

ULTRA MOD

AGENTS OF DISRUPT

BOOK ONE

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for all the dreamers in the world

IN A FUTURE SO BRIGHT

Aycee is an artificial super-intelligence who manages Big City from the cloud.

FEAR is the villainous syndicate who is always cooking up a cockeyed scheme to take over the world.

Only DISRUPT stands in their way.

Originally called the Department Involving Secret Really Unusual Powerful Technologies, nobody could come up with a better name so it stuck.

The Agents of DISRUPT are a special breed who are always on the lookout for new talent who can help save the world.

Which brings us to:

GIGANTIC HOLOGRAMS OF KOI FISH swim through the night-time sky above busy traffic in Big City. Bright neon from a forest of tall buildings adds a purple haze to the air. A huge jumbotron shows a promotional video for MindLink. It's a brain-computer interface that connects your mind to the internet of things.

Glowing through the mist, the super high-rises of downtown loom in the distance. Capped by a hologram of flaming red letters that spell its name, FEAR Tower is the tallest of all.

Smears of pink, purple and blue in the wet streets reflect the city lights. Self-driving cars squish through puddles with mechanical stop-and-go precision. The wails of distant sirens blend into the noise of the traffic.

Crowds bustle on the sidewalk as flocks of floating umbrellas tag along above their heads. A woman wearing three hats walks a two-headed dog on a single leash. Street vendors hawk their wares. Buskers make their music.

A twenty-something woman and a tween-age girl wear mechsuits with inline wheels on their feet. Made of nanographite, each mechsuit is a jointed white turtle-shell that wraps half-way around them from behind, head to toe and fingertip to fingertip.

Gliding with ease through the narrow gap between the rows of cars, the younger skater wears a rainbow stick-on mohawk on her mechsuit's headpiece. She also carries a colorful vinyl backpack emblazoned with a kitten's face.

The mechsuits' headpieces cup around from the back of the skaters' heads, ending at the hairline in front of their ears and across their foreheads. Transparent visors cover the upper half of their faces.

Superimposed on the glass, the visors also contain heads-up displays for video and data.

The two skaters cross an intersection into the next block. Holograms of flying jetbikes, each shaped like a dragon, race above the street in an endless loop. They are part of an advertisement for The Games of Life.

At the next stoplight, the two skaters pass a slow truck by cutting across the centerline and into the gap between oncoming rows of traffic.

The younger skater says, "Mod, this doesn't seem safe."

Calmly competent and world-weary for her age, Mod's eyes stay in constant motion between the traffic and her visor's display. The last of the raindrops spatter across the outside of her visor's glass, blurring her vision. "Rivv, we're in Aycee's traffic control system. They couldn't run over us if they tried."

A furrowed brow over piercing eyes, Rivv shakes her head as they skate the gap against the rows of cars. When they get to an opening in the traffic, the skaters cross lanes in front of an AutoTaxi that slows just enough to let them by. Its bumper missing their legs by a finger-width, the taxi texts the standard expletive. Mod's AutoRespond texts the standard reply. Crossing the centerline again, they merge into traffic going their way, leaving the slow truck behind.

Mod says, "We need to make this delivery early so we can get to the tryouts on time. I don't want to miss our connection. If we can get into the games, all this goes away."

"Are you recording?"

Mod focuses on the section of her visor that shows the video feeds. One feed shows a closeup of her own face, taken from the camera embedded within the visor itself. Another feed shows a closeup of Rivv, taken from the camera in hers.

Mod looks directly at the blue dot that is the camera and microphone in the center of her visor. "Hello to all my online friends, just another day in the life of a courier. Everybody, say hi to my little sister. She's gonna be taking

over more of the delivery stuff so I can do more of the coolhunts for you guys. Say hello, Rivv."

Rivv looks at the blue dot in the center of her visor. "Um, hello world?"

Mod smiles to herself as the data section of her visor's display shows her online feed filling with greetings directed at Rivv.

Rivv asks, "Can we talk offline for a sec?"

Mod says, "Private channel." The videos of their faces in her visor turn to a red tint. "Okay, it's just us."

"What are we delivering?"

"Did you ask Jammer?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She said it's data."

"Then that's what it is."

Rivv considers her response. "But that doesn't make any sense. Why would anyone move data this way?"

"Maybe they're the kind of people with the kind of data they don't want loose in the cloud."

Rivv lets that sink in.

Mod says, "Okay, back online. I want this delivery up on my feed. They have a cool, uh, interface." The red tint on their faces disappears. Rivv manages a weak smile.

Mod crosses through another lane of traffic and turns into a side street. Rivv follows close behind. There's an opening in the crowd on the sidewalk, so Mod steps up on the curb. Rivv gamely follows. They skate a short distance, then Mod does a tight spin-stop in front of a glass storefront. No door, just glass.

