

Sample Chapters from

The Bridge

By

CL Walker

Chapter 1

The office beyond the stationery cupboard was silent. Howard could almost fool himself into believing the threat had passed, that the tank had left, or never been there to begin with.

‘This isn’t happening,’ Howard whispered, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to block out the world. ‘I’m at my desk. This is a dream.’

‘Then why are you whispering?’ The runes tattooed on the angel’s face read “Not a representative of your chosen deity.” His softly glowing form filled the small space, a digital reminder.

‘I’ve been stressed and my brain is craving an escape.’ His hands curled into fists, the muscles in his back aching with the tension.

‘This isn’t helping.’

‘When I open my eyes this will all be gone.’

‘I’d like to stab you with a pencil. Would that get your attention?’

‘I’m home, I’m safe. There isn’t a mad tank woman roaming the office calling my name.’

‘If you’re good here, I can leave.’

The silence in the office beyond the flimsy wooden door was complete; static filled his ears and he was almost ready to believe his wish had come true and the intruder had been an illusion. Then something smashed into the cupboard door, cracking the wood and letting in a sliver of light. The glow from the office outside was pale and sickly beside the angel.

‘Howie, honey,’ the tank woman said, ‘Are you hiding in a cupboard, like a little girl?’ Her voice came from across the office, so whatever smashed the door wasn’t her.

‘To be fair,’ he said to himself, ‘If she’d punched the door it would probably have burst into splinters and exploded into here. Through me.’

‘You’re going to hyperventilate if you don’t chill out,’ the angel said, annoyingly calm.

When the angel first appeared he’d tried ignoring it, writing it off as a phantom avatar imposing on his personal realm. It happened, “trolls be trolling” and all that. You ignored them and they went away. Then the tank he’d warned of arrived and the building security had shut down.

‘Can you help me?’ Howard said. He was stuck in the nightmare; he might as well try to survive it.

The angel stood, naked but for a cartoony fig leaf, a seven-foot athlete with glowing white wings and shoulder-length blonde hair. His son would have called it surfer hair. Somehow the angel fit into the tiny cupboard, beside him, without losing any of his presence. He wasn’t really there, of course, but it was an impressive illusion.

‘Remember when I suggested you shouldn’t bother hiding in here, ‘cause it would only annoy her? That was me trying to help.’ He pushed his face through the broken wood to look at the office. ‘I have to disappear for a second, but I’m just invisible. I’ll be right beside you when she drags you out.’

‘When she what?’

The angel vanished as the tank tore the door from its hinges and tossed it away. She stood for a moment outside his hidey hole; six foot tall, dark hair, Chinese or Japanese – he got them confused, much to his embarrassment – and attractive, stunning even. Also the most terrifying thing in Howard’s world.

‘Hi, Howie.’ She grabbed his arm and there wasn’t anything he could do when she pulled him toward her. ‘You don’t mind if I call you Howie, do you?’

The office was empty; Howard was the only human employee left on payroll. At this time of night if the cops hadn’t arrived yet then they weren’t going to. Nobody was coming to save him.

‘My name is Kazumi, and I just want to ask you some questions.’ She walked to an empty desk still holding his arm – stepping around the heavy filing cabinet she’d tossed at the cupboard door – and forced him to sit. ‘Why would you hide from me?’

‘What do you want?’

She didn’t answer as she fetched a chair from another empty desk and sat opposite him. The only sound in the office now was that of his heart beating too fast. The smell of burning dust carried on a current from the ageing air-conditioner. I’ll have to get someone to fix it on Monday, he thought.

‘What do you want?’ He heard the whine in his voice but it had no effect on the woman. She studied him, perhaps trying to decide which part to remove first. ‘What?’

‘You’re what, forty?’ That’s the new twenty-five these days.’ She sat back, still examining him. ‘Maybe thirty in your case. Why are you working, and on a perfectly good evening like this? Why aren’t you out doing something interesting?’

He had no answer for her, his mind too scattered to think about the odd direction of her questioning. He settled for another, ‘What?’

‘Where is your son?’ The office vanished; the rooms full of empty desks and discarded ambition, the dusty smell from the air-conditioner, the sound of blood rushing through his body, it all faded away as he finally locked eyes with his tormentor. ‘Have you seen Smiley tonight?’

‘His name is Earl.’ She laughed at his words, as though humouring a weak joke. The whine was gone from his voice though.

‘Fine, Earl then. Seen him?’

‘Why?’ What had the boy done this time? Something big, something catastrophically stupid if he had a tank chasing him. Howard had grown to expect the police from time to time, had even used it as a way to keep tabs on Earl, but this was bigger, more serious.

‘Because I want to know. Isn’t that enough?’ She tilted her head and batted her eyelashes at him.

‘No.’ He held her gaze as the smile left her face. There was something of the machine under the skin when her expression shifted, something unnatural. She was suddenly in the uncanny valley and his heart sank in his chest.

‘Don’t grow a spine on me, Howie. You were doing the right thing being scared. I’m very scary.’ She lifted her arm above the desk and let it fall, showing no effort as it exploded away from her hand. ‘I’ll break you into little pieces.’

‘Tell me why?’ He held his ground, held her gaze, and waited.

'He stole something belonging to my employer, OK?' She wiped splinters off her jacket as she spoke. 'I need to get it back. I don't have to kill him.'

'Kill...' he said, his voice cracking, his bravery lost. 'Please, don't hurt him.'

'That's the Howie I know and love.' Her smile came back, bright and false. 'Have you heard from him?'

'We don't talk.' His palms were together as though praying, or begging.

'Do you know where he is, or where he hangs out?'

There were a million spots, an entire city full of hiding places for kids like Earl. There was no reason for Howard to know, so he lied.

'I don't know,' he said.

In a moment she wasn't sitting in front of him anymore. Now she stood behind him, her hand on his throat and her lips on his right ear. 'If you see him you'll let him know I'm looking for him, right?'

