brief span of darkness that seemed to stretch for two floors. Then, a sight unveiled before me that rendered me speechless: an expansive dark city sprawled around the colossal support structures of the megastructures, city lights and advertisements everywhere. The lower portions of these mega buildings were pyramid-esque, with supports branching out from their corners in an ‘X’ pattern. But what truly captivated me were the myriad structures filling every conceivable gap between these massive buildings.

The elevator came to a stop, and as I stepped out, my feet landed in a puddle. Above, the city was blanketed in an apocalyptic nuclear winter, but down here, rain prevailed. The cold sensation of water between my toes wouldn’t have been bothersome if not for the reminder that my attire was merely another hologram among the many. This meant I was, in truth, still naked. Yet, given my cybernetic android rig, I didn’t much care. That or perhaps my emotional indifference had resurfaced—or, more accurately, my negatively-tinted emotional indifference. A distinction worth making.

As I strolled along, my head swiveled in every direction like an awe-struck tourist. The sheer number of cables haphazardly strewn everywhere caught me off guard, not sparing even the pathways. Speaking of which, there seemed to be a lack of broad roads. It was as if this entire city was designed solely for foot traffic—which it clearly wasn’t—my guess, it must’ve been piecemealed together with no planning or foresight whatsoever. Funny thing, I loved it!

That’s when a sign caught my eye, making it sparkle with interest. In retro neon, it flashed “Lockhart’s Bar & Grill”. Though I conveniently overlooked the “Grill” segment, the “Bar” part beckoned, suggesting I was due for a drink. Grinning, I made my way into Lockhart’s. Though, a terrifying thought crossed my brain, “*Can I even get drunk?*”