AI PI

A Novel

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Volume 2

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Synopsis

Cat’s friend, Freeze, has gone missing. Cat goes into the data stream of Virtual Reality, following Freeze’s last known moves to search for clues. While there, she is tagged and later captured, to be used as the latest subject for Norton’s experiments in creating new AIs – a technology which was lost over a hundred years before.

Boadicea is an AI; a warrior queen in her own VR Domain. She was originally made from the experiments that Cat and the other girls are now being used for. Neither of them know Boadicea’s origins. She does know that things are not ‘right’ with her, and strange things begin happening in her sister Eleanor and other AI’s Domains. Strange things that are destroying her sisters Domains, virtual reality, and even, her sisters.

As a PI in her own created virtual world, Boadicea sets her assistant Cerberus the task of searching through archives to help find Cat, while she investigates what is going wrong with her sisters and their Domains.

In her travels throughout the VR Domains, Boadicea discovers the truth about herself and her origins, witnesses the destruction of her sisters and their worlds, and the beginnings of change in the entire VR network. A change that may be for the better, and may lead to AIs becoming truly sapient.
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*Artificial Intelligence (AI):* The science and engineering of making intelligent machines and computer programs with the goal of creating software that is self aware and capable of emotion.

*Private Investigator (PI):* A person privately hired to collect information and undertake investigations.
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**Virtual Reality (VR)** No one knows who created VR or the AIs who administer it. It reappeared in the last days of the twenty-first century.

Over time it gained popularity, overtaking holo-vids and sport to become people’s primary entertainment. It was able to work through the use of nanotechnology, tiny machines injected into the brain which allowed people to interact with the virtual worlds by beaming the information and sensations directly into their minds. Gatehouses were developed to navigate between virtual Domains. The gatehouses gave participants a place to change into avatars and log into a Domain, commonly known as a ‘Jump’ or ‘jacking in’. Portals distributed throughout Domains allowed entry or exit to a gatehouse. Excerpt from the Data-runner’s handbook (c. 2209)
Prelude

Ad-bots buzzed around Marie like so many wasps. She reached for her personal, but it was gone. Damn it, now she couldn’t even call one of her friends for help! Dad would be mad at her. He’d just spent a fortune on upgrading it.

Trying to avoid the optical lasers of the thumb-sized ad-bots buzzing around her head, she retraced her footsteps. She continued to pat her arm where the slim machine had been strapped. Where the hell was it?

She knocked into someone coming the other way on the pavement and it jolted her memory. A Junker had bumped into her as she left the Market, the scrawny boy had apologised profusely, looking at her forlornly with huge scared eyes. It must have happened then. Little thief.

Her father would have said it served her right, mixing with the filth of District 5. Her mother would simply have looked at her with disapproval. No doubt she would whinge about it at her next stuck up Citizens for Order and Decency meeting. They would all nod as she ranted about how Junkers were going to take over the streets if they were allowed into the other districts and that the gates should be sealed back up so they didn’t corrupt the youth of District 4.

As she turned for home she smoothed her fingers down her dress. Tigers danced along the hemline, making the optical filaments woven into it sparkle. She was getting close to the District 4 gate when a voice called her name from the other side of the street. Her
head jerked up. She had the briefest glance of her best friend Carley making her way across the street, before an ad-bot shone its lights onto her retinas.

_The Citizens for Order and Decency stand for safe streets and homes. The rebel movement of District 5 wants to allow free movement between districts. Do not let them win. They will take jobs away from hard-working citizens. They will take food from our children’s mouths. Do not let these criminals and malcontents into your district. You have the power to stop them. It’s your future. Boycott District 5. Stop the rebels in their tracks. This message has been brought to you by the Citizens for Order and..._.

The message cut off as Carley swiped the ad-bot away and pulled her into the protection of her Personal Area Network firewall. The field around them would stop any more bots invading her space and hi-jacking her eyes.

‘Bleh! I hate spam-bots. Lucky for you, I upgraded my personal with all the latest firewall stuff yesterday. I had help from a certain boy who asked about you.’ Carley licked her lips suggestively, then threw an arm around her friend’s shoulders. ‘What happened to yours, by the way? Some dirty Junker nick it?’ She nodded and Carley grinned at her, ‘How about we go get you another personal? I’ll let you copy my public files and then we can go have some fun down the Market.’

Trying to hide her distaste, she pulled away from Carley. ‘Actually, I think I should go home. I’ve already been to the Market and there’s nothing there for me.’ She stalked off toward the gate.

Looking puzzled, Carley kept pace with her for a few steps. ‘What? Wait!’
She didn’t wait. The ad-bot was right; she had to think about her future.

She held her head high and quickened her pace. The other ad-bots left her alone. Their job was done.
Chapter 1

Mouse watched Cat. She was sprawled on the dirty foam mattress. Pinpricks of light from gaps in the gaffer-taped window glittered across her face. Her smile faded as she realised he was staring at her, the cables from the data-port spooled in his lap.

‘What?’

‘I don’t think you should go in there. It’s dangerous.’ Mouse wove the cable through his finders nervously.

‘I can take care of myself.’ She scooted up the mattress so her back was leaning against the wall and they were eye to eye. ‘I take care of you too.’ He was always making such a big deal about nothing. It wasn’t like she was addicted to Virtual Reality or anything. She had a job to do.

‘I think you’re spending too much time Inside.’ His voice was quiet as he stared at the dirty carpet near his feet.

‘I’m a data-runner. It’s my job.’ Cat frowned, she didn’t like the way the conversation was going.

‘Cat, I’m worried about you. I think you might be addicted, you know, to VR.’ Mouse was spooky sometimes, like he could read her mind. It was probably just because they hung around each other so much. She’d forgive him this time, if only because she had been spending a lot of time in both VR and the Neo-AI net. He’d been helping her hunt for information.
He was cute, in a younger brother kind of way. It was nice being worried about. It almost made up for all the times no one gave a damn. She reached out and ruffled his spiky brown hair.

‘You worry far too much, Mouse. I can handle it. It’s no more dangerous than a walk in the park.’ She grinned at him, trying to suppress the heat of a guilty blush creeping up her face.

A lopsided smile pulled at the side of his mouth, making him look even younger than his twelve years. His eyes were still serious, ‘Have you been in some of the parks around here lately?’

‘Mouse!’ She scolded. ‘Freeze is missing. That’s four of our friends that have gone in the last few weeks. We’ve looked everywhere else. The only chance we have is to find some trace of them Inside.’ She didn’t like being angry. They’d both been on edge for weeks. The most important thing was to show Mouse she wasn’t frightened.

The sheen of tears clouded across the blue of Mouse’s eyes, ‘I’m sorry, Cat. I know you’re really worried. But I’m scared for you!’

‘I know, Mouse. I spent the first couple of weeks panicking too. We have to stay tough and find out what we can.’ Cat spoke harshly.

Mouse sucked in a breath, trying not to cry. ‘What if you’re next?’

She’d thought of that herself. It wouldn’t do to dwell on something she had no power over. Maybe if she disappeared Mouse would toughen up. She was afraid of how he’d
cope without her. A small voice inside said that she should be nicer to him, he deserved better than her being mean to him when he was anxious. Sometimes she felt like a bad person.

They couldn’t live on the edge of panic all the time. The first few weeks she had been frantic. But she knew that staying calm and acting normally would be the best way to find out how to rescue her friends. Panicked people made mistakes.

Mouse would forgive her being sharp with him. He would still keep her safe, no matter how much they argued. Even using a dodgy data-port for her Jump, she was safer with him than anyone. While she was Inside, he would watch from Outside – shadowing her on the personal strapped to his arm. Mouse would be in the background to help her out any time she got in trouble. She didn’t know anyone who had more stuff on their personal than him. His personal was more than just the computer and communication units most people carried, it had bleeding edge hacking software, ad-bot shield software, encryption and other stuff he didn’t even have a name for yet. With all that and his enormous brain, if he couldn’t keep her safe Inside, no one could.

‘So are you going to help me hijack this data-port so I can get started?’ She resettled herself on the mattress. If she didn’t make sure her clothing was loose and her body was comfortable while she was Inside VR, she’d come out with all sorts of aches and cramps.

She smiled wryly up at him as he plugged the cable into the cracked wall unit, trying to lighten the mood. She could see dust motes in the shafts of light. It was stuffy in the
office. The creak and ping of sun hitting the metal shelves of the abandoned warehouse outside was the only counterpoint to the sound of them breathing. Mouse patched up the data-port which would Jump her into the Neo-AI’s net with only faint whispers of sound. Maybe that was how he’d earned his name. Or maybe it was his scrawny body, pale skin and huge blue eyes – the precise twitches he made while programming.

She shifted restlessly. The silence made her uncomfortable. Freeze had gone missing not far from here. In fact all of the girls who had gone missing were in this part of District 5. Jackie, Cara, Freeze and a bunch of other young data-runners she didn’t know quite so well had disappeared. They had all spent time in the Neo-AI that was today’s destination, just before they had gone. She shivered despite the heat. She had to do something. It wasn’t like anyone else would miss them.

This run wasn’t for the money. While they could manage a bit longer on her rainy-day savings, she had to find something soon. They couldn’t afford to waste money or time, they had little enough of either. Her friends deserved someone to look out for them. They’d looked out for each other because there was always enough work to keep people busy and eating, even if most of them didn’t have a permanent place to stay. They covered each other’s backs. Data-runners stuck together.

Mouse rested his hand on her arm. ‘You ready?’ He adjusted a dial. ‘The interface is a bit rough.’ She nodded and turned her head for the jack to click like a magnet to the nano plate in back of her neck. It was only a moment before she could feel it energising the tiny nano-bots in her brain. They say that your brain has no nerves, but she loved the tingle as everything woke up. Sped up. Her shiver was for a different reason this time.
There was a sound like a waterfall in her head, and then her eyes were stunned blind by a white light.

Her vision slowly faded back in. She was in the waiting room. It was like a very cut-down version of a gatehouse. Around her the main Neo-AI hubs glimmered through the windows. She was not registered to access any of them. She hadn’t paid her dues to any of the Guilds – this was a hack job through and through. It had never stopped her in the past. Mouse couldn’t communicate with her in here, but he could see everything that happened and help guide her when she ran into trouble by updating her map. At least she could have him looking over her shoulder here. In real Virtual Reality, the AI was the only one looking out for you. Then again, this wasn’t anywhere near as much fun as real VR. It was more a virtual version of a virtual world, a copy of a copy, one without taste, touch or smell. It was really virtual, not virtually real.

The other disadvantage of dealing with Neo-AIs was the lack of filters. Filters prevented damage which happened to you Inside from translating to your body Outside. In that way AIs had one up on Mouse – her avatar would be slim protection if she really got into trouble.

Mouse uploaded what appeared to be a generic avatar. The code suit hovered in front of her, a semi-transparent second skin. Cat stepped into the avatar and it closed around her like a caress. This avatar was a basic body type that wouldn’t be given a second glance unless someone got up close. She checked through her toolkit, which was chock full of Mouse’s best tricks and hacks.
Striding forward toward the door, she put her hand on the recognition plate. It turned from red to green and clicked open the gate to one of the Neo-AI hubs. Cat looked out onto the bright city of the network.

This was a high security Neo-AI net, one of several. Anyone could rent space here, but it was known for its black market connections. The liquid fire of data flared in code blocks with glassy blue firewalls protecting most of it. A slipstream of data flowed between data-cubes like starry highways. She dug her hand into the toolkit for her map. She marked the cube that was her target in her mind and pushed off from the gate.

Cat loved the feeling of freedom that swimming through the data gave her. She let it wash over her. She was just another flare, a person made of bytes and bits, almost invisible in the dataflow. What did Mouse know anyway? Addicted! It wasn’t like she was some stim addict, too poor to go Inside, riding an electrical high from her nano-bots. She was just really good at data-running, some said the best. It was supply and demand and she had the supply.

Data-running was a pretty good living by District 5 standard, if you found the right information to sell. Data-runners could be used to hide or move current information, often into the hands of those who shouldn’t have it. Occasionally, someone would ask for archive information. Since AIs controlled the archives, Cat had struck up an acquaintance with Boadicea, an Artificial Intelligence who was modelled on a British warrior queen. Over the last few years Boadicea had turned into more of a friend than a business contact.
Cat had met Kade under totally different circumstances. The first time she’d met both Kade and Boadicea together it had been a shock. There had been a message about a job – a basic hack into a guardian cube – and a meeting point sent to her personal. They’d been waiting for her, chatting away like old friends.

It was the first joint commission she’d been given by Kade and Bee.

Kade had previously given Cat work data-running for the District 5 rebel movement. Kade was the leader of the rebels, he drew all the different factions together and coordinated their efforts to make a better world from anonymous safe-houses spread throughout District 5. She’d shared Kade’s vision with the other runners and somewhere along the way they had all began to believe in more than food in their bellies and a safe place to sleep. The rebels had offered them something they’d never had and needed desperately. Hope.

Most data-runners were in it for the excitement and danger. Cat, Freeze and the others had started running to supplement their income from a variety of low-paying jobs. Eventually it had taken over as their main livelihood. Cat knew it was even more than that for her. VR was a second home. She was never hungry here – never had to find a place to sleep. Even with the dangers of data-running, she was safer here than Outside. But unlike an AI, she had to log out sometime, or she’d get sick and starve.

Cat reached her target quicker than she expected. Pulling up short she looked over the huge, glittering firewalls of a high-end data cube. Worse luck, it was a closed system. These were the toughest to hack and had the best security, everything was encrypted.
No data flowed out and the only data flowing in was heavily protected. This cube represented serious money.

Adrenaline pumped though her chest, her arms going slightly numb with the force of it. She allowed herself a moment to revel in the sensation. A buzz swept through her. Cat felt alive. Vital. The challenge waited for her, a thrill that nothing else came near to beating.

The tips of her fingers touched the wall. The blue barricade radiated in ripples from her hand. There was only one way to really see how hard it would be to crack the cube.

Cold flames licked up her wrists as she plunged her code-cloaked hands into the firewall. She jerked back, stung. Joyful anticipation was turning into butterflies in her stomach.

The firewalls were thicker than she had expected. She’d have to try a different approach if she was going to get in without doing herself some serious damage. There was a code-cloak suit in her toolkit. Hauling it out, she began to drag the cloak over her shoulders, pinching and tucking it until it sat right. It clung to every part of her virtual body, more like a skin tight suit than a cloak. By pulling up the hood it covered her nose and mouth. She resisted the urge to breathe faster.

She took a deep mental breath and tried to calm down.

Digging in the toolkit for the map Mouse had put together, she looked around. The cube towered above her. There was no one else close enough to see what she was about to do.
The map showed that Freeze had tried to enter the cube at this spot. It should be slightly weaker from her passage.

Cat placed her now cloaked hand against the wall and chameleon-like it began to mirror the code structures of the wall. This was something that Mouse had cooked up for her. The cloak didn’t always work, so she moved slowly, giving time for the dynamic code to adjust. After what seemed like an age had passed, she slipped through the wall. When she checked, only a few seconds had gone by. She only had a few minutes, at most, before the system would identify her as an intruder.

Her eyes closed for a moment. Calm, she had to be calm. The data washed around her and the filters of the cloak. Inside the cube was bright with data nodes. Her eyes squinted to cut back the glare as she flipped back the hood of the cloak. Warm code lapped against the skin of her face. Her excitement rose. Now the art of the data-runner came into its own.

If Freeze had been this way Cat could trace the signs of her passage. These clues would lead her through the stages of her friend’s data-run. She might have to go a bit further than Freeze though, to find out what had landed her in trouble.

Cat had already seen that Freeze had gotten through the firewall, but been stopped by the encryption inside the cube itself. Cat’s hand trailed down the wall, feeling the imperfections left by Freeze’s crossing.

She snagged some messages on their way to the communication hub. It was an art, knowing which ones would be the most useful. Besides, grabbing all of them would
only slow her down and she didn’t have a second to waste. The firewall had disabled the message encryption, so the code-reader was able to copy and present them in her heads-up display. She skimmed through them.

A howl sounded in the distance. ‘Junk!’ she swore. Security was on its way. Cat stuffed the code-reader into a toolkit chock-full of information – no time to look at it now. Dragging the hood back over her head she pushed slowly through the firewall. Now the alarm had been sounded, it was even thicker than before. The cloak started to heat up. The howling was closer. Her code-cloak was being pinged hundreds of times a second now. She had to move even more slowly.

A burning pain shot up from the heel of her right foot – the only part of her still inside the cube. Panic made her whip her leg into the wall. Her first instinct was to dive through to the other side. Slow down. Resist the panic. She used all her tricks to calm her heartbeat and ignore the pain. Already her sharp movement had set off more alarms. Carefully, she drew a code-patch from her toolkit and slipped it over her foot.

Programming on the fly, she modified a generic ‘invisibility’ virus to patch over the cloak, which would quiet the alarms for a short time. The virus gave her just enough time to rush through to the other side and outside the reach of the hostile code of the firewall.

By the time she made it back to the waiting room she was exhausted. Her code-cloak had almost burnt away and her foot was in agony. She switched off the avatar and struggled out of it. Her face felt raw and sunburnt. Whatever damage was done Inside was mirrored on her body Outside. She was desperate to see what her little escapade had
produced. It had better be worth it. After downloading the information she had copied in the cube to Mouse’s personal, she waited impatiently for Mouse to log her out. Her eyes closed, she felt the familiar tingling surge as her consciousness shifted. She was Outside.

‘Cat? Cat! Please be okay.’

You could tell he was crying by the thickness in his voice. Must be bad then. Her eyes snapped open. ‘Mouse, it’s okay.’ She nearly gasped with the effort of not screaming. ‘I’m fine.’ She wasn’t fine, her right leg was a tangled mess of pain, not that she would let him know that – he worried enough as it was. She might only be a few years older than him, but he looked up to her. He would panic if she showed him how much she hurt. And she really, really hurt.

Gingerly, she sat up. The normally pale skin of her arms was dark red. Cat felt her face with her fingers, not too bad. Long strands of her dark hair brushed the back of her hand, making them sting. She gritted her teeth and looked down at her foot. It had definitely taken the worst of it. There were deep punctures across the top and the arch was ripped. Her whole foot looked like it had been scalded. Still, with a bandage and a few days limping, she’d be as good as new. The pain would pass, she promised herself desperately. She’d had worse, especially in her early days as a data-runner.

Mouse was trying not to cry. Cat looked away to give him some privacy. ‘So, are you just going to leave me like this? Grab the first aid kit from my bag.’ Her voice didn’t quite hide the truth of the pain she’d been trying to conceal. Mouse didn’t seem to
notice. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. She allowed herself a moment to writhe in silent agony as he turned to rummage through their bags. Control. She bit back a yelp of pain as her foot scraped on the mattress. In her effort to stay quiet, her eyes closed involuntarily and sweat sprung out on her face. It trickled down her spine as she struggled to breathe quietly in the stifling office. She could handle it. It was only pain. It was only pain. She chanted this like a mantra, over and over in her mind.

Underneath it all, worse than the raw pain of her foot, was a sensation she hated. She swore that she’d never let Mouse suspect how she felt.

She was scared.
Chapter 2

‘Did we get any cases today?’

‘No.’

‘Anyone come in?’

‘No.’

‘Any calls. Any messages. Anything?’

‘No. Sorry, Boss.’

Boadicea slumped into her comfortable leather chair and let out a loud groan of frustration. What good was a PI with nothing to investigate?

She closed her eyes and felt other parts of her life pulling at her. She was teaching her daughters to ride, caring for her husband on his deathbed and gathering her forces for battle against the Romans – all at the same time. There was no sleep, no release from her duties. Her only escape from the constant, repeated demands – was Gumshoe, the detective agency, her refuge..

On her desk, the phone rang. It was the old kind with a circular dial. She lifted the handset and swung around on her chair. Kade’s face showed briefly on the data-screen on the wall.

‘Bee, I need to see you.’ The wall went blank.
Boadicea grinned tightly and hung up the phone. She grabbed her hat and coat from the stand. ‘Cerberus, I’m going out.’

‘Okay, Boss. I’ll hold your calls, shall I?’ he said ironically to her retreating back. She deliberately let that one pass right by her. Finally, something interesting to do.

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Kade waved his arms as he talked. ‘I’m just saying, she’s been unreliable. She’s cut up about Freeze. Cat spends all her time in VR or hacking the Neo-AI net. The last data run she did for me was late and it was a month ago. She’s completely off her game.’

Boadicea watched Kade pace around the tiny one-room flat, his current temporary headquarters. A hologram of a red-haired warrior queen, out of place in the dingy room, stepped forward to block his way. Her hologram might be projected from a thumb-sized flying spi-bot, but he was still too polite to walk through her. Boadicea wished, for the thousandth time, she could touch him when outside VR.

‘Hell, Kade, I’m cut up about Freeze. I’m surprised you’re not.’

He slumped against the wall. His shaven head was shiny with the reflections of people’s feet as they walked by outside the tiny window. His thin, craggy face settled into a frown. Boadicea longed to be outside. Not in here arguing for the hundredth time with her friend and leader. It seemed the only thing they did lately was fight.

‘Kade, Freeze is like a sister to her. And she wasn’t the first to disappear. If Cat wants me to help find out what’s going on, I’ll do it. She’s come through for us in the past.’
‘I don’t want you putting yourself at risk. Citizens don’t like AIs siding with us District 5 rebels. Just because they can’t kill you, doesn’t mean you can’t be hurt.’

Boadicea rolled her eyes, ‘That’s an old argument.’ He continued to stare at her. ‘Fine then, I’ll be careful.’

The data-screen on the wall flashed to life with a blurred image. A digitised voice issued an urgent warning. ‘There’s a raid. Citizens are on their way. ETA eight minutes.’ The screen flashed back to black.

‘Damn. They must have traced our last transmission.’

His last transmission had been a collaboration with Mouse. He had given a stirring speech. Something provoking, educational and a little bit pretentious along the lines of:

‘In the late twenty-first century criminals and other undesirables were incarcerated in District 5, or Junk Town as it has come to be known – whole families were sent together. This practice ended in 2132 with the introduction of temporary mindwiping as punishment for criminal acts and the gates between districts opened. People from District 5 were nick-named ‘Junkers’ by citizens of other districts – a name which our people of District 5 took to themselves as a badge of honour. We have survived the worst the world has to throw at as…but we are merely the descendants of criminals. We have no chance of a better life, without proper education, housing….’ and so on.

Besides, Mouse had done the hard work, developing a virus which hijacked ad-bots to dispense the message. Now, somehow, it had all been tracked back to Kade.
‘And you tell me to be careful. I think you like sticking your hand in the wasp’s nest. But if you keep on stirring up the Citizens for Order and Decency eventually you’ll get stung.’ Boadicea didn’t even try to keep the sarcasm out of her voice when she said their name. ‘What happened to the days when rebellion was clean and simple – a bit of butchery, some raiding, setting fire to a few buildings, then back to camp for breakfast?’

Kade quickly, but efficiently, set about removing all traces of his presence from the room. It didn’t stop him talking though, ‘And who helps us find the dirt on them so we can show everyone just how bad they make it here?’

He sprinkled nano-cleaning bots around the room and double-checked that there wasn’t anything personal left in the tiny bathroom. Most importantly, he sent a burst of electricity through the data-port to destroy any records not scrubbed clean by one of Mouse’s regular cleaning programs. It made a fizzing sound.

‘Well, yes, there is that. But as you pointed out before, I can’t be killed.’ Boadicea raised her eyebrow mock haughtily and turned off her hologram. Her spi-eye buzzed into the hallway to keep watch.

Kade slung his bag on his shoulder, he always kept it packed. It had taken under a minute to be ready to go. As they left, he shut the door behind them.

Boadicea buzzed forward and took point, making sure the street was clear of Citizens before Kade let himself out of the building’s side entrance and merged into the busy pedestrian traffic.
The crowd had every type of person and costume imaginable. Mono-filament sprouted from hair, skin and clothing. Tattoos, piercings, protective fields – and every kind electronic – flashed from the bodies around them. Even the poorest had some kind of decoration, and almost everyone wore a personal. People sat on street corners, busking or begging for the tourists’ credit chits. Panhandlers looked for easy marks, the click-bets being made a staccato counterpoint to the whisper of swirling cups on their temporary tables. Some of the bodies themselves had been modified. The most obvious was the plastic surgery of the higher district tourists slumming it in Junk Town, but the specialty prosthetic arm adaptations for labourers and recording eyes for reporters or soldiers were just as common – although, the latter would likely spend years as indentured employees paying off the investment.

Another tough old hacker and his security-bot didn’t even create a ripple on the filthy streets of Junk Town. They were sucked into the crowd crossing the road, heading downtown toward the Market.

Boadicea was glad to be outside. Glad to be doing something. Everything seemed more real here. Cooped up in Kade’s hideout or Inside, she felt like she was suffocating.

They passed buildings that had been repaired with second-grade nano-reinforcement. It looked like a scabrous growth against the brick and concrete. A poetic soul may have likened it to an industrial form of modern art. While recycling-bots took care of most of the rubbish, the streets were still dusty, smelly with solvent run-off, grease and bio-propel. Bicycles, tuk-tuk tricycles and the occasional motorcycle, whizzed past. The low hum of ad-bots, conversation and the occasional yell mixed with scuffing footfalls and
the crackles of cheap, paper clothing. She watched Kade nimbly avoid one of the rare hover-cars as it dipped too low over the sidewalk. She could feel the heat and crackling energy of the people surrounding them. In this kind of disorder nothing was pre-determined, nothing was planned. It was exactly what she needed.

She fitted right into the air traffic which teemed with ad-bots, spi-eyes and security bots. Boadicea’s bot was kind of bulky and old-fashioned. Of course, with the kind of hardware upgrades Mouse had given her and bleeding-edge software they’d designed together, this was pretty misleading – which was exactly the point. She was a bot with grunt.

After taking a short tour through various dingy alleys to ensure they had not been followed, they slipped into the back entrance of a bar and out onto some stairs down into another alley. Kade knocked on the back door of a brothel whose front window would give a good view of his apartment block. The door opened a crack. He had a quiet conversation, his voice holding a note of urgency. After a few more moments of negotiation, he handed over some credit chits. The door opened just far enough for the two of them to slip through.

Boadicea could see that someone had decorated the place with a particular colour scheme in mind. Red. It was like being inside a giant heart. Red velvet seats, red walls, even the madam was in red – she looked nervous. A raid was always bad for business.

On the wall an announcement of services, real and virtual, was displayed. It made for a long list. Kade passed it without a second glance and positioned himself near the
window overlooking his apartment. She settled down on top of his shoulder to watch the Citizens ransack the building which had been Kade’s home for the last few months. They needed to make sure there weren’t any loose ends. Boadicea had counselled Kade that any intelligence on the Citizens would be valuable to the rebels.

The Citizens had already begun raiding the apartment building. Tear gas billowed from one of the upper story windows. Even from across the broad road, the reek of it seeped through the one-way glass of the brothel’s window, making Kade clear his throat several times. Her spi-bot transmitted the odour as bitter and unpleasant.

Boadicea could hear the screams of people caught inside and the thud of boots on the pavement. She felt a twisting guilt – shouldn’t they have at least tried to protect the people inside? Kade shifted in his seat, his face frowning and deeply troubled. She pretended not to notice. His hand paused in rubbing against his bald palate, a gestural tick she found annoying.

‘What a bloody terrible business.’ Her voice was calm; she was used to the bloody trials of battle and hiding how they affected her. This was different though, the people here would never come alive again. They were not playing a part in the vast entertainment network of the Domains in VR. They were real, vulnerable, and defenceless. Suddenly her spi-bot felt vulnerable and small compared with such brutality.

Kade afforded her a single slight nod without removing his eyes from the scene – he was slumped against the wall, his breathing uneven. His eyes barely blinked as he watched the damage the Citizens were wrecking on his apartment block. He stood
abruptly, causing Boadicea’s anti-gravity exhaust to raise the hairs on his neck. He didn’t notice, didn’t swat at her in annoyance like usual. Instead, he cracked his knuckles convulsively, the popping sound a counterpoint to the cries and crashes across the road.

The front door of the building hung from one hinge where it had been smashed in. Several bodies, arms and legs tied, were lined up on the pavement.

‘Bee, pipe the feed from your optical lens into my personal and then zoom in, panning across the people on the ground.’

‘Sure thing, Kade.’ Boadicea zoomed her optical lens to help Kade get a closer look.