I'm going to die, he thought, but it was Earl's fate that filled his mind.

'I'll let him know.' He choked the words past the machine grip of her hand.

She was in front of him again a second later, smiling and friendly before he could take his next breath. 'Thanks so much for your time. I'm so sorry to have bothered you.' She blew him a kiss and strolled to the exit. 'Work, and in an office no less. How quaint.'

The lift was waiting for her and she stepped out of his life without slowing.

'Earl, pick up.' A blank screen hung in the air as Howard's PDA tried every username it could find.

'She knew you were lying.' Howard jumped when the angel appeared beside him. 'You can't fool a machine like that.'

'She bought it.'

'She really didn't.' The angel sat in Kazumi's vacant chair.

'Then why am I not dead now?' The PDA brought another screen to life with another potential username. No answer.

'She planted a bug on you, very small.' Howard began patting himself down without thinking but the angel held up a hand. 'You won't find it; it's tiny, in your bloodstream. She left it on your neck before leaving. I've hijacked the signal though, so you're fine.'

'Hijacked the signal?' Another screen popped into life in the air around his head, but for a moment Howard ignored it. 'Who the hell are you?'

'My name is Angel.' He gestured to himself and shook one of his wings. 'Because I lack imagination. I tracked your intruder from the site of an interesting news story and it looked like you could use some help.'

'You're a reporter?'

'A gamer, actually. Think of this as grinding.'

'What?'

'I need something interesting to get my next level.' The angel, Angel, was laughing at him, Howard was sure.

'What the hell are you talking about?' I'm going mad, it's the only explanation, he thought.

'It doesn't matter. Let's go find your son.' Angel bounced in his seat in apparent anticipation.

He hadn't named his PDA, hadn't wanted it at all, but you couldn't live in a city like London without one any more. He just called it PDA, to the amusement of anyone nearby.

'PDA, disconnect my realm.' Howard had no bells and whistles in his Realmware, no cute alterations superimposed over the real world on the lenses of his cheap glasses. When the PDA carried out the command the only change was an empty chair where the angel had been.

'I've been unable to find Earl,' PDA said in his generic male voice.

'Have a cab waiting for me downstairs.' He'd lied to the tank – successfully, despite what Angel thought – and he had a few ideas where to find his son. 'And see if you can find anything newsworthy happening tonight. That gamer said he followed her from something interesting.'

'You should call the police,' PDA said.

'If he's mixed up in anything big they'll be looking for him already.' How much trouble was too much? Had he finally done something that couldn't be glossed over, that would land him in jail?

'They might be able to protect you, and Earl.'

'Shut up. Get my cab and leave me alone. Don't say anything unless it's useful.'

'In case you're interested, building security just came back up. There are systems pinging me to find out what you saw while they were down.'

Howard removed his Realmware glasses – hideous wraparound plastic sunglasses, the curse of the augmented-reality-on-a-budget crowd – and put them in his pocket. The PDA and the last of the call screens left reality.

He needed a bit of quiet, a bit of stability, if only for a moment. He was still shaking.

What had Earl done now? An image of the tank woman, crushing Earl as she'd threatened to crush him, flickered through his mind. He closed his eyes and let his chin sit on his chest.

He just needed a moment, just a few minutes of calm before going to look for his troublesome son. Again.

Memory 1

Hil hurried to catch up with her parents, dodging adults eager to start in this land of opportunity. She'd dressed up special for today, put on her best, most flowery dress, and tied her long blonde hair into tiny little braids arranged around her head in cute swirls. She'd even made the extra effort of putting on good shoes. Good shoes, she had come to learn, were always extremely uncomfortable for some reason.

Nobody noticed her effort. Even her parents were too eager to get off the boat – no, it's a ship, she reminded herself – the ship they'd been living on for a month to notice her. And she was their daughter!

She caught up at the bottom of the ramp leading from the side of the enormous, clanking, rusty boat. Someone had idiotically decided to call it the *Elegant Journey*, a name which bore no resemblance to anything the stupid thing might have been a part of.

The adults were slowing. Hil slipped her hands into those of her parents, sandwiched between them as they clumped up with everyone else. The dock was amazing after being confined for so long. It was a large paved area, big enough to comfortably fit more people than she'd ever seen in one place. Maybe a few thousand. Beautiful, curved buildings ran along either side of it, the milky stone of their walls catching the early morning light and making them shine. Giant trees, redwoods or something, grew along the line where the dock ended and the new country began.

From what little she'd managed to see on her way down the ramp over the heads of the grown-ups, beyond the trees was a real countryside, with rolling hills and little houses dotted among stands of normal trees. Everything green and healthy, and enough space for everyone.

A stage had been set up at the far end of the gathering area, closing the normal exit road and giving the handsome man behind the podium enough height to see everyone. This man was their reason for coming to the new country.

Her parents – mostly her dad – believed they were moving to the future. Becoming part of the grand experiment of the age. They were going to create a new world, free of a bunch of stuff Hil didn't understand. Politics and money, and old white guys on TV. All she knew was it meant getting out of the city, which was fine for her. She was twelve, and already a world traveller.

'I can't see,' she said, tugging on Dad's hand. He didn't notice, his attention focused on the stage as though he couldn't see anything else. 'Dad. Daddy, I can't see.' He frowned for a second when he finally looked down at her, but he

forced a smile – she could always tell when he forced it – and picked her up and put her on his shoulders. Some people behind them grumbled, so Hil made sure not to look at them.

‘Welcome,’ the man on the stage said. ‘Welcome to Bransford.’ The crowd gave a tired cheer and the man continued. ‘Your countries are failing you. Those who would prefer not to participate, those who would prefer to indulge themselves instead of doing a hard day’s work are fleeing to your cities. London and New York are full to capacity with the lazy and the irrelevant. So much so they’re madly building as fast as they can to accommodate them. And they’re giving them your money.

