

Chapter 8: The Past

Don't think about it, you said to yourself as you left the hospital after your change. The sight of yourself, so small and pretty, it's pushed you to the limit. You feel like you're about to become unhinged, freak out, do— something- because what's happened to you isn't right, what The Hive is going isn't right, and yet everyone seems to be just going along with it, acting like it is perfectly normal to inject a guy with some weird serum and strip away almost everything that made him a man.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

You don't want to think about it, but it's hard not to *think about it* when, walking onto the sidewalk, you discover the world has been taken over by towering Amazons. Women are so tall! So big! Of course, you realize they are the same height and size as before. You're the one who's changed. You feel small.

Vulnerable. You haven't been this short, skinny and devoid of muscle since middle-school. You feel like a child, and you look like a child- a girl child.

And everyone looks like a female— either a woman or a girl. There is no one on the street who even vaguely resembles a man.

How the fuck are we supposed to tell each other apart? You wonder. Men and women. We all look the same. You weave and dart your way through the pedestrian traffic, your whole experience of the world upside down. You're not the big, swaggering male anymore, confidently sheathed in muscle. You're a tiny little thing, and when you pass a teen-age girl at one point— she's not all that tall for a girl, maybe 5' 7" though it's hard for you to tell since you're not used to looking up from such a low angle. She looks at you in your oversize clothes, with your pipe stem arms. She knows you're a guy, and she gives you this smirk that says, *I could kick your ass.*

You want to stare back, to let her know you aren't scared of her, but you look away instead, bristling inside, because you know she *could* kick your ass. Something inside you knots. You try and tell yourself it's because you are an adult, and you can't get into it with some teeny bopper, which is all she is, and what does that make you that so are so much less than her now?

It reminds you of the women in the hospital. The way they talked down to you, condescended, and you are getting a sense of the new order of things, the new dynamic between men and women. You feel like a second-class citizen. You feel anxious, nervous, a little afraid.



You find yourself in a land of towering women. A preppy, skinny, girly girl who probably does yoga and zumba, never touched a weight in her life. Yet, you find yourself intimidated.

As you get back to your old neighborhood, the anxiety grows. You don't want to bump into anyone you know to see you like this, and you keep your head down, quicken your pace, just wanting to get back to your apartment, lock the door, hide under the covers and wish all of this away. You reach your building. The outer door feels so heavy, and you strain to pull it open, then go right to the elevator, pushing the button frantically, glancing furtively at the door. The lobby is empty. You can pull this off, get home unseen. Come on. Come on.

Bing. The doors finally open. You dive into the elevator, relieved. It's small, dingy, smells like bleach. You sigh with relief, digging in the pockets of your baggy pants for your keys as the door closes and—

A hand shoves between the doors. Pink nails. Bangles. The doors pop back open, and you turn to the side, looking away from the doors, from the woman who just entered, trying to seem nonchalant as you cringe inside because it's Erin, a girl from down the hall, and you know each other in the Biblical sense.

“Just made it,” she says, pressing the number for your shared floor, though the button was already lit up. She seems distracted, lost in her own thoughts. You glance up at her. She looks different from this angle. The elevator starts to rise. Then, you sense her looking at you, staring, and then, “Oh. My. God.”

You put your face in your hands.

“Adam?” She says. “Is that you?”

You turn your back to her. You don’t want to answer. Can’t answer, because you’re so ashamed of your squeaky, high-pitched voice. Erin puts her hands on your shoulders, and she turns you around, and you crane your neck up at her, facing her because you have no choice. “Hey,” you say, annoyed, ashamed that your voice is so much higher and softer than hers now.