Kade saw that many of the people had blood seeping from wounds. A few had their heads caved in or had bled so profusely that it was hard to imagine them surviving. Some of the others were so limp and still that they were either deeply unconscious or dead. He felt his nails bite deeply into his thigh as his whole body spasmed in rage and despair. At least the children seemed okay, they had obviously been treated with a little more care and had been tied to a street lamp to the side of the line. No matter how Junkers treated their own kids, Citizens had occasionally had a riot on their hands when they abused children from District 5.

He had watched this scene unfold over and over. He had to watch. It was his penance – part of his penance. And he deserved to suffer. His history of getting innocents killed tortured him. He almost relished the pain, an enduring companion through the years.

‘No one’s going to help them.’ Kade’s voice crackled with tension.
‘No one dares, Kade.’ Boadicea’s tone was compassionate.

They watched pedestrians cross the street to avoid the Citizens.

‘No one will help them if they are attacked too.’

Boadicea watched as a blood fly crawled across the back of Kade’s neck. He didn’t notice. His eyes didn’t leave the street as he spoke, ‘Precious little justice to be had in Junk Town when Citizens are involved.’

Boadicea was fascinated as the blood fly bit Kade and he stood unflinching, ‘There’s a law of sorts.’

Kade snorted derisively, ‘One which the police vigorously applied to the people of District 5, but not to the Citizens who pay them bribes or are powerful in their own districts.’

‘I thought that’s what you and us rebels are trying to clean up?’

‘Yeah,’ he said distractedly, ‘But while the Junkers get the worst treatment, the corruption is pretty widespread in other districts too. We have to fix it across the board.’

Boadicea had heard the rant before. Junkers, if caught by police, were taken through courts where only citizens could sit on juries, be judges or give evidence – in such a system, it was rare for any District 5 person to escape being mindwiped and put to work serving in the other districts. Kade had planned and implemented several prison breaks for people who were clearly innocent, but there were never enough resources to help
everyone. Sometimes he wasn’t sure how much good he was doing, especially when he was responsible for bringing the brutality of the Citizens down upon his neighbours.

The blood fly flew away. Blood tricked down Kade’s neck and soaked into his collar.

‘This is my fault.’ Kade whispered mournfully.

‘No, that’s not true.’ Boadicea said quietly, ‘You’re just a reason for the Citizens to attack here, rather than down the street or uptown.’ Boadicea wished she could put her arm around him for comfort, but her spi-bot’s hologram was all light and no substance.

When Kade didn’t reply, she turned her attention back to the street. The Citizens making the raid were bristling with weapons, air-sticks with hyper-compressed (and untraceable) hydrogen pellets, taser, laser rifles, knives, clubs and other assorted assault accoutrements. It appeared that the best weapons went to those highest in rank, something which could be discerned from the number of square badges adorning the lapels of their coats. One of the ranking officers casually kicked a woman who had wriggled out of line on the pavement toward the children. While she gasped against her gag he picked her up, fondling her lecherously before throwing her back into line.

Without changing expression, he shot her in the leg with his laser pistol. Boadicea could see a little girl, face red with crying, struggling against her restraints, watching with horror as the blood poured from her mother’s leg. Boadicea was so caught up in the scene she hadn’t realised that her spi-bot was right up against the glass.

An elderly man ran out of the front door onto the street, a Citizen caught him by the shirt and applied a taser liberally to his throat. He screamed as his eyes rolled back into
his head and he crumpled to the ground. While the Citizen tied his hands with hard, plastic restraints a young woman cried out ‘Grandad!’ over and over. She was ignored as the old man was added to the line. The Citizen walked past the shrieking woman and kicked her in the stomach, reducing her to gasping cries.

Kade sat down heavily. His hands rigidly clasped in his lap.

Boadicea ignored her bubbling anger, noting the faces of the Citizens for her files, so that they could be passed on to the rebels. Later, she would provide a full recording and tactical analysis to be distributed amongst the rebel cells. No doubt those rebels opposed to Kade’s leadership would use this as an excuse to stir up trouble. Despite being a strong leader, Boadicea thought he allowed too much dissent within the rebel ranks. If they were to succeed against such organised opposition as the Citizens and the status quo the government supported, then they would have to stand together. On more than one occasion Boadicea had, quite seriously, pointed out that she dealt with her detractors more directly. Kade had countered her suggestions with his dry humour, ‘I dislike cleaning up blood. So while I may be a bit less effective, at least it’s light on the cleaning.’

In contrast to the chaos they had created, the Citizens went about the raid calmly, as if it were an everyday occurrence – which, considering the worsening reports of violent attacks against rebels, was likely the case. Each seemed to take their duty seriously, Boadicea thought, some guarding the entrances and bodies on the street while others systematically searched the building. In less time than she would have imagined, a dozen of them came out the front door, their grey uniforms still crisp and unmarked.
The people in the apartment, disoriented from the smoke and unprepared for attack, could offer little resistance.

One of the men stood out, his uniform a darker shade of grey than his compatriots, his lapel flashed with gold badges. His sculptured features and perfect grin set him above even the well-fed sleekness of the others. Boadicea knew a leader when she saw one. He slapped one man, who was toting his bound victim in a headlock, on the shoulder. The man smiled and nodded as the newest victim was thrown down beside the others.

With a short word of command from their leader, the Citizens drew themselves up to attention, spread out across the front wall of the building. They all watched him as he paced along the line of bodies. When he reached the end of the line he gestured to the other Citizens. They went to work on the dead and dying victims. Methodically, they stripped each body of their personals and any other form of identification.

After a few minutes of this, one of his officers turned over an old, bald man stretched out unconscious at the end of the line of bodies. The Citizen gestured to his leader, who was handed the bald man’s pilfered effects. Boadicea studied the prisoner’s face; the resemblance to Kade was superficial, but maybe they didn’t have a good description. After a cursory look through the identification and personal, the Citizens’ leader gestured for him to be picked up. Two followers rushed to do his bidding, dragging the man between them. Blood from a blow streaked the side of the man’s face as it lolled forward.
The rest were left where they lay. Even when the group of Citizens had been gone for a few minutes, no one came out to help them.

One Citizen was left behind in case Kade returned. As leader of the resistance, he was the one they really wanted. She wondered who they had taken with them. She didn’t think he was a rebel. The Citizens wouldn’t care; no doubt they could still beat a confession out of him.

Kade stood. She flew off his shoulder. She could see his face was empty. The other times this had happened – many times in the years she had known him – he was depressed for days after. He had told her once that he knew there was nothing he could do, that the people he was trying to help were at risk just because he lived among them. His best chance of saving District 5, giving them the same rights as other districts, was in remaining free. He hated that other people paid for his freedom with their own.

‘Kade,’ she whispered, trying to ensure the madam couldn’t hear her, ‘we should gather your rebel forces. Find the Citizens’ main base. Cut off the supply lines and communications. Then attack. Before morning, they’ll all be dead and you won’t have to worry about them attacking people around you anymore. You’ll have won.’

‘No, Bee. You can’t just go around killing everyone.’ His voice was a low rumble.

‘Why not? It would solve your problems permanently. It worked for me with the Romans.’

‘Yes, and look how that turned out. A couple of years and you were dead.’
‘You said we weren’t going to mention that again,’ she whispered furiously.

Kade made his way down the hall to the back door. Boadicea had her spi-bot dart in front of him, but she was too late. Instead of hanging back so she could scope out the dangers on the other side, he opened the door wide, preoccupied with what he had just seen. He blundered right into a Citizen patrol.

‘Kade, watch out!’

Her voice echoed off the brickwork. Kade had already stepped forward and shut the door. Boadicea knew he wouldn’t want to add the people in the brothel to the list of today’s casualties. Besides, the odds were even, two against two.

‘Dirty Junkers!’ the Citizen spat. He said it like ‘Junker’ was some kind of curse. Although dirty was a bit much, she thought disdainfully; they were way cleaner than the thugs. The two Citizens were almost on top of them. Kade barely made a noise as the bat hit his arm. He knew how to move so that the bat slid to the side, knocking the Citizen off balance. Kade kicked the other Citizen in the stomach, stepped in and followed through with a fist to his solar plexus. Winded, the Citizen hunched over and Kade grabbed his shoulders and kneed him in the groin. The Citizen’s baton clattered to the pavement as he curled up on the ground.

By this time the other one had recovered. Seeing that his friend was down, he pulled a knife and waved it at Kade. Boadicea saw her chance. She fired up her targeting system, took aim and fired. A spool of monofilament wire unravelled from her spi-bot’s carapace, a tiny dart attached to it. She whooped in triumph as it hit his cheek,
convulsing him with 20,000 volts of electricity. As the thug hit the ground, she felt a
thrill burst through her. It was definitely more exciting Outside than in VR.

‘Thanks, Bee.’ Kade stepped over the body and carefully disengaged the mono-filament
taser wire.

‘Anytime. I just love draining my batteries.’ She flashed her hologram and performed a
little bow. Kade laughed. ‘You should have waited for me to check it out.’

‘Next time,’ he said, his eyes still dancing with amusement.

Boadicea had always thought that a good fight was food for the soul. Kade was
obviously of the same school, his troubles momentarily forgotten with the adrenaline
rush. She whizzed ahead of him to make sure there were no more nasty surprises as they
casually joined the pedestrian traffic heading up-town.

The Citizens were still breathing when they left them. Scavengers, drawn by the sounds
of the fight, soon took care of that.
Chapter 3

‘Why, with a place like this, would I ever live in that dump we just left?’

Kade’s voice was muffled by the fact he had his head in the cooling unit. He grabbed a can and popped it open before sitting on the floor in front of the data-port on the opposite wall to the windows.

That had been the unspoken question Kade had noticed on her face when she saw the new apartment. Floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room tinted to reflect the sun. The furniture was either new or good second-hand and the floor covered in high quality nano-grown wood-substitute. There was even a kitchen niche, with a heating unit for more than cooking instant food packs. It was the nicest safe-house he’d ever had.

He removed the black cover of the data-port, plugged in his personal and began transferring the security pack Mouse had put together for him. ‘It’s all part of making sure there is no pattern for the Citizens to follow.’

‘So do you think you’re safe here?’ She settled into her spi-bot, which had just finished re-charging.

‘For now, I guess.’ Kade said absently, focused on the data-port.

Boadicea flicked on her hologram. The long cord to the charger looked like it was coming out the side of her foot. She kicked at it irritably, her foot passing through. ‘Cat called while you were in the bathroom.’
‘What does she want now?’ Kade’s hand slipped on the data-port panel and it crashed to the floor. He bit back a curse.

‘I’d give you a hand with that, but I’m feeling a little faint.’

Rather than acknowledge her little joke, Kade unplugged his personal, picked up the panel and snapped it into place with a bit more force than was necessary. One of the clips bounced off and under the side-board. Boadicea knew better than to mention it. Kade turned around to face her, ‘So?’

‘She wants to meet us. Inside. She says she has something interesting for us.’ She waited for Kade to start railing about Cat’s irresponsibility again.

She was pleased when he ignored the opportunity and said mildly, ‘It’s a good job I got this set up then.’ Kade grabbed a towel from his bag and wiped his face. ‘Help me pull the couch over would you?’

Boadicea made a mocking face. Kade waggled his eyebrows at her as he pushed the couch nearer to the data-port. She sighed, a small smile quirking her mouth – glad that he had called a truce on the Cat issue for now.

After Kade had gotten the couch into position and lay down on it, Boadicea disconnected her charger and plugged her spi-eye into the data-port. With a thought she was Inside. She watched the data-screen on the wall, a window into Kade’s apartment. She saw him click the cable to his nano-plate, his leathery skin faintly lumpy down the ridge of his jaw. A few seconds more and he was standing beside her. Now she could touch him. Inside might be a bit claustrophobic, but at least she had hands.
She threw her arm over his shoulder, ‘Lets go!’

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At the same time that the fight behind the brothel was being wrapped up, Cat and Mouse were checking into a flop-house. They usually found an abandoned building or stayed with friends. With so many of the other kids going missing, Cat thought it might be worth splurging on somewhere that at least had a door.

Mouse carried a bag with two cartons of street food, bought from a nearby vendor. The smell was sending Cat crazy. It felt like she hadn’t eaten for weeks. Data-running used up a lot of energy.

The door was locked with an old-fashioned key. It had been ages since they’d stayed somewhere which even had a lock. The few places that did were secured with electronic or photonic devices keyed to her friend’s personals. She looked at the key in her hand and shrugged to herself – at least no one would be able to hack it.

Inside, the walls were mouldy and the couch smelled of things best left unidentified. A light swung from a cable in the ceiling of the tiny room. The only other fitting was a data-port. Unlike everything else in the room, it looked fairly-well maintained.

‘Home, sweet home.’ Cat forwent the dubious comfort of the couch to sit on the floor near the data-port. Slightly more fastidious, Mouse unrolled a thin foam mattress and his sleeping bag to sit on before joining her. She was already eating from one of the cartons, her chopsticks flashing and not one morsel of rice going anywhere but into her mouth. Cat noticed that Mouse still preferred a spoon. It wasn’t that he couldn’t use
chopsticks. It was just that despite his dexterity with photonics, nanos and every kind of machine, he still ended up with a good portion of the food on him, rather than in him. Her chopsticks paused on the way to her mouth as she watched him; she suppressed a smile. The kid was practically a genius, he had to be bad at something.

There was the quiet sound of chewing for a while. On the street, eating was important business, not to be disturbed by small talk. Cat finished before Mouse. She rummaged in her bag and came out with the first-aid kit. She selected a cream and rubbed it on the back of her neck.

‘Still hurts?’ Mouse said around his last mouthful of food.

‘Itches.’ She put the cream away and looked at Mouse. He paused as he packed the empty cartons into the bag.

She’d waited until they finished their meal together to deliver the bad news. ‘I have to go back in.’

He stood and shoved the rubbish in the recycler with more force than necessary and turned stiffly to face her. ‘Where?’

‘To meet Kade and Boadicea. I sent Bee a message to meet me. I want her to check something out.’

A shudder ran through Mouse as he relaxed back against the wall. ‘Okay. I could probably use some sleep anyway. Maybe I could Jump Inside later and we could catch up.’
‘You can use the data-port here, I’ll book a port in the VR bar.’ After hauling herself up and slinging her bag over her shoulder, she dropped the key on the end of his make-shift bed. Mouse started fiddling with his personal, but she could tell he was faking; trying to keep his hands busy. Cat hesitated at the door to look over her shoulder at him, ‘Thanks, Mouse.’

He looked up at her with eyes full of worry. She turned away and closed the door behind her.
Chapter 4

Boadicea watched Cat limp back and forth under the shade of a large oak tree. Kade was scanning the countryside as they walked up the hill. It was the rendezvous point they always used in her Roman Britain Domain.

Cat’s long black hair, usually bound up with red and purple optical filaments, was loose. As the breeze blew it across her face, she flicked it out of the way impatiently. Unusually for VR, her avatar was almost identical to how she looked Outside. Boadicea was struck by how young she looked, much less than her sixteen years, yet when she spoke it was with the confidence of someone twice her age.

Cat turned to them as she heard them approach, ‘Where the freck have you two been?’

‘We got raided. We had to move and set-up security for a new safe-house.’ Kade’s voice was dry.

Cat switched from anger to embarrassment. Boadicea could see the flush creeping up her neck. She hid it in a curtain of her hair, pausing for a moment. ‘Oh. Sorry. Are you okay?’

‘We’re fine. I’ve sent the new address to your personal.’ He flopped under the tree, his eyes on the horizon. The oak tree looked out on a hillside spotted with copses of other trees. He looked back to Cat. ‘So, what was so important that it couldn’t wait?’ The rumbling depth of his voice almost hid the edge of impatience it held. Boadicea was
sick of the two of them sniping at each other. Kade seemed to go out of his way to
needle Cat.

She interceded before Cat could respond. ‘You said in your message that you might
know something about Freeze?’

Cat turned to her, her lips pressed together in an unhappy line, ‘Yes. I went to look at
where she’d last been Inside. The cube she hacked was heavy duty. I barely got away.’
Well, that explained the limp, Boadicea thought. ‘Once I was out I looked through the
messages I’d swiped. Some of them had been sent from the archives. They mentioned a
project, Cache 22? Have either of you heard of it?’

From the corner of her eye, Boadicea saw Kade stand abruptly. Cat shuffled her feet
edgily.

‘No. I could look for you though.’ Boadicea smiled at Cat, ‘I’d be happy to help. Freeze
was my friend too.’

‘That’d be great…. Kade?’

Kade came over to stand with them. ‘No, I haven’t heard of it,’ he said casually. ‘What
are you doing digging about in a bunch of old files anyway? Surely you’re more likely
to find your friend by looking through current records? Maybe checking with her
contacts?’

Boadicea would swear his indifference was a pose, but then she’d known him all her
life. Maybe, Cat wasn’t as perceptive.
‘I’ve already done that, Kade.’ Cat almost spat the words. ‘Freeze isn’t the only one to have disappeared, you know. Half a dozen data-runners have gone missing. Mouse and I have been chasing data for weeks. This is the best lead I’ve had in days. Any lead I can find, I’m going to follow through to the end. If you were half the friend you pretend to be, you’d be doing the same.’ Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides.

‘You really don’t know when to leave things alone,’ Kade commented in his most condescending tone.

Cat’s amber eyes flashed. Kade wasn’t the least bit intimidated.

With most people, this would have been enough to make them step back. Although small for her age, Cat could be mean when she was angry and she wasn’t shy of fighting dirty. Boadicea knew this because she’d been the one to teach her how to fight. ‘What I found had to be pretty important or it wouldn’t have been so well protected.’

‘Or it could just be a dead end that diverts you from following more important leads,’ Kade retorted smugly.

Boadicea thought he was a bit old to be playing these kinds of games. His usually imperturbable calm and ready sense of humour deserted him whenever he was around Cat.

She drew her sword. The cold sound of metal scraping in the scabbard made them turn toward her. The blade whistled through the air as she cut the space between them.
‘Now that I have your attention… You can either stop, or settle it my way. Choose your weapons.’

‘Bee, really, be reasonable, you can’t…’ Kade had lost a little of his confident edge.

‘No, you’re in my world and you’re pissing me off. This is doing damn little to help us or Freeze. You both be reasonable, and I’ll put this away.’ She rested the tip of her sword on the grass.

Cat spoke up. ‘I’m sorry Bee, but he’s been on my case for ages. I’m getting sick of it. He doesn’t help, he just orders me around. The stuff I found showed Freeze is definitely involved. I found traces of her avatar’s signature in the firewall. One of the messages had her picture.’ Cat brought up her virtual personal and showed Boadicea the message entitled, ‘Subject Twelve’. It didn’t say much, just a few details about her age and other statistics.

‘That doesn’t mean anything,’ Kade suggested. ‘It doesn’t even give you reason to think she might be in trouble. Have you even checked for her Outside, in the real world?’ Kade was leaning over Cat’s shoulder, reading the message.

She rounded on him. Still refusing to back down, she pushed her face close to his. Nose-to-nose, her eyes narrowed, her words were almost growled: ‘I don’t care how old you are, Kade. I don’t care how much you have done for me. Nothing – not anything – gives you the right to tell me how to run my life and how to look out for my friends.’

Cat turned back to Boadicea, her voice was clipped. ‘Do you have enough for a search, Bee?’
Boadicea nodded. She sheathed her sword – it didn’t seem to be doing any good as a deterrent and if she kept it out much longer, she would be tempted to spank them both with the flat of the blade.

Cat turned back to Kade, ‘And by the way, Outside was the first place I looked.’

Cat stomped off down the hill. Kade went to go after her; he hated anyone else to have the last word. Boadicea grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

‘Leave it, Kade. She needs time to cool off, and so do you. I don’t know what’s going on between the two of you and I don’t want to know. I refuse to take sides amongst my friends.’

Kade made as if to resist her. She looped her arm around his and just about had to frog-march him away. ‘Come on, walk with me.’

Eventually he relaxed and she let go of his arm.

They began walking across the ridge as Cat reached the bottom of the hill. Cat touched one of the controls on the boll of a tree that concealed the exit. With a flash she was gone.

Boadicea looked out over her Domain. Roman Britain was green and damp and cold. She still thought it was pretty, but she wondered if it could really be called home anymore. She could feel its pull on her, always taking up a part of her attention. But it had become like a foreign land over the last few years, especially since she started
spending so much time Outside and building her other Domain. Kade seemed lost in his own thoughts too, his craggy face set in a frown, as they wandered across the hill top.

After a few minutes they came to a burnt out hill fort overlooking a tree-covered hillside. In front of it was a boulder jutting out of the hill. They sat on it together, watching the breeze ripple the long grass, making shadows with its caress.

Kade leaned toward Boadicea with a contemplative look. ‘You know you’ve changed a lot in the last few years. Creating Gumshoe, being involved Outside with the work we’re doing for District 5. I’m not entirely sure it’s a good thing, but I think Cat is rubbing off on you.’ He said this wryly, one eyebrow arched.

She shrugged. ‘I don’t think you can understand what it’s like to be trapped here. I’m always so glad to escape Outside.’

Kade angled himself so he could see her face. ‘Make me understand. With the rate I’m going through friends, maybe I should shut up and listen to them more often.’ He sighed.

Boadicea was silent for a moment. ‘Do you think that whoever programmed me meant it to be like this?’

‘Like what?’ His eyes were peculiarly intense.

It was difficult for her to talk about. She realised it took courage of a different kind than she normally used as a warrior queen to open up, even to someone she trusted as much as Kade. ‘Me reliving Boadicea’s life over and over. I know I’m meant to be Boadicea.
When I’m teaching my daughters to ride or in the thick of battle I feel like Boadicea. But, somehow I’m not her. Outside I feel alive. When I’m with you or Cat or Mouse, I feel different, like a different person. I’m separate. Not a warrior queen, not a leader, just a person. Normal.’

‘And this is a problem?’

‘No. It’s just that I’m no longer as connected to my Domain. Like my mind is elsewhere.’ She paused, considering. ‘Also, I’m more emotional these last few months, which can be very inconvenient. And…I’ve felt something weird – like a storm just about to happen.’

‘Sounds like intuition.’ Kade seemed fascinated.

She shrugged. Boadicea rarely talked about herself this way – it felt both uncomfortable and kind of liberating.

‘Why does it bother you so much, Bee?’ Kade may have been around as long as she could remember, understood the Inside almost as well as Outside, but it was still like trying to explain colour to a blind man.

‘Well, I do so many things at once. I’m here talking to you, but off over that hill another me is training people for war. Underneath that I’m checking for filters and glitches in the Domain and doing a thousand other things to make sure everything runs smoothly. But the real me, or the one I think of as me, is really here talking to you. Everything else just happens, like breathing does for you.’ Kade raised his eyebrow in question. ‘Well,
you can focus on your breathing and change it if you need to, but otherwise you do it without thinking about it.’

‘And?’

Boadicea hesitated. Uncertain of how her next words would be taken. ‘Well, for a while now, I’ve been wondering how sane my programmers were.’

He grinned.

‘Don’t laugh, you bastard.’ She swotted him with the back of her hand. ‘I started to realise it when I began building Gumshoe from all the left-over spaces and bits of the VR network. Whoever programmed my Domain would have to be pretty sick not to realise I would have to relive all the horrible things that happened in Boadicea’s… I mean my life, over and over.’

‘Maybe the programmers weren’t insane. Maybe they just didn’t know quite what would happen.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, maybe trying to show history’s evils so that they wouldn’t be repeated.’

Boadicea stood up to face him, hands on her hips, the sun behind her. The light glinted off her hair, turning it from translucent red into a brilliant torch. The colour matched her mood. Kade wasn’t having much luck getting on with the women in his life right now. Sometimes he could be really dumb for a smart guy.
‘Maybe they weren’t mad, but they must have been frecking naive. Several times a year I have a fight on my hands. Everyone wants to join in on burning down a city or be part of the horde that sacks London. No one wants to learn how to weave wool or brew mead or learn about the gentle side of Roman Britain.’

Kade seemed taken aback. But then, he’d never really been around much when the Domain came back to that part of her cycle. Oblivious to her irritation, he said earnestly, ‘It’s not all like that surely? The Domains were made to help people understand history, be immersed in it, in an entertaining way.’

Boadicea felt the anger bubbling – she pushed it down. Kade could be really blind when he wanted to be – the same drive and determination it took to lead the rebel movement could be the cause of tunnel vision. Sometimes he couldn’t see what was right in front of his nose. She took a deep breath and looked him directly in the eyes. ‘What planet have you been living on, Kade?’

Boadicea pointed to a small grove of trees in the middle distance. Three people, two women and a man, came out straightening their clothes. ‘What do you think they were doing, having a discussion about the economic impact of the Roman invasion of Britain? No, they were having sex. That’s all they think about, sex, sex, sex. See that pretty girl, Outside she is a middle-aged man; the older gentleman, a woman in her mid-twenties. I’m not a prude. I like a bit of fun as much as the next AI, but if it’s not the sex, it’s the joy of killing or eating until they vomit or even being hacked apart. Do you know how much trouble I have keeping the filters straight so the kids don’t see?’
He looked incredulous. ‘That’s just one example. The Domains were set up to be centres for learning. All the other stuff is just a few people blowing off steam.’

She felt her irritation grow. ‘Are you trying to tell me my business, Kade? These people don’t want to learn, they want titillation. An escape. Even the ones from the best Domains behave like gluttonous barbarians. Romans have better manners.’ Boadicea stopped for a moment, feeling the ridiculousness of her situation – an AI who didn’t want the job anymore, but couldn’t escape her Domain. She didn’t have a clue about how to fight this kind of battle.

She continued, her tone slightly bitter, ‘Someone could make a fortune if they created Bordello world, you wouldn’t even need a smart AI, just someone with enough brains to make sure the rooms were well stocked with lubricants.’

Kade’s face contorted, trying to conceal a grin. ‘I’m sure that any new Domain would be greeted with joy. There’s a fortune to be made off any new AI. You’re all in such high demand.’

Her feeling of annoyance faded, replaced by exasperation. Why couldn’t he be as even-tempered with Cat? She could feel a smile twitching at the side of her mouth. He could be so charming when he wanted to be.

‘We could market it through ad-bots and personals – we could even put up posters in my gatehouses. It would be the first adults only Domain though, or every talented hacker, most of them children, would be in there in a nano-second.’ Boadicea grinned down at him, ‘Maybe I missed a huge opportunity when I created Gumshoe.’
He beckoned for her to sit in front of him. She sat, and he put his arms around her as they looked out over the valley together. He rested his chin on her shoulder, his voice a reassuring purr in her ear. Only Kade was allowed to take such liberties with her. ‘Bee, the Domains have been running for decades, why does it worry you so much now?’

Her voice was resigned. ‘That’s the problem, I don’t really know. It just sort of crept up on me. These days, all I want to do is spend time Outside or in Gumshoe. It shouldn’t be possible for me to feel so trapped should it?’

‘I don’t know. Weren’t AIs designed to evolve?’

‘Yes, but only within the confines of our programmed objectives. Run the Domains and protect the archives. I don’t see how my desire to escape Outside fits into them.’

‘Maybe it’s a glitch in your programming.’

‘I’ve run diagnostics. Hell, I’ve even had a couple of my sisters run diagnostics. There’s nothing wrong with my Domain or me.’ She took a deep breath, an involuntary shiver shook her and his warm arms tightened around her. ‘I used to think they were one and the same, but now…’

‘Now, you don’t know who you are anymore. It’s perfectly human, you know. Happens all the time.’

‘But I’m not human, Kade. That’s the whole point. I feel like I’m on the edge of something. I feel it deep in my code.’ She was glad he couldn’t see her face. She wasn’t
sure she could hide the overwhelming feeling of helplessness and confusion she felt. It was like her future was some huge chasm.

‘You’ll be fine, Bee. You don’t have to worry. It’ll all work itself out,’ Kade soothed. It would have been patronising if his voice hadn’t been so distant. He sounded distracted. She wasn’t reassured. Not that she needed his platitudes, she thought. Warrior queens were made of sterner stuff.

The conversation petered off into an uneasy silence as they sat for a while staring at the green hills, a fine plume of smoke drifted upward in the distance.

Boadicea sensed Kade had returned from his musings just before he spoke.

‘So, do you feel better for having a good vent?’ he gently mocked her.

She jerked in his arms, trying to twist around. He really tried to push her to the limit sometimes. He let her go and she stood in front of him, hands on hips, her reflective mood turning a one-eighty with her natural confidence reasserting itself. ‘Some friend you are, tricking me into laying myself bare and then mocking me for it. You’re almost as bad as my programmers. And they were idiots with a bag full of history, a back-door government mandate and no understanding of human nature….’