‘Here you will be rewarded for your work. We won’t coddle the irrelevant members of society, the ones who don’t want to get involved but would rather live off the excess. The world has no more excess to offer, yet still they come. Not here though. Here we will remake the world, rebuild it as it once was. Here you’ll be free.

‘Here no government will take your money in taxes. Here you’re in charge. If you want a nice home and a comfortable life then work hard and get it. If you want to lie around all day and feel sorry for yourself then you can get out.’

The crowd erupted at the final line and Hil winced at the thunderous noise around her. The emotions on people’s faces were hard to read; happiness, hope, but also anger, for some reason. Dad’s face was out of sight, but she imagined she’d see anger there. He was always saying things like the man on the stage. Mom was just tired.

When the applause and shouting died down, the man on the stage continued. ‘Thank you for being a part of this my friends. Thank you for coming here. As long as you’re happy to do your part you’re welcome to stay on my island.’

People started moving toward the milky white buildings. They were immigration offices, she’d been told. She didn’t notice though.

The man on the stage stayed where he was, watching the new arrivals and smiling, occasionally waving at someone in the crowd. Behind him though was a boy, a teenager, sitting on an uncomfortable chair, patiently waiting for his father to be done. The boy caught her eye as soon as she could see him and she leaned against her father’s head in an effort not to lose sight of him.

It was strange, but the boy seemed more real than the rest of the world, like he was superimposed on the scene, the only thing the camera focused on. He had dark hair like his father and was handsome too, but it wasn’t why she stared. It was like he was in colour while the rest of the world was in black and white. Then he looked her in the eye, from across the gathered immigrants, and he smiled.

She began to raise her hand to wave but stopped. Don’t be stupid, Hil, she thought. He can’t see you from there. He’s just smiling for the crowd, like his dad.

But he kept watching her, kept looking right at her. She felt herself blush at the attention, even as she knew it couldn’t actually be true.

Screw it, she thought and raised her hand to wave.

The boy waved back.

Chapter 2

Howard spent the rest of the evening and early morning searching every place he could think of. When he'd run out of options, run out of people he knew who knew Earl, he returned home and collapsed into bed.

Howard had always needed his sleep, and at least a good eight hours were a requirement for a bare level of functionality the next day. There were drugs to make sleep more of an option – there were drugs for everything these days – but they didn't work on him. Apparently not even a missing son in trouble could keep him up much past his bedtime.

When it came time to wake up PDA opened the blinds, beginning his morning routine. He had a precise schedule which got him to the office on time and ready for a hard day of work, and the machine was just doing its job.

Howard pulled the covers over his head, fleeing the sunlight reflecting off the building opposite his window.

'It is time to get up, Howard.' PDA's voice grated on his sleep deprived nerves. The machine's voice came from the wall speakers, so he couldn't even throw his Realmware across the room to shut it up.

'Snooze.'

'You don't have time. You must get up if you hope to get to work on time.'

'Snooze.'

'I've made you coffee and laid out your clothes for the day. The shower is already running.'

Howard briefly risked exposing himself to the daylight and pulled back the cover. 'I said snooze, dammit.'

'You had me disable that function.' Something tugged at the duvet, gently pulling it to the bottom of the bed. 'You insisted you would rather be angry with me than have your employer angry with you.'

Howard mumbled something and gripped the duvet more tightly, but it was dragged from his hands anyway. Daytime settled on him. He sat up and glared at the bottom of the bed where his maid – a robot the size of a German Shepherd and shaped like a chrome-plated praying mantis – stood with his covers bunched in its arms.

'Traitor.'

He left the room, took a sip of coffee – too hot, as always – and jumped in the shower. When he got out the coffee was perfect and toast waited for him, with marmalade. He ate it slowly – wouldn't want to choke – and when he was done he moved to the sitting room and sat on the overstuffed beige couch. It farted as his weight pushed air from it.

Now he allowed himself to think about Earl, and the tank, and Angel, and what the hell was going on.

‘Did you find anything helpful on the news from last night?’ He hadn’t checked back with the PDA after leaving the office, perhaps not wanting to know. What if it was a bank heist or a bombing or something? What if it was something he couldn’t protect Earl from?

‘There were a few candidates but I was able to narrow it down to one. There was a firefight out beyond the Line last night. The few witnesses report a number of police drones destroyed and at least two human officers injured. Apparently an unknown tank was involved, though no footage exists providing an adequate view for identification.’

For a moment Howard stopped listening. This, this is what I worried about. This is actually worse than a damn bank heist, he thought.

‘How do you know this is the one? Couldn’t there be something else?’ Let there be something else. Let there be something else. Anything.

‘While you haven’t wanted to speak to him, Angel has been insistent in his desire to help out. He provided me with the details.’

‘I told you not to speak to him.’

‘You didn’t, actually. You requested that I disconnect your realm.’

‘You knew what I meant.’

‘I wouldn’t dream to presume.’

Damn machine. They weren’t really intelligent, though their programming was good enough to fool a person. Even renting a cheap PDA got you a convincing conversational interface. Why they’d programmed it to fake initiative and try to help was unknowable. Who would want a machine to second-guess its owner?

Howard sighed and reached a hand toward the kitchen counter. The maid fetched his Realmware for him and he slipped them on. ‘Can you show me anything about the news story?’

His sitting room, and most of his house, would have felt cluttered to most people, filled as it was with colourful plants. Most people decorated their homes virtually these days, or so he’d heard. He preferred to have a little real life in his real life.

The room faded away, replaced by London, beyond the Line. As far as his sleepy eyes could tell he now sat on a floating couch, hanging over abandoned suburbs in the middle of the night. A cold wind – it was always a cold wind in London, though he couldn’t actually feel it – blew around him.

