

CYBERIZATION

CHAPTER 10

THE ENCLAVE

After tossing back a few more drinks that, annoyingly, didn't do squat, besides taste, I had a weird thought. When I... y'know... flushed 'em out, would my drinks still be as pristine as when they went down? I mean, it's not like I have a real stomach and all. Gross ponderings aside, I gave Britt a raised eyebrow when she told me that my tab had already been deducted. Wasn't really clued in on how the whole future digital wallet shindig worked, which got me paranoid about some hacker dude swiping my creds. And man, I was still in the dark about my full monthly stipend. "*I should really ask Viri about that,*" I mused to myself. Giving the ol' noggin a mental shake and tossing a casual wave to Britt, I made my exit.

Naturally, I couldn't bail without tossing a nod to Buster on my way out. As soon as that big lug caught sight of me, his grumpy face melted away. Oh, it was clear as day the big guy already had a thing for me. But man, those kinda desires? Just not on my radar. At all. Now, the bartender, on the other hand, might be another story. But given my current lack of... proper upgrades, intimacy wasn't on the cards anytime soon. Also, she was just... too perfect.

Anyway, as I ventured back onto the narrow streets of the city—or "Undercity Phoenix," according to some graffiti I'd just spotted—I felt an urge to explore. What struck me most was the absence of main roads; every path felt like a back alley. Yet, the farther I strayed from the elevator that brought me down here, the more people I saw navigating these dim, rain-soaked alleys. And, just to set the record straight, there were cars—loads of them. Only thing? They were zipping around in the air overhead, leaving the ground level to us pedestrians. Still, with all the tangled wiring, thick cables, tubes, and walkways crisscrossing every which way, it was a mystery how those flying rides managed to avoid collisions.

Venturing further into Undercity Phoenix, I was somewhat taken aback by the noticeable decrease in holographic advertisements. True, they were abundant, particularly if one cast their gaze upward, but they were less pervasive compared to the over-saturation within the megastructure. The denizens of this place? There was a palpable, gritty undertone to them, as if life in these alleyways had imparted a certain ruggedness.

Now, on the fashion front: hooded ponchos seemed to be the in-thing. But oh boy, what folks chose to wear beneath? That was where things got unpredictable. I passed by a trio of women sporting transparent plastic ponchos complemented by luminous heels and... well, let's just say minimalist undergarments. Then there was this group that seemed prepped for a swanky yet underground BDSM affair—clad in provocative black attire, intricately laced with straps, buckles, and yes, the ever-present luminescent touches. Some even sported outfits that were basically wearable cinemas, playing everything from fireworks to vintage flicks.

Amidst this stylistic maelstrom, the fusion of flesh and technology in the populace was quite evident. Those retaining a semblance of humanity? They perhaps had a twenty percent biological-to-cybernetic ratio, making them an anomaly in this sea of tech. Don't get me wrong, a good number sported that uber-human look, but one gaze and bam! It was pristine perfection. Think Britt. Honestly, it felt like they were tapping into some next-gen Barbie android energy.

Still, the majority seemed to have opted for a predominantly robotic existence, mirroring my own transition. But my rig model? It was as if I'd just rolled off a high-end assembly line. Well, that's how I like to think of it, but if I remembered right, Robo-Punk made some comment the first time I saw him about me looking retro or something. How did he say it? "Yo, ain't seen a rig like yours in forever. They still churnin' those out at the tech-mills?" I tried to mimic his voice, but judging by the few side-eyes I caught, I might've missed the mark. Just a tad. Either that, or I appeared like a glitching droid having a chat with itself.

I halt mid-step as a dramatic jingle rings out, soon replaced by this ethereal, translucent news anchor hologram that pushes all the other ads and projections to the background. Around me, the entire alley—people from all walks—freeze, turning their attention to the broadcast. Yep, this has got to be big.