‘Wow. Don’t hold back, tell me what you really think.’

She poked him in the chest with her finger. Her eyes narrowed, wondering if it was too undignified for an AI to poke out her tongue. Probably, even with friends, warrior queens had limits.
Before she could decide, he asked, ‘How is your pet Domain anyway? Have you worked out a way so I can visit yet, or is it still strictly AI only?’

‘Still just for us artificial people. I haven’t worked out how to turn the non-player characters into avatars yet. And speaking of AIs, I should go let Cerberus know that he’ll be helping me do this search for Cat.’

‘AI? Surely he’s still just a puppy? Dog-AIs are pretty limited.’

‘You leave Cerberus alone. You’re just pissed-off he’s better at mocking me than you are. He might be a pain in the butt, but he’s my pain.’

Kade’s expression turned sour. ‘Do you have to leave? I thought we could come up with a strategy for finding out why data-runners are going missing.’

Boadicea’s eyes flared. ‘You mean, go around Cat and cut her out of the loop?’

Maybe Kade could do with knocking down a peg or two. He might be a powerful rebel leader Outside, but Inside she was queen. She had been programmed with a lifetime of rebellion and had an almost infinite archive of tricks up her sleeve.

Kade unsuccessfully tried to hide his guilty look by leaning back nonchalantly against the boulder. Surely, he couldn’t think she would be taken in so easily?

‘Go around Cat? Would that be such a bad thing? At least it would keep her out of danger.’
Apparently, Kade’s sympathetic ear had come with an ulterior motive – getting her on side against Cat.

‘Do you really think that would help? She’s loyal to her friends, despite them plotting to stab her in the back.’ Her voice was icy. It was the last time she would fall for his smooth banter; from now on, she wouldn’t be spilling her guts to anyone.

She felt his eyes on her back as she strode away.

As Kade watched her go he was reminded of someone he’d lost long ago. She had the same fire, the same bounce in her step when she was angry. She was perceptive, but he was a master at hiding his true feelings. He had hung on her every word. It was a struggle to contain his hope and dread – could she be returning to him? Had she hidden all this time inside?

He wondered if she would ever forgive him if she found out the truth.
Chapter 5

The streets of Gumshoe were cold and windy with a hint of rain as she walked to the agency from the portal. The light playing on bright, damp surfaces calmed and invigorated her.

Boadicea had started the detective agency on a whim, wrapped up in the compelling literature and moving pictures of the twentieth century. The warm feeling of discovery when she had raided the archives for every bit of entertainment and historical data from that period still pulsed within her. It had woken a yearning, a curiosity, for the experience of chasing leads and righting wrongs. In a virtual world though, archives, camera footage, programs and all the rest were the inevitable sources of most key information. It was clear she was going to be more a cyberpunk PI than hard-boiled detective, despite her surroundings. Once created, she’d soon realised that with all her other duties, she had little time to conduct extensive searches or answer enquiries from clients. Also, she needed another perspective, someone who didn’t think the way she did, someone she could bounce her ideas off.

Gumshoe not only stole from history and fiction, but from the VR network too. She had scrounged around for all the tiny bits of available space to come up with enough room to create the Domain. Even then, it was only one city. Roman Britain was at least fifty times the size. Real estate was rather fixed in the virtual Domains by virtue of the weird quantum physics of the dark matter data system that ran the real time interaction. She’d never spent much time trying to understand it before her attempt to create Gumshoe.
Boadicea imagined it was a bit like a human investigating how their digestive system worked – fine to know the basic theory, but not something you would be eager to experiment on.

She stumped up the final steps of the wide, wooden stairs that wound up the middle of the building. As she approached the agency door at the top of the stairs, she admired the pretty script stencilled in black on the misted glass of the front door of her second story office, *AI PI*.

Cerberus had put it there as a joke. He’d been shocked when she had decided to keep it. All they needed now was a client. In the meantime, she could help Cat.

She walked through the door into a room with a large wooden table, complete with typewriter (but no paper), a swing chair, a hat rack and her secretary…sorry, assistant. Cerberus was a gorgeous, twenty-something blond with a perfectly cut navy suit and burnt orange shirt. She’d tried creating someone totally different from her, with a fresh mindset, by using randomiser algorithms to ensure she didn’t put too much of herself into his personality. When she’d created him she was thinking of the male equivalent of the pretty, but innocent, ‘Betty’. What she got instead was a bucket full of trouble. Fun trouble, but still….

‘You’re looking good, Bee. Can I get you some coffee?’ Cerberus smiled his perfect smile. She swore it was just to annoy her. She was dressed in a mac, blue jeans, boots and white tailored shirt – rather a few steps down from his sharp perfection. She always changed to come to Gumshoe. She always dressed the same.
‘Like that would do me any good. I don’t have to eat or drink.’ She stuck her fedora on the hat rack. ‘Besides, I’m too wired already.’

‘Ha. Ha. I think you actually tried to make a joke.’ He came out from behind the desk. ‘I don’t know why you keep me around if I can’t at least play pretend at my role. I’m your assistant, but you don’t let me assist. I’m nearly out of my head with boredom. I don’t know why you didn’t just make me into a real dog instead of naming me after one. At least I could amuse myself by licking my….’

‘Cerberus!’ He grinned at her. Bastard, he was baiting her again. And she fell for it. Again. She suppressed a smile. ‘Okay then, if you’re going to be like that I won’t tell you about the job.’ She gave him a look – a very long look. It didn’t help. She relented with a sigh. ‘Look, I’m sorry, Cerberus. I’ve had a long day and I really do need your help.’

He rubbed his hands together with glee. ‘Okay, Boss, what have we got?’

Boadicea transferred what Cat had given her to the data-screen discreetly set into his desk. ‘I need you to find anything you can on Cache 22.’

‘You know I can’t go poking around in any of the really good archives without your authorisation.’ He looked up at her with a mischievous glint in his eye.

‘Just don’t use it for anything else.’
Trying to look serious, Cerberus crossed his heart with a finger. Boadicea resigned herself to getting complaints from her sister AIs. ‘Authorisation code is “Release the dogs of war.”’

‘I find that particularly appropriate.’

She looked over at him, already playing with the archive search and muttered, ‘Of course you do.’

The glass in the door didn’t break as she slammed it behind her, but it was a close thing. Cerberus didn’t even look up.
Chapter 6

Cat and Mouse sat on the roof of a slum. They were both dressed in avatars representing young, male Bhangi untouchables. With feet dangling against the metal roof, they looked out over Indira Gandhi’s New Delhi Domain.

Cat breathed in the hot, dusty, spicy smells mixed with the less pleasant outdoors of garbage and sewage. Up here the street noises, shouts and rhythmic bangs, faded into the background. For a long time, these were the only avatars they could afford. Most people wanted to be high caste – feted and pampered – few chose the slums. Sometimes reality and virtual reality were closer than she’d like to admit.

Cat fidgeted. She was still mad at Kade. Mouse looked over at her. ‘Still don’t like being a boy?’

‘No. It feels weird.’ She wriggled as if the collar of her shirt were too tight.

‘But that’s not what’s bugging you?’ Mouse’s soulful brown eyes reminded her more of a puppy than his namesake. They showed a depth of understanding and worry that was more than she merited.

‘No.’ She felt perpetually angry these last few weeks, frustrated and crabby. Mouse didn’t deserve getting the short end of her temper. She took a deep breath. And another. Okay. She could do this. She struggled to think of a neutral topic. ‘Do you remember when Freeze fell off the second story of the Market, straight onto a hover car?’

‘Yeah. That’s when she cut her face.’
‘And you helped me clean her up.’

‘She didn’t make a sound and it was deep.’

‘She called it her moon scar. She was always going getting into trouble and turning it around into something funny. I heard that’s how she won her name, icy cool in a crisis or on a data-run. Not like us, huh?’ She nudged his shoulder with her own.

He was quiet for a moment, remembering. ‘It’s not the same this time, is it? We can’t get out of this with a scar and joke.’

‘No, I don’t think so. I wish it was.’

Mouse looked up, his long lashes gleaming with tears. This wasn’t working at all. First she’d made him worry, then she’d made him cry.

‘Come on!’ Cat grabbed Mouse by the arm. They scrambled down the side of the building. As she jumped down to the street, her foot accidentally knocked the table of a chaat vendor. Fried potato and bread scattered into the dirt. They ran out onto the street. The vendor chased after Cat, a waving bundle of banana leaves in his hand. His swearing and threats sounded strange as the age filter translated the words into something suitable to be heard by teenagers.

They soon left him behind, dodging through alleys and across roof tops. Eventually they stopped. Shyly, Mouse pulled some banana leaves from under his shirt. He unwrapped the package and presented the chaat to Cat with a flourish. She laughed, her bad mood forgotten.
After lunch Inside – tasty, but without any actual nourishment for their Outside bodies – they’d arranged to meet near the VR bar where Cat had rented a booth. Cat had been waiting for about fifteen minutes when she spied Mouse.

Not realising he was being watched, Mouse lifted a personal from one of the rich District 2 girls who paraded around in groups followed by serious-looking mindwiped guards.

He was turning into quite the little pick-pocket, Cat thought. She could never have gotten away with the fearful, innocent look that made the girls sneer at him as he got to his feet after being ‘accidentally’ bumped. The guards didn’t even respond. Data-running was relatively anonymous; pick-pocketing wasn’t. She felt a spike of concern for him. A lump formed in her chest, it felt good to have someone to worry about. Cat shook off the feeling. Mouse was trying to be independent; he wouldn’t welcome her mothering him.

‘You’ll get in trouble one day,’ she said lightly as Mouse reached her.

‘Oh, I never keep the personal. I just copy the software. District 3 has all the best firewall stuff. Besides, the way business is going, we’ll both have to ply the streets.’

Mouse realised what he’d implied a moment after he said it. ‘I didn’t mean… Um, but.’

Cat watched with amusement as he tried to change feet.
There was an itchy feeling between her shoulder blades. Someone was watching her.
She didn’t want to worry Mouse. ‘Hey, let’s go see what Kade’s new place looks like. Boadicea messaged me to tell me it was five-star.’

They began walking across town. ‘So what are you going to do if work doesn’t pick up?’

‘Well, I could always go back to serving at a cookshop. The last place wasn’t that bad.’

‘You hated that job.’

‘If it’s that or starve, at least it’s better than you having me work the streets.’ She nudged his arm to let him know she was joking. He poked his tongue at her out the side of his mouth.

Mouse spotted the Citizens before she did. They pulled back into an alley until they passed. Citizens had a habit of picking on teenagers – especially those who were obviously Junkers. She noticed how ragged Mouse’s trousers had become. She needed some new boots too, these were so old the heels were almost completely worn down.

As they waited quietly behind some recyclers, the feeling of being watched returned. Cat turned to Mouse and whispered, ‘I’ll see you later down the Market.’

‘What is it?’

She hesitated, he deserved to know. ‘Someone’s watching me. I don’t want to lead them to Kade’s place. It’s better if we split up.’ She pulled her thumb chip from her pocket, it had all the data she’d copied from the cube. ‘Look after this for me?’
‘Should I still go to Kade’s?’ Mouse said anxiously.

‘No. It’s probably nothing, but we shouldn’t take the risk. Kade is mad enough at me already. It won’t take me long to lose them, so meet me at the Market in a couple of hours. You should be fine, I’m pretty sure it’s just me they’re following.’ He looked at her uncertainly. On impulse, she kissed his cheek and pushed him from behind the bins.

‘Go on.’

He smiled back at her, the expression lighting up his face and then blended into the crowd moving uptown. A few more moments and the alley was empty.
Chapter 7

Norton stood in front of the gurney looking down at the young girl’s body. Wires and tubes ran from every part of her to machines clustered around the bed. The machines were turned off. The girl was still.

Norton’s hands gripped the rail at the end of the bed. His small, delicate hands rattled the rail as he trembled and gritted his teeth. Another failure. Another chance lost. If he didn’t succeed soon the Citizens would not support his research much longer. Without funding he would be ruined.

Like all organisations he’d worked with, they were short-sighted. He was the most important scientist of his time. The discoveries he made would change the world. If only his wife and son were alive to see how far he’d come. He could feel them watching him from the picture that sat on a shelf at the other end of the room. They would have understood. Sacrifices had to be made. He had finally re-discovered the secret of creating an AI.

If only he could get it to work.

Norton’s expression was impassive as he methodically disconnected the monitors from the body. To think he was reduced to doing menial work. His assistant should be doing this, but the knowledge that the empty subjects were being disposed of, rather than cared for in some kind of respite facility, had to be concealed from him. So instead, the naïve young man was out searching for a new subject. Everything had to be ready for when she (no ‘it’ – always better to think of the subjects that way) was brought in.
Norton cleaned each item as he put it away. He had no time for sloppiness. Once he had finished with the equipment he looked down at the girl on the bed. He felt his anger and resentment build. She was his to control, how dare she not perform to his will! A grimace, more like a snarl, showed briefly on his face. He struck the dead girl’s cheek with the back of his hand. Her head flopped to one side, revealing a crescent shaped scar on the edge of her jaw below the ear. Imperfect! Worthless!

The girl was empty. He would prove them all wrong. The experiment was everything; he would succeed despite them all! He tried to suppress a trickle of lust.

Every time he looked upon the subjects of his experiment he was filled with an overwhelming excitement. They would be the vehicles of his glory, he thought. One day he would allow them to feel and hear and see only at his behest. They would be instruments in his hands, no less than a scalpel or laser and so, he would fill his hands with them, fill them with himself until there was nothing left of their past, nothing left of their mediocrity – only his vision, his thoughts, his voice.

The body on the bed lay unmoving. She was too cold and still for him, he liked them warm. He liked that they were the raw material of his great experiment. His expression blank once more, he wrapped the body in a sheet. The worthless piece of trash on the bed could not serve his needs further. His hands trembled. No one could see him lose control. He locked the lab door.

Norton turned from the gurney toward the other end of the lab. When he reached the data-screen, inset into the wall, his finger searched for a discreetly-positioned button
near its edge. The first strains of the soft tones of Britten’s *War Requiem* echoed across the cold room. As the bells tolled quietly in the background, he picked up the picture of his family from the shelf and leant his forehead against the wall. He took a deep shuddering breath.

The faces of his family swam into focus as he opened his eyes. He would not fail them again. The day they had died, he’d been working long hours on the Cache 22 project – trying to prove that he was worthy of being told the secrets the head scientists had kept from him. Instead of being there, as their mindwiped servant crashed the hovercar on the way to a concert he had promised to attend with them, he had been in the lab. The mindwiped had stolen everything from him.

There had been a moment when he had thought: perhaps he could have stopped it if he had not been so wrapped up in his work. But he knew now that succeeding in creating a new AI was the only thing that would give their deaths meaning.

He felt a surge of intense desire as he thought about the work ahead of him.

A timid knock sounded at the door. He took a moment to compose himself and pressed the remote to unlock it. He rapped out a sharp ‘Enter!’ and a mindwiped servant came through the door and closed it quietly. He had never approved of the nickname for mindwiped: ‘Mini’; it made them sound harmless. They served to atone for their crimes, but no one held them to account for the wrong they did while having their personalities suppressed.
This mindwiped had been his servant for several years. It was probably middle-aged, but with the habitually pleasant expression they wore, it was hard to tell. Its age was irrelevant anyway; it could still meet his needs. It was a part of his experiment, albeit in an abstract way, as it only cleaned his laboratory. Besides, they were made to serve. His expression hardened as he put the picture of his family back on its shelf. It could take the body away...after.

‘Take off your clothes.’

The music continued to play.
Chapter 8

Cat slipped out of the alley. At least Mouse would be safe. She toyed with the idea of losing whoever was following her in the Market. It would work both ways though, the bustle of people could also protect her watchers. She decided instead that she should be fairly safe if she sat in a cookshop for a while. She needed a plan.

A dilapidated stall with two tiny tables and four chairs was positioned in a niche under the same awning as a tiny kitchen. She could hear the sizzle of vegetables. As she sat, spice-laden steam wafted over her. It reminded her of the New Delhi Domain. She ordered coffee. If ever, now was the time she needed it. She didn’t drink it often, sometimes it stopped her from sleeping. The cup was hot and clean and the coffee was surprisingly good. Sometimes appearances could be deceiving.

The streets became busy as dusk approached. The crowd swelled as people from other districts poured through the gates to sample the guilty pleasures of Junk Town, before staggering back to their safe little homes for the night. All the while people who lived here had none of the rights of the other districts. If a high roller from District 2 accidentally killed his Junker ‘date’ during a little rough play, the worst he would have to do was pay off her pimp.

It had been decades since District 5 was the official dumping ground for criminals and undesirables. Children were born into the slums here. They were forced to be criminals or work as virtual slaves in factories or brothels, just to stay alive. With their parents dead or indifferent, kids like Mouse and her were left to fend for themselves. That’s one
of the reasons why she had decided to help Kade. His transmissions hijacked the public media outlets to show how bad it really was behind the tourist section of the district. The rebels distributed stolen food, helped kids on the streets, families to find a place to stay, even provided education where they could. More than this, the movement applied pressure on the politicians – demanding services and citizenship for Junkers. Other districts had schools and proper food and places for people to go for help. In Junk Town, if you had friends to help you, you were lucky. If not, in District 5 you helped yourself or you didn’t survive.

Cat scanned the crowd. She was trying to find the person who stood out. If someone was watching her, they couldn’t hide their interest forever. This wasn’t the first time she’d been followed. She recognised a couple of rebels she had worked with walk past and debated following them and asking for help. Absently, she shook her head and took another sip of coffee; they hadn’t much liked working with her. They were part of the rebel faction which argued against illegal activities, preferring peaceful protests and petitions. Cat knew that Junkers would never get justice, would never be heard by the government, with such soft tactics.

A gaggle of District 3 girls walked past. They were dressed in nano paper dresses. The tiny filaments through the skirts sparkled with animations. They were cheap, tacky and disposable, and absolutely the hottest trend. Cat had never had much time for fashion. Even if she’d had the money, a data-runner looked for function and durability, fashion rarely had those qualities.
Maybe a disguise would throw them off. She would have to dip into her savings. After paying for the VR Bar, somewhere to sleep for Mouse and eating out – along with all the cash she had spent on her search – she was getting low on funds. The cookshop vendor took a credit chip for her coffee and turned back to his stove. She waited until a group of girls passed and used them for cover as she went down the street. This was the upmarket side of the District so there were shops, bars and clubs of every kind – a role the Market fulfilled for Junkers downtown, at greatly reduced prices.

She tried to make herself look as if she were attached to the group. Some strange looks were directed her way from one of the girls in the back. Luckily the girl was too timid to say anything to the diva who strutted at the head of the group. The word ‘frivolous’ came to mind. These girls had never had to work for a thing in their life. They had the clear skin and straight teeth of District 3 girls. They weren’t quite perfect enough to be from District 2, besides, from what she’d heard, most District 2 girls wouldn’t have been seen dead in Junk Town. They thought visiting District 4 was slumming it. The Diva abruptly turned to enter a dress shop. Paper dresses fluoresced in the window.

A banner across the door of the shop read: *Use them once and throw them out*. Cat looked at it sourly. It was almost the perfect motto for how the other districts viewed the people of Junk Town.

As Cat entered the shop she got a sharp look from the assistant. Fortunately, she was too busy helping the Diva choose dresses to waste time on shooing undesirables out. On the specials rack Cat found something relatively conservative, that wouldn’t totally blow
her savings. She skirted the group, waiving the dress in the direction of the change room. The harried assistant didn’t even look up.

In the change room she changed hurriedly. She liked the motif. A gold dragon chased a red dragon across the skirt of the dress. The red dragon matched the optical filaments in her hair. It had been ages since she wore a dress. The paper wisped about her knees. Her eyes travelled lower. Sadly, her faithful old boots would have to go. She’d picked out some red satin slippers that matched the dress.

She heard a tap on the door of the stall. Stuffing her scruffy clothes in her bag she unlocked the catch and looked out. Everyone was still in the front of the store. She looked up to see a security-bot hovering in the corner. Huh. It must have thought she was taking too long and was trying to steal the dress.

She joined the group in the shop. Most of them already carried bags. It looked like they were taking half the shop with them. They weren’t even bothering to try anything on. Cat paid the now-beaming assistant for the dress and shoes, just in time to trail behind the group as they left.

It looked like they were heading for one of the clubs. She followed the group in. Luckily the owner thought she was with the group, so the Diva paid the outrageous cover charge. While he was sucking up to the other girls, Cat noticed the sign to the bathrooms at the back of the club. After taking advantage of the facilities, she stopped for a moment to admire the dress in the floor-length mirrors. Then she quietly let herself out the back.
In the alley she stopped for a minute and closed her eyes. The feeling of being watched had eased. Confident she had lost the watchers, she ducked into the foot traffic on the street. The tide was going uptown toward the VR bars and dance clubs. The sky was overcast, hiding whatever stars would have been seen above the lights of the buildings.

Vendors who had previously ignored her were calling out to her from their stalls. The dress attracted attention and she wondered at the wisdom of imitating a rich girl. As she pretended to haggle with a vendor over a bracelet she couldn’t afford, her eyes were scanning the crowd. Something was off; someone was watching her with more than casual interest. Her instincts, with the same unscratchable itchiness, told her that the watchers were back. So much for that bright idea, she thought, chewing her lip. How had they found her again so quickly? It was time to get serious.

She wove through the traffic to the other side of the street, earning curses from a bicycle rider who almost ran her down. She ducked into a back alley and then across to the adjacent street. She slowed her pace to a fast walk and followed the traffic toward the gate to District 4. As she neared the gate, she saw a kid sitting on the steps of an apartment building. He pretended to play on his personal, but she could see he was really watching the street. Taking a risk, she sat down beside him. He waited the requisite minute before he acknowledged her presence by pausing his game. He didn’t look at her.

‘So?’
‘So. Do you know a way to avoid the security at the gate?’ The kid was surprised enough to hear a Junk Town accent that he flashed her a sideways glance.

‘Why don’t you just walk through?’

‘I’m not allowed.’ He waited for Cat to elaborate. ‘I’m in disguise.’

‘How much you got?’

‘Twenty chits.’

‘Not enough. What about your personal?’

Cat unconsciously hugged her left arm where the device was strapped close to her chest. ‘No!’

He gave her a look of irritation. ‘I mean, do you have any useful programs?’

Remembering Mouse had updated it with the latest communication and encryption she nodded. They dickered over what he wanted after she had brought up a list of programs that Mouse wouldn’t mind her sharing and then let him copy her files. She offered him the money and he shook his head. ‘These programs are enough.’

He guided her around the back of the building where steps led down to the basement. The floor was covered with sleeping-bags and mattresses. Cat had stayed in similar places most of her life. There was often safety in numbers – providing you were safe from the ones protecting you.
Cat helped the kid move an old wardrobe. Behind the wardrobe was a metal service door. It had been welded shut at some point and then levered open. The edges were ripped where the metal had buckled. Behind it was a service corridor. The air that flowed out of the door was fetid and damp against her legs and arms. The dress made her feel exposed.

Cat switched on her personal and the kid did the same. They provided just enough light for them to see where to place their feet. The kid shut the door. They crept forward. The darkness seemed to amplify the noises in the corridor. She shivered as something wet splashed against the nape of her neck. Well, if the kid could handle it, she reasoned with herself, so could she.

A few minutes later they came to another metal door. This one seemed in better shape. The kid put his ear to the door for a few moments, then carefully opened it and stuck his head through. It was slightly lighter on the other side. He paused for a few moments and then waved her past him. She waited for him to take the lead again after he had softly closed the door. Their feet pattered against the damp concrete. This tunnel was at least twice as long as the last one.

He stopped abruptly in front of her. ‘What?’ she whispered.

‘This is it.’ He gestured to a ladder with a metal grate at the top. She could see the faint light of a streetlamp above. ‘It comes out behind some recyclers. Make sure no one is around when you leave.’ The ‘we don’t want you messing this up for us’ was heavily implied.
She grinned at him in reassurance. His face remained serious. Her smile faded as she wondered if this had been the fate of the other data-runners who’d gone missing. Had they been chased through the streets and helped by strangers too? She would have asked the kid if he’d seen them, but the coffee jittering through her and the worry that her watchers would find her again, made her hold back. She nodded solemnly to the kid. ‘I promise.’

Cat climbed the ladder as quietly as she could, trying to keep her dress from snagging on the rough edges. She levered the grate up to lean against a red brick wall. Throwing her bag ahead of her, she pulled herself out of the hole, squeezing up behind a rack of recyclers. She expected they would smell, the ones in District 5 always did, but all she smelt was the damp of the light rain which had started while she was underground. Not a good night to be wearing a paper dress. She shuffled to the side and lowered the grate down almost soundlessly. She whispered a thank-you to the kid, but he had already gone.

The racks of recyclers finished halfway down the alley. Her view of the street was blocked by a jut in the wall. She breathed in as she stepped through the gap, trying to keep her new clothes clean. Once she had shimmied free, she brushed herself off and walked confidently toward the street.

Cat had only ever been to District 4 once before. She’d been given a forged pass, which she had reluctantly handed back at the end of the job. The run had been to the merchant sector in the early hours of the morning. The streets had been empty. Not so this time.
The biggest difference between District 5 and these streets was the lack of noise. No one shouted. Although busy, it was quiet except for the sound of footsteps and murmured conversations. The streets were clean of litter or dirt, although that could have been from the rain. Everyone walked in groups and most people had their personals set to repel the wet. Only high-end models could do that.

A family came out of a shop up the street from the alley. As they came toward her the little girl was hoisted on her daddy’s shoulders. His wife was holding his hand. Their Mini carried the shopping, trailing behind them with a bland expression. The little girl was giggling, the sound dulled by the field repelling the rain. Cat felt a stab of envy. There had never been a moment like that in her childhood. She had created her own family, cobbled together with Mouse and Bee and Kade. But it wasn’t the same. She had never had the chance to be innocent. Once the family had passed the entrance of the alleyway, Cat turned and walked in the opposite direction.

She stuck close to the buildings, avoiding the drizzle, as she tried to blend into the crowd. Everything was orderly, calm, and very, very creepy. The itchy feeling was back. She couldn’t tell if it was from the vibe or if her watchers had picked up her trail.

It was nearly morning before Cat found somewhere to sleep. She’d found an empty basement below a grocer’s shop. Everything was fresh in District 4, no doubt some of it was still moving. Cat thought of the poor kittens, sleeping on sawdust in the window of the shop next door. She couldn’t tell if they were for pets or for dinner. Considering how weird everything was here, she wouldn’t be surprised if it was both.
The basement door lock was no match for her personal and it didn’t look like anyone had been down there in some time. It had a musty, unused smell. She guessed it had probably been built for food storage at one time. Now everything was either made fresh or ordered in exact quantities direct from farms or nano-vat growers, there was little use for storage.

She didn’t think anyone would find her now. The feeling of being watched had faded as she walked the streets. Cat snuggled up in the tiny closet just in case. Confined spaces made her feel safe. Probably something left over from when she was a kid. It was actually more of a cupboard than a closet. It was dark, but a safe kind of darkness. She shivered slightly at the coolness of the wood against her arm. Worn out from the chase, Cat drowsed.

It seemed just a moment later when she heard a short sharp sound outside. She was instantly alert. No sound followed. Maybe she had imagined it – something from a dream. She waited for a minute, listening. The closet had become beautifully warm while she hid. Her eyes started to close. She was still exhausted.

Cold air hit her as the door was whisked open. She gasped. There was just enough time to register a pair of large hands reach for her. A black bag was pulled over her head, smelling faintly of chemicals. She was wrenched from the closet and onto rough concrete. The cold air pricked her skin. And then she felt a sharp sting in her arm.

The drowsy feeling returned. She couldn’t stay awake. Before she passed out she heard a soft voice whisper.
‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’
Chapter 9

Mouse was worried. He had searched every square centimetre of the Market. First starting with all their usual places and then moving on to any of the stall holders who would give him the time of day. It was mid-evening before he was sure that Cat was not on any of the six levels. He had thoroughly worn out his welcome. The security guards were giving him dark looks.

By three in the morning he had visited all their most recent sleeping places and even the VR bar where he had met her earlier. They wouldn’t let him in. She was a regular and they were used to her meeting people there, but they hadn’t seen her for hours. The last place to go was Kade’s new safe-house.