London – the real London – rose into the sky to his right. Kilometre tall buildings formed a mountain which lit up the sky and shone down on the forgotten outskirts of the old city. Between the miles of abandoned buildings – bought up when it seemed the city would keep growing forever and now left until it could grow again – was a large street which surrounded the newer buildings growing into the sky. Whatever the street was called officially – it varied as it encircled the city – everyone called it the Line. Trains and cars still travelled on the trunk routes in and out of the city, through neighbourhoods once home to millions. The only people who crossed into the abandoned areas were criminals, and kids looking for something interesting to do. Like Earl.

Below, on the roof of a dilapidated hardware store, he spotted a small explosion.

'This was captured by a reporter in Istanbul. He keeps a number of drones floating around in the hopes of catching something sellable. He is no doubt very happy today.'

'I can do without the commentary, thanks.'

'Just trying to give you a moment to acclimate. I know how you feel about all this virtual stuff.'

'Stop trying to make me feel better and show me.'

'As you wish.' The couch fell from the sky as the drone dove toward the explosion. He shut his eyes for the fall but in seconds he was examining the wreckage of another drone, a six-bladed 'copter. It had the blue colouring of the police.

'The cops were chasing someone?'

'Apparently, though nothing was officially reported. Next thing.' His view lifted as the reporter tried to follow the action. Another police drone rose from the street below and hovered over the adjacent building. A moment later it listed to one side and began spiralling, like a spinning top about to fall over, then slipped from view between the buildings again.

The reporter rushed over to see what was going on but the other roof was now empty. A siren sounded from the street and the camera moved to follow it. It left the roof in time to see a cop car screeching to a halt to avoid hitting someone. The someone then reached a hand under the car and casually flipped it over, tossing it across the road and into an abandoned pharmacy.

Howard recognised the shadowy form of Kazumi the tank wearing the same jeans and short jacket she'd been wearing when she'd visited him. She stayed a moment to observe the destroyed car before disappearing, running so quickly all the reporter could catch was an impression of her heading away from the Line.

The recording paused and the couch came to a rest on the road. Shards of glass from the damaged police car were caught mid glitter on the road around him, reflecting the light from the city.

'Why are we stopping?' Howard wanted to get up and run after the tank.

Light burst to life above him and he had to shield his eyes as Angel descended slowly to the road in front of him.

'Your PDA is stopping because all the footage from here on out was scrubbed. It cannot gain access to it without my help.' The avatar remained floating in the air as he lifted both legs and crossed them. The angel was still naked, the fig leaf barely in place, though crossing his legs hid his privates from view, for which Howard was grateful.

'I'll find out some other way.'

'I don't think you realise how difficult it is to scrub something from these servers.' Angel placed his hands on his knees and hung in the lotus position. 'Someone very important didn't want this seen by the general public.'

Howard glared at him but didn't reply. The glow from the angel's skin twinkled in the broken glass and in the storefronts around them, the only thing moving on the street.

'You're going to have to let me help, or you're going to have to go it alone. You might get somewhere; this Kazumi chick certainly thinks you can. I can help though.'

'Why?'

Angel smiled. 'You're too paranoid, Howard. Sometimes people just do nice things.'

'No they don't. People do what they want to do. They do whatever gives them the highest return on investment.'

Angel paused before replying. 'Fine. Then I'm doing this for me.' He shrugged. 'You're in luck though; my aims are the same as yours.'

'I don't buy it.'

'Man, life must have slapped you around badly for you to be this way. Chill out for a second and think, okay. The only thing you care about is getting Earl to safety. I have no reason to give a shit about Earl, so whatever I do want isn't going to be a problem for you. If I wanted your son it would have been in my best interests to leave you oblivious to me and just follow you, like the tank planned. Also, you're welcome.'

'For what? Turning up at my office and warning me she was coming when it was too late for me to do anything about it? Really?'

'No, for masking the signal from the tracker she has floating around in your bloodstream. She thinks you came home last night and went to bed.'

The argument made sense, despite Howard's intense desire to dismiss it. Why didn't he take help from the guy, for now anyway? He could always change his mind later.

'Fine, you can help me.'

'Let's not get all thankful or anything,' Angel said, chuckling. 'I'm going to skip around a bit when I start the playback. I'm taking it from all the working cameras but I still couldn't get much.'

'How did you get anything?' Howard said as Angel spun in the air and moved toward the couch. Howard had to get out of the way.

Angel came to a rest and turned to him, smiling. 'I'm just that good.' He waited, as though hoping for a response from Howard, which he wasn't going to get. 'Fine. Let's watch.'

The couch jumped to an intersection and a fight in progress. A young woman was frozen a moment before Kazumi's fist hit her in the face. Howard counted six drones hanging in the air around them; two were police and the other four looked civilian.

'You have to watch this,' Angel said. He had a bag of popcorn in his lap suddenly and was happily stuffing some in his mouth. 'It's so cool. Ready?'

Howard nodded and the scene began to move in silence, slowly at first but running at full speed by the time the unknown woman danced out of the way of the punch. Kazumi, unbalanced, staggered forward and the young woman moved behind her.

Angel paused playback again to add commentary. 'Never mind somehow dodging a tank trying to hit you, watch this.' He allowed the scene to continue slowly and changed camera angles. The couch appeared in the air on the other side of the intersection.

The young woman's hand chopped down on the tank's collarbone. It didn't look as impressive as Angel had made it out to be.

Then the playback resumed real speed and Kazumi silently screamed. She moved faster than Howard's eye could follow, scrambling away from her attacker.

'I love this chick,' Angel said around a mouthful of popcorn.

Kazumi pulled a gun from her jacket, aimed, and fired in a moment. The other woman dodged, then dodged again, and again, as Kazumi emptied her gun before throwing it to the ground.

'How is she doing that?' Howard said.

'We live in an age of mechanical gods,' Angel gestured to the tank. 'If we can have someone like her fighting in an army, soaking up more damage than anyone can throw at her and still coming, why not someone rebuilt for speed.'