Rivv does a graceful spin-stop next to her and looks up at the sign above the glass. "Mutants?"

"Maybe we're delivering body parts."

"Yuck!"

"Or maybe it's just sushi. Everybody has to eat."

"Double yuck! Maybe it's both?"

"Yeah, that would be yuck. Especially if they get them confused. Turn around."

Mod removes the kitten backpack from Rivv's mechsuit. She hefts it in both hands. "Doesn't feel like sushi, but always keep the package upright just in case." She hands it to Rivv, who takes it with a mix of curiosity and disgust.

A young couple across the street wave at Mod. The woman yells, "Hey Mod! Love your show!"

Mod blows a kiss. "Thanks!"

Rivv says, "You're getting famous?"

"Almost famous. If I can ride the wave of a few more trends, I'll switch over to the coolhunting full time."

Rivv hefts the backpack in her hands. "And I get stuck with sushi."

"If you're lucky." Mod looks up at the address on the storefront. "Aycee, we're making a delivery. Please advise recipient that we are on site and ready."

Aycee's soft voice speaks into their earbuds, "Done."

A section of the glass shimmers, liquefies, then splits open to reveal a dark recess with a ledge about waist high.

Mod indicates with her head for Rivv to put the backpack inside. So she does, carefully placing it on the ledge.

The glass reverses its process and returns to a blank sheet.

Rivv catches her reflection. She looks like a humanoid robot. She reaches out to touch it, sliding her fingers across the pane. "It's just like it's normal glass."

Aycee notifies Mod, "Incoming videocall — accept?"

"Yes, call accept."

The tiny screen inside her visor switches out the feed from Rivv's camera to the feed of the incoming call. It's a twenty-something guy with a round face and big friendly eyes. "Hey Mod, this is Winn. I just wanted to let you know we're here."

"Hey Winn, sorry we're running late. Give us about ten and we'll be there. Looking forward to meeting you in person."

"No problem. We're up for the second bout, so you have some time. Yeah, looking forward to meeting you too."

The video call ends and Rivv's camera feed refreshes in its place. She looks directly into the camera at Mod. "He looks nice."

"They all do at first, that's why we're doing a test run."

"You never give them a chance."

"My little sister, the match-maker."

"No I'm not. I just..."

As gently as she can, Mod says, "I miss Mom and Dad too, but I can't fix that."

Rivv looks away.

Mod checks the street for cars. "Aycee, we're back online. Path submitted and give priority when cost does not exceed five credits."

"Path accepted — proceed."

They step off the curb and enter into traffic. Mod crouches and digs in deep for some power strokes to get her up to speed. Rivv follows close behind.

oOo

The pre-games tryout area is ten blocks of a city street with three lanes on each side of a center median. The median was landscaped at some time in the past, but now it just has a few dead trees and the debris of abandonment. The mid-rise buildings along each side of the street are empty carcasses of a once vibrant business center.

Abandoned cars and the remnants of looted store fixtures clutter the parking lanes. A furniture store appears to have vomited out its contents at one end of the street, providing creaky seating for a few hundred onlookers.

A DJ with pink hair and a glitter jacket provides music from her portable sound system. Hangers-on continually make new requests, so she never stays on one selection for very long. A couple of food carts add the smell of fried VatMeat to the air. Several large signs, pock-marked with bullet holes, warn about a long-ago biohazard.

The crowd is a mixed bag of skaters and posers, along with their friends and supporters. Several people stand

around a metal drum filled with burning office furniture. When they drop the seat of a chair into the drum, sparks boil out and fly up into the night sky.

Teams of skaters try out their mechsuits in sudden bursts by taking off from the starting line and skating fast for a short distance before turning around.

One skater loses control of his mechsuit, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" before crashing into an abandoned car.

On the sidewalk nearby, a mechsuit stands empty as its owner kneels next to it and works on one of the knees with a cordless drill.

Another mechsuit stands armless while its owner holds the mechanical arms in his hands as he tries to figure out which is left and right.

Mod and Rivv arrive at the far end of the street away from the crowd. This end is the turnaround where a construction of plywood leans against the concrete barriers that initially blocked the street. The plywood forms a crude banking half-circle. Mod and Rivv skate toward the crowd.

Rivv says, "This seems really low-tech compared to the real games."

"It is, but like us the people here can't afford that level of tech."

"Then why do the scouts even bother with this?"

"They don't care about the tech. They're here to find the right kind of people to play in the games."

"What kind of people?"

"Young, reckless, and desperate."