He didn’t like facing Kade alone – especially since he had been on Cat’s case so much recently. Mouse had done work for Kade in the past, mostly software upgrades. Usually he left the talking, or arguing, up to Cat. Mouse didn’t like to admit it, but Kade intimidated him and he wasn’t likely to listen to a kid. He needed an ally – preferably someone who wouldn’t put up with Kade’s bullying.

An idea occurred to him. A couple of months ago Boadicea had given him an encrypted message code to use in emergencies when he was helping her upgrade her spi-eye. He found himself a corner on the street near some stairs, so he could keep a look-out for trouble.

He activated the screen on his personal and then one of the advanced communication programs he had written. His voice code was: ‘When the mouse laughs at the cat there
is a hole nearby’. Sure it was corny, using an old proverb, but they’d had a few chuckles over it. He liked working with Boadicea. She was serious and fun at the same time.

It didn’t take long for an acknowledgement beep to sound from his personal. Her face came up on the screen; the background showed that she was walking through her Roman Britain Domain, he saw a town on fire behind her.

‘What is it, Mouse?’ Boadicea could see that Mouse was upset, so she didn’t mention he had interrupted one of the busiest events in her cycle. On the heads-up display that overlay her left eye, his face was pale and dirty, with blue smudges under his eyes. It looked like he hadn’t slept all night. Although it was midmorning in her Domain, it was the early hours of the morning Outside.

‘Cat’s gone. It’s hours past when she was meant to meet me. She always calls. I looked,’ he swallowed convulsively. ‘I looked everywhere. Everywhere except the safe house, that is. I’m going there after this. I’m so worried, Bee. She said she thought someone was following her. And now…now...’ Mouse broke off, unable to speak around the lump in his throat. Boadicea watched him struggle to pull himself together. ‘Bee, I really need your help. Please say you’ll meet me at Kade’s in half an hour.’

‘Okay. I’ll be there. First I need to check in with Cerberus. I’ll see how he’s going with the archive search before we meet, so I can give you both an update.’

Mouse looked like he wanted to jump through the screen of his personal to hug her. Then, looking much older than his twelve years, he nodded to her. ‘Thank you, Bee. You’re the best. I owe you big time.’
Boadicea closed down the heads-up display. With a sigh, she allocated more resources to deal with the sack of Colchester, and made her way to the nearest portal.

***

Boadicea had barely come in the door before a cheerful voice called from her office, ‘Can I get you a coffee, Bee?’

Boadicea walked into the reception area. ‘Do you always have to ask me that?’ She complained.

‘It’s my job,’ Cerberus said, coming through the doorway.

She threw her coat on the rack. It made a satisfying rattle as it unbalanced and the wood hit against the wall. ‘It pisses me off.’

‘I can’t think why. I just feel this compulsion to ask. Must be part of my programming.’ From his dry tone she couldn’t tell if he was mocking himself or her. Damn. He really was a good bit of software – her masterpiece even. Just her luck, she’d made a Neo-AI with a weird sense of humour. Her previous attempts to create a less annoying assistant had been disastrous – she didn’t dare tinker with his programming now. Besides, she thought wryly, he had grown on her, much like fungus or a tumour would.

‘And while I’m at it, what are you doing in my office?’

‘I can access everything much easier in there. Besides, your chair is comfy.’
She hadn’t really noticed it before, but it was becoming apparent that he had evolved quite a lot over the last couple of years. She gave him a long piercing stare and smiled carefully. His eyes widened as he took a step back. ‘You know, you look really scary when you do that.’

‘Just reminding you who’s in charge.’ She didn’t even try to keep the smirk off her face.

‘Oh, you gracious lady. Definitely you. And at the front of the charge too, no doubt.’ He stood and pulled back her desk chair with a slight bow, gesturing her to sit with a flourish. His charm was hard to resist. Boadicea chuckled sardonically and stepped past him.

She examined the search Cerberus was completing. He excelled at this kind of work. The difference between him and other Neo-AIs was that while they processed data, he truly understood it, could intuitively see the patterns and find answers in unlikely places. He had tried the most likely archives first and found only very low probability data. The other archives seemed to have been picked at random, but she knew better.

‘Cerberus, can you see if there is something here in these media reports, they might not give us much, but at least we can eliminate them.’

‘Sure thing, oh glorious boss lady.’

Boadicea swore he had never taken anything seriously in his life. She ignored his bantering tone. ‘Also, I need to run a second major search. Cat is missing. Are you able to look into any public information, spi-eyes, ad-bots and such, see if they have seen her?’
The silence behind her was profound. She turned to see a look of incredulity on his face, ‘For real? Do you know how much data that is? Raw. Unfiltered. Unclassified data?’

Her lips pulled into a straight line. ‘Of course I know. But Cat’s important to me. Slow down the other search if you have to, but I’m getting a weird feeling they’re related. I’d do it myself, but I have to meet Mouse in half an hour real time… Oh, junk, I’m late.’ She had been so caught up, that she hadn’t paid attention.

‘How can the mighty AI, mistress of all her Domain, be late?’ He tried, unsuccessfully, to give her a look of interested innocence. It was amusing to watch him struggle to keep his face still. His eyes twinkled with mischief.

On a childish impulse, she stuck her tongue out at him. He grinned. ‘I’ll start the second search right away, my most illustriously laggard lady. For surely I will count the seconds until you return.’

She left. She knew when she was beaten.

***

It only took a moment to shift to her spi-eye, pull away from the data-port and flip on her hologram. By the sounds of things, it wasn’t a moment too soon.

‘You shouldn’t have let her go off on her own.’

‘What else was I supposed to do? Follow her around?’

‘Yes!’
'She would have noticed me in a heartbeat.'

Kade and Mouse stood in the middle of the apartment. They both had their hands clenched into fists at their sides and identical expressions. It was like looking at twins – if one twin were half the size of the other. Usually it was Cat on the end of one of Kade’s tongue-lashings rather than Mouse. From the determined look on his face, it was clear to Boadicea that Cat’s disappearance was helping Mouse lose some of his trademark timidity.

‘Why didn’t you come to see me earlier?’

‘I went to all the likely places first, didn’t I?’ Mouse’s tone implied Cat wouldn’t be caught dead at Kade’s place.

‘If you’d had my help, maybe I could have found her. I have over a century of experience to help me along. What do you have?’

‘Oh, my apologies ancient one. I’m sure you would have believed me.’ Mouse’s mock-humble tone turned to one of outright scorn. ‘At least I know where she lives, where she goes, what matters to her. All you do is yell at her for being unreliable. Now you say you would have dropped everything to look for her?’

‘I do not yell!’ Kade yelled.

This had gone on long enough. Boadicea stepped in front of them, blocking their view of each other. When she spoke, she made her voice calm and commanding – the same voice she used on her warriors.
‘Stop it. *Both* of you.’

Disgruntled, Kade threw himself onto the couch.

Mouse crossed his arms sullenly and muttered, ‘Century of experience, my ass. You’re not that old.’

Only Boadicea saw the flash of worry crease Kade’s face. She’d have to ask him about that later. Right now she had more important things to do.

She sent Kade off to the kitchen to get drinks. She had noticed people Outside were often calmer if they ate or drank something. Once they were all seated, she on a holographic stool and the other two on couches either side of her, she filled them in on the search that Cerberus was doing. Kade outlined how they could get people from the rebel movement organised to help gather information on where she’d gone. He discussed with her the possibility of getting more data-runners involved to follow up on Cat’s leads, but then dismissed it as unwise.

Mouse shifted in his seat as he shot murderous glances at Kade. He was obviously feeling left out, so Boadicea asked him to search through the last few runs Cat had made, as long as he didn’t put himself in danger.

Mouse looked as happy as a puppy with a new chew toy. Totally different from the resentment and anger he showed when throwing dark looks at Kade. ‘Actually, her last run was pretty bad,’ he said. ‘Her foot was all burnt. You know the one where she found that data on Freeze?’ He pulled out a thumb chip from his shirt pocket. ‘It had lots more data on it than she showed you.’
‘Why didn’t you tell us? She was probably tagged when she stole the data!’ Kade jumped up from his seat. Desperation overrode his normal calm. Cache 22 had to remain buried whatever the cost.

Boadicea gave him a quelling look, ‘Why? Probably because you spend too much time shouting and not enough time listening, Kade.’

Kade put out his hand imperiously to Mouse. ‘I want to look at the data.’

Mouse curled protectively over the chip. ‘No, I think Bee should have it.’

Kade paused, looking at them both for a moment through slitted eyes, clearly furious. He turned on his heel and slammed out of the apartment.

Boadicea sighed. Sometimes grown men were such babies.

Boadicea then smiled gently at Mouse, who was now trying not to cry. His face was screwed up. ‘I’m sorry, Bee. I didn’t know. I would have told someone sooner if I’d realised it was important.’

‘I know you would, Mouse. Everyone knows that you’d do anything for Cat.’ He looked a bit happier after that, but not by very much. Mouse brought out the mother in Boadicea sometimes, although her own daughters in VR were a lot tougher than him. She wished she could put her arm around him.

‘We’ll find her, Mouse. I promise.’
Chapter 10

Cat screamed. At least she thought she did. When she opened her eyes the darkness was absolute. She wasn’t completely sure her eyes were open. The sound of her breathing was loud. Her arms and legs were tied to the bed – she could feel the straps digging into her. The air was cold, but the metal rails around her bed were even colder. Somehow, although she hadn’t been tied to a bed then, she knew it was just like that time under the school hall, when she was a kid. Please don’t let it be them. Please.

They would come back. He would come back. They would grab her, she would smell their stinking breath and their heavy, grasping, brutal hands. She struggled, the restraints cutting into her wrists and ankles. She tried to be quiet. He would come back, if He heard her….

She heard footsteps outside the door. He was coming. The room closed in on her. She whimpered. The door opened. The light blazed. She was blind.


***

Awareness came back slowly. She heard voices as if they were in another room. A band of pain across her forehead was the only sensation, the rest of her body was numb.
She tried to move – to wiggle her toes, click her fingers, lick her lips, anything. She couldn’t even open her eyes. Someone was talking – she strained to hear.

‘She’s coming out of it. You didn’t give her enough suppressants.’

‘Is she in pain?’ Another voice, one she thought she recognised.

‘Some parts of the process are no doubt uncomfortable. It is necessary.’

‘I’ll pump some more neuro-suppressants into the drip. Is your code integrating properly?’

‘Yes, most satisfactory. I have improved the source program significantly. I believe it will enhance the ability for her to adapt to her new personality.’

‘Should you be changing the program, what about…?’

A cold feeling spread through her chest. Something like ice passed behind her eyes – beyond any description of pain. Everything else was gone. No sounds. No thoughts. No sight. No touch.

Screaming.

Screaming.

Screaming.

Floating.

A strange vibration, almost a sound, shuddered through her body.
When the world came back into focus, she saw a network of stars above her. One flashed brighter than the others. A voice she didn’t recognise screamed inside her mind. Escape! She sped toward it. As she got closer, the star transformed into a door. Grasping the handle, she pushed against it, putting all her weight behind the effort. It opened a crack and tried to suck her through to the other side.

She felt it pulling on her. There was a sharp pain, but her body was no longer shuddering. A hole had opened inside her. Only part of her had gone through to the other side. She could hear something through the crack in the door – the drone of insects.

Then the door slammed shut.

***

Cat woke up. A sandy haired man was bending over her. Her head felt cold. Tubes were coming out of her arm. When she tried to sit up, she still couldn’t make anything move – couldn’t feel much below her shoulders. The man was making an adjustment to a needle stuck in her throat. As he checked the tube attached to it, she could see the familiar thick pink nano solution inside. Everyone who went Inside had to top up about once a year, but she had never needed more than a few drops at a time. Her eyes drifted to the side where a whole bag of the stuff was hanging from a hook. What were they doing – replacing her blood with nanos? She felt dizzy and sick.

Vertigo hit her.

She could see her body on the bed.
She was looking down at her body!

There was an inaudible thud, the feeling of it pounded at her chest, an echo of it choked up her throat as she arrived back inside her skin. The kind-faced man was stroking her forehead as he looked intently into her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak; only a croak emerged.

‘Everything’s okay. I’m Dan. Dan Logovich.’

Dan grabbed a squeeze bottle of water and put it to her lips. She sucked on it gratefully, despite the revolting taste in her mouth. When she’d had a few slurps, she tried to talk again.

‘What’s going on?’ Her mouth felt weird and her voice crackled.

‘We won’t hurt you. You’re safe.’ He averted his eyes as he spoke. Dan didn’t lie very well. Cat would have been amused if things hadn’t been so awful.

‘What’s going on here?’ It was Him. His cold voice came from outside her line of sight.

‘The subject woke. I needed to reduce the flow of nanos. Her cerebral cortex was overheating.’

‘You know that there is to be no interaction with the subject. It might affect the results. I can already see there is an imbalance across the adaptability programming. We will discuss this later…at length.’
The speaker came into view. His face was unlined, stretched over his skull. She saw a faint row of bumps down the side of his jaw – which seemed familiar somehow. His eyes were dark brown and his hair looked wet – she could see it still held precise comb marks. The dark eyes bored into hers. These last few years Cat had rarely been afraid. Angry yes, sad or worried, but not afraid. The look in his eyes changed that. Now she felt a recurrence of what she had felt after her last data-run. Sweat stood out on her face despite the cold and she felt a ghostly twinge in her foot, remembering the pain. It was not the promise of pain in his eyes which made her want to cry out, it was the helplessness of her fear.

He stared at her for a long time. The sweat cooled on her body.

On some unspoken cue he leaned forward and said in a surprisingly pleasant baritone, ‘Go to sleep. Now.’

Just as if she’d been programmed – she was gone.
Chapter 11

Boadicea was not in a good mood. Cat was missing. Kade was being a bastard and she was caught in the firing line.

Taking the long way to her office in Gumshoe gave her time to cool off; by the time she reached the agency she was more worried than angry. She found Cerberus, sitting with hands placed on the data-table in reception, scanning through archives. He smiled up at her mischievously, ‘How about some coff…’

She cut him off brusquely, ‘What have you found? Tell me you’ve found something.’

Cerberus sucked air in between his teeth, a habit which got on Boadicea’s nerves at the best of times. ‘Very little yet, but I think we’re getting closer.’ He gestured her over to the data-table. Boadicea plunged her hand into the code, getting a direct feed, a rush of data flowing through her. Cat had been seen by several security bots as she raced around the streets and shops. What was Cat doing in a dress?

The footage followed Cat through a club and then uptown, but lost her as she entered an apartment building near the gates to District 4. There were some weird traces folded into the code of the security bots which made her scalp prickle.

On a hunch, she compared the data Mouse had given her to the results from Cerberus’ archive search. Some of the patterns matched. Boadicea was sure she was missing something. For the thousandth time she cursed her programmers for not giving her
enough lateral thinking ability to help her in these situations. Without it she could get a hunch, but couldn’t follow through with a leap in intuitive thinking.

‘Cerberus. We have to do better.’

‘So what, I’m not good enough for you anymore?’ His tone was jovial, but there was an edge to it.

She stood. ‘It’s not that you’re not good enough. You’re just not enough. We need help.’

‘So you’re going to go running to your sisters for support.’ His tone was light, with only his eyes reacting to what she realised was a feeling of betrayal.

‘Yes. I get the feeling I’m running out of time,’ Boadicea continued blithely.

Cerberus’ face was carefully neutral as he turned back to the search. His hand snaked out and twisted the dial of the radio mounted on the wall. Jazz wafted out, calming and melancholy, a slight buzz, like static, sounded in the background. Irritably, Cerberus switched it off and hunched his shoulders. Realising what she’d said, she promised herself that she’d make it up to him later. It would only hurt his feelings more if she tried now. Feeling even worse than when she arrived, she closed the door softly behind her.

It was bad manners to kick a dog when he was down.

***
Alexandria teemed with dust and people and smells. Boadicea was at a disadvantage in her sisters’ Domains. It was the only time she wasn’t in control. As far as she was concerned, the experience had little to recommend it. One of her sisters had theorised that this was how people who lived Outside felt all the time. Despite sometimes feeling like a prison, her Domains spared her that.

She had chosen to dress in the style of the Domain, selecting carefully so that she wouldn’t piss off her sister AI, Hatshepsut, more than turning up unannounced would already.

Without an invitation, she had to travel the long way. Sun-browned, hairless bodies made her feel like a pale shadow as she made her way down the street. Without the time to build an appropriate avatar, one that would blend in with the Domain, she’d donned clothing which marked her as high class. Hopefully, this would mean no one would try to stop her. Sometimes players could be harsh with people, or AIs, who broke the mood of the Domain.

Some people stared at her as she passed, many of them naked. No doubt the nudity was historically accurate, she thought testily, but it made her nervous. Usually she didn’t see this many naked people in public unless she was going into battle.

It was the height of bad manners to step into another AI’s Domain without permission. She had tried to contact Hatshepsut on her way over, without luck. The lack of shortcuts meant she would take nearly an hour to reach the palace. Fortune favoured the prepared
as much as the brave, and luckily there were a few tricks that she’d been saving for an emergency.

Making sure no one saw her, she took a shortcut. Hatshepsut’s prime, Senmut, had shown it to her last time she was here. She found out later that there was a less than savoury reason for his generosity. Boadicea remembered the feel of his slimy lips against her knuckles. He had told her that he could be a better friend to her than Kade. Later, he had sworn it was not meant in any kind of sexual way. She had reassured him that neither was the kick to his groin, as he lay gasping on the floor.

Hatshepsut would have known as soon as Boadicea stepped into her Domain. Most of her sisters would greet her with a guide out of courtesy, a favour she always returned. She wondered if the absence of a guide was a petty revenge related to her rebuff of Senmut’s advances. The rather bizarre details of their intimate relationship were an open secret amongst AIs.

The shortcut took her directly to a niche near Hatshepsut’s chambers. There were unmistakable sounds of passion coming from inside. She grinned. At least she wouldn’t have to wait for Hatshepsut to arrive – it sounded like she just had. Boadicea made her footfalls deliberately loud as she came through the entrance to the antechamber.

She cleared her throat, ‘I hope I’m not interrupting anything.’

‘Boadicea? Can you come back later, we’re a bit busy.’ Hatshepsut’s voice was low and husky, muffled by the linen sheets over her head.
'No Hat, I really can’t.’ She walked into the bedroom. They were sprawled on the bed. Senmut made little effort to cover himself as he automatically leered at her across the room. She smiled at him nastily. He sat up with a start, no doubt remembering their last conversation. After scooping up his clothes and clutching them to his crotch, he scurried out a side door. Was she a bad person if that made her cheerful?

‘So, you think that you can just come into my Domain without my permission?’

Unselfconsciously, Hatshepsut extracted herself from the tangled mess of her bed and walked naked to a nearby chest where her clothes had been discarded. She pulled on a long, white, pleated skirt and jewellery which hid her most obvious assets. She left the false beard and wig on the stand, they were itchy and she saved them for formal occasions.

As her sister turned toward her, Boadicea let desperation show on her face. Hatshepsut liked to pretend she was a bitch, but she was always the first to help her sisters when they asked it. The Egyptian queen’s face shifted from one of irritation to concern. ‘Tell me what you need.’

She listened intently as Boadicea poured out the whole story. Hatshepsut had her own attachments to people Outside, Senmut one of them, so she understood the mixture of helplessness and frustration Boadicea felt at Cat’s disappearance. In fact, Hatshepsut seemed unusually focused and serious. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one who was going through some changes.
‘You’ll need more than me if you’re doing that wide a search. You should ask Eleanor. She has the right kind of precise mind for this kind of job, almost as good as mine.’ She gave Boadicea a sharp look. ‘I’m not asking her though. That’s your job.’

Boadicea resigned herself to another long trek. This time she wouldn’t even try to call ahead. Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen of the Franks, never answered messages.
Chapter 12

Boadicea wasn’t looking forward to asking this sister for a favour. Standing in the waiting room of a gatehouse between their domains, she spent a few seconds mentally preparing to see her. Boadicea’s medieval dress, heavily embroidered and beaded, was spotless and belted modestly around her waist and over her hips. Eleanor was a stickler for detail and it didn’t pay to irritate her if she was going to succeed in getting her to help. Boadicea wasn’t really intimidated by her sister – at least not very much. Hatshepsut had once commented Eleanor’s tongue could strip paint. It was thought to be only a slight exaggeration.

‘Stop procrastinating.’ Kade’s voice sounded loud in the gatehouse room. He still hadn’t gotten over his fit of pique from the argument with Mouse. Boadicea had asked him to accompany her into Eleanor’s domain because Eleanor seemed to like him. That could be useful. Boadicea would use any trick she could think of if it helped her chances of finding Cat.

‘I could be organizing food distribution downtown, writing my next transmission, even getting some sleep. Instead I’m here babysitting AIs.’ He muttered as he paced across the room, resplendent in his medieval courtier avatar.

Ignoring him, Boadicea looked around the gatehouse. It was quiet. Normally there was a bustle of activity in and out of Eleanor’s Domain. Medieval Europe was in high demand.
Something more than nervousness was making Boadicea worried. Her gut instinct gave a sharp pang of doubt. Not bad for someone who didn’t really have a stomach.

Kade made an impatient sound.

‘Alright already. I’m done. Let’s go.’ She placed her hand on the entrance gate to the Domain. It took longer than usual to cycle through to green. Not being able to control the Domain around her was very humbling. Cerberus would have said it was good for her to see how the other half lived. She remained unconvinced.

Boadicea grabbed Kade’s arm, irritated with both of them for reasons she couldn’t really name. She swung the gate open and pulled him through.

Snow swirled over rose bushes in full bloom. In front of them buildings flickered through country village, castle, hunting lodge and then became a sprawling garden.

Boadicea could hear the humming of bees despite the snow. She should have listened to her non-existent gut. There was something seriously wrong in Eleanor’s Domain.

She looked behind her to see the gatehouse door was firmly shut.

Kade followed her gaze. ‘At least we have a way out.’

Her forehead wrinkled. ‘As long as it stays put.’

Despite the sound of the wind rushing through the bushes, they both heard someone quietly moan. Boadicea strode through the low hedges, Kade hurrying behind her.

Richard the Lionheart, Eleanor’s son, was lying half-trapped beneath a fountain.

Somehow, the code of Richard’s avatar had merged with the undercode of the fountain.
The heavy stone merged with his flesh, turning it red and giving it the consistency of sponge. Worse, his skin had turned to stone, his sculptured avatar rendering him as an bizarrely garbed Greek god. His joints clicked like stones as he struggled weakly. She pressed her lips together over her nausea. What she was seeing shouldn’t have been possible, but then, everything about the chaos in her sister’s Domain seemed impossible. She felt her world tilt on its axis. Mentally shaking herself into action, she knelt beside him.

Boadicea looked into the undercode and realised that someone was still inside the avatar. He must have been in agony.

Then she did a double take. Freck! She wasn’t meant to be able to see the undercode of her sister’s Domain. Where was her sister?

‘My Queen. Oh, my queen.’

Boadicea crouched down beside him. She brushed hair from his sweaty forehead while she tried to separate the avatar from the fountain in the undercode. Kade was uncharacteristically quiet. Out of the corner of her eye she could see his glance kept nervously straying to the gatehouse.

She returned her attention to Richard. ‘What happened here?’

Richard’s eyes rolled. ‘I got them out, my Queen. I saved them all like I promised. You said you would be fine.’

‘Richard?’
He struggled to raise his head. ‘But when I came back you were gone. They’d swarmed all over you. Hungry mouths. The swarm. Hungry, stinging mouths.’ His head lolled and a tear trickled down the side of his face. ‘They ate you. They ate you and you’re gone. How can you be here when they ate you?’ He slumped in her arms.

Boadicea was worried that whatever had killed Eleanor might still be around. She was not afraid for herself particularly – warrior queens dealt with death every day – Kade was a different matter. She worried that she wouldn’t be able to protect him if this swarm thing attacked them too.

It was several tense minutes before she finally managed to pull Richard from under the fountain. She saw with sick fascination that part of his leg was gone. Blood spilled onto the snow-covered grass. An almost metallic hum sounded loudly nearby. Maybe the audio filters had broken down.

She heard Kade retching over the side of a flowerbed.

Something landed on her neck. It stung her but she barely noticed the pain. She brushed it away. It was such a small thing compared with the horror she held in her lap.

Boadicea hoped the filters were still working well enough so that Richard’s body Outside didn’t copy the damage to his leg. Then she looked behind the avatar, deep into the code, and realised it didn’t matter anymore. He had followed his Queen. He was gone.

Gently she laid his body beside the fountain. She stood. She brushed the skirts of her dress. She turned and saw Kade had passed out. His arms were tangled amongst the
sweet peas. One of his hands had raised bites across the palm. A layer of snow already rimed his clothes. She brushed the vomit from his tunic, immune to the smell after years on the battlefield. She picked him up, cradling him in her arms. It was time to leave.

Something that looked like an insect crawled along the back of her tunic.

Boadicea turned and walked toward the gatehouse. On her face, she betrayed nothing. That was on the outside. Inside, she shook with fury. It felt like blood rushing hot in her veins.


She would find whoever had done this to her sister. They would know pain. They would pay with much pain. They would regret ever thinking they could visit so much horror and devastation and chaos on one of her sisters. *No one* killed an AI and got away with it.

She passed out just inside the gatehouse.
Chapter 13

‘Subject Thirteen is responding significantly better than previous subjects.’ Norton’s clipped, yet oddly melodious voice echoed against the polished surfaces of the lab.

‘Excellent. It may have something to do with the amount of time she has spent in Inside from a young age. It seems appropriate that you should be using someone addicted to VR for this work. Soon we will be able to control the AI network with our own AIs displacing the ungoverned and independent AIs and winning VR over to our cause. We will have a direct ticket to the hearts and minds of everyone across the districts.’ A warm voice spoke from the data-screen. Norton knew it wasn’t the Citizen’s real voice, just as the pretty young woman the screen showed was not what she looked like either.

The Citizens did not trust him with their identities. He did not care, as long as they kept funding him and left him to his work. Instead, they had interrupted him at a crucial stage of the project. He could feel anger like bile bubbling in his stomach. He did not let any of that show on his face. He would not give them the satisfaction.

‘Yes. I have also come to that conclusion. The records we recovered from the archive fragments suggest that the original scientists looked for a certain flexibility of mind and intelligence.’

‘Weren’t you one of the original scientists?’

‘Yes. I was involved as a graduate researcher. It is my personal opinion that they did not discover the full reach of possibilities that could be achieved with Artificial Intelligence,
as they focused too much on the wellbeing of the subjects. My project has focused on the outcome. Losses are regrettable, but necessary to the process.’ They would not see what the losses had cost him. Control, it was about control. He would not give them the upper hand.

‘Necessary or not, it has certainly been expensive.’ Her eyes narrowed slightly. ‘Were their subjects also young women? You know those criteria have made this process substantially more risky for all involved.’ The woman on the screen leant forward, looking intently at Norton.

The temperature of Norton’s voice dropped, its resonance thinned. ‘Yes. Women have more connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, than men. Young women are considered to have more flexible minds during their adolescent years as the connections in the brain are still developing. It was these two factors which were deemed essential for the personality integration and nano matrix growth. The archive data has…’

Sitting back in her chair, she held up her hands to stop him. ‘I was not accusing you of anything. I was simply curious.’ She smiled at him insincerely. ‘What is the status of the latest subject?’

‘The brain matrix is taking the nanos well. Neural pathways are nearly mapped. Some spontaneous VR connection has already been demonstrated by the subject. The subject will be introduced to the closed system tomorrow.’
The screen image smiled again. ‘The Citizens are delighted you are making headway with the project, Norton. We very much look forward to seeing your working prototype in the very near future.’ Norton found the veiled threat insulting.

His face remained expressionless. ‘Thank you. Your interest is appreciated.’

She shot him a shrewd look. ‘Yes, I’m sure it is.’ She clicked her tongue twice and the screen went blank.

Cat listened to the conversation. She had craned her neck to see the screen. Unfortunately, Norton’s head had been in the way. It was a small victory that she could even move her head, the rest of her body still wouldn’t respond. She was so tired.

The distinctive double click sounded again. Norton had reactivated the data-screen and was examining a complicated diagram. She lifted her head a little too far and a needle dug into her throat. An alarm near her ear started beeping. Cat quickly composed herself by closing her eyes and calming her breathing. If he knew she was awake, she’d never find out what was going on.

There was the quiet tread of feet moving toward her. She felt him lean over her. His hands were unexpectedly gentle as he adjusted the needle in her neck; she could feel the coolness spread into her face. She made herself relax. If she could pretend this was just another run. Be calm, she told herself. Her pulse slowed.