Kazumi breathed heavily, watching her opponent, confusion on her nearly-real face. Howard almost felt sorry for her. She came to a decision, slipped off her jacket and ran back to the fray. As she did she must have signalled the four civilian drones. They fired on the police drones, disabling them immediately, before firing at the young woman.

'I think this is why Kazumi wants your son so badly.'

Howard had been so lost in the fight he'd forgotten why he was watching. 'Why?'

'Watch.' The woman dodged back and forth, easily escaping the drone fire, but she wasn't fast enough to miss everything. While doing an elaborate spin Kazumi barrelled into her and drove her to the ground. Kazumi then held on as tight as she could as the woman landed blow after blow, each setting off a cry from the tank. Even screaming she held on, crushing the other woman.

The attacks stopped and a moment later Kazumi got to her feet gingerly. The other woman remained on the ground.

'I don't get it,' Howard said. 'She got what she wanted.'

'Wait for it.' Angel changed the camera again and they were watching Kazumi's back when the explosive stuck to her scorched skin went off. The explosion was large enough to knock out the cameras. The scene paused.

'That must have taken out the entire intersection if it took out the cameras and the drones.' Howard couldn't stop staring at the look of agony on the tank's face. 'How did she survive? How was she walking when she came to me?'

'They're tanks, and they're called that for a reason. We built them to take damage, first and foremost. Everything else they can do is gravy. They're what terminators would have nightmares about.'

'So why does she want my son?'

Angel tossed the popcorn over his shoulder and it vanished. The scene before them changed. 'This is the only video recorded of the aftermath, and it's from the reporter we were following earlier. His drone only caught up once the action was over, and someone scrubbed everything else. Even I can't find it.'

The area was a mess; already creaky buildings had given way and fallen into the street. Lights lay twisted among the bricks. The couch was back in the air, following the path of the drone.

Figures – young men – ran from the rubble to the mangled form of the young woman, still lying where Kazumi had left her, with the tank lying face

down beside her. Ignoring the tank they checked the woman's pulse before having a hurried conversation. Howard wished the recording had sound so he could hear what was said, but it didn't take long for them to come to a decision.

'They kidnapped the girl?' Howard recoiled from the sight; two of the men lifted her while the others kept watch, scanning the area for any trouble. One of them saw the reporter's drone, drew a gun, and blew it out of the sky.

'That wasn't a gun, by the way. It was some kind of electric zapper. At least the street gangs haven't gotten their hands on firearms yet.'

The scene was frozen at the last moment before the drone was knocked out. Howard got up and walked toward the gunman, ignoring the disorientation as his PDA tried to give him a valid simulation, even as he felt the carpet in his sitting room beneath his feet.

'That's Earl.' Howard's son, with a manic grin on his face and a weapon in his hand, protecting his friends. Friends who were kidnapping an injured woman off the street.

'I think Kazumi saw this video. She probably had it erased, though she'd have to know someone pretty important to pull that off. She got a picture of your son and followed his paperwork to you. You're her only lead.'

Howard tore the Realmware from his face and threw it on the empty couch. He was back home and the light from the new day outside burned his night-adjusted eyes.

'Angel is asking what the problem is,' PDA said over the wall speakers.

'Tell him I'm not interested.'

'He says you promised to take him along when you looked for your son.'

Howard screamed at the glasses. 'She can have him.'

Memory 2

Hil finished collecting the textbooks – ragged from constant use over the course of years – and put them in the cupboard at the back of the classroom. She gave the room another look to see if she'd done a good job before leaving, locking the door on her way out.

The hall was empty, with all the kids off to the party in a rush. It was strange walking through the primary school alone. She'd only done a single year there before moving on to the high school – and that only two years ago – but it felt like an age, and a huge part of her life. Everyone had been new at the school, so they'd had to work out their hierarchy from scratch, though by the end of the first month it was set in stone. Hil hadn't been at the top but she hadn't been at the bottom either.

She stood in the hall, staring at the rough brick walls and watching dust dance in the light from the windows at either end, for a while. She had places to be and jobs to do, so she settled the heavy backpack on her shoulders walked quickly to the head control office, unable to make herself run in the halls.

The control office housed the small server running the teachers, as well as the few members of staff required to keep a mob of preteens under control. She signed out and waited for her pay to appear in her account. Sometimes the school would “forget” to pay her for a while, so she made sure to never leave without confirmation first.

The primary school was near the docks, as was the high school, but at least it was above ground, which the high school was not. The island still looked pristine, with rolling green hills and smoke rising from a few chimneys, even this late into spring. Some of the kids from the school were walking the lanes, picking the wild flowers growing beside the road. There weren't many who lived up here and went to the main primary school, but those that did looked happy. Their parent's hard work paying off.

Hil waited for the express elevator behind the school. Kids weren't allowed to use it; it was too small for a horde of children to crowd into, and they would if given the chance. Only adults could use it, and though she was only fifteen – almost sixteen – that made her adult enough. It used to give her a small thrill, but it wore off pretty quickly.

She was going to see Dad and deliver food to the work crews. Her dad was a robo-wrangler – robotic work crew supervisor – and she hit the button for the upper manufacturing level, many floors below. The elevator plunged into the island superstructure and she was there quickly.

The elevator let out on to a kilometre-long hall with endless office doors along one side. She ran for a few minutes to reach number seventeen, her dad's office.

She hadn't seen him in weeks. He'd been working on one of the new islands – there were ten now – and only got back last night. He'd been off to work before she got up for school. He took leave from his normal job whenever something opened up on the new islands and only came back when the first wave of immigrants arrived and the jobs dried up. The new islands paid better for someone with his experience, but as soon as there were enough workers the pay started dropping as more competition came on the market. It gave them an extra boost of money, but it meant he was away more than he'd like.

'Hil,' Dad said, meeting her at the door with a huge, tight hug. He smelled of cigarettes – the grossest smell – and looked tired, but she happily let him hold her as long as he wanted.