When they get within a block of the starting line, Mod activates the augmented reality mode in her visor. A holographic identifier appears above the head of everybody there, all blue except one in red at the back. She and Rivv skate the final block and join the others behind the start line.

The identifier floating above each person's head displays their online avatar's name, sometimes their real name, plus any other information they care to share. Mod checks out some of the names and flips on DeepSearch to

see more. The identifiers double in size as bank accounts, health records and criminal histories crowd into the virtual holograms.

The person with the red identifier locks onto Mod's location and skates toward her.

A tween-age boy follows close behind, both wearing dark gray mechsuits. The fire and sparks in the background give them an aura of invincibility.

The man skates up to Mod and stops neatly. "Hi, Mod? I'm Winnow. Call me Winn for short."

He holds out a fist for a bump, so she does. "Yeah, Mod. This is my sister, Rivvet."

"Rivv, just call me Rivv."

The boy holds out a fist toward Rivv. "Daze." They bump fists, shy and clumsy.

Winn says, "We definitely hit the target demographic they're looking for."

Rivv asks, "What's that?"

"Mixed doubles, twenties and tweens. Daze, you and Rivv will skate together. Can you be like, not a monster for the young lady?"

Daze pushes on Winn. "Stop it." From behind his visor, he catches Rivv's eye and flashes a smile.

Winn turns to Mod. "Which means we skate together."

"Yes it does, but let's see how we do here first."

"Absolutely. Like I said in the ad, the Academy is putting together a new team for the games, so it's a full sponsorship. They seem to be in some kind of hurry, so don't wait too long to decide if they make you an offer."

Mod says, "I understand. I do have other offers, just so you know."

"Cool. I saw the other scouts here." He indicates with his chin toward a group of people behind her. "You should have your pick."

The crowd raises a yell as the red and blue teams line up to start the first bout. Two adults in red mechsuits, male and female, line up on one side of the median. A pair of mixed-gender tweens in blue fall in behind them. On the other

side of the median, the order is reversed with the adults in front in blue and the tweens behind them in red.

Rivv asks, "Why are they mixed together like that?"

Winn says, "Each team is going to cross over at the turnaround at the end. When they come back, it'll be red coming in to red and blue to blue."

Rivv realizes that her and Mod's white mechsuits don't match Winn and Daze's dark gray. She holds a forearm next to Daze. Almost as if reading her mind, Mod says, "We'll invoke a color when they assign it."

Winn says, "We're purple." He touches a control pad on his wrist, causing his entire mechsuit to turn purple. Mod helps Rivv find the controls, and the four of them end up in all-purple.

A skater with the word 'Staff' on his chestplate brings them a container of equipment. He drops it on the pavement and leaves without saying a word. Winn reaches in and hands out their chestplate targets — about the size of a dinner plate. They each attach a target to the fronts of their chests.

Winn says, "You know the strategy, hit them here but not get hit yourself." He passes out a pair of LazerTagger guns to each of them, holding two for himself.

The RaceMaster bangs the side of the steel drum. A cloud of glowing embers flies up from the fire. Several CameraDrones lift into the sky and take positions along the length of the skate route.

Winn says, "The drones are on channel five twenty three."

Mod sets her visor to display feeds from different parts of the course, and showing both the red and blue teams. She notices that her online audience is higher than it's ever been before.

The DJ picks a new song with a fast beat intro.

The RaceMaster holds up a flare gun and bellows, "Are we ready to fight?"

The crowd roars its approval.

The front skaters crouch into starting position — all four

of them holding a laser gun in each hand. The music builds toward a crescendo.

The RaceMaster yells, "Then fight!" He pulls the trigger on the flare gun, launching a bright comet into the night sky. The flare provides just enough wavering light for the skaters to see the course.

The front four skaters take off down the street, red on one side of the median and blue on the other. The four CameraDrones assigned to track with them match their speed. One drone out in front of each team looking back, and one up and behind each team looking down. Within moments, the skaters let loose a barrage of laser shots at the team on the other side of the median.

Mod watches the videos in her visor. Two of the intersections are blocked with concrete Jersey barriers. The skaters do a jump and leg-tuck each time, easily clearing the tops of the blockades. Cars parked sideways in the middle of the lanes are a tougher jump. Most of the skaters jump onto the cars' hoods, adding another crease to the flimsy metal before dropping to the pavement on the other side.

One skater, a show-off on the red team, takes on the side of a car at the mid-point. Approaching at speed and holding a laser gun in each hand, he crosses his own arms across his chest and lets his mechsuit's hands grab the edge of the car's roof. He flips himself up backwards and over the car, landing with a crunch on the other side. Never missing a stride, he lets loose a barrage of laser shots at the other team.

Mod says to Winn, "Impressive."