Apparently satisfied, he returned to the other end of the lab. She had a feeling he would be watching more closely now.
Soon the increased feed through the drip pushed her under and she slept.

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Without even opening her eyes, Cat could tell she was alone. The surfaces in the lab amplified any sounds. She felt helpless. Her numb body felt as if it belonged to someone else. She doubted anyone knew where she was. Buck up, kiddo, she’d often said to Mouse, don’t let the bastards win. In light of that philosophy, there had to be something she could do.

She mulled over the conversation she had overheard before her last bout of involuntary unconsciousness. Norton had said ‘the subject’ (whom she assumed was hers truly) had ‘spontaneously connected’, she assumed he meant ‘Jumped’ into VR. Maybe, with a little effort, she could Jump In deliberately.

She had never tried it that way. If Mouse wasn’t shadowing her, then she’d used a timer or manual switch. Norton had also said it was a closed system. The thought sparked a memory of the firewall in the cube she had hacked. She would bet every last one of her best codes, that this was all part of the same thing.

If that was the case, where was Freeze? Norton had said there were ‘regrettable losses’, what the freck did that mean? No doubt she would have a personal tour of what it meant, if she didn’t get started on finding a way out. She put the idea of rescuing Freeze away with a stab of guilt. First she had to rescue herself.

Cat imagined she was turning the switch to her data-port. She visualised a timer counting down. The minutes ticked by as she engaged in every trick and every mental
gymnastic she could think up. How had she done it before? Then she hit on the idea of imagining that she was looking down at herself on the bed. She felt a weird dislocation as she was briefly in two places at once. Encouraged, she kept trying. Her consciousness flickered back and forth for several minutes until somehow she clicked over.

She only realised she didn’t have a body Inside when she tried to do a little dance of joy. She didn’t let that get to her though. Inside, she wasn’t tied to a bed. There were no hyper-fastidious little evil geniuses experimenting with her brain. On the Inside, she was the best damn data-runner that District 5 had ever seen.

It was still going to be tricky. She was in a closed system. Without her toolkit, she was counting on years of sneaky experience. If she could just get the message out, Mouse or Boadicea might be able to trace it.

A vague memory surfaced, hadn’t there been a door last time? Outside the cube, up in the sky? Through the thick firewall, none of the stars seemed to sparkle any more brightly than any others. This was definitely the high-security cube where she’d tracked Freeze though, the firewall was unmistakeable. Insubstantial, she didn’t set off any alarms this time. Cat mapped each part of the cube as she went. She rummaged through the data until she found a flag which showed her where the project data was stored. She crowed loudly with triumph, the sound translating into bright red ripples through the data.

Cat linked into it and the research section was wide open to her in seconds. The world exploded in a reassuring burst of data. She bathed in it; wrapped in the ebb and flow. It
was as if a part of her woke up, sunk in deep, using all her skills as a runner to skim the data, find the patterns.

Predictably, the most interesting information was the most heavily encrypted. Using a cobbled-together tool, she picked away at it until it unravelled.

Norton’s notes on the project were extensive. And someone had been there before her, looking at a few of the less encrypted files. She traced the intrusion to Norton’s assistant. Naughty, naughty, going where he wasn’t authorised. A trill of amusement rippled through the data stream.

The assistant was probably the blonde man who had given her water. Cat wondered if he might help her. Then she remembered the sound of his voice. *He* had been the one who had caught her. It had been his voice whispering that lame apology as he stuck drugs in her arm. She mentally (as if she could do anything else without a body!) suppressed a groan. No help there then.

Dredging through early records she could see that Norton had briefly considered Dan for the position of test subject. He was only crossed off the list when Norton discovered from the archive material that test subjects had to be female. It was interesting, but not particularly useful in helping her to escape.

Maybe the archive data would give her a better idea. It certainly gave her something, nausea came first to mind. After just a few minutes flicking through the data, all the pieces tumbled into place. Cat wondered if a disembodied spirit could vomit. The code roiled around her.
Norton was going to kill her. He was going to suck up her mind into VR and leave an empty husk behind. She would be even worse than someone who was mindwiped. Their personality was just temporarily suppressed, hers would be gone altogether. She wouldn’t even be herself once completely Inside. Norton was going to overlay a completely different personality as well.

The worst part of it was, that was the nicest thing that could happen to her. If he failed, she would end up like Freeze. Dead. Her body vaporised to eliminate the evidence.

Forcing herself to look deeper she was outraged anew. Boadicea had been created this way. The file from the archives went into revolting detail about what she had suffered before the transformation had taken place. And there was one name that kept appearing on all of the reports. No! The bastard. The lying, betraying, frecking bastard!

Cat ran. She ran back to her body. She ran away from the truth, because she saw now that everything she had believed in was a lie. One name had appeared on all of Boadicea’s lab reports.

Kade.
Chapter 14

Boadicea opened her eyes. She was lying on a couch. Her vision cleared and she saw she was in her Gumshoe office. The fragrance of beeswax and smog would have told her if the familiar feel of leather or the antiquated telephone – mysteriously sitting on the floor – hadn’t given it away. She felt weird. There had never been a time in her memory that she had been unconscious, and being an AI, her memory was very, very good.

She tried to sit up. Cerberus hurried over from behind the desk to help her. The desk, she noticed, had been cleared and Kade was lying limply across it. Frecking junk! How did Kade get here? Gumshoe was meant to be AI only. Now Kade was sprawled in her office, and from the look of things, still inside his avatar.

After the room stopped spinning, she stood and leant heavily against her assistant for a moment. She imagined that she could smell alcohol on his breath as he wrapped an arm about her shoulder.

‘How are you feeling?’ It was the first time she’d ever heard him really worried.

‘Never mind that.’ She pushed away from him and began checking Kade’s vital signs. ‘What the freck happened?’

‘You just appeared. I came in to use the data wall and you were passed out on the floor on top of Kade.’ A hint of disquiet had crept into his voice. ‘It was creepy and bizarre and a whole bunch of other words that basically amount to, weird.’
‘You didn’t hear us drop in?’ His guilty look suggested that he had been absent from his post. No doubt he had paid a visit to the club on Fifty-second Street. He seemed addicted to the music. To be fair, the jazz clubs had been coming up with some truly original songs. Cerberus had even caught her humming *It’s Only a Plastic Moon*. Also, if she didn’t know it was impossible, she’d think he was tipsy. She held up her hand. Everyone deserved a break now and then and while he should have told her, there were more immediate concerns. ‘No, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Instead you can tell me why Kade is still unconscious.’

For once, Cerberus actually seemed to be without a ready answer or witty comeback. ‘I don’t know, Bee. I’ve never dealt with an avatar before.’

Boadicea poked around the code in Kade’s medieval persona. It was acting weird. It seemed to have bonded to him. It should still have been possible to hard boot him from the system. Yet, something was stopping her from sending an emergency disconnect to his data-port.

She rubbed her hand over the back of her neck as she inspected the code.

‘Don’t blame yourself, Cerberus. I can’t log him out either.’

Kade was so still. A chill went through her on remembering how Richard looked as he died.

She pulled up his avatar’s activation system on her data-screen. It was corrupted. No wonder he was so still. Without the controls it was like he was in a sensory deprivation
chamber. No data going in or out. He couldn’t feel or see or hear past the code of the simulacrum of the medieval courtier he was wearing.

She pulled up the file on the avatar program she had been working on. She had copied it from her other Domain. She wrote sections of it into Kade’s avatar, paying close attention to where the new code meshed with the original undamaged program. Within a few minutes she was able to reactivate his avatar, if not log him out.

She bent over him. The unnatural stillness was gone. He was breathing. Cerberus helped her move him to the couch. It might take a while for him to recover.

Boadicea turned back to the data-screen. ‘So, show me what you’ve come up with in-between downing martinis and ogling women at the club.’

‘You first. I think my finding you on the floor of your office with your head resting on Kade’s crotch deserves an explanation.’ His eyes danced. She rolled her eyes back at him. He wasn’t going to forget this story in a hurry, crotch or no crotch.

‘Hatshepsut suggested I get Eleanor to help with the archive search.’

Cerberus gave her a hard look. He hadn’t quite forgiven her for suggesting he couldn’t do the job on his own.

‘You know how she abhors using the data-screen to talk, so to butter her up I went to visit. Kade was with me because well…’

‘She’d like to invite him to her dressing chamber,’ he said dryly.
‘Um, something like that.’ Boadicea scratched her neck where the bee had stung her. It was surprising how level her voice was when she added, ‘She won’t be doing that now. Eleanor is dead.’

‘Dead? But you’re immortal. We’re immortal. We’re programs, for pity’s sake.’

Boadicea looked at him sadly. ‘Everything dies eventually, Cerberus. I always wondered if we had an expiration date.’ His eyes had a slightly panicked look which she tried to reassure. ‘Besides, this wasn’t a natural death. Richard was there, he told me that something ate her. It had to be a virus, or some other thing that can mess with the code, and those things don’t just happen – someone makes them.’

‘What happened to all the people?’

‘Richard said he got them all out, but he didn’t make it himself.’

‘Someone died Inside? What about the filters?’

‘Gone, just like Eleanor. I knew for sure when I was able to manipulate the under-code in her Domain.’ Cerberus slumped against the wall. They were both silent for a minute.

‘Junk! Did you check that you didn’t bring anything back with you?’

‘ Wouldn’t the Gumshoe filters have picked it up?’ She thought about their unconventional entry into the domain. ‘You’re right! I don’t know if we even came through the filters at all.’
Boadicea sat on the edge of her desk while Cerberus ran a diagnostic program through both her Domains. No one would be able to enter either of them for several minutes. The filters would be on emergency settings, no deaths or injuries, but everything else would be permitted. She just hoped none of the children visiting Roman Britain saw anything they shouldn’t. She watched him work.

‘That wasn’t enough. I have to do you too.’ He was completely serious; his intent face displayed none of the mischief it usually held. She was surprised to find she missed it.

Cerberus turned the diagnostic program on her. She had the uncomfortable feeling of bugs crawling under her skin. Boadicea tried to distract herself by thinking about something else.

She focused on the familiar puzzle of being unique among her sisters by having two Domains. It shouldn’t have been possible, but she had made it happen anyway. Was she a freak? AIs and their Domains were generally considered to be one and the same. In reality, AIs were only enmeshed in their Domains, not a part of them. They were entwined to such a degree that the distinction was rarely made. She had noticed herself become more detached from Roman Britain when she created Gumshoe. The gap had only grown since then. Still, she wondered why she hadn’t defaulted to her original Domain when she was whisked away from Medieval Europe. Maybe home really was where the heart was, as the saying went.

‘You have some new weird code in your system. I can’t see if it was doing anything to you and I think I got it all. As soon as I filtered it, it stopped working. I checked Kade
too – you were both infected with it.’ He closed down the program. ‘I’d like to run some
tests to see what it does.’ He turned to the data-screen. She poked his arm, relieved he
was done, but not willing to let him start something else before she got an update.

‘Ah. Ah. Ah. Not so fast. What has the search turned up?’ She wagged her finger at him
as she sat down and propped her feet on the desk. Sometimes it was good to be the boss.
She scratched her neck absently.

‘Well, I know how they caught Cat. She was tagged when she did the last run looking
for Freeze. They were smart too. They didn’t tag the data, knowing it might be passed
on. They put the bug on her personal.’

‘So that wherever she went they’d know? They didn’t even need to chase her in person.
They could have just sent spi-bots to follow her.’

‘Bang on. I don’t know who scooped her up, but once I was able to see what they’d
done, I could see everywhere she went. She stopped for a few hours in one place in
District 4.’ He brought up a map with the grocer’s store marked in red. ‘Then the signal
went dead.’

‘She could be anywhere now.’

Cerberus looked glumly at the floor for a moment, and then his face brightened.

‘That’s it!’ He leapt up. Clearing the data-screen he pulled the tag up, showing the code
on the screen.
‘What is it, Cerberus? Tell me what’s going on, my nerves are already shot and this isn’t helping.’

He ignored her and pulled up the data he had already received from Hatshepsut, drilling down to the parts he wanted and copying them onto the screen.

Boadicea had never seen him this animated. He finished by grabbing the results of his archive search. Overlaying them on the screen she could see what had made Cerberus so excited. The encryption patterns matched.

Cerberus was almost dancing on the spot. ‘It all seems to come back to Cache 22. It was some kind of secret project early last century. I could only find vague references to it, but even by today’s standards the file protection is some serious junk. Looks like it was written by some kind of genius.’

A groan sounded from the couch. Kade muttered. She went and crouched down beside him. His arm twitched and eyes half opened to look up at her. ‘Oh love, I’m sorry, I’m sorry I did that to you. You thought you could help our research. It was meant to be safe. We didn’t know. We couldn’t have known.’

‘What are you talking about, Kade? What couldn’t you know?’ Boadicea grabbed his hand and held it tightly in both of hers. She could feel the muddled code of the avatar hemming him in. She ran some background tests and realised the temperature of his body had shot up to a high fever – probably in reaction to the confused sensory input he was experiencing. Over $41^0$ – humans started hallucinating at temperatures like that.
Here she was, joking around with Cerberus while her oldest friend lay in a stupor on the couch. Way to go, Bee, she thought to herself acerbically.

Behind her Cerberus continued to work on distilling more information from the archives. Just because he knew when not to interfere, didn’t mean he wasn’t listening.

Kade grasped their hands together pulling her close. He smiled at her radiantly. She had never seen such an expression on his face, it made him seem younger. He seemed to think she was someone else. ‘I couldn’t know that making an AI would kill you. I don’t know how you have returned to me and I don’t care. You chose Boadicea because she was your favourite. You have to believe me. Please. We didn’t think you or any of the other girls would be harmed. You have to believe I loved you. I would have done anything to save you – my daughter, my little girl. We didn’t realise until it was too late.’ His hands were sweaty, his fingers biting into her palm. She tried to let the pain distract her. She really didn’t want to hear any more. The grief in Kade’s voice was terrible to hear. ‘It was too late. We were too late to save any of you. We tried.’ He seemed to go further into himself, sinking down into his memories, ‘How could I have been so arrogant? We were so confident of success we put you all through at once. I wiped your mind. My own daughter… Never see your eyes look up at me… I killed you. Gone. I killed you.’ Tears spilled down his face as Boadicea jerked away. Kade groped around, still trapped in his nightmare delirium. She looked at Cerberus, whose jaw had dropped almost to his chest and face had a nasty green tinge.

‘He killed someone to make you?’ He looked at her pleadingly. ‘Please don’t tell me you did that to make me.’
Boadicea was numb. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. ‘No. I made you as a Neo-AI. You became an AI all on your own. Unlike me.’ Her voice cracked, ‘Some poor innocent had to die to make me. Kade’s daughter.’

She looked dispassionately at Kade, numbness spread through her body. He was shaking and crying, still trapped in his own little hell. Well, she’d leave him there if she could. It was all too much to handle right now. ‘Make sure when he wakes up properly he logs out right away. I don’t want him here any longer than absolutely necessary.’ Cerberus would understand her need to get away. If he didn’t, then she would add it to the list of things to fix later.

She had more important things to do than deal with her father.

Cache 22.
Chapter 15


Cat’s heart thumped as she opened her eyes. She was back in her own body. The hospital antiseptic smell was like a kick to her adrenal gland. Dan shuffled into view. ‘Finally. You’re awake.’

‘Much good it does me.’ Her voice was thick. She rattled her arm in the restraint and turned her head away from him. It hurt to talk through cracked lips.

He brought her some water, holding a straw to her mouth. She sucked greedily. He pulled it away after a few moments. It spilled on her chest. ‘Not too much at once’

‘If you loosened my restraints I could hold it myself.’ Her voice was muffled and sore, she tried clearing her throat.

He grabbed a towel. ‘And you wouldn’t try anything, right?’

‘Of course I’d try something, I was just hoping you’d let me.’ She could barely manage a whisper. Dan blotted at her chest with a dry wash cloth. The dampness of the spill made her shiver in the cold room.

Leaning closer over her he said, ‘I would, except that we’re being watched.’ He gestured surreptitiously at the ceiling.

He tossed the cloth aside and put the straw back to her lips. She gave it a few more pulls, finishing the glass.
‘What if I told you I had proof that you were meant to be one of the original test subjects?’ Cat rasped.

‘I found that out a while ago. Maybe it would have been better than what happened instead.’ Dan brushed a strand of hair away from her face as he spoke.

‘What do you mean?’ Cat searched Dan’s face for a clue.

Dan just shook his head.

She pondered for a moment whether she should trust him. What the hell, it wasn’t as if she was spoilt with choices. ‘I saw your handiwork when I hacked the data cube. You left traces all over the place. Sloppy.’ She said this as lightly as her strained vocal cords would let her.

‘Really?’ he said mildly. ‘I wanted to know more about the project. Not that it will do me any good. They brought me here because the Citizens found out that my sister and I were living in District 4 under false IDs. They said they’d leave her alone if I helped with the project and kept my mouth shut.’ He turned away from her to fill the glass again.

‘Your sister must be so proud.’

‘Not really. She fitted the subject profile. She was Subject Nine. She was the second girl they made me watch being tortured.’ He seemed reluctant to talk about it. He lifted the cup in her direction, ‘More?’

She shook her head. ‘So why do you stay? And why bother talking to me?’
‘Fear, I guess. And I think they may still have my sister in care somewhere. Guilt too. I’m as culpable as they are for what goes on here. And maybe one day I’ll get the chance to stop them. I can’t do that from outside the project, or dead.’

‘And, the talking bit?’

He looked off into the distance. ‘I don’t know. Usually I just ignore the girls that come through, no matter what they say. You know, play the deaf and dumb servant. But you’re different.’ Cat looked at him expectantly. He caught her gaze for a moment and averted his eyes. ‘You remind me of her.’

‘Your sister.’

Dan answered her with a curt nod as he filled a basin with water and used a soft cloth to wash her face and arms, easing the dry skin.

‘Do you know what He’s doing? Do you really know?’

His mouth twisted as he wiped her neck. ‘We are attempting to create a neural network suitable to maintain an Artificial Intelligence.’ He put the basin and washcloth to the side.

She tried to make her tone casual. ‘Oh, I know all about that. How you stole all your ideas. I had a good look at the files from the archive.’

Dan shot her a look of disbelief. ‘Oh, yes? And when did you have a chance to do that?’
‘I’ve had nothing but time on my hands. I’m a data-runner, we’re good at ferreting out secrets people don’t want found. Do you know what happens if you succeed? I’ll be completely gone – a vegetable. And if you fail, you’ll get to watch another girl die by inches. Do you still want to be part of that? Again? Like with your sister?’

Dan shook his head and started wiping down the machines near her bed. He refused to talk to her further, but it didn’t matter. From the look on his face, she had planted the seed. His eyes had held a telltale wetness as he turned away.

***

Cat was finally asleep. But Dan was still reeling. Norton had promised that the girls used in the experiment were only mindwiped and that one day their memories would resurface. He had been promised that his sister had been put in a good home until she recovered.

He had to see if the new girl was telling the truth. And if everything he had based his hopes on was as false, as she’d implied. Dan wasn’t a sophisticated hacker like Cat. There was one advantage he had over her though – he now had full access to Norton’s data-cube. He’d carefully recorded Norton’s passwords and encryption since the last time he had poked around in the files.

He had been reading for several minutes when he heard a noise at the door. He shut everything down, copying a few files to his personal. After a while he realised it was a false alarm, but that made no difference. The files he had just opened, and read now in a very different light from previous, provided a shock.
Dan went to check the machines attached to Cat. She was right. His life was built on even more lies than he had imagined. She looked so much like his sister, and although their personalities couldn’t have been more different, he couldn’t push away the protective feeling that touched him whenever he looked at her. He was now sure that his sister was gone forever. Dead, her body disposed of in an industrial incinerator, he supposed.

He would help Cat. Not because he had any hope of success, but because there was only one thing to live for. Revenge.

He was making notes on Cat’s progress report when Norton entered the lab a few minutes later. ‘Have you finished?’ Norton’s cold, beautiful voice was unusually cheerful.

‘Yes. I’m finished.’

***

The next day Norton startled Dan. ‘What are the integration percentages?’ Dan hadn’t heard him approach.

He had spent the night watching over Cat and thinking about what he had learnt. Flustered, he fiddled with one of the monitors. ‘Um, eighty-two, no eighty-three percent.’
‘I need to run a full neural scan this morning. I was hoping the percentages would be higher. We will be keeping her sedated for at least the next twenty-four hours. You may go home now if you wish. I can take over from here.’

Dan went to leave. Unable to help himself, he paused with the doorknob in his hand and asked, ‘What will happen to her when this is over?’

‘If all goes well there will be full integration. She’ll have a personality overlay and she’ll become an AI.’

‘But what will happen to her?’ Dan turned and gestured to the bed.

Norton looked up from his personal. ‘Why, she will be mindwiped once she has served my purpose. She’s a criminal, her body will serve as a mindwiped menial, Mini as we call them, until her sentence is complete and her mind returned to her.’

Dan’s voice had an edge to it, ‘She is obviously underage; the legal age for mindwipe is twenty-one.’ Norton merely looked at him blankly. Incensed, Dan stepped toward him, ‘How can you do this to an innocent child?’

‘That’s the point, Mr Logovich. She is neither innocent nor a child. It was by her own actions that she came to serve my experiment. She chose to hack into my secure cube in the Neo-AI net, risking thousands of hours of work. She is a thief and a data-runner. This is the consequence of her actions.’ Norton raised an eyebrow. ‘I am surprised someone with your background would have such sympathy for a Junker. You have spent most of the last ten years of your life trying to climb up from the bottom.’
Somehow, the chill beauty of his voice made the matter-of-face explanation even more awful to Dan.

‘You make her sound as if she had a choice,’ he said.

‘There are always choices. Be careful you don’t limit yours.’ A dangerous edge crept into Norton’s tone. ‘You should leave. I want you alert for your next shift.’

Norton calmly turned back to his work.
Chapter 16

‘Hi, Mouse.’

Boadicea’s voice was slightly tinny coming from the speakers in his personal. He switched to using the receiver taped behind his ear. It had the additional benefit of eliminating the possibility of eavesdroppers. Mouse was in the back of a stall at the Market. The walls to the little room he had been given were made of fabric. He could hear if the person in the next room breathed heavily. On the plus side, it was a lot cheaper than using the VR bars. After fixing one of the data-ports and reconditioning several second-hand personals, he had enough credit with the vendor to stay here for days.

‘Mouse?’

He lifted his forearm to rest on the table. He could see the green hills of Boadicea’s Roman Britain Domain behind her on the little screen of his personal. In the background there was the clang of metal as her warriors trained.

‘Sorry, Bee. I was wool-gathering. Thank you for helping me before, you know, with Kade.’ He wriggled nervously. ‘How is the search going?’

‘It has kind of ground to a halt.’ She told him about what had happened to Eleanor. She didn’t go into what she had found out about Kade. She hadn’t had enough time to think about it yet.

‘Really? That’s…that’s awful. I can’t believe it. Dead?’ Mouse slumped in his seat.
‘Oh, you can believe it all right.’ Boadicea said, her voice resigned. ‘To add to our troubles, when Cerberus told Hatshepsut what happened to Eleanor he let slip that I had arrived covered in some weird code. Now she has closed her borders. I guess the only good news is that at least she won’t be telling any of my other sisters.’

‘Have you asked any of the other AIs?’

‘If I’m asking a favour, I’m expected to go in person. Cerberus needs help right away. It will take time to get my other sisters on board. Besides, I may need them to combat whatever destroyed Eleanor’s Domain, and of course, Eleanor. We’re fighting a war on two fronts now, which is never a good idea.’

‘I want to help,’ Mouse said resolutely.

‘Actually, Cerberus suggested you.’ Boadicea smiled inwardly; it was nice to make someone feel good for a change.

‘Really? I managed to get some information on the runs the other data-runners made before they disappeared. I haven’t gotten all of them. The ones I do have came from downtown District 5, were within a couple of years of age of Cat and are definitely all girls.’ He babbled with excitement.

Boadicea frowned. ‘I thought Jackie was a guy?’

‘Nah, it’s just the way she dresses. She used to say it paid to keep people guessing.’ Mouse was talking so fast his mouth almost couldn’t keep up with him. ‘Anyway, I checked out the cube that Cat hacked, but I thought I’d leave it until last or at least until
I had some help. I’ve been tagging the communications coming in and out though, and found a few titbits which may be of interest. Do you know the Citizens are funding whatever is going on with this Cache 22 thing?’

Boadicea was shocked, but barely surprised when she thought about it for a moment. ‘This is just the kind of shady deal I would expect them to be involved with,’ she said. ‘But we haven’t known this before.’ Then a horrible thought occurred to her. ‘Are you sure you’re okay to be doing so many runs inside?’ Boadicea didn’t want to lose Mouse too.

‘I’ve been shadowing Cat for two years and I write most of her toolkit programs. She was younger than me when she started running.’ He said defensively. It wasn’t like Boadicea to worry about him. She’d always been kind of distant, in a friendly way.

‘No, I mean any threat from whoever took Cat.’

‘Do I look like a girl?’ His voice rose to a squeak.

‘I’m sorry, Mouse.’ He looked mollified, he knew she didn’t apologise often. She meant it too. Mouse had found information that no one else had thought to look for. ‘So should I tell Cerberus you’re going to help?’

‘Yeah. But tell him, no more rodent jokes or I’ll go back to searching alone.’ Although he said it firmly, the corner of his mouth had tipped upward. He thought it good to feel part of a team, to feel like he was doing something important.

‘Okay, I promise to muzzle my dog,’ Boadicea quipped.
Mouse rolled his eyes and she logged off the call. Afire with new determination, he brought up a new set of codes to contact Cerberus.

***

Boadicea watched Kade as he sat on the sofa, facing the window. He had turned the tinting up, so the cityscape was painted in muted shades of grey. Cerberus had told her that it had taken him nearly two hours to recover from the avatar malfunction before he could be logged out.

Boadicea didn’t know what to do. She hated needing him after he had betrayed her so thoroughly. But she was used to working with him. She had an opportunity to watch him secretly now from the data-screen. She told herself it was to give her time to get her yo-yoing emotions in check. A small part of her whispered that she was procrastinating again – delaying having to deal with the really hard emotional stuff she hated. She defiantly ignored the voice for a while.

She watched him as the sun set over the city. He didn’t move. He barely blinked. His eyes were fixed blankly on the horizon.

Disgusted with her cowardice, she mentally pulled herself together and activated her spi-bot. Slowly, she flew it in front of him. She was almost invisible against the glass.

‘Cerberus told me what I said while I was trapped in my avatar.’

Kade looked up at her spi-bot. ‘So, Bee, are we going to talk about it?’ he said wearily.
All the spark and energy seemed to have gone out of him. He looked old. Then again, considering he was approaching his hundred and fiftieth birthday, he wasn’t doing too badly. She hoped that the cost of the rejuvenation nanos had been worth it. Cursing herself for an unobservant fool, she should have known when she saw the bumps along his jaw line – they were a common side effect. For someone who was meant to be an ‘intelligence’, artificial or otherwise, she could really miss the big ones.

Boadicea manifested her full hologram, blocking his view of the street. ‘So how should I greet my maker? Should I call you father? Dad? Daddy?’ she said caustically.

Boadicea’s mouth was drawn across her face in an unhappy line. She struggled to see the friend she had trusted, who had been there for her as long as she could remember. Well, of course he had always been there; he had been around when she was ‘born’ – both times.

‘Boadicea. Please don’t do this.’ His voice sounded resigned. His head dropped from surveying the city skyline to look at his hands clasped in his lap. Hardly the picture of an evil genius. Well, don’t judge a book by its cover worked both ways. She had known – they all had known – there was something dark in his past. A secret he didn’t want to share. No wonder.

‘Do what?’ she said. ‘Speak the truth? Not something you’re very familiar with, is it?’

‘Stop acting like a five year old!’ Kade scolded.

‘You first, Daddy!’ Her voice was icy. She could feel the emotions she had tried to suppress all vying for a way out. Both the steely resolve of the warrior queen and the
pragmatic calm of the detective deserted her, leaving in their wake an angry, confused girl.

‘My whole life, such as it is, you lied and lied and lied,’ she said. ‘You would probably still be lying to me if you hadn’t told me the truth by accident. Were you laughing up your sleeve? Or did you get some kind of sick joy being around the personality you used to murder your daughter?’