When he let her go – he kept hold of her arms and stared at her for a while – she said, 'I brought the guys their lunch orders.' He was dressed in an ageing suit and his receding hairline showed the freckles he always got from working outdoors.

'Just leave them on the table in the corner. I'll hand them out when they go on lunch.'

His office wasn't huge, but it felt comfortable. He had pictures of his family on the walls, including the family he'd left behind on the mainland. Knick-knacks covered his desk, reminders of family holidays and odd projects he'd been involved in over the years, with his Realmware glasses and processing box lying in the only clear bit.

His desk was pushed against the glass wall opposite the door. Beyond the glass was the manufacturing floor, where pieces of new islands were built before being shipped off and assembled out in the sea. Bransford's economy was based primarily on the production of these new islands and Dad's job was very important.

'I brought you something extra,' Hil said as she unloaded the lunches on the desk. She pulled a tightly wrapped bundle from the small pocket on the outside of her backpack and handed it to him carefully. It was chocolate cake, the real kind. A thick, icing covered monstrosity that tasted almost too sweet.

'How...?' He took the cake and held it for a moment. 'Where...?'

'One of the custodians at the primary school retired the day before yesterday and they left it out when they went home.' She finished emptying her bag and watched him, waiting for him to take a bite. 'It's still good, promise.'

'I believe you.' He dug his fingers into the brown stickiness and carefully pulled it in half. 'Here, you should have some.'

'No, I'm fine.' Her mouth watered at the thought. 'Besides, I've got to watch my figure.'

'You're a stick. More calories will make you look better.' He held it to her, dropping crumbs on the floor, and waited until she took it. She raised it to her mouth and took a bite.

Chocolate cake wasn't something you could just get. Very few people made it and then only for the higher-ups, the ones who could afford to have it flown in if they felt the need. She hadn't tasted any in years, and the cake had felt like the

heaviest thing in her bag today, weighing her down with the vague memory of chocolate awesomeness. It was too sweet, too sticky, too rich, too much, and she loved every bit, even licking the icing from her fingers after. While sure she imagined it, she could feel the sugar racing along her veins already.

‘I have to get back to work,’ Dad said, one hand on his Realmware. He controlled the robot crews building the pieces of island, using a virtual space to keep the robotic crew in line. Their software was buggy sometimes and it wasn’t possible to have them build something to a standard pattern as each island was designed differently. Every billionaire had a different idea of what paradise should look like. It kept Dad in work.

‘Make sure the guys give you money for lunch, ok?’ She’d lost an entire batch more than once, meaning she’d lost the money she’d paid to the baker without any hope of turning a profit.

‘Of course, Hil. I’m not stupid.’ He smiled when he said it, but he’d been the one who let them walk away without paying before.

Someone knocked on the door and they both jumped. The door opened and a head – pretty brunette with antique, huge glasses on her tiny nose – poked through.

‘They’re early,’ the head said before disappearing again. Dad scrambled to try and tidy up and Hil stood in the corner, confused. Then the door was pushed open and she understood.

Alan Bransford, owner of the island of Bransford and literally lord of all he surveyed, stepped into the room. He didn’t bother with a suit and wore instead jeans and polo shirt. Where her father’s light brown hair had started to show signs of early grey, Bransford had a full head of perfect, black hair. He smiled at Hil before turning to her dad.

‘Mr Bransford,’ Dad said, full of sudden nervous energy. ‘Welcome. It’s good of you to visit.’

‘I haven’t been down here in a while and I thought it was time.’ His voice was a comfortably deep one, confident and easy. He towered over Hil’s dad, both figuratively and literally. This was the man her dad wished he could be, Hil knew.

Then Alan Jr stepped in and Hil stopped paying attention to the conversation. The young man still looked a lot like his father, though more athletic, better built. He swallowed the light in the room. Hil tried to stop herself from staring, and failed.

‘Hello,’ he said, walking away from their fathers and holding out his hand. ‘You’re Hillary, right?’ She blushed and shook his hand, which was warm and soft. She knew he had augmentations built in and could look up her name with a thought, but hearing him say it still affected her.

‘Hi, um, Mr Bransford?’ What the hell do I call him? He’s barely older than me.

He laughed at her, but he wouldn’t let her take her hand back when she tried to turn away. ‘Call me Alan, please. My father doesn’t even like being called Mr Bransford. I fucking hate it.’

‘Alan!’ Mr Bransford said, breaking off his conversation as though he’d been listening in. ‘Language.’

‘Sorry father,’ Alan said quickly. He still hadn’t let go of her hand, and she worried about starting to sweat on him. He locked eyes with her and said, ‘You really are the most beautiful thing down here, aren’t you?’

‘Alan!’ Mr Bransford said again, angrily. ‘Go wait for me down the hall.’

‘I’m sorry, father.’ He finally let go of her hand as he turned to face his father. He lost none of his confidence, none of his charm as he faced down the owner of the island. ‘I’ll be quiet, promise.’

‘Go. Now.’ Alan turned to her and shrugged, then made for the door. Before he left he turned back, gave her a wink and another smile, and left. When he closed the door Hil let go of the breath she’d been holding.

She couldn’t focus on her dad’s conversation with Mr Bransford, but it passed quickly. When he’d been gone for a while she said goodbye to her dad and made her way home.

There was an email from Alan Jr waiting for her in her room. He wanted to see her again, as soon as possible.

Chapter 3

He was late for work, but there was nobody there to reprimand him. He walked from the lift, through the empty office, under the air-conditioner which still smelt like burning dust, and to his desk. He'd moved things around a little once the last of his colleagues had gone and his chair now faced out from the office. If he raised his head a little to see over the ferns surrounding his work space he could see out the window.

Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows was the city, rising up and around him, a comforting wall of steel and glass. To look at them had, at first, been almost too much to deal with; they were too high, too thin for his mind to accept they wouldn't just blow over. They'd been built by robot labour and thrown up as quickly as possible, as the government struggled to deal with the waves of economic refugees coming from everywhere else in the country.