"Calls himself Vexx. And yeah, he's good."

"Who does he play for?"

"Nobody yet, but he's made it clear that he wants to go into the games for ECM."

"Echo Chamber Media?" Mod enlarges the video that shows the fronts of team Vexx — studies his face. He's a young guy with sharp features. Hungry. "He doesn't look familiar."

"Should he?"

“ECM has been bugging me for ages to join their team.”

“In the games?”

Mod shakes her head. “No, coolhunting.”

“What?”

Mod laughs. “Trendspotting. Finding the latest and greatest and putting it up on my feed. I just like the sound of coolhunting better. I’ve built my own following by not falling in with a bunch of suits. Once you do that, you’re just a clickbait slave. And they’re the slavers.”

Daze says, “They’re at the turnaround, check it out.”

Mod watches the videos in her visor as the players enter the turnaround. By prior agreement to avoid collisions, one team goes low while the other team goes high. Vexx sets up an approach to go high on the plywood embankment, then deftly turns around and skates backward into it.

The maneuver conceals his chestplate target from the lasers of the other team. He lifts his guns over each shoulder and fires at them, scoring several hits in their chestplates before they pass. Then he turns around and keeps skating forward, coming down off the plywood embankment into a nimble one-foot glide. His team of supporters cheer.

A man’s voice from behind Mod and Winn says, “You really should come over to ECM Mod. We can make you a very lucrative offer — even better than the last.”

They turn around to face a big guy in a dark business suit with flat-top hair and a black stretcher-loop in the lobe of each ear.

Mod says, “Fud, the answer is no. It will always be no.”

“You could get away from all this riff raff.” He indicates the crowd with the wave of one arm. “Move up in the world and provide some stability for your sister.”

“Maybe I like riff raff. Maybe they’re my kind of people.”

Fud turns his head to face Winn, then back to Mod.

She takes the hint. “Fud, this is Winnow, Winn. Winn this is Fud, VP at ECM.”

Fud stares at Mod, but doesn’t offer a handshake to Winn. “Executive VP and personal assistant to one Miss Fomo Churn, CEO, Echo Chamber Media.”

Winn lifts a hand, then sees the handshake snub coming and pretends to adjust his headset.

“Talent scout, Disrupt Academy.”

That gets Fud’s attention. “The Academy? Well well, that is an improvement Mod. My apologies. You’re moving up. From riff raff to professional troublemakers.” He stares at Winn, daring a rebuttal.

Winn turns to Mod. “Hear that? We’re professionals.” Winn gives Fud a big grin.

Rivv whispers in Mod’s earbuds, “Are you recording all this?”

Mod gives a slight nod.

“Awesome.”

Mod notices that the audience number for her online feed is soaring. “Well Mister Executive VP, can you deliver a message for me to this one Miss Fomo Churn, CEO of ECM? Seeing as how you’re her personal ass?”

Fud says, “Perhaps I misjudged, and it’s riff raff after all.”

“Tell Fomo—”

“That’s Miss Churn to you.”

“Tell Fomo that I will never sell out and make her kind of crap content for ECM.”

Daze yells, “Here they come!”

They all turn to watch as the two teams of skaters come racing into the finish. As soon as all four adults are behind the start-finish line, the four tween skaters take off down the course, lasers blasting.

Daze and Rivv’s eyes light up as they watch their peers on the field of battle.

Mod and Winn turn back to face Fud.

Fud says, “Never say never. We can offer a full sponsorship in the games, a top tier link and the latest nanotech. Then when you’re done, your own show. Hell, your own channel.”

Mod stares into the blue dot camera/mic in her visor to address her online audience. “Hear that guys? My very own channel! Like, you’re just a toy.”

Fud winces. “Business negotiations are supposed to be private. Professional courtesy?”

Mod laughs at him. "You really don't get it, do you? This is not a business negotiation because I'm not negotiating with you. I'm rejecting you."

Vexx and his female cohort skate up next to Fud. Vexx says, "Trouble here boss?"

Mod says, "Boss? So you already have a team?"

Fud stares at her for a moment. "We do now." He turns to Vexx. "Let's do the contracts, you're in."

Vexx barely resists the urge to jump into the air. "Yes, yes, yes! Thank you!" The three of them turn to leave.

Mod says, "Excuse me, just a sec?"

They turn back to face her. Mod looks at Vexx. "I know you're Vexx." She turns to the woman. "But I didn't catch your name."

Tall and lanky with roughly chopped hair poking out from under her headpiece, she says, "Fret. Name's Fret."

Fud smiles. "You'll rue this day Mod, mark my word." They turn away and leave.

Winn says, "That went well."

Mod looks at her audience numbers — off the chart. "Yes it did, yes it did."