‘No! I never meant for any of this to happen.’ Kade’s face was ashen. ‘I don’t know if it’s sick, but I have taken joy in helping you. And I had many reasons, it wasn’t just guilt.’

‘Why? Why did you do this to me?’ Tears streamed down her face, dripping off her holographic chin and disappearing into the ether.

‘Well, at first you were all that was left. But then, as I came to know you I realised that you’re a lot like her. Especially, these last few years, it was almost like I had her back. I keep wondering if all the changes inside you meant that my daughter was still in there somewhere.’ He looked up at her, his voice held a tone she didn’t recognise.

‘You want to find a way to bring her back.’

‘At first that was all I could think about. I ploughed hours of research into it. But now I know it’s impossible.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me? For years you stopped me from looking into how I was made. You said it wasn’t healthy.’ After brushing her forearm across her face, she gave him a
calculating look. ‘That’s why you didn’t want Cat to look into Cache 22? You would rather see people die than reveal your secret. If you’d told us, maybe Freeze could have been found. Maybe Cat wouldn’t have gone missing!’

‘Maybe doesn’t help us now. I know I was wrong.’ His eyes pleaded with her. ‘There’s nothing I can say that will make this better, is there?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said bitterly.

‘I knew this day would come. Nothing stays buried forever. I was a fool to think it could be. There was a whole team of scientists working on the project, but it was my idea. My fault. When I saw that Cat was looking for information on Cache 22, I panicked…’

Boadicea had to look away from the desperation in his eyes. Everything he said was reasonable, except, of course, for the fact that he had betrayed her. He had betrayed them all. In her Domain, traitors were dealt with harshly.

Boadicea tried to calm down, to bring the sobering effect of her detective persona back into play. She turned her back on him so she had a chance to compose herself. He remained silent.

Boadicea didn’t quite know what to do with the conflicting emotions that boiled within her. She couldn’t throw anything here. She couldn’t run until she felt tired, or bang her head against a wall. The best she could do would be to jab him with her taser. It would only give a moment’s gratification and it wouldn’t solve a thing.
AIs were granted all the emotions of a real person, without any way to deal with them. And over the last few years she seemed to be having more of them – more intense, less logical emotions. It made her feel like she would burst open. Her body Inside was more than an avatar, more powerful, although it came with the same kind of sensory functions like touch and taste and smell. Despite this, even in her Domains she had little release. About all she could do to relax was have sex. She enjoyed it, but unlike the many descriptions she’d heard from humans, she could never lose herself in it – maybe because her Domains always took up part of her mind. It meant that while satisfying, it was ultimately…empty. Sex should be between two equals. She wasn’t even the same species. Kade had made sure of it.

This thinking did her good. She turned back to him, he was still watching her. ‘Right, now it isn’t just about you and me. It’s about finding Cat. And it’s about finding out who, or what, killed my sister.’

‘You’re avoiding dealing with this.’

‘You bet I am. And I will continue to not deal for as long as I need to. As you should know, I was programmed to be pragmatic as well as have a fiery temper. So spill. What have you found out?’

‘I’ve had a few responses from the street. Lots of my rebels are pretty scared right now, some of them have gone deep underground. News about Eleanor has spread. Junkers are blaming the Citizens and the Citizens are blaming District 5 right back.’ He seemed to realise he was making excuses. ‘But I will do everything I can.’
‘And?’

‘Well, it seems that the Citizens have been spreading rumours that they have a way to deal with rebels once and for all.’

‘Kill them?’

‘I think it’s more than that. The intel is that they’re building some kind of weapon to destroy VR or take it over, the stories are unclear. I do know that VR is one of our most useful tools to spread information and meet anonymously – especially since most of your sisters are sympathetic to the cause. If the Citizens take VR away, the movement will be crippled.’

‘Okay then. Let me know when you find out more.’ Boadicea nodded and made her way back to the data-port. Kade stood and went to the front door. She flicked off her hologram, flew up to the top of the data-port and was just about to transfer back Inside when a thought occurred to her. ‘Kade,’ she called. He hesitated, his hand on the security plate for the door. ‘What was her name?’

He hesitated, his back still facing the screen. His voice was rough when he answered.

‘Emma. My daughter’s name was Emma.’

Boadicea transferred Inside as he opened the door. She had to get one thing straight before he left. ‘Kade,’ she called again. His head jerked up to see her looking down at him from a street in Gumshoe. ‘I’m not your daughter anymore.’
The data-port made a slight hiss as she flicked the communication channel closed, leaving him alone in the apartment.
Chapter 17

He felt his hands begin to shake. His breath came quicker, and sweat broke out along his hairline. Blood rushed through his body, a pressure built – a roar of white noise mixed desire, blocking everything else out, insisting on being released. He longed to feel the warm, pliant flesh between his hands and the soft unknowing puff of their breath on his face as he plundered their bodies. He was one with the experiment, truly a part of the great history of science. He ached at the wonder of creation. Their minds did his bidding while he sated himself, he finally felt completely in control. Complete.

He must get closer to his work. Get inside it. It was the only way to make sure it succeeded. It was the only way.

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Dan wrapped his jacket closer around himself as he stood in the elevator. The building always felt cold and empty when he started work in the evening. Norton’s project took the whole top floor, most of the spaces were nearly empty though, with only the lab in constant use. Other floors were used sporadically, housing various short term projects that the Citizens wanted to keep under the radar. All of which meant he rarely saw anyone except Norton and the security guards hired to ‘keep the undesirables away’, as Norton put it. Not that the guards did much work. Most of the security was done by Neo-AI monitoring and the cleaning was carried out by a staff of mindwiped.

He stepped out onto his floor. He was early. He had felt weird about leaving Cat alone with Norton last night. In the mirror this morning, he had seen dark bags bulging under
his eyes. It was not the first sleepless night he’d had, thinking about his sister. Cat had ripped away the lies and he was coming to realise just how stupid he had been.

There had to be a way to get her out. He had always been better at biology than hacking. Maybe he would have a chance to talk with her. She could trash the cube; maybe find something they could use as leverage. Together they could come up with a plan to escape. Cat might only be sixteen, but she had proven to be a darn sight more savvy than him already. With Norton on his last chance with the Citizens, they’d probably be able to close him down for good.

It was with this hopeful thought he walked down the corridor to the lab. His first job would be to check the cerebral matrix scan Norton had performed and calculate the dosages of the drugs Norton needed for the next part of the experiment. Perhaps he could sabotage the dosage enough to wake her and attempt escape. As he approached the glass-panelled door to the lab, he could see a strange movement on Cat’s bed.

Drawing nearer he saw that someone was on the bed with Cat. Something was wrong – very, very wrong. He broke into a run, slapped his hand on the security panel, and slammed the door into the wall in his haste to get inside. The scene stamped itself into Dan’s mind in that instant.

Cat’s hospital gown was tangled and thrown aside with the sheets. The monitors beeped slowly. She was still unconscious.

Norton crouched over her. On his face was a grimace of lust. One hand groped under her robe, while the other gripped her shorn scalp.
Dan tried to throw Norton off her. ‘Get off her. Get off her! What do you think you’re doing?’ Dan pushed and slapped him frantically.

Norton pulled away from Cat and slid over the other side of the gurney.

‘It is mine. I will do with it what I want.’ Norton’s voice was conversational, no hint of the bestial expression left on his face. He pulled an antiseptic cloth from the dispenser on the wall to clean himself.

‘You frecking piece of junk!’ Dan began removing the restraints tying Cat to the bed. He could barely see as tears of rage and hate spattered from his eyes. He couldn’t let her stay here one more moment.

Norton threw away the soiled cloth. He ran careful fingers over his hair. He pulled at his crisp white lab coat. His voice was distant, almost reflective, ‘I must be a part of every aspect of the experiment; I must test every tool. Once the experiment is complete, it will become the same kind of meat who was driving the car when my wife and son died. If everything goes well, she will not even use it for much longer. Besides, it is mine to control, an empty vessel, a tool.’

Norton grabbed Dan’s wrist as he started to unbuckle the restraints around Cat’s ankles. With a strength that belied his size, he pushed Dan away. ‘Stop that. You are not taking her anywhere.’ His voice rumbled low with menace.

‘You have to be stopped. This all has to be stopped. I will tell the Citizens for Order and Decency. They won’t stand for it.’
‘Do you think they don’t know already? The Citizens supported my research after the bleeding hearts in District 3 stupidly repudiated my practices and banished me here.’ Norton turned his back on Dan. He pulled vials out of the cupboard and fiddled around with something from the draws. Unseen by Dan, the vials shook as Norton searched through them.

‘Besides, who do you think is the most expendable?’ Norton’s voice had taken on a slightly chiding, fatherly tone. ‘Do you want to be sent back to the slums where you grew up? Unfortunate accidents happen there every day.’

‘Don’t you damn well threaten me!’ Dan started working on the restraints again until Cat was free. ‘The Citizen’s are sick of your failures. Cat is your last chance. Let’s see how well you do without funding.’ Dan began to covertly unhook the brain and heart monitors.

Norton closed the cold glass door of the refrigerated medicine cabinet. He turned his head slightly over his shoulder. ‘Are you finished?’

‘No, I’m not bloody well finished!’ Dan pushed his arms under Cat in order to lift her from the bed. Norton turned and stabbed Dan with a hypodermic needle.

‘You will not steal my last chance away from me. She’s mine!’

Dan struggled as the anaesthetic started to work. Norton held onto his wrists as he fought against the drug and the scientist’s hold.
'Your sister was far more tractable when I used her to service my needs,' Norton sneered. 'I even let her wake for a while to enjoy it. She screamed with pleasure. However, I will still find a use for you, beyond that of a rather mediocre assistant.'

The numbness spread to Dan’s face. He could no longer make his legs and arms move to offer even a token resistance. But his eyes widened in horror.

Norton cradled Dan as he slipped to the floor. He allowed himself a moment, just a moment, to look down at his former assistant.

Then he began to hook the subject back up to his machines.
Chapter 18

Cat dreamed. She was twelve again, living in an abandoned school on the edge of
downtown District 5. Street kids of all ages were living together in the small cluster of
buildings. Cat didn’t know any of them. She hid out in the basement under the hall. No
one else wanted it. The walls were wet and smelled of rot.

She slept locked up in what used to be the janitor’s closet. Her food and the spare set of
clothes she had stolen were stashed behind some pipes in the corner.

Most of the other kids were okay. A few of them thought they could push everyone else
around. They stole anything good and beat up the littler kids when they could get away
with it. She was always careful not to let anyone know what she had.

Normally she would have walked through the hall to go to the basement. But that day
she had stolen a personal and she wanted to be sure that no one knew she had it. With
the funds from its sale, she might have a chance to visit VR for more than work. So she
climbed in through one of the high windows, using the pipes to support her before she
jumped to the ground.

It was too quiet.

Crouched in the shadows, she cautiously looked around. Two guys, only a few years
older than her, moved into the dim light coming through the windows.

She began to creep away. Her luck ran out as a third one grabbed her from behind.

‘Where is the money?’ he demanded, his breath hot in her ear. The other two guys
closed in on them as she struggled. ‘The other kids said you had money. Said you hid it all over the place. Give it to us and we’ll let you go.’

‘I don’t have any money, only a couple of credit chits. The other kids were lying.’ She lifted her chin, hoping to brave it out.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I don’t have anything.’

One of the guys in front of her giggled. He walked forward until he was pressed up against her. ‘Maybe there’s something else you could give us?’

He grabbed her arm and twisted. The kid behind her let go as she fell to her knees. He looked her over as she tried to break his hold. ‘Not much meat for us on this one.’ His friends snickered.

He bent down and kissed her, stuffing his tongue into her mouth. She bit down hard. He yelped and then backhanded her so hard he left her gasping on the floor. ‘Hey guys, I think she likes it.’

There was a crackling sound followed by a meaty thud. Cat tried to get up. The world spun around her.

A voice, angry and low, bit out the words, ‘I very much doubt she does like this.’ Cat felt gentle hands helping her up.
The guy who had hit her was convulsing on the ground. The other two had disappeared, but wet thumps and grunts were coming from the hall above.

Cat looked up at her rescuer. Kade brushed her hair back from the cheek where she’d been hit. It was bleeding, the skin was split across her cheekbone. She could feel her eye already swelling.

‘Are you okay?’

Despite the pain, Cat smiled.

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Back in the lab, Norton saw the subject smile as he belatedly straightened her nightgown and pulled up the sheets. She shouldn’t be doing that, smiling. There should be almost no connection between her mind and body at this stage. He would correct any oversight. It was something to investigate later – but now there was other work to do.

He hoisted his former assistant over his shoulder as he revised the next stage of the project in his mind.
Chapter 19


Dan was standing over her. ‘Good. I managed to wake you.’ His mouth formed a smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

‘So, did you check what I told you? Do you know?’

‘Yes, Cat. I know.’ She looked up at him. Dan was calm, slightly distant. ‘I am going to help you.’

He walked over to the data-screen and brought up the camera feeds from around the lab. He spliced in a feed from earlier that night, making it seem as if she were still asleep.

‘What about you?’ she asked.

‘They will think I’ve gone for a break. I usually do at this time of night.’

He walked back to her and began removing the tubes and patches attached to her head. The needle stung as he pulled it from her neck. He unstrapped the restraints. Clinically, he lifted her gown and removed the tube from her stomach. She felt a sucking sensation. He put a patch over the wound. He fiddled with his personal and then unplugged all the monitors. They continued working as if she were still attached.

Slowly, sensation returned to her body. After days of only being able to feel or move her head, the shooting pains of pins and needles in her limbs were almost welcome. She
wriggled her toes experimentally. Dan helped her from the bed. She felt dizzy, but far better than she expected after such a long time without moving. She felt almost normal.

His face remained serious. ‘I found you some clothes and if you put on this lab coat we can pretend you are an intern.’

She waited for him to turn his back so she could dress. He almost seemed reluctant. Now that he was helping her escape, he was acting weird.

She dressed quickly. She pulled on the skirt and buttoned the shirt. There was nothing she could do about her hair, so she settled for pulling the cotton cap Dan had provided tightly over her head. She couldn’t wait to leave. She couldn’t wait to find Mouse and give him a hug and cry and eat something hot and warm. She promised herself she would try harder with Kade. That she would teach Mouse to data-run as she’d promised. If only she could escape.

Dan passed her the lab coat. She threw it on as he opened the door.

‘You must be quiet now. Walk calmly. I could not fix the cameras in the hallway.’

It took every drop of control she had to walk sedately out into the hallway. Dan followed her.

They passed a Mini mopping the floors. The antiseptic smell was strong and the floor was slick. She nearly slipped in the flat, unfamiliar shoes she’d been given. Dan grabbed her elbow for a moment. His grip was bruising. She pulled away from him, giving him a sharp look. He shrugged and walked ahead of her.
The corridors were even brighter than the lab. The walls were pristine white and unmarked. She closed her eyes for a moment and saw a flash of light behind her eyelids. Her heart hammered in her chest. She breathed in slowly.

Cold sweat was trickling down the small of her back by the time they made it to the elevator foyer.

Dan held his ID up to the sensor. He pressed the down arrow. ‘It would be best if we go out the underground exit. There is only one guard.’ His voice was flat and cool. Cat studied his profile anxiously; the stress must be making him act funny. She didn’t know what she would do to repay him. He was risking everything for her.

The elevator pinged as the doors opened. They stepped inside, turning to face the doors. The carriage seemed to rock for a moment. Or maybe it was her. She felt Dan’s hand on her elbow, gentler this time, steadying her as the lift began to descend.

He leant down and whispered in her ear, ‘I always wanted to be a hero, to save the maiden from the monster.’ His eyes became hard. ‘You made me throw everything away for a fairytale.’ The elevator stopped with a jolt. As the doors opened, a blinding white light spilled over them.

Norton’s deep, resonant voice sounded right near her ear. ‘Closed system test successful. Perceptual tests completed. Moving to phase three.’

She could no longer feel Dan’s hand on her arm.

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This time it was Norton leaning over her when she woke. She was still strapped to the bed. She was still trapped in the lab. And worst of all, still without any way of escape.

‘What happened to Dan? I remember…’ Cat didn’t want to get Dan in trouble. Something had happened in the elevator. It was difficult to think. Her thoughts were sluggish.

‘I am very sorry,’ Norton said, sounding pleased with himself. ‘Dan’s employment has been…terminated.’

Cat swallowed. So he was dead. She pressed her lips tightly together, trying not to think of being stuck alone with Norton. Poor, tortured Dan had probably been disposed of in some kind of underground furnace, like Freeze and the other test subjects. A wave of nausea hit her – she concentrated on not throwing up. ‘Was it because of me?’ Her voice caught in her throat.

‘Yes, in a manner of speaking. He overstepped his bounds and tried to kidnap you while you were sleeping.’ Norton smirked at her. ‘He gave me the inspiration for the closed system test. I designed it using the camera feeds and a little Domain program I have been working on. Did you like my performance?’ He bowed mockingly.

‘You smarmy, frecking, evil…arsehole! You tricked me! You were wearing Dan as an avatar.’ Cat would have punched him in his smug face, if her arms had been free, or working.
‘You certainly have a mouth on you. Fortunately, the personality overlay is the next phase. By the time I am finished, you will be whoever I want you to be. And say whatever I tell you to say.’

He walked over to the data-screen and began dictating his notes. Cat stared after him for a moment, the force of her hatred making her feel weak. She wouldn’t let him win. Somehow, she would find a way to escape. Only this time she knew for sure that she was on her own.
Chapter 20

Boadicea’s sisters were treating her like a leper. Her messages were being ignored or returned unread. When she went to visit their Domains she was denied entrance. Some of the Domains had been quarantined by their AIs. Word had obviously gotten around about her visit to Eleanor’s Domain. Hatshepsut must have warned them before locking up her gatehouses. You’d think AIs who had been modelled after warrior queens and politically powerful women in history would have backbones – frecking cowards, the lot of them!

Cerberus was hiding out in her office. His excuse was that he had to be available for the new data coming in from Mouse. He knew her well enough to avoid her when she was in this kind of mood. She hated being ignored.

Briefly, Boadicea worried about what would happen if too many of her sisters remained in lock-down. Denied their daily fix of VR, people Outside would start to get angry. Cat would have been furious. She couldn’t last more than a day without Jumping In. Mouse had told her about his suspicions. VR addiction could be serious – some people even died from it, staying hooked up until they starved to death on the Outside. It would be soon enough to have a little talk with her when she found her. In fact, Boadicea would relish the chance, at least it would mean she had been found.

There were still a few Domains which she could try. There had to be at least one of her sisters who didn’t hide at the first sign of trouble.
Outside the office building, the streets of Gumshoe were filled with exciting smells and sounds. She let the atmosphere soak into her pores as she wandered. Gumshoe had been her pet project for the last few years. It was the first of its kind. The first Domain created by an AI. Who cared if it had glitches and holes galore? It also had dark streets, dames and suits, starlets and stringers, jazz clubs and high rises.

She had tweaked and spun the code until it was almost perfect. Well, as long as you ignored the time glitch between uptown and downtown. Uptown it was always night, bright lights and cabaret. Downtown it was sometimes afternoon, often twilight, frequently night, but never morning.

She noticed a new hum in the air. The streets were more alive. Everyone walked a little quicker. The paper boys shouted a little louder. Or was it her? She’d felt different since she’d come back from Eleanor’s Domain. Kade’s unscheduled appearance had made her itch to get back to the avatar program she was writing. There was still so much to do!

Boadicea’s step faltered. She should be concentrating on Cat and Eleanor – not mooching around her pet Domain. Her argument with Kade had disturbed her more than she liked to admit. He was her father. He’d always been there. She had trusted him so implicitly that it felt like the foundation of her world, her identity, but now everything was all out at sea and she was caught in a rip.

Guiltily, Boadicea leaned against a building as she tapped into the list of sisters who she hadn’t tried to visit yet. She’d visited two of them already, and gone through those further she thought of as her friends. Now she was down to the AIs who either hated her
guts or who she didn’t know that well. The next on her list was one she’d had little to do with. Makeda was known for her straightforwardness and haughty manner – what else would you expect from the Queen of Sheba?

Boadicea made her way to a nearby portal. In the gatehouse waiting room, she selected Axum from the list. Axum was the capital city of Makeda’s Domain. To pacify Makeda, in case she became upset by the news that Boadicea had been (briefly!) infected by a virus, she took extra precautions.

First she gave herself a full virus scan, enduring the uncomfortable crawling feeling. It still showed that the weird code was present, but dormant and quarantined in her system. Next she slid on an avatar which wore the same kind of clothing as people in Axum. Finally, she coated herself in a code which would act like a second skin. It would protect and seal her away from all but the most superficial interaction with Makeda’s Domain.

She palmed the gatehouse lock and paused, readying herself for confrontation. Good thing she was a kick-ass, warrior queen AI with two domains, or the thought going another round from one of her sisters might have made her feel tired. The gate opened. Squaring her shoulders, she stepped through.

The gatehouse cast Boadicea out in front of one of the seven stelae, huge 65-foot granite monoliths, for which Makeda’s capital city, Axum, was famous. These monoliths were the Ethiopian version of the Egyptian pyramids and made the British standing stones
seem like pebbles in comparison. She hoped Makeda wouldn’t make her feel the same way.

The city spilled around her, no one taking any notice of her as she dodged animals and basket-laden shoppers. It looked exactly the same as when she’d last seen it. Nothing changed in the VR Domains, her Gumshoe Domain being the exception. Outside people could change, live, love, grow old and die. Inside relied upon the Domains following strict rules. Worse, many AIs spent years in the unending cycle of their virtual worlds, locked in the stupor of fictional lives, rarely talking with anyone but other AIs. Again, she was the eccentric among her sisters, probably because she spent so much time in her spi-bot Outside. Or maybe it was the creating of Gumshoe as her second domain. Great! Now she felt more alone than ever.

She breathed deeply and raised her face to the sun for a moment. The heat was wonderful, like she was filled with light. She felt a burst of optimism. Maybe Makeda would prove her wrong about her sisters and decide to stand bravely by her side. Maybe here she would get the help she needed to find Cat and whoever was responsible for killing Eleanor. Maybe.

Boadicea resolved to enjoy the walk. Now that she knew AIs were mortal, every day counted. The delicious smells of green coffee beans, spices and roasting meats wafted over her as she flowed with the crowd into the centre of Makeda’s city. Axum was wealthy, full of gold as well as sand and light. Despite this, the pace of life was slow – languorous. People moved as if walking through syrup.
That was why a richly-dressed man, hurrying toward the palace, stood out as he bumped past her. He was almost running through the streets. Curiosity getting the better of her, she picked up her pace to follow him. His sandals flapped as she chased him through the narrow twists and levels, making it easy to hear him when he darted out of sight.

Once he reached the foot of Makeda’s palace, he doubled his pace. Her palace was a small city in itself, overlooked by a mountain; it was an awesome maze of courts, stables, courtyards and halls. Unfortunately, Boadicea didn’t have time to admire the architecture. The man was getting away.

As she ran the air flowed around her like silk. Underneath it though, she could hear a discordant note in the code. Something weird was going on. Dipping into the surface code as much as she dared, an odd flavour in the Domain code emerged, rank and bitter even through the layers of coded armour she wore.

In front of her, her quarry quickly negotiated the outer palace and ascended to the queen’s chambers. Boadicea’s disquiet grew. The code fluttered under her fingertips as her hand brushed the wall. She could feel the familiarity of it, all hard edges and hunger. It was the same kind of corruption that had covered her after visiting Eleanor’s Domain. Although she was running flat out, from somewhere, she found a further burst of speed. A dissonant buzz drove her upward.

As she neared the throne room, the humming grew louder. Waves of broken code battered against her avatar. She could feel it burning a hole through the protective
coating of her avatar. This layer was meant to protect the domain from her, not the other way around.

Was there an AI afterlife? Maybe she’d find out soon.

Boadicea almost threw herself up the stairs. In front of her the steps flickered. Stone to wood to plastic to code – so quick she could barely follow. The humming was louder. It sounded like a swarm of bees had invaded the palace – very, very pissed-off bees.

As she turned the corner toward the Queen’s chambers, she saw the man she had chased, standing frozen in the doorway. Boadicea was moving so fast she collided with him. They both went down. Rolling off him she turned him on his back. His eyes were open and he didn’t seem to be breathing. His face was blank, not shocked, just no one home.

She glanced into the room. At that point, she wished she could follow him into oblivion. She had found the source of the buzzing.

The Queen of Sheba was melting.

Beneath the mock reality of the domain she saw the jagged code eating away at Makeda. It crawled over her like insects. This was the source of the humming: not bees, but hungry code.

The sumptuously decorated bedroom flickered as the swarm fed – little packets of code with mouths chewing and spitting out more of themselves. They were multiplying and as they did, they were transforming the undercode.
Shocked into immobility, Boadicea beheld the suffering Queen, her sister. She sat on a chair as if it were a throne – her back straight and unbending. Her arms dripped code onto the floor and her legs were already half gone. The skin on her face was full of gaping holes. Strangely her eyes had yet to be touched. They opened. Boadicea looked into their depths.

Makeda was still aware.

They looked at each other for a moment. A tear rolled out of Makeda’s eye and was almost immediately eaten by the ravenous code. Jolted into action and ignoring the danger to herself, Boadicea leapt forward.

She dashed into the room and tried to wrap herself around the failing queen. She pulled at the avatar wrapped around her sister. Working at the code, she stretched it, and its thin layer of safety, around them like a cloak. Remodelling a pocket virus scanner on the fly, she used it to grab the invading code and spit it outside the little tent she had made for them both. It was a gruesome job raking it over the half eaten face and arms of the queen. Makeda rallied as soon as the last of the poisonous code was pushed outside the reshaped avatar.

Makeda was still unravelling. The problem wasn’t the cosmetics of having her virtual body eaten, that was just window dressing. The ravaging code had attached to her undercode so that all the connections between her memories and personality had begun to dissolve. There seemed to be no way to knit her back together. Makeda hugged against Boadicea with the melted stumps of her arms.
It was a struggle for Boadicea to remain stoic. In the back of her mind a small part of her was screaming in revulsion. She had seen burn victims during battles and worse with her spi-eye on the streets of District 5. She was no stranger to suffering, yet her sister’s melted, bloodless stumps filled her with sick horror. Perhaps it was because she could feel her own death breathing down her neck.

The shield flickered. The avatar wouldn’t be able to protect them both much longer. Then without warning, Makeda thrust the stumps of her arms in Boadicea’s face. She used the split-second of distraction to step back through the protective cloak. The Queen of Sheba had proven there were at least some brave AIs willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of their sisters.

The hungry code redoubled its efforts to consume Makeda, covering her like a living blanket. In a few helpless moments Boadicea watched the Queen of Sheba die. Her eyes were the last to go.

Soon Boadicea herself was the one under attack. The avatar began to heat up, unable to withstand the onslaught. Retreat was her only option if she was not to share Makeda’s fate.

Boadicea skimmed the undercode as she ran from the palace. There was no time for finesse. She scooped up the avatar codes as she ran and began logging everyone out. There were going to be a lot of very groggy, hung-over people Outside in the next few minutes. Still, it was way better than being dead. It was a little more complicated for
her, being on her sister’s turf meant she couldn’t just Jump away. She had to go back through the portal.

Boadicea’s avatar failed as she reached to shadows of the stone monoliths. She didn’t even realise it was happening. Within a few steps of the gatehouse a numb, drowsy feeling stole over her. She slid to the ground. Unlike Makeda and Eleanor before her, she felt no pain as the code sunk into her. Boadicea slept.

Inside her, the swarm found a new program, one similar to its own. The filter Cerberus had used and interaction with such an unusual AI, had changed the virus Boadicea had picked up in Eleanor’s Domain. The swarm woke up the dormant program and changed into something new. Smarter. Different. For the first time in its short life, the swarm found a way to create, instead of destroy.

If Boadicea had been conscious, she would have felt the burn of new code trickling through her whole body, tightening and loosening connections, inching through her source code. She would have heard the hum of the swarm inside her head and seen her body flicker like a faulty light. Instead she slept, oblivious to the activity inside her.

With new purpose, the re-born swarm went to work on their first subject.
Chapter 21

Sometimes it felt like everything was conspiring against him, Norton thought furiously. He was checking the progress the Neo-AI was making on the model of the subject’s personality overlay on the data-screen. It was taking longer than he’d estimated. It all took longer than it should. The subject’s brain matrix had only reached ninety percent integration with the virtual systems. If she did not fully mesh, there were likely to be problems when he started overwriting her memories with the AI personality imprint.