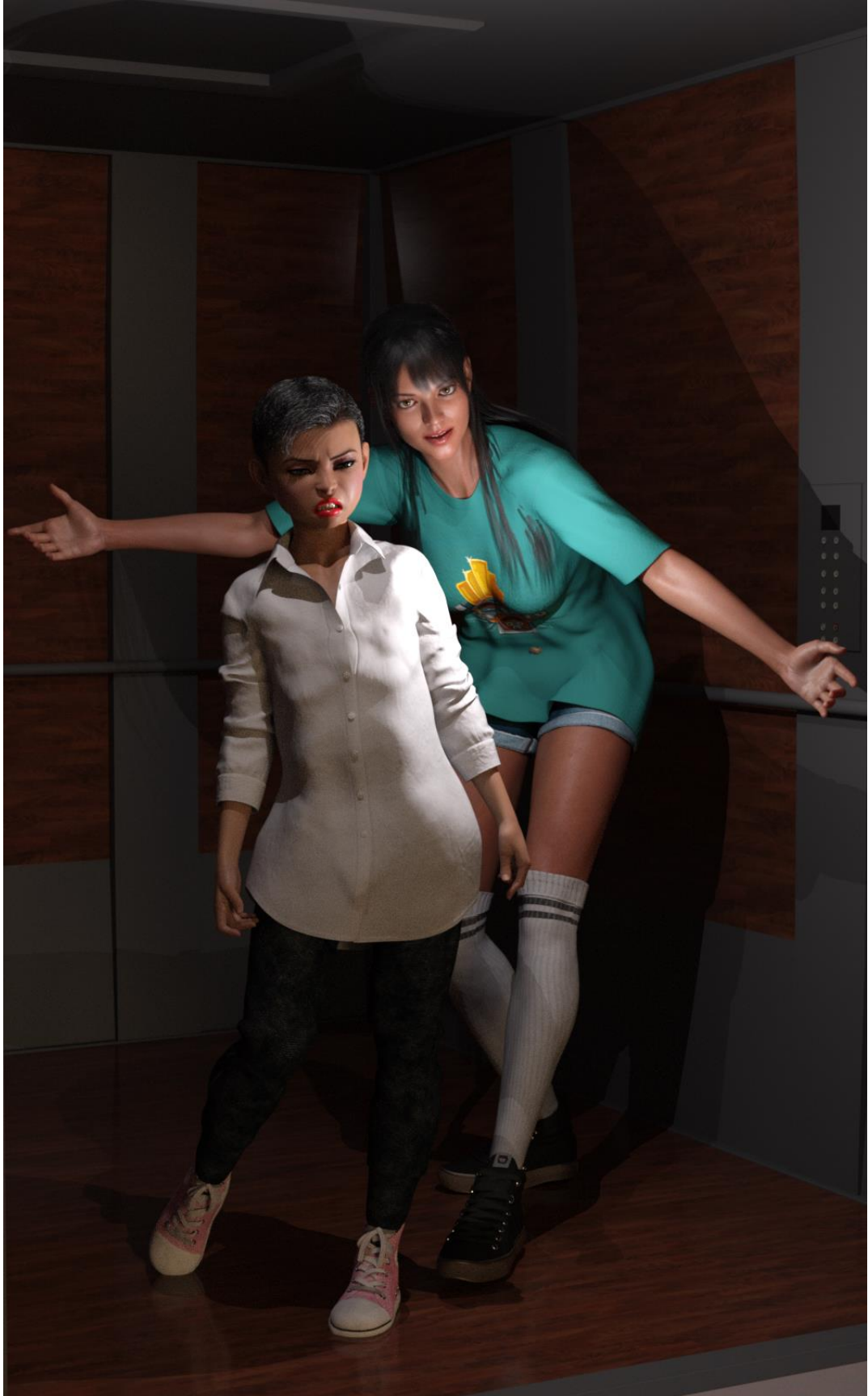
“You got your shots,” Erin says, ruffling your hair. “You’re so cute.” She can see the rage behind your eyes, the shame, and she kind of just laughs and pats you on the cheek. “You’ll get used to it,” she says. “It’s not so bad.”

You step away from her. “It sucks,” you say. “It’s bullshit.”

“It’s the future,” Erin says as the elevator finally reaches your floor and the doors open. “After you,” she says. “Total Quality.”

You glare at her, and as much as you hate the fact she’s playing the gentleman and doing this whole ladies first act, you go because you just want to get away from her and this feeling of being so— inferior.

“Men are so cute when they’re angry,” she says.



You fumble with your keys, hands shaking, finally sliding it into the lock. You open the door and plunge into your apartment, slam it behind you and sigh with relief. Home. Finally. Everything looks bigger. Higher. You're tired. The walk home has taken a lot out of you. The nurse warned you about this, that in your "delicate condition" you would tire easily. You crawl into bed and sleep. You dream you are lost in a dark wood, huge, moss-covered trees towering over you. Heart racing, you run along narrow, shadowy paths, while all around you the woods echo with the sound of women laughing.

"What the fuck?" You're staring at your closet. Your empty closet. Everything is gone. There is a sticker on the wall, with The Hive logo at the top. You skim the tiny, legal-notice sized text under the looming logo. Confiscated. Possible contagion. For your safety, blah... blah...

You go to your dresser and pull open a drawer. Empty but for another notice. You pull open another door and another. Nothing. Nothing. Empty. The Hive has been here, inside your apartment, and they've taken all of your clothes. You feel violated. A sense of

dread grows in you, paranoia. They can do anything. They will do anything. You're not safe from them even in your own apartment.

Now what? All you have are the clothes you wore back from the hospital, and rent is coming due, and though you have, like all men, been granted an indefinite leave from work, you have not been granted an unlimited leave from paying your bills. You need money. You can't afford new clothes, you don't want anyone to see you like this, The Hive has been in your apartment... it feels like your apartment is growing bigger and bigger around you, that you are shrinking, getting smaller, weaker, smaller and you feel powerless, helpless, hopeless...

Your breath grows shallow. You start to hyperventilate. You wobble on your feet and the world goes dark as you fall to the floor.