"Good evening. Breaking news coming in!" The anchor's poised demeanor catches immediate attention. *"The Enclave has just announced plans to send two of its ambassadors to the Unified Human Alliance in three months, on the anniversary of our discovery of FTL. Anticipating this move, concerns are rising as predictions of mass protests loom large. However, sources within the UHA report on proactive strategies to prevent such disruptions."*

The hologram shifts to show images of past protests. *"Despite precautions being taken, widespread dissent is expected. The central issue? The Enclave ambassadors are anticipated to amplify their call for the end of human cyberization and end all dependence on artificial intelligence. This becomes particularly significant in the backdrop of humanity's desire to earn a seat at the table of the galactic community – a condition set by the Enclave."*

As the scene transitions, a shimmering image of a distant star system emerges. *"Adding another layer of intrigue to this developing story, murmurs suggest the Enclave may extend an olive branch in the form of a star system offered to humanity. But not everyone's buying it. Skeptics argue that our symbiotic relationship with AI and cybernetics is so deeply woven into the fabric of human society that relinquishing it might lead to catastrophic consequences."*

The anchor's intense gaze feels almost personal, as if he's connecting with each viewer. *"Moreover, there's a looming concern: as our resources within the Sol system dwindle, many fear that the clamor for war against the Enclave is intensifying."*

Lastly, as the news anchor recedes into the digital abyss, he leaves a haunting query in his wake: *"With the scales tipping, where will humanity find its footing?"*

The atmosphere in the alley? Charged, with people swearing and throwing around slurs left and right. And me? I felt like I'd just landed on a different planet. "Enclave?" I echoed, brows furrowing in confusion.

A cyborg, who looked like Mr. Miyagi if he'd been given the tech treatment, scoffed. His goatee, dramatically dropping way past what could be considered normal, fluttered as he said, "You been living under a rock or something for the last eight hundred years?"

"Nope, more like an iceberg," I quipped with a smirk.

He raised an eyebrow, the circuits in his irises flashing briefly. "Ah, a ward of CryoCyber Solutions, then?"

"Wouldn't exactly call myself their 'ward', but yeah, they're the ones who had my brain on deep freeze," I said, nodding to the old man.

"Ah, the 'Enclave' refers to the grand assembly of the extraterrestrials. Alas, we humans stand apart, our profound dependence on technology bars us from joining the galactic fold," he articulated, his voice suddenly seeming rich with the timbre of wisdom—or perhaps dementia.

"Why can't we drop our dependence on technology?"

"Ah, now you're touching an old nerve," he began, his cybernetic eyes glinting with a mix of ancient and possibly senile wisdom. "Imagine a pot, overflowing with water. That's us humans, overflowing our little blue planet. To make sure the water doesn't spill—metaphorically, of course—we've got a few choices: either alter ourselves with tech, genetically alter ourselves, or pour some water into new pots among the stars. But the Enclave? They're like gardeners who say, 'No watering plants not in your yard.' They've got a 'Prime Directive' against us spreading out, especially to gardens with their own flowers," the Mr. Miyagi-like cyborg mused, leaving me to untangle his whimsically wise words.

"Why the need to modify ourselves?"

"Consider this: there's just not enough organic stuff in our solar system to feed all of us. Plus, while some of those aliens might be pint-sized, they think circles around us. Then there's the bunch that's not just brainy but packs a punch too. Our shot at leveling the field? Modification. With a touch of AI and cyber-augmentation, we cannot just match but outdo them. Makes them jittery, to be honest," he remarked, his voice tinged with a hint of pride. "As for going the genetic route, same hiccup – we can tweak ourselves all we want, but if we ditch the tech, there's still the problem of feeding the ever-growing human crowd. It takes a lot less to feed a brain than it does an entire human body."

"Huh, I guess that makes sense," I mumbled, my fingers brushing my cheek in thought. "So, our choices are lean into the whole cyberization thing and keep thriving or drop it to hang with the Enclave elite – but that could also leave us vulnerable, possibly staring down the extinction barrel. Yet, if we want to branch out beyond our dying solar system, we've gotta play by their rules."

"Or," the elder cyborg's tone grew more somber, "we could choose the path of war. We've been gearing up for it ever since the Enclave stopped us from expanding out into the stars," he confessed, a simmering resentment evident in his words.

With that hefty tidbit dropped, I headed home, most of the undercity seeming to be going into full riot mode after the news. Regardless, my mind was swirling in a maze of thoughts. Honestly, my jaunt through the undercity was half curiosity and the other part avoiding Viri. I had a nagging feeling she had the lowdown on my alleged first mark, and facing up to that reality? Not on my to-do list just yet. Deep down, I was convinced I wasn't the killer type.