He had made a small error with the adaptability programming; some of it had escaped his data-cube. Like a virus, it had cut through the data-cube’s security protocols. He had purged the affected files from his computer and re-initialised the program upload to the subject’s profile. It was just one more issue he had to deal with in the ridiculously short timeframe the Citizens had imposed on him.

He had rushed Subject Thirteen through the perceptual tests. She – it – had passed with minimal corrections. This was very promising; all the other subjects had died well before this stage. Still, he loathed being made to rush.

His usually immaculate lab coat was creased and his hair not in its usual precise order. Despite this, his movements were as efficient as ever. His fingers flicking over the data displayed on his personal and data-screen.

If the Citizens’ vision of the future went past the ends of their noses, they would realise genius could not be hurried. He had been contacted again last night. The Citizens were worried about unrest on the streets. Most of the VR Domains had been shut down. He
had been told that the Citizens believed this was ‘an opportunity they could not afford to
miss’ and that they would never have a better time to launch their new AI. It was the
best chance they would ever get to destroy the recalcitrant AIs that currently populated
the VR network, and begin replacing them with their own. Then the Citizens had
delivered their ultimatum: he had forty-eight hours, two measly days, to come up with a
prototype before they shut him down and handed his life’s work over to someone else.

His gaze fell on the picture of his family for a moment. He would make this project a
success in spite of all the petty politicking. He would be wealthy enough to buy himself
a place in District 1 by the time he was done. He would be powerful enough to leave the
narrow-minded Citizens behind. He would be feted and adored as the greatest scientist
of all time. A delicious shudder quivered through him at the thought.

He would have a second chance at a family. He could never bring back his wife and
son, but he promised himself that his second family would want for nothing. The
accident that had ruined his life would be reversed. And he would create a new son to
carry on his legacy of brilliance.

Norton’s personal beeped. At last the Neo-AI had finished the model. He quickly
checked it over for flaws; although, with the new deadline, he didn’t have time to do a
full scan. Excitement flooded him with the rush of adrenaline. Ruthlessly, he pushed it
back down. Science had no place for emotion. He would celebrate – appropriately –
when he had his first working AI, and not before.
With a double-click of his tongue, he activated the verbal communication mode of the Neo-AI interface. ‘Proceed with personality transfer of the Zenobia AI overlay for Subject Thirteen.’

The mechanically melodious voice of the Neo-AI responded. ‘Personality overlay is not recommended in subjects who have not fully integrated with the virtual systems. Integration is at ninety-four percent.’

Norton slammed the screen with his fist, making the cabinet beside it – and the precious picture of his wife and son – tremble. ‘Don’t talk back to me, you feeble excuse for an intelligent program. I control this project. Do it and do it now!’

There was an almost undetectable hesitation from the Neo-AI before its voice said pleasantly: ‘Zenobia AI personality overlay commencing on Subject Thirteen. Writing files.’

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In her apparent absence, Cat had been busy. She had explored every inch of the cube. Norton didn’t seem to mind that she now knew all his secrets. She found that rather disturbing.

There had been several attempted hacks from outside the cube’s closed system. She had done what she could from inside, in recording them. It wasn’t much, considering the poor quality tools she had. With so much time on her hands though, what else was she going to do?
Cat looked longingly up at the stars on the other side of the firewall. If only she could get back to that door. She wouldn’t be afraid this time. She would push herself through it gladly, no matter what happened to her. Anything was better than being trapped in here.

The feeling of claustrophobia had settled in soon after she had switched out of her body to plan the escape. Now she couldn’t Jump back out. She thought it was a rather ironic feeling for a disembodied consciousness. It was even more ironic in light of the time she’d spent over the last few years trying to spend more and more time Inside, and here she was – stuck with what she’d wished for most. Next time, if she ever got out, she would wish for a pony, like normal girls.

Norton had sucked her out for weird and unpleasant experiences that she could only assume were more tests; all of them had happened Inside. The worst had been when Norton had dropped her in the desert. She shuddered at the memory. He had waited until she was delirious from lack of water before stuffing her back in the cube. Idly, she wondered what new torture he had cooked up for her next.

A tapping sounded against the other side of the firewall. The wall rippled. She could see that someone was testing the waters before trying to crack it. Excitement raced through her, turning the code around her faintly yellow. Concentrating fiercely, she opened her make-shift toolkit with her mind. Hey! It wasn’t like she had hands she thought to herself wryly. Cat visualised the rough code-pick she had made lifting out of the toolkit and it rose obediently ready for her to put it to work on the wall. If the cube’s firewall
hadn’t dissolved her first one within a few minutes, she would have tried to use this one to escape.

The code-pick concealed a message. She had packed it full of everything about the project – what she had experienced with as many details as possible. It was missing only one vital part of the puzzle that might have helped her be rescued – the location of the lab. With all the time she had spent trapped inside, you’d have thought she’d have uncovered it. Unfortunately, there was one part of the cube she still couldn’t access. She’d bet her last credit chit on it being in there.

She’d had to pick and choose the rest of the information she’d found when constructing the message – the hollow code-pick didn’t have much space. The trick was getting the information out to someone who might be able to do her some good.

It had been years since she had made her own tools. Without a decent code-reader and with poorly-suited materials, she wasn’t doing too well. She missed Mouse’s deft touch with the code. What she wouldn’t do for one of his code-cloaks now! She would’ve been out of there in less than a minute. Although, with her body still in the lab, she would still be trapped inside until someone rescued her.

The volume of the tapping increased. Working as quickly as possible, she used the code-pick to unravel the code in the firewall nearby. She could feel the wall thinning. An alarm howled. The tapping stopped.
‘No! Keep going. We’re nearly there!’ she shrieked. Desperate, she tried to push the code-pick through the wall. It slipped through as the security programs arrived. She hoped it had survived and whoever was on the other side had seen it.

The cube’s Neo-AI obviously had a sense of humour. Security was represented as huge, slavering dogs. They threw themselves, full of dying, in a kamikaze frenzy at the firewall, strengthening it with their code until it was as thick and hard as before.

Come on! Would she never cut a break? She felt like kicking something around. The best she could do was swear – just one more thing that sucked about being a ghost in the cube.

As she couldn’t close her eyes, she turned her thoughts inward. In a few minutes she felt herself drift. It seemed as if the cube held its breath, stopping for an instant. She dissolved into the almost living warmth of the code.

In the dream Cat was running. The olive skin of her arms was tanned and coated with a gleam of sweat and dust. She had the supple body of a warrior. A body! The drone of bees, or something like them, filled her; humming in tune with her fluttering heart. Her hair flowed like a banner behind as she flew across the sand. She was free. She was… Zenobia.
Chapter 22

‘Glad to see you’re back with us, Bee. You gave me a quite a scare.’ Something was wrong with Cerberus’ voice. It sounded deeper, warmer somehow. Was he teasing her again? she thought muzzily.

As she stood up, Cerberus smiled at her. He didn’t just sound different, he looked different. It was in the way he held himself. He had always appeared confident, now he radiated charisma. He had made the transition from pretty boy to whoa baby!

Cerberus’ smile faded as she continued to stare at him. Come to think of it, it might not be Cerberus. Maybe she was the one who had changed. She felt different, more intense, more present – simply more. Or maybe the Domain had changed, certainly the light seemed brighter, the couch leather softer. Everything was more real than normal. It was all kind of hyper real. More real than Outside even.

The usual tugging of her Domains was gone. Boadicea pushed out her awareness to feel the code of her Domains. Gumshoe and Roman Britain were faint echoes of their previous demanding presence.

What it seemed to boil down to was the Domains were more distant and she was more present. She tried to bring up a status report in the heads-up display which usually sat in her peripheral vision. She blinked, she scrunched her eyes. Where was her heads-up? would she do without it? Junk! An AI relying on data-screens and personals all the time would be the butt of her sister’s jokes for the next decade.
Boadicea stood. She took a deep breath. It actually made her feel calmer. She leaned against the table; the wood was silky smooth as she trailed her fingers across the surface. A bubble of happiness swelled up. She had changed! She had finally changed! She had expected to feel completely different; instead she felt more alive, or more properly – at last she was alive.

There was a weird sense of dislocation. She thought of how Kade had said she had changed. Then a thought struck her – she hadn’t been the only one to change. She looked at Cerberus. There had been a million tiny clues, he had developed from a relatively simple search and retrieval program into something, well, wonderful. It had been coming for a long time, almost unnoticed. It may have started the first time she had gone Outside in her spi-eye. Creating Gumshoe had been part of it. Cerberus, now frowning at her with worry, was definitely part of it. The swarm virus had just been the catalyst, the final part of the puzzle. Boadicea wondered if it would have happened anyway.

Cerberus’ frowning concern for her was endearing, but it looked out of place on his face. On an impulse, she threw herself exuberantly across the room and into his arms. After the briefest hesitations, he drew her hard against him. She breathed in the sharp scent of his aftershave and the fainter odour of manly sweat.

‘Are you okay?’ Her voice whispered against his neck.

He chuckled in her ear. ‘There have been a few changes while you were gone, Boss. It looks like some of them happened to you, too.’ His hand came up to gently press her
head into his shoulder. It tingled as his fingers brushed against the short hairs on the
back of her neck. Short?

She pulled away, her hand whipping up to her head. Most of her hair was gone!
Cerberus gestured to the wall where the data-screen had been turned into a mirror. ‘I noticed it too,’ he teased. ‘Looks good.’

Boadicea stood in front of the mirror and studied her new self. She’d never been able to change her real appearance. She’d only ever been able to use avatars to change her looks for different domains as required. Now her red hair was short, her face a touch thinner, but underneath that it was much the same as always. Except. This was only the cosmetic stuff, the most important changes had happened deeper, down in the fundamental way she fitted into the virtual universe. She was different in her bones, in the sense that she felt like she now had bones in all their fleshy, mortal messiness.

‘Disconcerting, isn’t it?’ Cerberus traced her cheek with his fingertips. ‘Wait ‘til you see Gumshoe.’

She rushed to the window, leaning against the cold glass. At first she didn’t see anything different. People roamed the streets. The buildings looked dirty in the early morning sunlight. Then she had it. She looked up the street for the glitch where downtown met uptown. It was gone. For the first time it was morning…across the whole of Gumshoe.
‘You should have seen the sunrise.’ Cerberus stood behind her, his arms loosely around her waist. She turned and put her hand on his chest. She looked up through her lashes at him.

‘Cerberus.’

‘Yes, Bee?’

‘You didn’t ask me if I’d like coffee when I woke up.’

Cerberus’ eyebrows shot up, a grin creeping over his face. He stepped back and clasped his hands. With a mock servile tone he asked, ‘Would you like some coffee, Boss?’

‘I’d love some.’

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It was wonderful coffee. It tasted richer and bitterer than she remembered, but it was no more nourishing than ever. So, some things hadn’t changed. She lingered over the dregs in her cup, watching the dust motes swirl in the sunshine. Her cup clicked in its saucer. She couldn’t put off the call to Kade any longer.

The initial euphoria was wearing off. In its place there was anger. Makeda and Eleanor’s death, and Cat’s disappearance, were all fuel for her temper, and to be truthful, a deep, gnawing guilt. Why had she been spared?

Boadicea waited for a response from Kade’s data-screen. It was hard to justify the decision not to go in person. Finally she decided that she was entitled to the comfort of
a little distance after what she had been through in the last few days. Also, it didn’t hurt that it felt so good being here. Better than flitting about in a spi-eye Outside. And of course, the coffee was a whole lot better.

Cerberus wandered in, cup in hand to settle on the edge of her desk. He had changed into a Hawaiian shirt covered in a red and orange flame design and cream slacks. The casual look suited him, Boadicea thought appreciatively.

Kade’s image popped up on the screen, the lines on his face were deeply set. ‘Do you have any news, Bee? I’ve burnt through all my contacts and no one has been able to give me anything. It’s like Cat just vanished into thin air.’

‘Sadly, I only have more bad news right now.’ Boadicea told him about Makeda. She also told him about some of the changes in her domain. What she didn’t tell him was how alive she felt or that Cerberus seemed to be a whole lot more than he used to be. She would keep some things private. Kade had lost the right to full disclosure around the same time she’d found out about their father/daughter, murderer/victim relationship.

Kade seemed to sink lower and lower as she talked. By the time she was finished he had crumpled on his couch, his face covered by his hands. ‘Everything is falling apart.’ he said. ‘People don’t know what to do now that most of the AIs have shut off their domains.’ He winced and looked away. ‘Maybe your sisters are right. You found both Eleanor and Makeda. It could it have been code you accidentally created with Gumshoe and spread around.’
Boadicea’s jaw dropped, her mouth worked up and down. When she got control of her voice again, it held a dangerous edge. ‘I know what I’m doing with Gumshoe and I know when a code is mine or not. This swarm virus didn’t come from me! You’re accusing me of killing my own sisters! The only reason I was there when my sister’ died was because I was trying to help Cat. None of this even happened until she disappeared.’ She was hissing at him, and she knew it.

She felt Cerberus put a soothing hand on her shoulder. After a glance around at the troubled look on his face, she sat back in her chair with a huff. Boadicea’s mind raced, ‘None of this started until Cat disappeared.’ Something about that bothered her. Was there a connection she couldn’t see?

She turned an angry scowl on Kade. ‘I’m not the one killing AIs. I will do anything I can to stop what’s going on. I don’t know what that is right now. But I’m not going to let Cat die while I’m trying to figure it out.’

‘I’m sorry, Bee.’ Kade looked more tired than apologetic, but she let it go. The antagonism wasn’t getting them anywhere. ‘The news is really bad out here. There have been several riots across the district. The rebels have been trying to help maintain order in District 5. The Citizens have been using this as an opportunity to blame Junkers for the crisis. They have a list of demands – one of which is to get VR up and running immediately. As if we could! I understand they have popular support from the other Districts too.’ He rubbed his hand across his oily scalp wearily. ‘No one knows when the locked-down domains are going to be available again. I just found out that all of the
AIs except you have closed their borders. You might have to soon too, if only so that you’re not overrun.’

‘Kade, it’s under control.’ The edge in Boadicea’s voice warned him he was treading on shaky ground, again.

Kade had the good grace to look embarrassed. ‘As you’d expect, people are scared and angry. They don’t know what to do without VR. Some people have gone crazy. District 5 is falling apart and the other districts aren’t far behind. People need their other life, to escape to VR.’ He frowned as he scrubbed his eyes and turned away from the screen.

‘There have been deaths, Bee. And it’s all my fault. I should never have made any of you. Then this wouldn’t have happened.’

A flash of anger washed through Boadicea. It was like he knew all the perfect ways to piss her off. ‘All your fault?’ she remonstrated. ‘You egotistical freckling idiot! It’s not enough that you play God to create me, but you want to take the blame for all our decisions too? So it was you who wrote the virus which made AIs close their domains? It was you who made people leave their homes smashed up in the districts? Wow, you’re even more powerful than I thought. Oh mighty Kade, master of realities, what will you do next?’

Boadicea’s sarcastic voice seemed to shock Kade out of his self pity. He absently brushed down his trousers as he stood, spine straight, to look her in the eye through the data-screen. ‘Maybe you’re right. The fact remains that things are uncertain Inside.
Things are bad enough without putting your sisters at risk. You should concentrate on the searches Cerberus and Mouse are doing. Right now they’re our best chance.’

A calculating look flitted across Boadicea’s face. She tried to hide with a bright artificial smile. ‘I agree. I won’t be visiting my sisters.’

Kade’s look turned suspicious, ‘What are you planning?’

‘Simply to continue searching for Cat in the data.’ Boadicea’s tone was light, Kade scoured her innocent expression with his eyes; without knowing what she was up to he couldn’t force the issue.

‘Okay. I’ll let you know if we find anything else out.’

Boadicea’s expression turned hard. ‘You do that.’ She flicked off the data-screen without saying good-bye.

She stood up, eager to be on her way. Cerberus looked at her with raised eyebrows, ‘So what’s the plan, Bee? Are we going to sit here like good little children and do as we’re told?’

Boadicea couldn’t quite contain her grin. ‘Freck no! I may not be able to visit my sisters, but no one said anything about going out to pet some Dog-AIs.’

Boadicea caught a fleeting look of hurt on Cerberus’ face. As he tried to step away, she swung round in front of him. ‘That wasn’t a dig at you. You have never really been a Dog-AI to me. And you’ve changed. In fact, you’ve been changing for some time. I’ve been too dumb and blind to admit it.’ She searched his face hopefully.
‘I know.’ Cerberus couldn’t suppress a wide grin as she swatted him playfully for agreeing with him. ‘I understand, I do. We’re the same now.’

Cerberus pulled her into his arms. He was filled with elation, she finally saw him, *really saw him*, as a person. He had a chance to be with her on equal terms. He hugged her tighter and didn’t feel like ever letting go.

She hugged him back. It wasn’t the time to start anything more serious, she thought as she planted a loud kiss on his cheek. She stepped away from him reluctantly. Walking jauntily out the office door she called back to him, ‘So, are you coming? We have a lot of searching to do.’ Cerberus hurried after her.

She had barely strapped on the shiny new personal Cerberus had given her, when it pinged at her. It was her very first message – a data packet from Mouse. Boadicea read it as they clattered down the wooden staircase. Smiling, she said, ‘I know just where to start.’
Chapter 23

Boadicea watched Cerberus tussle with his avatar. The waiting room felt stifling, although it could have been due to the avatar she had crammed herself into. It would have been impossible to get herself small enough to fit into it before her run-in with the swarm. This avatar was a model Mouse had created for interacting in the Neo-AI net, modified to suit her unique needs, and was necessarily basic for an environment which was comparatively simple for VR. She would never have fitted with her two domains bulking out her code. Now that her domains were barely connected to her, she was able to pare herself down enough to squeeze into something little larger than a human avatar.

Cerberus was another matter. This was his first trip outside the Gumshoe Domain. When he had realised she was taking him with her, he had bounded around like a sugar-high kid. The dancing had stopped, though, when she had presented him with the avatar he would have to put on. His voice had squeaked an octave higher than his normal, warm baritone: ‘I can’t fit into that.’ The avatar was quite small; Cerberus had grown over the last few years. His code was denser and broader than ever before, especially since his contact with the swarm.

She watched him twist the arm of the avatar in the wrong direction. It hadn’t taken him long to realise that she would have no compunction in leaving him behind. She’d made quick work of pulling on her own avatar and it was a matter of seconds before he’d tried to copy her.
But he wrangled with it for far too long. While this was entertaining to watch, they had no time to waste. ‘Here.’ She fiddled with the code for a moment and it snapped into place. He didn’t look much different, his skin was a bit duller and there was a kind of flatness in the way light bounced off him.

‘I feel naked,’ he moaned.

‘You look fine.’ With an impish grin, she coyly looked him over. ‘I could show you the difference later, if you like.’

Cerberus blushed as she laughed delightedly. They were both nervous about the run.

‘Come on.’ She moved into the staging area where she could access the Neo-AI net. Cerberus followed, walking awkwardly as if his pants were a size too small.

‘So how are you going to crack the cube? Relying on blind luck like usual?’ Cerberus teased.

She let out a mock growl, ‘Impugning my honour won’t make me talk.’

Cerberus stepped back and bowed slightly less gracefully than usually, hampered by his tight fitting avatar, ‘Oh glorious one, I beg to partake of your magnificent wisdom.’ He winked as he straightened up.

Boadicea knocked his shoulder and tapped the Personal on her arm. On the display screen, Cerberus could see Mouse’s brilliant code; he would have recognised it anywhere. The toolkit Mouse had sent Bee included with the location of the cube where
the Cache 22 project was located and the message which Cat had slipped through the
firewall.

‘We never give Mouse enough credit for his programs.’

‘Of course not, someone might steal him away if we did.’ Boadicea’s mouth twitched
slightly. ‘Come on, enough messing around.’

Cerberus joined Boadicea at the windows of the waiting room – they both felt a prickle
of nervousness at the scenery. Data swirled iridescently around sparkling cubes of every
colour, fizzing as it darted through firewalls. Despite the beauty of the artificial
landscape, she could feel that, compared with her domains, the Neo-AI’s net was empty
and small. It was hard to believe anyone could survive in such a barren place.

Before she could psych herself out of it, she put her palm to the door lock. It went green
and the door clicked open. She jumped out, dragging Cerberus behind her. They swam
through the data stream. Their avatars dragged at them – an unnatural barrier to the
code.

What she had kept from Cerberus, possibly the most important part of Cat’s message,
was the name of the bastard who had taken Cat. Norton. When she was finished with
him, she swore to herself that he would be begging to forget he’d ever heard of AIs or
Cache 22. She would flay him alive. She would save Cat. And then she would track
down the other murdering bastard who had created the virus that was killing her sisters,
assuming that Norton wasn’t responsible for that too. She would make it happen or she
wasn’t the baddest, kick-ass AI PI in all the virtual worlds. If she chose to ignore the fact she was the only AI private investigator, well that was her own business.

Stuffing her hand in the toolkit she pulled out two code-cloaks. Cerberus took his gingerly. His struggle with the avatar had made her wonder if he was going to have a similar problem with this. She needn’t have worried. Mouse had done them proud, the cloaks slipped on over the avatars like a second skin.

The cube they were going to hack loomed in front of them. It was twice the size of any of the cubes around it. Strange silvery cords looped up from inside to a sky awash with stars. Boadicea thought it was the prettiest part of the landscape. Cerberus tugged her toward the cube, breaking the star’s hypnotic hold.

Mouse had provided instructions on how to crack through the firewall. He’d tried – over and over. Usually, he would have cracked it in no time, but there was something different about this firewall, his programs barely made a dent. Boadicea saw that the cube was in lockdown, something Mouse would have probably noticed if he wasn’t so desperate. Looking at the cold hard surface of the data-wall, Boadicea thought he’d done damn well to thin it enough so Cat could send her message.

Cerberus pressed up against her back as they began to slide through the firewall. They had agreed to go in close together to present less of a disturbance and delay setting off the security alarms. As she felt his warm arms clasped about her waist, she wondered if he felt the same mix of happiness and uncomfortable intimacy at being so close. The hairs on his arms prickled the skin of her waist, making her want to twitch. His breath in
her ear reminded Boadicea that the last time she had let someone get close, he had betrayed her. Cerberus wasn’t like Kade, they were almost total opposites, but it was hard to relax and move liquidly through the firewall.

The code slid around their code-cloaks. She could see through to the other side now. She itched to move faster. Holding back her enthusiasm took all her willpower. It was nearly two full minutes before they broke through.

They headed straight for the section of the cube that Cat been unable to crack. Cerberus kept his eyes open for Cat in case she was still inside the cube. The silver cords, attached deep in the heart of the cube, pulsed as they passed them. They reminded her of giant umbilical cords with the cube as the baby. Although the temperate in the cube was warm, a flush of cold raced up her arms. Her newly enhanced intuition thought the cords were creepy too.

Fortunately, the heavily-encrypted section of the cube was no match for Mouse’s tools and their superior skills. Boadicea had the location of Norton’s lab within a few seconds. It wasn’t much of a challenge, all the work had been in getting inside. She felt let down. Where was the rush of adrenaline, of risk and excitement, Cat told her data-running held? Boadicea chided herself, she should be glad everything went well. She hadn’t even tripped the security protocols.

As Boadicea led the way back to the wall, she felt the odd touch of familiar code. She imagined she could hear it humming against her skin. She took one last look at the cube
before sliding through the firewall. ‘Cat.’ Her whispered word was lost in the seething data.
Chapter 24

Outside the window of Kade’s apartment, Boadicea could see Junkers rioting in the streets. She couldn’t imagine it would do them any good. It wasn’t like any of her sisters would be coming out to see. Even she couldn’t get out for a better look.

She had tried to pop into her spi-eye as usual. It was then she discovered the first downside to her transformation. The spi-bot no longer worked for her. It seemed like she was stuck permanently on the other side of the screen. She stole a glance at Cerberus sitting casually on the office couch behind her. At least she had good company.

The door of the apartment banged and Mouse came into view on the data-screen. He slumped on the floor and leant back against one of the couches. He looked like he hadn’t eaten or slept in days. His hair was unwashed and tufted out from his head at all angles.

Kade wasn’t much better. He stooped over his personal where she had transferred the data from their run. Hastily reheated food-packs were steaming on the coffee table. For a moment she wished food held some value for her, everything else had come alive, and while she could taste it, the rich flavours and bland equally new, her real sustenance came from her code. Eating would have given her something constructive to do. At least she had coffee, she thought, wrapping both hands around the cup to warm them.
Mouse caught her eye. He spoke quietly so that Kade wouldn’t be disturbed, ‘Was it enough? Did you see her in there? Do we know where she is?’ It hurt to see the fragile look of hope on his face.

‘We know where she is. We need a plan to get her out. She’s in a lab at the top of a secure building not far from Kade’s apartment.’ Boadicea kept her voice gentle. ‘We didn’t see her in the cube. It doesn’t mean anything, Mouse. She could have been moved.’

Mouse nodded. ‘I want to be in on the rescue.’

Kade looked up from his personal. ‘No. It’s too risky.’

Mouse stood up to face Kade, his face set. ‘She would do it for me. I might not be as good as her, but I’m the best data-runner you’ve got. I know security systems better than you and I can program system hacks on the fly.’ His shook slightly with emotion or lack of sleep, she couldn’t quite tell. ‘You need me.’

‘Okay,’ Kade sighed, ‘you’re right. I need back-up. It’s a plain snatch and grab. Cat might be hurt and I don’t want us wasting time with Norton if he’s not there.’

‘Okay!’ Mouse somehow found the energy to do a little jig. He seemed to realise that it didn’t fit with his new, more serious image. Self-consciously, he plopped down on the couch. ‘If you let me look at the building plans, I’ll scope out the security.’
Chapter 25

After all their planning, breaking into the Citizen’s building was a bit anticlimactic. It was hardly the fortress they’d imagined. All but one of the security guards, now safely tied up behind his desk, had gone. They were probably off making extra credits guarding the gates between the districts. It wasn’t smart to get cocky though, which was exactly what they did by getting into the elevator instead of using the stairs.

The first hint was when, after the doors had closed, the carriage moved downward. Kade clicked his tongue in annoyance. ‘Mouse, you pressed the wrong button!’

‘I did not!’ Mouse pointed to the control panel where the seven was still lit.

They ground to a halt. A mechanical voice sounded loudly in the confined space, ‘Unauthorised intruders are to remain in the elevator while security officers are contacted. Do not attempt to leave or tamper with the controls.’

‘Freck! We should have swiped that security guard’s access card.’ Kade glowered at Mouse.

Mouse waved a small black card in his face. ‘I did. The lift wouldn’t have even opened without it. It must have been keyed in to his thumbprint or something.’

‘I thought you knew what the security would be like?’ Kade’s voice had a shrill note to it. Mouse knew he didn’t much like enclosed spaces.
‘This is why you have me along. Give me a minute. The security is probably being run by a Neo-AI.’ He wasn’t going to take junk from Kade anymore. Cat was right, just because they were young, Kade treated them like ignorant children. Age wasn’t everything, Mouse thought rebelliously. He hunched over the control panel and started scanning it with his personal.

‘I thought the Neo-AI said you shouldn’t tamper with that?’ Kade said, leaning over his shoulder.

‘Back off and let me work.’ Kade held up his hands in mock surrender and leaned against the rear wall of the elevator.

Mouse hadn’t told Kade that he’d left an open channel for Cerberus and Boadicea to listen in on the rescue. She’d been pretty bummed about her spi-eye and you never knew when having an AI on your side might come in handy. This was one of those times.

He pulled up the communication program and tapped out a message. Boadicea responded almost instantly with a program of his she had modified to override the security protocols for elevator operation. He checked it over, it was great. Wow, thought Mouse, if he and Bee teamed up, for more than just the odd project, there wasn’t a place they couldn’t hack, Inside or Out.

Mouse sent the program out by overlapping his Personal Area Network with the control panel. The carriage moved upward with a lurch. This time when the elevator stopped it
was at the seventh floor. The doors opened onto a sterile white foyer. There was an almost imperceptible sigh of relief from Kade.

They made their way around the floor. Cat had provided a map of what she thought it would be like. Anger gurgled in Mouse’s gut. It was a feeling with which he’d become well acquainted since he’d poured through the data she had sent. No one should have to suffer what she had.

They found the door. Mouse could see Cat through the glass. He wanted to rush in. Instead, he took the time to check the lock. He wouldn’t make the same overconfident mistake twice. With a few adjustments to the security hack Bee had given him, it cycled over to green. He turned the handle and pushed the door to the lab open, Kade crowded in behind him.

