

# CYBERIZATION

## CHAPTER 9

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### THE HANDLER

I stepped through what I believed to be the entrance to the bar, only to find it was a passageway leading to a back alley. This alley, in turn, led to a flight of stairs going down. Navigating through puddles, the sight of rats caught my attention. It seems they remained a nuisance even eight hundred years into the future—go figure. Refreshingly, the barrage of nonsensical advertisements that dominated the streetscape was absent here. Descending the stairs, I was met by a towering figure guarding the door. Resembling a blend of a cybernetic gorilla and a man, he wasn't entirely android like me—a significant amount of human flesh was evident on his face and bare chest.

With a hint of apprehension, I moved closer to the imposing figure, his arms crossed, and his gaze fixed intently on me. The metallic green accents of his cybernetics nearly made me chuckle—seemed like he might be a fan of the Jolly Green Giant. Yet, as I stood before this hulking guardian barring the bar's entrance, his raised eyebrow indicated surprise at my audacity to approach him.

“I don't recognize you,” his voice rumbled out in a deep baritone. “We don't take kindly to strangers,” he added.

“I just woke up from being a brainsicle,” I shrugged. “Everywhere I go, I'm a stranger.”

To my surprise, the hulking figure winced. “Ah, you're one of those, huh? We've heard about how they did your kind wrong.” He seemed conflicted for a moment, then reached up with one of his massive gorilla-like hands to rub his shaved head. Sighing, he said, “Go on in.” He stepped aside and held the door open for me. “If anyone gives you shit, tell them Buster's got your back,” he added.

With a smile tinged with confusion over Buster's words, I gave him a firm nod and made my way inside. “Thanks,” I uttered as I passed him, my voice balancing between hesitation and cheerfulness. Above all, I was left pondering what he meant by ‘them doing my kind wrong’.

Navigating the entrance, I was met with another narrow corridor, reminiscent of the alley that had brought me to Buster, only this one was indoors. The dimness and eerie ambiance heightened the sensation that I might've walked into a morgue. Yet, that feeling vanished as soon as I emerged into the main bar area. Though still shadowy and a tad unsettling, the space was awash with the haze of smoke, with many patrons vaping or enjoying hookahs. The establishment buzzed with activity, accommodating around seventy individuals, each showcasing varying levels of cyberization.

Interestingly, only three individuals appeared to have a full-rig chassis like mine. Theirs seemed more advanced, while mine appeared rather basic. However, I was well aware that appearances

can be deceiving, especially since I knew my body was a military-grade infiltration model. Still, I couldn't be sure if they actually had a brain within their android bodies or if they were full-on robots. "*I wonder if there's a way to tell,*" I mused.

I spotted a few vacant bar stools and made a beeline for them, choosing a middle one to ensure I wasn't seated directly next to anyone. I wasn't certain if I had been antisocial before my brain was frozen, but the signs were pointing that way. As I waited for the bartender, I took another survey of the surroundings, noting a blend of metal and the dark concrete material that was becoming all too familiar to me.

"A new face? I'm surprised Buster let you in. He's been tightening security with the escalating gang wars," a velvety voice commented from behind the bar.

I turned to find a woman who appeared almost entirely natural, reminiscent of a true flesh-and-blood person. Yet, something was amiss. Her face, though striking, was too perfect, too symmetrical.

I responded with a gentle smile, "He even offered to handle anyone who gave me shit," I said with an appreciative chuckle.

"Well, damn, that doesn't sound like Buster at all," she remarked, rubbing her flawless chin thoughtfully. "Tell you what, first drink's on me if you share how you convinced the big lug to let you in and have your back."

With a light laugh, I nodded. "Simple. I just told him the truth," I began, my eyes drawn to her flawless pink and blue irises—further confirmation of her cybernetic nature. "Mentioned that I just woke up from being a brainsicle and that I was a stranger wherever I go," I concluded with a casual shrug. "He did, however, comment on 'them doing my kind wrong', but I'm not entirely sure what he meant," I added hoping for her to clarify it for me.

The bartender paused, examining me more closely. "That does make sense," she murmured, nodding slightly. "Alright, I owe you a drink, and perhaps an explanation. But first, what can I get you?"

"Umm... Honestly, it's been a few hundred years since my last drink. Any recommendations?" I asked, wearing a sheepish grin.

"Sounds like you're in need of some whiskey," the bartender remarked with a smile. She set a glass on the counter, then grabbed a tin-like bottle, pouring the amber liquid into my waiting glass. "I'm Britt by the way."

"Obsidia," I replied.

"Welcome to Lockhart's, Obsidia," Britt said. "I've got a couple of drunks to handle, but I'll be back shortly with that explanation."

I nodded in acknowledgment as I prepared to take a sip of my drink, hoping I still had the capability to savor it. Bringing the glass to my nose, an unusual metallic spiced scent wafted up. The first taste was intriguing. As the liquid cascaded over my tongue, I realized I could perceive each

nuance. Although my memories were fuzzy, I was certain that no whiskey I'd ever tasted was quite like this utter crap. Still, I relished every second of the experience, even feeling the familiar alcohol burn. Whether that sensation was genuine or a software-driven illusion to trick my brain, or both, I couldn't say.

Halfway through my glass, I noticed a minor scuffle breaking out on the opposite side of the bar. I chose to largely ignore it, continuing to savor my subpar whiskey. After a brief moment, Buster strode in, his face marked with a deep scowl. However, his expression shifted to a broad smile when his gaze met mine, only to disappear as he moved toward the ongoing skirmish. With ease, he grasped both of the brawlers by their heads, his gigantic hands enveloping them entirely. Although the two instigators flailed and shouted, clutching at Buster's wrists, he remained undeterred, hoisting them off the ground and carrying them out. To my amusement, the other patrons resumed their drinking, seemingly indifferent to the altercation, as though such events were commonplace here.