Now he enjoyed looking at them only rarely. What he really liked was the way the sunlight played off the leaves of his plants. When more people had worked at the company he'd been put deeper in the building and they'd threatened to take away his greenery; it had been too expensive to keep when anyone who wanted to spruce up their work environment could just do it with Realmware. Besides, some people had hay fever.

He'd been a drone, not even middle management, but as more people were replaced with machines, or realised their jobs didn't pay as much as the government subsidies, he'd found himself in the unique position of being indispensable. He didn't earn enough for them to bother replacing, but he looked after their money. Even though he had very little to do with the actual finances, it made someone higher up happy to have an actual human nominally in charge of the money.

'You're daydreaming, Howard,' PDA said softly, intruding on his thoughts. 'You have reports due.'

'Dim the windows a little please.' PDA set the building windows to his preferred tint level and brought up his working environment in his Realmware. Three large screens appeared in the space over his desk.

He worked through the morning, checking the reports prepared by the many systems which now ran the company. He rarely spotted an error; he could approve them all without looking, but he spent the time to go over every one. The ones he couldn't fully understand – and the machines had come up with some systems and processes he thought weren't meant to be understandable – he'd farm the work out to the net. As long as he kept the distinguishing details vague and spread the work thin enough, no one would put it all together and

know who it was for. The people who checked it over did it for fun anyway, stuck with nothing much else to do.

The company handled a large number of offshore farming operations: algae and fish farms mostly, with some research, where the required permits could be arranged. He was proud to be part of a business which had found several new antibiotics, buried on the ocean floor.

Lunch, which he took precisely at midday, was taken on the small balcony on the seventy-sixth floor. It had once been a smoking area and he'd always been jealous of the people who'd come out every hour for five minutes to enjoy the sun. They'd bitched about having to stand in the cold or the heat, depending on what was going on. Howard loved it.

There was only one table left, in the centre of the balcony, and the waiter, a rolling ladybird lookalike with spindly arms which folded under its carapace when not in use, brought him his toasted sandwich. He ate in silence, reviewing his forecasts for the coming month. Things were looking up, and the endless round of layoffs and forced retirements had paid off. There were no further people left who could be let go, and the automated systems were doing a better job at a fraction of the money.

When he was done with lunch he broke his routine for the first time since getting in late, and walked over to the edge of balcony, pressing himself against the railing before he could chicken out. Holding his coffee tight he looked up at the amazing buildings for a minute while his stomach settled.

Down below the streets were surprisingly full, given nobody was working. People were out shopping, or just walking around for the hell of it, spending time with loved ones.

When the first wave of automation hit, when the robots became sophisticated enough for manual labour to no longer need the labour, it took everyone by surprise. People were used to seeing the world as a slow moving, slow changing place. The machines seemed to come from nowhere, and suddenly an entire class of people had no jobs.

Those who dropped out were looked down on, and rightly so. Those who retrained went on to work in industries previously immune to much automation: brain-work, as Howard's father had called it, as opposed to the real work of before. Society got a little richer and everyone went back to their lives.

People were surprised again when machines could suddenly do most of the low level brain-work jobs too. They were less surprised the higher up the food chain the machines moved, their software devouring whole departments and leaving only people like Howard behind. They were minimally useful, which meant they got to keep their jobs if they wanted to.

The government scrambled, hiking taxes up as far as it was possible and creating the subsidies, a living wage given as a right to everyone, whether they could find work or not.

And so the streets were as full as they'd been back when everyone was busy being productive, except now only people like Howard bothered actually producing. And only people like Howard now saw laziness as something to be ashamed of.

Howard finished the dregs of his coffee and set the cup on the ground, then lifted a leg over the rail and tried to toss himself off the building. At first the rail

was too high but he persevered, bouncing on one leg to try and gain purchase with the other, holding the top with his thigh muscle and scrabbling until he managed to balance at the top.

It made sense, though he'd never thought of it before; he didn't fit in with the world, didn't have whatever it took to just settle into a life without change, or hope for something better. And now he'd failed at the one thing he was meant to do well, the one area of life he had to excel at.

He tilted toward the street, closed his eyes, and waited for the fall.

The waiter saved him. It must have come out to grab his empty coffee cup. When it saw him it rushed over, unfolding its thin metallic arms and grabbed him as he began to slide over and down. It pulled him violently back, scraping his face and hands on the railing.

'Leave me alone,' he said, struggling to go back. The robot's arms might have looked thin and weak, but it had a grip stronger than any man.

'You are in distress, but I am here to help,' it said, its voice that of an attractive sounding young woman. 'Assistance is on the way. You are safe.'

'I don't want to be safe.' Howard kicked at the robot but didn't even scuff the thing's shell. 'I failed. I raised a monster.'

The waiter sounded confused. 'Help will be here soon. Please remain calm.'

'Let me go.'

The waiter didn't listen, asking him to be calm as it held on tight and kept him sitting on the ground. A few minutes later one of the security guards arrived, a slight man in a perfect uniform who took Howard away from the edge and off the balcony.

He was sent home. A human resources algorithm somewhere decided that what he really needed was some time off. His continued employment could be reviewed at a later date.

Howard lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. There were messages waiting in his inbox from friends who'd somehow heard already. He decided to ignore them.

'It's my fault.'

'I don't think so,' PDA said through the wall speaker. Howard had left his Realmware on his desk when he went to lunch, but the security guard had made sure to pack it in one of the boxes he was sent home with.

'You don't think.'

'Hear me out. Your son did what he did, but you had no control over that. You did everything you could to raise him well. To give him a strong work ethic and good morals. He chose not to follow the path you laid out for him.'

Howard sighed. 'They have you set to some kind of psychiatric mode now, don't they?'