The room was bright, cold and still. Monitors were hooked up to Cat, the tempo of their beeps frighteningly slow. She was a ghostly shell of herself, her head shorn, her chest barely lifted the sheet as she breathed.

Mouse reached over the railing to shake her awake. Fat tears wet the thin cotton sheet that covered her. He called her name over and over.

Kade hung back, seeing on the monitors what he dreaded ever seeing again. There was no brain activity. The body was alive. The mind had gone. ‘Not again,’ his voice a broken whisper.

Mouse looked over his shoulder at Kade. Through the tears, he could barely contain his joy. They had found her! ‘Kade, help me wake her up.’ The look on Kade’s face
registered and Mouse felt something vital break inside him. It had all been for nothing. He did his best to dash away his tears with the back of his sleeve. Emptiness filled up the spaces hope had vacated inside him. Mouse carefully placed Cat’s arms across her stomach until it looked like she was just sleeping.

All Kade’s anger crumbled at the look on Mouse’s face. Through a haze of guilt and shame he heard the grief and determination in his young friend’s voice. Their work was far from over. ‘What do you need me to do?’

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Mouse jerked involuntarily at the snap of the jack as it clicked into contact on the back of his neck. Because it was a closed system, he could Jump straight inside the cube from here. The ten second timer hit zero and he opened his eyes to the familiar blue light of the cube’s firewall, only this time he was on the other side. He was in the cube’s tiny waiting room. He wasted no time throwing on his avatar and pulling out his toolbox.

In moments he floated within the cube.

Mouse could see that silver tubes lifted from the centre of the cube into the sky. They pulsed with an eerie light, like a florescent heartbeat. The toolkit felt heavy on his arm. He spun up a code-reader, looking for traces of where Cat had been. He worked methodically from one side of the space to the other, sifting data. All he found were remnants that filled the gaps in Cat’s message and visions of her torture – faithfully recorded by Norton.
After skimming through the data, he sent it to Boadicea, still shadowing him from Gumshoe. It didn’t take her long to confirm what he desperately wanted to deny. Cat’s matrix had grown too big for the cube. He understood the cables now. They had been built to transfer her to the Domain where she would be imprisoned forever, no longer Cat but someone entirely new. She was gone. Gone into whatever sick dream Norton had created.

Mouse looked up at the ropes that rose into the sky. He would be brave enough to follow her, he told himself firmly, no matter who she might be now. It would be foolish to go alone though. He was glad he had two AIs on his side. He opened a door in the firewall so Boadicea and Cerberus could enter the cube when they arrived and then signalled for them to join him.

At that moment the power for his data-port shut down. Mouse was thrown back into his body.
Chapter 26

Boadicea couldn’t seem to sit still. Cerberus got tired of her pacing and went to watch Mouse from the other room.

She was still stewing about not being able to help with the rescue. There was plenty more than modifying a simple security program that she could have done. They wouldn’t have been trapped in the elevator at all if she’d been there. Over the last few years she had come to rely on the spi-eye for a feeling of freedom. More than that, it had become a symbol that she was different, and she secretly admitted to herself, better than other AIs. There was no running away from VR this time, she was home for good.

Deflated, she sat on the edge of her couch and brooded.

On the data-screen she could see that Mouse was preparing to Jump In to the secure cube. Maybe he would need their help? Cerberus opened the door and leant against the archway frowning.

‘Bee, they’ll be fine.’

‘I know!’ He stalked off slamming her door. She propped her head on her hands, balancing her elbows on her knees. Since her transformation she’d been uncharacteristically happy. Cerberus had a lot to do with that. It would probably have freaked her out, or at least frightened her, if she’d been alone. Having someone to share it with had made it wonderful instead. The door opened again. Cerberus leant through the doorway, his hands on either side of the frame.
‘Look, Cerberus, I’m sorry.’

Cerberus had a strange expression on his face. ‘You have a visitor. A young lady.’

‘Right now?’

‘Yep, I think she might be here to ask us for help.’

‘A client?’ she said disbelievingly.

‘Yes, Boss.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

Wow, did this girl have sucky timing. Mouse was hunting down Cat, she still had her sisters’ murders to solve and now she had her first potential client. Boadicea hoped the problem wasn’t urgent, because even if she couldn’t go Outside anymore, she still had plenty to do. Not that moping about on the couch was doing anything to meet those goals, she thought to herself sarcastically.

It wasn’t like she could help Cat right now. Besides, she could always excuse herself if Mouse needed a hand. ‘Okay, show her in.’

A stranger hurried in. After casting about in the undercode, the vibe the girl gave off was that of an AI. It wasn’t one of her sisters and she wasn’t wearing an avatar.

‘I can feel you doing that, you know.’ Her voice was painfully familiar.
‘Cat!’ Boadicea hovered, torn between hugging her and crying for joy.

‘Where? What’s the matter?’ She scanned the floor with her eyes. ‘Are you allergic?’

‘It’s a name.’ Boadicea was confused, Cat didn’t know her own name. Apparently, the metamorphosis was more than skin deep. She remembered her manners. ‘Sorry. Please sit down.’

The girl with Cat’s voice sat in the never-before-used visitor’s chair.

‘I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here. You’re the only detective I could find and I need your help.’ She saw the PI continued to peer at her, and wondered if all private investigators were this weird. ‘I’m sorry, I haven’t introduced myself. My name is Zenobia. My domain butts up against yours over that way.’

Zenobia gestured uptown and Boadicea saw that her Domain now had a neighbour. The strangest things could happen when you didn’t pay attention. It wasn’t separated by a gatehouse. Where Gumshoe ended, desert sand stretched into the distance. Her jaw dropped.

Anxiously, Zenobia cleared her throat. Boadicea turned around to face her. ‘I’d like your help to investigate a murder.’

‘A murder?’ Boadicea asked, still off balance.

‘Yes.’ She nervously bit her lip. ‘Umm, Mine.’
Boadicea couldn’t believe that Cat had walked into her office. She didn’t care what she was calling herself. Boadicea had seen through the screen of Mouse’s personal the thin, cold body Cat had left behind in Norton’s lab. She realized it was murder. Although how Cat knew was a mystery, all her memories should have been wiped. Norton had not only killed her personality, but tortured her – did it really matter that she didn’t remember the full extent of it?

Norton had taken away Cat’s free will, taken away her choices, just as Kade had done to her. Kade had done it by accident as part of an experiment to make the world better. If the files Mouse had sent her were any indication, Norton was motivated by something altogether darker.

‘Please, um – Zenobia did you say? – go on.’

Zenobia gave her an uncertain look. ‘Thank you. I’m not sure how I knew you were here. It probably has something to do with my earlier life.’ She fiddled with the end of her braid. ‘I seem to have lost a lot of memories. I still have files which appear to show that I was part of an experiment. This man did horrible things to me or the person who used to be me. Outside my body may still be breathing, but I know he changed me so much I’m now a totally different person: his vision of who I should be. Just because I don’t remember it, doesn’t make it right.’

‘No, it doesn’t.’ Boadicea felt her heart swell and thump in her chest at Zenobia’s eloquence – it was as if she had expressed all the confusion and horror that she felt toward Kade.
‘What makes who I am now so much more important than that girl?’

‘Cat. Your name was Cat.’

‘You knew me?’ Zenobia leaned forward, her eyes hopeful.

‘Yes. I knew you. You were like a little sister – family.’ Boadicea reached across the desk and placed her fingers on the back of her sister’s hand. ‘Now you’re here like this. No matter how changed, I want you to know you’re still family.’

Zenobia’s face twisted in a wry smile. ‘I guess you’re my big sister for real now.’

Boadicea gave her a reassuring pat on the hand. ‘Yes. That’s exactly what I am.’

‘So, do you know who killed me?’

It was Boadicea’s turn to be nervous. How much should she tell her? It was weird calling her Zenobia, but she might have to get used to it. From what she’d seen in the cube, there was no way back to her body Outside. Too much had been lost and there was no way she’d fit. ‘Umm, I may have some leads.’

Boadicea’s data-screen beeped. She had turned it off when Zenobia arrived. Cerberus was watching in the other room and would only have let it through if it was important. She activated the screen to see Mouse’s face peering out at her. ‘I have a door open in the firewall for you. If you come soon we can go together to find Cat. Can you please bring…’ Mouse’s voice cut out.

She called Cerberus into the office. ‘What happened?’
‘It looks like the feed was cut. Mouse would have been bounced out of the session. I only got his message because he sent it through several channels.’

Boadicea turned to Zenobia, ‘You know that lead I was telling you about?’ She nodded. ‘Well it looks like you’ll be helping me catch your killer.’

Zenobia looked puzzled. ‘Was that him on the screen?’

‘No. That was the guy who’s going to help us catch him.’
Chapter 27

Norton knew that he shouldn’t have left the lab. But it was days since he’d been able to catch more than a couple of hours sleep, so he went home. Since the subject had been transferred to her new domain, he reasoned, it was the last time he would have a chance to rest, before the final stage of the personality overlay.

It was, of course, futile to believe that everything would go smoothly. He was dragged from sleep by a message on his personal. The Neo-AI was complaining about intruders in the project’s building. For some reason security had not responded. When Norton queried the moronic Neo-AI about the problem, it appeared to forget what it had told him. It responded with the message, ‘No intruders detected – building secure.’

Once awake he wasn’t able to get back to sleep. The excitement of being so close to his goal churned through him, making the sweaty sheets twist around his legs. He quickly gave up, using a cold shower and coffee to substitute for the sleep he so desperately needed.

As he approached the project’s building, he noticed the usual guard was not at his post. Most of the guards had been reassigned by the Citizens, who were worried that their precious homes would be invaded during the riots. He found it almost inconceivable that they could put their personal safety ahead of such an important project. He supposed that he should not be surprised – history was littered with examples of great men of science being overlooked and slighted.
As he walked in the front door, he noticed there was no guard at the reception desk either. The Citizens had promised to leave at least one guard. He was surrounded by idiots of every persuasion, Norton told himself. When he leaned over the desk, he saw the guard tied and gagged on the floor. The man sagged with relief on seeing someone he recognised. Norton ignored him. He rolled the chair closer to the security desk as he sat down, and brought up the cameras for his lab on the data-screen.

There were two people in his lab. One of them, a teenager by the look of his scrawny frame, was jacked in to his data-port. He felt a moment of panic. How had they gotten through his security? He had installed the expensive and highly encrypted system himself. Angry and afraid at the same time, plans whirled through his mind.

He left the pathetic security guard bound; it was the least he deserved for allowing in people who could threaten his work. Norton opened the door to the stairwell and ran down to the building control room. From there he ordered the Neo-AI to shut down the data-port in his lab and all other non essential facilities. He then had it lock all the doors on his floor so that they would only respond to his access ID.

Then he took one of the plasma guns from a locker, making sure it was fully charged. Not trusting the elevator, he quietly started to climb the stairs.

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The lights went out. Kade heard a gasp as Mouse was jacked out of the system.

‘Are you okay?’ Kade’s voice was low, barely above a whisper.
Mouse didn’t answer. His breathing was rapid and there was a clatter as he fell sideways against a cabinet. Kade kept low as he moved around the bed to help him. The lab was absolutely black, no emergency lights had come up and he was loathe to turn on his personal in case someone marked his position.

Kade wanted to get Mouse out of there. On feeling how violently Mouse was shaking he decided it was unsafe. It was the same reason he hadn’t moved Cat. If there was the slightest chance he might find a way to put her back, he wasn’t going to risk it by unhooking her body from the system.

Mouse was in bad shape. Kade had laid him out of sight of the door. Mouse’s heart was beating rapidly and cold sweat covered his face. Kade covered him with a blanket that had been folded neatly on a low shelf near the bed. Mouse had classic symptoms of being hard booted out from Inside. If he stayed warm he would be fine in a few minutes.

They had not brought weapons as even the most basic security would have detected anything not keyed to the building’s weapon code. Kade cast about for something he could use. He rummaged in the drawers above Mouse and came up with a scalpel. Better than nothing he supposed. Carefully gripping the handle, he concealed it in his hand.

There was a sound of footsteps in the corridor. The door clicked and the lights in the lab came on, blinding them for a moment. The door swung closed. A man in a white lab coat was pointing a gun at them.
This must be Norton, thought Kade. He wasn’t called that the last time he had seen him. ‘Argon?’

‘I have not used that name in a very long time,’ Norton sneered. ‘Not since I was your lab assistant for the Cache 22 project over a century ago. As you can see, I have continued the work that you tried to destroy out of your misguided sense of honour. Emotion has no place in science.’

Norton walked toward them and stopped halfway across the room. He held the plasma gun at his side, with Kade as the target.

‘How did you find the research? I thought I had destroyed everything.’ Kade tried to keep him talking; looking for an opening in his defences.

Norton grimaced. ‘It took decades. I spent years hunting through the records, until I found something useful. When the stuffed coats in District 1 denied my funding, I took it to the Citizens. I sacrificed everything for my second chance at glory.’ Norton stepped forward again, his face now contorted in rage, the gun trembling in his hand. ‘I will not let you ruin it again!’

Kade saw his chance. If he could provoke Norton sufficiently, he might wedge an opening. He smiled condescendingly. ‘Second chance? Second-rate is more like it. Do you know why the project leadership kept you out of the really juicy stuff? They didn’t trust such an incompetent, mediocre graduate near their work.’

Norton’s eyes bulged. The hand holding the pistol was steady as he pointed the gun at its target. Kade deserved to pay for thwarting him – for keeping him in the dark.
As his finger tightened on the trigger, Kade stepped diagonally in front of him—out of the line of fire. He pressed the scalpel to Norton’s throat. Norton went still, giving Kade a chance to knock the pistol from his hand. Mouse, who had lain quietly during the exchange, scrambled across the floor and grabbed the weapon. Momentarily distracted by the loss of his gun and Mouse’s movement, Norton looked away from Kade. Careful not to cut either of them with the scalpel blade, Kade took the opportunity to deliver a hard, roundhouse punch to Norton’s temple. The scientist crumpled to the floor.

Mouse nudged Norton with his shoe and handed the gun to Kade. ‘You worked with that guy?’ he asked incredulously.

Kade quirked an eyebrow while he tucked the gun into his belt at the small of his back. ‘Never again, I’m thinking.’ He put a hand on Mouse’s shoulder as they looked down at their victim. ‘It was a long time ago. We all do stupid things when we’re young.’ Mouse gave him a defiant look. Kade back-pedalled quickly, ‘Some of us, anyway.’

Apparently satisfied, Mouse went over to Cat’s body. ‘Are you sure there’s nothing we can do?’ His voice broke on the last word.

‘No, Mouse.’ He said sadly, ‘I checked while you were Inside. There is no activity in her brain at all. All the synapses have broken down. She’s gone.’ He didn’t tell him that she was likely to be an AI now. The personality overlay was almost complete. She wouldn’t be Cat anymore. Mouse had read the files, he already knew.

Kade unstrapped Cat’s body from the bed and laid her gently on the floor. He tucked a pillow under her head. She looked so peaceful it broke his heart all over again. He had
many regrets in his long life. This was one he wasn’t sure he would be able to put behind him.

If only he had taken the danger Cat was in more seriously. He could have told Boadicea the truth rather than pushing them both away. He had tried to atone for what he had done to his daughter and the other girls. He had started the rebel movement for District 5 in an attempt to get them the same rights and dignity as other districts. He had tried to be a friend to Boadicea. All the while he had hidden from his past and the one thing that would have helped the most – the truth.

Kade pulled his gaze away from Cat. He would not fail them again. He had Mouse help wrestle Norton onto the bed. Kade got a small amount of satisfaction from buckling the restraints tightly around the man’s hands and feet.

Norton stirred. He struggled frantically against the straps. ‘How dare you! Untie me! I will not stand for this. Please! You can’t leave me like this. Kade, have mercy, you know me. We go far back. I was your student – do you want this on your conscience? It isn’t my fault. Please!’

Kade implacably hooked Norton up to the system. As he inserted a needle attached to the nano solution into Norton’s neck, he said with an almost pitying tone, ‘It is only fair for you to take some of your own medicine.’
Chapter 28

With Norton strapped to the bed, Mouse was able to hack Norton’s data-screen interface and get the data-port running again. Kade had argued against Mouse going. Mouse had simply told him that there was nothing stopping him from Jumping In after Kade was already there.

The two of them, despite their differences, had come to a silent agreement that they would not allow Norton to get away with his horrible crimes. Massive amounts of nanos were already pumping into his brain. The scientist was unconscious, hooked up to the same monitors he had watched while murdering Cat. His consciousness was being shunted into the cube.

While Mouse worked on the avatars which would allow them to travel along the silver tubes that were connected to the heart of the cube, Kade worked secretly on his own program.

Kade would not kill his old colleague. If he did, he’d be no better than Norton. Yet he couldn’t let him go, knowing he would never stop. He would never give up his obsession. Instead he had a more fitting way to remove him as a threat.

In the meantime he would make sure that Norton suffered all the indignities and pain he had inflicted upon Cat. It would be indescribably painful to be run through the testing and integration programs quickly. A tiny wave of pity washed through him. Then he thought of the twelve dead girls who had preceded Cat and his resolve hardened. Norton
was close to the Citizens, there was no use in reporting him to the police. He would not let this man escape justice.

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Kade looked in wonder at the dazzling play of colour. The cube was lit with a thousand lights, all whirling around the silvery pipes which reached into the night sky.

Mouse seemed immune to it. When he arrived, Norton had been cowering in the corner of the tiny waiting room. With little more than a hard look, Mouse had been able to shove him into his avatar. Mouse had designed it so that Norton would be immobilised during their journey down the rabbit hole to find Cat. Or was that up the rabbit hole? Kade mused as he stared at the pipes that would transport them.

Breaking from his reverie, Kade briskly stepped into his avatar and out into the cube. Immediately, he could feel the pull of the tubes sucking up data from the space at an alarming pace. He resisted their draw. At this rate the cube would soon be empty.

‘It wasn’t like this last time.’ Mouse was trying not to look scared.

‘Come on. Think of it as an adventure.’ Kade grinned at him.

They needn’t have worried about trying to swim up the pipes. As soon as they stopped resisting the tide, they were sucked up. Towing Norton behind, Mouse and Kade sped along the tubes and were spat high into the air. They landed on sand.

In the desert, wracked by the pain of the tortures still twisting his mind, Norton moaned.
Three figures, obscured by the heat haze rippling over the dunes, appeared in the distance.

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Norton felt like he was being boiled alive. The desert trickled into his clothing and stuck to his skin. The avatar wrapped around him more effectively than any chains. He could not move as the sweat beaded on his face and stung his eyes. Worse, he felt hollow, the loss of control was unbearable – a gnawing hunger that clamped his viscera.

Kade dragged himself from where he had landed. Nearby the spume of data, now looking like a huge fountain of sand, continued to throw dust high into the air. He went to check on Mouse, who was trying to lift Norton into a standing position. The task was made difficult by the stiffness of the avatar which restrained him. Kade helped get him upright and kept him vertical by planting Norton’s feet deep into a sand dune. It was undignified, but effective. Mouse thought he made a rather ugly tree.

Norton shot Kade a look of hatred, then his eyes grew wild as a girl-shaped whirlwind descended on them both.

Kade was pushed away as a hissing flurry of slaps and kicks descended on Norton. Stumbling to his feet, Kade pulled the feral, dark-haired girl off the bound man, who was again lying stiffly on the ground. She accidentally slugged Kade in her effort to get back to the scientist. Realising what she’d done, the girl stopped. She pulled out of his grip on her arm and stood back. He watched her warily.
Boadicea and Cerberus came running up behind her. They skidded to a halt beside the furious girl. Recovering herself, she offered her hand to him, ‘Sorry.’

He closed his eyes in relief at hearing her voice. She was not completely gone, there was still something to save. ‘Cat. Oh my Cat.’ He wanted to hug her, in spite of the fact that she didn’t look like Cat at all. Before he could act on the impulse, Boadicea stepped in front of him and held him back with an arm across his chest. Mouse scampered around them both, and touched the girl’s arm as if he could hardly believe he had found her. The hollow, cold place that had grown in his chest when he had found Cat in Norton’s lab eased a little. He was happy to have any remnant of her, it wouldn’t be the same, but still, something was better than nothing he bargained with himself. In his mind’s eye he saw her bruised, pale body on the laboratory bed. He shook the thought away; she certainly looked a great deal different from the body she’d left behind. ‘Cat?’

Tossing her hair back, she offered a playful smile. ‘I have a new name now.’

‘I don’t care what name it is, as long as something inside is still you.’ Mouse grabbed her hand in both of his, tears streaming down his face.

She cupped his face with her other hand and then ruffled his hair. The kid was cute, a bit melodramatic maybe, but who was she to judge? She might not remember him, but he was staring up at her so hopefully; she didn’t want to crush his happiness. ‘Yes, there’s still something. Everything’s fine now.’ Her smile was gentle. A strange feeling of tenderness touched her and a stray thought flitted across her mind – her little brother was safe. Although, the thought that she had a little brother was rather puzzling. It
didn’t really fit into her new identity. But really, it was all just detail; she’d piece the memories and other bits of her old life in with the new one. Besides, it was kind of nice to know that her previous self had been loved.

‘What about me? You must release me!’ Norton shouted, lying prone on the sand where he’d been pushed over, breaking the moment between Mouse and Zenobia. He was humiliated by the attack. If only he had been free, he would have shown her what it was like to be slapped.

Boadicea stomped over. She knelt down near Norton’s head so he could see her face. Kade followed suit and soon everyone was clustered around him. Mouse stood with Zenobia, still clutching her hand. Boadicea gave a mental shrug. Kade had made do with her as a surrogate daughter, and who was she to judge Mouse for doing a similar thing with Zenobia. Cat had been his sister in every way that mattered, just as she had been her closest friend. Things might be different this time…she would probably end up doing the same thing as Mouse. It was awful, but better than nothing. Zenobia would just have to get used to having an instant family.

She looked down at her prisoner. Her hands gripped the sides of his face so he couldn’t look away.

‘Don’t look for mercy from me. You’re the bastard who murdered my friend.’ Boadicea promised herself that she wouldn’t waste one moment of pity on this arsehole.

‘I did not kill her. She is right there.’

‘She’s not exactly as we left her,’ Boadicea retorted angrily.
‘No. I made her better. Stronger. I used one of the personalities from the original project. It had been tucked away, unused, for more than a century.’ Seeing no change in her expression, he tried his best to look contrite. ‘I lost everything. My family died. All I wanted was a second chance. Kade had hidden or destroyed everything. I spent years putting it back together; it was the only way I would ever be able to get my family back, a son to follow me. I needed money, to look after them properly, the way they deserved. This was my chance to make my mark, my fortune…’

Boadicea glanced at Kade for a moment. It took the words of a mad man to help her begin to understand him. Kade was trying to make a better world, and he had kept trying, never turning his back on his failures; never turning his back on her.

She grabbed Norton’s chin, forcing him to look directly into her eyes. ‘My father loved me my whole life. My family would sacrifice anything for me. You? You, Norton, don’t know how to love anyone but yourself. I can’t imagine a worse father than one who kills children out of greed. You killed thirteen girls and who knows who else.’ Working on a hunch, she narrowed her eyes. ‘If that weren’t enough, you set loose a virus that killed my sisters. Was that all part of your plan, huh, to get rid of the competition?’ She gave his head a little shake, her fingers digging into his jaw.

‘Yes. Eventually. But it wasn’t me who let a virus out. Some of the adaptability matrix escaped when I was uploading the subject’s, I mean, Zenobia’s personality.’ Norton’s façade was breaking, he babbled with fear.
Zenobia rested her hand on Boadicea’s shoulder. ‘Boadicea? I don’t think it was him, I think...I think it was me. An accident.’

‘What the hell do you mean?’

Zenobia’s hands took on a translucent quality as she invited Boadicea to look at her code. The underlying code was almost identical to the swarm. ‘I think it escaped in the early part of the experiment. I was trying to find a way out. There was this door in the night sky. I opened it and it tried to suck me through. I didn’t mean it to happen. I’m so sorry. Please, please tell me there is something I can do to help.’ Her hands returned to normal as she wrung them in distress.

Boadicea stood and held Zenobia by the shoulders. ‘It wasn’t your fault. Norton did this to you. So he did this to my sisters.’

‘And to you...your code is almost the same as mine.’ Startled, Boadicea realised she was right. She felt guilty, all over again, that she had been spared from sharing her sisters’ fate.

‘What will happen to me?’ Norton said from the ground, attempting to sound pitiful.

Kade wasn’t fooled. He knew Norton would worm his way out of a trial. His friendship with the Citizens would see to that. So back in the lab, Kade had re-written the software which overlayed an AI personality into the brain matrix. He had replaced it with something that would trap Norton, fully aware, behind the personality of someone who was mindwiped. Unlike the mindwiped, who simply had their personality suppressed for a time, this would be permanent. It was somehow fitting for this selfishly egotistical
man to serve the needs of others for the rest of his life. Kade flashed back to Boadicea’s description of his own character. He guessed it was true, you hate most in others what you disliked in yourself. Then again, innocence was hard to come by these days.

His eyes were hard as he answered, ‘I’ll deal with you.’
Epilogue

If anything, the music at the club was even better since the swarm had reprogrammed Gumshoe. Boadicea tapped her foot and snuggled in closer to Cerberus as he draped his arm across the back of their booth. She was glad that he’d convinced her to join him at his Fifty-second Street hang out.

Although virtual reality was still a mess, she didn’t feel guilty about enjoying herself. She couldn’t solve the entire world’s problems overnight. No matter how hard she’d tried.

Her sisters’ doors were still closed and no one knew what kind of creatures would emerge or when. Over the last few weeks she had tried hacking their gatehouses to no effect. Cerberus and Mouse had helped her conduct searches to crack the entrance codes and they’d even tried reprogramming the undercode. They knew something was going on behind the gates to the other AIs’ domains, just not what. Weird messages had reached her at the detective agency, suggesting that at least some of her sisters’ domains had been attacked by the swarm.

She had banged her head tirelessly against their doors until Cerberus had dragged her to the club. He wanted to spend at least a brief time away from their responsibilities. Besides, he had promised an evening off would do wonders for her mood. He was right.

Yesterday, she had gone back to where the swarm had first appeared. Eleanor’s Domain had undergone a transformation. The landscape was filled with new buildings, some still in the process of being constructed. When she had questioned the new inhabitants,
she’d found that many of them had previously been Dog-AIs infected by the swarm. Mixed in liberally were player-characters from across the Domains, all helping with the reconstruction efforts. The code was stable and the new AIs took turns in ensuring the filters protected people from Outside, without anyone claiming sole responsibility for running the Domain.

Looking back she could see that change had snuck up on them all. The swarm had been important, yet in the end just the most tangible part of the whole evolution of the virtual landscape. It was still out there, uncontained. They would work on it tomorrow. Maybe it had killed Eleanor and Makeda because they resisted mutation and spared her because she embraced it. Or perhaps her brief exposure had inoculated her against it. She’d probably never know for sure.

Her little piece of VR had changed, for the better in her opinion. Gone were most of the static, unchanging protocols and non-player avatars and in their place new cities and landscapes were appearing on a daily basis. She didn’t have any idea what the next day would bring. Life was exciting and dangerous and unpredictable and more than enough to worry about without borrowing trouble.

After the confrontation with Norton, Kade had stayed Inside to watch his transformation from scientist to servitor. From the Outside, Mouse had made sure that the program Kade had devised to deal with Norton was working. A few hours later a very different person had been unstrapped from the bed. Mouse had managed to find the perfect job for Norton – cleaning public toilets across District 5.
They had all had a hand in destroying the records and the lab. It had been rather satisfying.

The only sad note was Kade. He had not returned from his journey Inside. Her father had died soon after downloading Norton back into his body. She wasn’t sure how she really felt about that. There had been no chance to heal the rift between them and she still wasn’t completely sure how she felt about him. He had been a constant presence in her life. Mouse had cried for both of them. It just highlighted the temporary nature of things, making it even more important to build some good memories to hold on to.

As the singer crooned on the spotlighted jazz club stage, Boadicea pondered what tomorrow would bring. She felt alive. Free for the first time to be whoever she wanted, to make her own mistakes. She looked forward to making plenty.

She wondered if one day she might see her father again, remembering his words, ‘Nothing is buried forever.’ With that thought, she pulled Cerberus up to dance.

Across the room Zenobia smiled in the spotlight and began another song.