"Oi, Plastic-Girl, long time, no peekaboo," a familiar voice rang out as a man took the empty barstool beside me.

"Huh?" I mumbled, turning to face the man, only to be greeted by the electrifying sight of a wild afro with a lightning storm effect pulsating through it. "Oh, hey, Robo-Punk," I shot back with a playful smirk. If he was going to label me 'Plastic-Girl', it seemed only fitting to use the nickname I'd coined for him. After all, his actual name remained a mystery to me.

"Robo-Punk?" He repeated, a playful twinkle in his eye. After a beat, he shrugged. "Aight, diggin' that! Saw you got yourself some shiny new mods. But for real, still flashin' that polished noggin, huh?" he teased, drawing a sharp glare from me. Seeing my reaction to him mentioning my baldness, he quickly raised his hands in a mock-surrender. "Whoa, whoa, chill! Just havin' a laugh. But on the real? Kinda miffed you didn't buzz me. And, heads up, you left that loc-pin on in your deets," he added, leaving me puzzled.

"Your what now?" I responded, clearly puzzled.

"Guess that trans-chip ain't vibing with my lingo," he laughed, adopting a mockingly slow tone. "Means everyone in your contacts," he continued, exaggerating each word with dramatic hand gestures, "can track you." I shot him an unamused look.

"I'll need to chat with Viri about disabling that," I lamented. Thankfully, my contact list was slim, but having a location tracker available to anyone on it wasn't ideal, especially if I was pegged as some kind of assassin. "*How did I get dragged into this murderous mess?*" I wondered internally.

"Viri?" Robo-Punk echoed, momentarily distracted.

He was about to continue when Britt interjected, "Jaxt?! What's got you crawling back into my bar?" She shifted her weight, one hand resting on her hip. "I should have Buster toss you out on your ass after what you did last time," she added pointedly.

Robo-Punk or Jaxt raised his hands in mock-surrender, once again. I was getting the feeling that was a common gesture of his. “Oi, Britt, how’s your sis? Been meaning to hit her up,” he said, offering a cheeky smile.

Britt swiftly grabbed a bat from beneath the bar, leveling it at him. “Stay away from my sister, or I’ll crack those metal teeth out your skull,” she warned.

While he kept his hands raised, trying to placate the irate bartender, I took the opportunity to finish off my whiskey with a long sip. “Hey, Britt, mind pouring me another?” I asked. The whiskey might’ve been subpar, but it had grown on me – kind of like how some people have a taste for that watery stuff they call Lite Beer.

“Got it, hun,” Britt responded, her gaze and bat still trained on Jaxt. After a tense moment, she sighed, setting the bat down and pouring my refill. “You’d do well to steer clear of this one. And whatever you do, don’t let him charm his way into your bed,” she cautioned.

I dismissed her concern with a casual wave. “Don’t stress, I’m fairly certain I lack the necessary hardware for that,” I joked.

Jaxt chimed in, “Yo, if you’re lookin’ to mod up, I know a dude. But heads up, with his gear you gotta pop out your girly bits for a sink scrub. Might wanna stick with the off-the-shelf stuff,” he said, drawing an even fiercer glare from Britt.

Regrettably, Britt had her hands full managing a bar teeming with drinkers and vaporers, leaving me alone with Robo-Punk. As I nursed my second drink, I felt his gaze on me, heavy and expectant. Finally, I met his eyes and sighed, “What?”

“Don’t trip. Got your first gig lined up,” he responded, his cheeky grin never wavering.

“My first gig?” I echoed, my eyes widening in realization. “You’re my handler?” I gasped out in shock.

“Ain’t no biggie,” he said with that signature grin. “Look, you got a pair of bids on ya. That top spender? Down to foot the bill for either job. Wild, huh? Funding two gigs that clash? That’s some new level mess right there.”

“What?”

Jaxt halted, clearly irritated, his incessant hand gestures pausing for emphasis. “Alright, let’s dial it back a sec, simplify things,” he began, tone dripping with condescension. “You’ve got two jobs on the line. Someone’s willing to pay up for either one. But, and here’s the twist, these jobs? They’re at odds. And somehow, our big spender knows about both. Smells like they’re testing the waters to me. But who really knows?”

I felt the urge to both groan and bolt, or at least, I assumed that’s how most would feel in this situation. But my usual range of negative emotions was eerily absent. “Wonderful,” was the only sentiment that came to mind. “Firstly, who put you in charge of handling me? And why is everyone convinced I’m some top-tier assassin?” I demanded some clarity.

“Oi, that’s a piece of cake,” Jaxt scratched his head. “They dug up whatever they could from your record, and lemme tell ya, your kill count, it really turned some heads. I mean, your stats at Verdansk International Airport? Impressive stuff, a hundred straight kills without kickin’ the bucket. Damn, girl, you’re a total beast.”

“Verdansk,” I echoed, but that didn’t ring a bell at all. I looked back up, now even more baffled than before. “I can’t recall any of that,” was all I could muster in response.

“No sweat. I’ll shoot you all the deets so you can check ‘em out yourself,” Jaxt said, slapping me on the back before he stood up to leave. “Hey, Britt, give your sis a shout from me,” he yelled over to the bartender as he walked off, barely dodging a flying bat she hurled at the back of his head.

As for me, I downed my second glass before signaling to Britt for a refill. The last thing I wanted was to murder someone; I wasn’t cut out for that. “I wonder if I can get away with murdering Robo-Punk,” I pondered aloud, only to catch myself mid-thought, filled with slight horror—or at least, I believed I should have been horrified by those thoughts, but I wasn’t. “I’m a psychopath,” I groaned.