You fainted, you realize, when you wake up, the cold, hard wood floor against your cheek. You push yourself up and sit, cross-legged. You don't know what else to do, so you go the refrigerator and, of course, it's empty but for a couple bottles of Corona. This is not on The Hive. You hadn't bought any groceries. You grab a bottle of Corona and pop the cap, take a sip. For tonight, you'll order something from Grubhub, but that needs to stop and soon. You live paycheck to paycheck, and the

time off from work has already got you behind, and you wonder if you'll have to hit up your parents for money.

Your parents. Is your dad like you now? Did he have to get a shot? The thought makes you sick. Him? Your Dad? Like this? You can't think about it. You order a couple beef burritos from the place down the street and climb into your now comically oversized easy chair with your smart pad, thinking you'll order some clothes while you wait for your food. Your mind is running through plans now as you open Amazon, thoughts about escaping from the city, going off the grid somewhere...

Your full attention is drawn back to the Amazon website, though, because you only find two categories of clothes: Girls and Women. You check another website and another and find the same thing. Girls. Women. Finally, you notice a pink bar at the top of the page and a message:

In Accordance with Fashion Equality Edict 4.65, men will no longer be forced to wear inferior, male gendered clothes. Males will now enjoy the same fashion privileges as females. Total Equality.

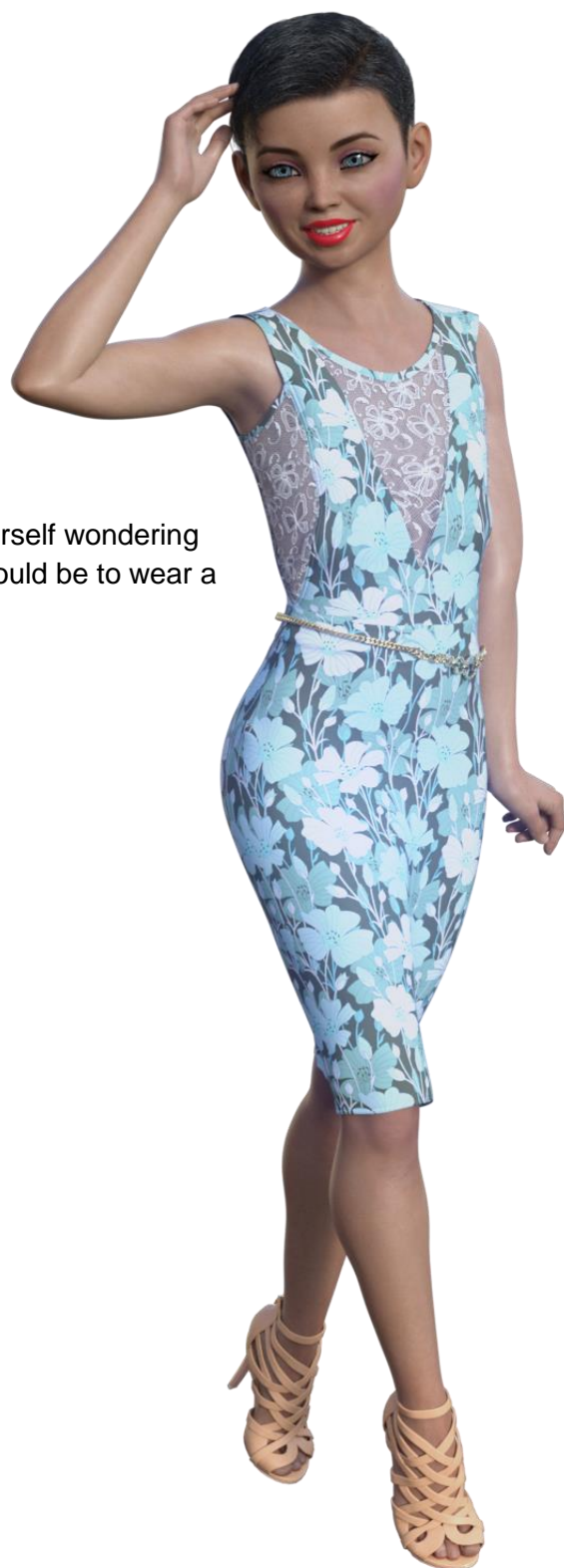
"You are so full of shit!" You shout, pounding your tiny fist against the screen. You look over the pictures under Based on Your Interests and see nothing but skirts and dresses. "Fuck that," you say. "Fuck you." Women wear pants, t-shirts, and you will,

too. The Hive, you tell yourself, will never get me in a dress. “Total Equality my ass!”

“That skirt, though,” you mumble as your eyes are drawn back to a pleated mini-skirt, “is super cute.”

This was before the Pretty Boy Dress had been introduced, of course. Already, though, as much as you insisted you would never wear one, you found yourself looking longingly at dresses and skirts, cute blouses, wondering how fun it would be to wear a flirty dress. You fought that day, struggled to buy a pair of girl’s jeans, at least, a plain t-shirt from the girls’ department, since the clothes sized for women were all too big for you, but the urge was there and growing. You almost screamed when you saw a pair of sexy to die for heels.

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Bonus Pic: Reverse shot of the teen girl intimidating you.