'It was suggested I might be useful in helping you recover your usual temperament.'

'Don't bother.'

He dozed for an hour and half, wasting his afternoon, until the PDA spoke up again.

'I believe I have found your son. Or rather, I know where he will be later tonight.'

The bedroom wall became a screen and PDA displayed a social calendar his son occasionally updated. It listed a party he planned to attend that evening, followed by various symbols and slang Howard didn't understand.

The boy is shouting his position to the world, Howard thought. He's going to get killed.

Would that be a bad thing? He let the thought sit there for a moment before realising what he'd done. He rolled over and buried his face in a pillow.

'What the hell is wrong with me?' His voice was muffled but PDA heard him anyway.

'You're suffering from post-traumatic stress, most likely. You place a high value on family and this failure was probably enough to —'

'Shut up.' Killing himself had been an impulsive idea, and a stupid one. He could still get things back on track.

'Being rude to a machine won't help.' PDA sounded hurt.

'Heat up the shower and call Angel.'

'What shall I tell him it is regarding?'

'I promised he could come with, and he needs to dress for a party.'

Memory 3

Normally, when she looked at Alan, he appeared more vivid than everything around him. This evening, as a warm breeze blew through the open floor to ceiling windows of the bungalow, everything was special. She lay on the bed, sheets tangled around her, her hair untied and covering the pillow, trying to take it all in. This was special and she needed to remember it.

The bungalow was rarely used, Alan had said. It lay too close to the edge of the island for his family's liking, though they had caretakers who kept it and their other properties tidy. Hil had never seen such opulence.

The bungalow was a tree house, resting in the widespread arms of an enormous tree. In fact, the tree had been specially grown, its branches teased into the bowl shape required over decades, before being convinced to be part of the walls as well. It was only big enough for a few rooms – a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and a small sitting room – but each of those rooms, though built into a living tree and barely used, was bigger than their counterparts in Hil's home.

The tree had been brought to the island from the Bransford estate before the first immigrant arrived, planted when the land was still receiving its delightful rolling hills. And now it was theirs, hers and Alan's.

He stood, leaning against the sliding door, half in and half out of the bedroom, staring at the sunset over the Pacific Ocean. Hil had watched the sunrise on the other side of the island many times, wedged into a high part of the workshops and staring out a small porthole while she waited for the first of her customers to get breakfast. The new islands were taking some of the charm away – they dotted the landscape now, growing like pimples from the otherwise smooth horizon – but it was still a beautiful sight.

The bungalow had unobstructed views though. Mr Bransford wouldn't allow anyone to build on this side of the island, not if they wanted to be part of his new country anyway.

Alan's hair wasn't messy like hers, but then nothing about him was ever messy. Even standing naked in the light he was perfect. She called him over and he came, bouncing into the bed with a giggle and hands that knew exactly where they wanted to go.

She'd made up an excuse for her parents and Alan had made it believable, but she'd still have to go home in the morning. She had work to do, customers to serve, and this little bit of dream would have to end at some point.

She lay in the dark staring out the still open window at a million stars, listening to his breathing. This was the way life was meant to be, beauty and pleasure, comfort and stability. Not constant work just to make it one rung further up the ladder, one step closer to a pale, insulting shadow of this heaven.

This was her destiny, she knew. She'd known it since seeing Alan on the stage with his father, more real than anything around him. Now, lying in the dark with his arm around her, his hand on her breast, his breath on the back of her neck, everything had that same quality. Everything was more real than the rest of her life, and there was no reason for her to go back to that imitation of reality. She could stay here.

She resolved to bring it up with Alan in the morning.

'I can't.' Alan hadn't eaten any of the breakfast she'd made him. His fork still stuck out of the scrambled eggs. 'My father would never allow it. He wouldn't understand.'

Hil's world shook, the realer-than-real feeling threatening to bleed away. 'But we're in love.' She blushed at saying the words out loud, but Alan didn't contradict her. 'We could have this,' she gestured around the home she'd hoped could be theirs, 'All of this, forever.'

‘My father sees himself a monarch, a new kind of king. He isn’t going to let me be with someone like you.’

‘Like me?’ He’d lost his lustre, and so had the bungalow. The warm light which had suffused the scene, which had given her the courage to actually speak her mind, was gone. It all felt unreal, as though the grimy truth was trying to push its way past the beauty.

‘I didn’t mean it like that, but he will when he says it, and he will say it. He needs me to marry someone from one of the other islands, one of the Sheik’s girls maybe. He wants this to be one kingdom, one country, and I’m part of his plan.’

‘Then tell him to shove it up his ass.’ She banged her glass on the table.

‘You’re so naïve,’ Alan said as he tried to take her hand. She moved out of range and his face changed. He lost the extra colour completely as he turned angry. ‘Stop being a bitch. I’m a prince, and I have to be with a princess. I don’t have a say in it.’

‘What about me?’ she said softly, fighting back tears.

‘What about you? I’ve enjoyed this time together, we’ve had fun, but we can never be a thing. The best I could do would be to buy you from your father.’

‘What?’

‘Some of the other founding families are doing it. Your father gets some land on the surface and a stipend for the rest of his life, and I get to keep you. As long as you stay with me your family is looked after.’

‘You want me to be your whore?’ She stood up and knocked over the chair. She looked around but couldn’t decide where to go, what to do. She wanted to hit him but the table was in the way.

‘It’s the best I can do.’

‘You don’t want to be with me?’ Now she was crying, unstopably, disgustingly, like a child. His words hurt more than anything, more than mere pain and she wanted out. This was a nightmare.

‘Of course I do.’ Alan shovelled the eggs she’d made him into his mouth, not looking at her. When he’d finished chewing he continued. ‘I just know the reality. We can have a great life, but not the way you want. Not ever.’

She left without another word, leaving the treehouse bungalow and the Bransford lands before finding an elevator booth down to the trams. She cried the whole way and didn’t care who saw.