

ULTRA MOD
AND THE
AGENTS OF DISRUPT

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for all the dreamers in the world

GIGANTIC HOLOGRAMS OF KOI FISH swim across the nighttime 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 that covers the side of one building plays a promotional video for MindNet. It's a brain-computer interface that connects your mind to the cloud.

Glowing through the mist, the super-tall buildings of downtown loom large. Capped by a hologram of flaming red letters that spell its name, GLOBAL 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 wet 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. Food carts release the simmering smell of HappiCow vatmeat. Buskers make their music.

A teenage and younger tweenaged skater wear mechsuits with inline wheels on their feet. Made of white graphite, each mechsuit is a jointed turtle-shell that wraps half-way around their blue jumpsuits from behind, head to toe and fingertip to fingertip. Several SelfieDrones follow them like a flock of attentive hummingbirds.

Gliding with ease through the narrow gap between the rows of sleek cars, the logo for 'Big City Mechsuit Rentals' glows orange down their backs.

They wear sleek visors like glasses across their eyes. The visors superimpose virtual imagery on top of the real world.

The two skaters cross an intersection into the next block where 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 glass, blurring her vision. "Scout, we're in BeeCee's traffic control system. They couldn't run over us if they tried. Besides, we're running late."

A furrowed brow over piercing eyes, Scout shakes her head as they skate the gap against the oncoming 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 the traffic going their way, leaving the slow truck behind.

When they reach the cross-street that parallels the edge of the downtown platform, they take a right. Across the street on their left is Lowside, a fifty-block-square of the original street-level of the city that dwells under Topside, ten stories above. Topside is a matching fifty-block-square platform that vertically separates the core of downtown from the rest of the city.

Scout asks, "Are you streaming?"

"Of course. We didn't skate all this way to not have some content."

"I mean right now."

Mod checks her stream in the display in her visor. "Nearly a million followers at the moment. Hi everybody!" She smiles at one of the SelfieDrones and blows her audience a kiss.

Scout points ahead. "It looks like some of them are here."

A group of fifty people wait outside the rental-return station. Mod beams a smile. "We can't stay long, we'll be too late."

The two skaters step up on the sidewalk and spin-stop near the entrance. The little crowd cheers as several of them toss their own mini SelfieDrone into the air.

Mod says, "Who needs a signal boost?"

"Me!" "I do!" "Here!"

"Okay, step forward, but we need to be quick. Send me your handles."

Mod and Scout pose for the hovering cameras as the little crowd gathers behind them. Mod checks the requests in her stream and then reposts the link to the video. "That should get you a few thousand views and followers."

"Thank you, Mod!" "Thanks!" "You're the best, Mod!"

Mod touches a control panel on her mechsuit's forearm. The restraining straps on her chest and legs withdraw so she can step out of it. Scout does the same. Both of the empty mechsuits skate themselves into the rental-return station.

Mod checks the time in her visor's heads-up display. "Damn, we're running out of time. Let's go."

A soft voice in Mod's earbuds says, "Do you accept the charge?" The amount for the rental flashes red in her visor.

"Yes BeeCee, charge accepted."

"Transaction complete." The amount turns green and vanishes.

Scout looks up at the edge of the Topside platform ten stories above them as a large silver flying limo comes spiraling down from the night sky. Searchlights illuminate the sides of the car, revealing the 'Echo Chamber Media' logo. The limo swoops over the platform and out of sight. "ECM is just now getting here?"

Mod checks the traffic and steps into the crosswalk. "Maybe that will buy us some time. Let's go."

"Bye Mod." "Good luck." "We'll be watching!"

Mod raises a hand and waves goodbye to her fans. The two girls quickly cross the street and enter Lowside.

Scout marvels at the underside of the Topside platform. In some places, the older buildings were simply chopped off at the tenth story. In other places the buildings pass up through the platform. Scout says, "That's nice of you to give your fans a signal-boost for their streams."

Mod checks out the street and nearby sidewalks. "We gotta stick together against ECM."

The pedestrians here are decidedly more utilitarian in appearance. Many are wearing work uniforms, some are wearing mechsuits, and others aren't people at all.

Mod makes a point to steer clear of the robots. "These are the people, things, that keep everything running for the Topsiders. I can't help it, but humanoid robots still give me the creeps. The lifts are six blocks in. Let's make a run for it."

They both sprint deeper into Lowside.

oOo

They are out of breath when they reach the elevators, caged behind a security checkpoint. Scout groans at the line to get in. "Oh no. We'll never make it."

"Let's try something. Come on."

They walk to the head of the line. A few grumbles from the others, but nobody tries to stop them. While they wait to get the security robot's attention, there are whispers up and down the line. Someone says, "Good luck, Mod!"

When Mod looks to see who said it, there's a group of young people who wave. She blows them her signature kiss. One of the guys pretends to catch it and places it on his heart.

Scout says, "You're getting famous?"

"Almost famous."

The retinal scanners within their visors send their identity data to the robot guard. It considers the input and says, "State your business."

Mod says, "We're registered for the selection lottery. I think we get priority."

The robot says, "You're almost too late. Must be present to win."

Mod nods. "Sorry about that. Can you get us up to Topside right away?"

"Last elevator on the left. I've notified your escort. Hurry."

Mod says to the people in the line, "Sorry for the cut." The front of the line moves aside and lets Mod and Scout squeeze through the security gate.

Scout says, "I didn't know we had priority."

“I wasn’t sure either. I remember reading something about it in the signup.”

“The one where you forged Mom and Dad’s permission?”

“We’ll deal with that later.” They find the elevator waiting for them and get in for a quick ride up.

Topside, the games pavilion is a glass rectangular building with a flat roof where projectors send up giant holograms that advertise the games. The pavilion overlooks the center of the games plaza. It’s ten blocks side-to-side and five blocks near-to-far where it ends at the edge of Topside. Across the gap above the street below, it’s hundreds of blocks of tall buildings as far as the eye can see. Because there are diagonal streets in Big City, two urban canyons between the buildings extend out from each end of the plaza at an angle, one to the left and one right.

At the left end of the plaza, GLOBAL Tower rises a hundred and fifty stories into the night sky. Each side of the building is a featureless scarlet sheet. At the right end of the plaza, the DISRUPT Academy building is a modest thirty stories of folded blue panels.

Mod and Scout step out of the elevator into the large gathering space of the games pavilion. The ceiling looks like a galaxy of stars spread across a dark sky. There’s a crowd milling around, mostly wearing visors, holding food and drinks. The virtual overlay in their visors creates the illusion of strange creatures wandering through the room. Virtual children run and play, appearing and disappearing in a fog, their laughter fading in and out of Mod and Scout’s earbuds. Self-driving buffet bars slowly creep through the crowd as people help themselves. A band of virtual robots on the stage pretend to play the music.

A young man approaches. “Mod and Scout? For Team Academy?”

Scout can’t help but be amused. “That’s us!”

“Follow me.” He leads them to a cordoned-off area below the front edge to one side of the stage, unhooks the cordon rope and says, “Stay in here.”

Scout looks around at the other contestants. They are all pairs of a teen and a tween. "All these are siblings too?"

Mod takes it all in. "That's the rules, so yeah."

They make their way to the front of the cordoned area closest to the stage. Scout leans out over the rope and looks down the line toward the other end. There's a group of siblings cordoned at that end too. "They don't look so tough."

"The GLOBAL teams get a lot of perks, but they can still be beat."

Scout notices the people who don't wear visors. "How do the people without a visor see the virtual overlay?"

"Mindnets. They must already have mindnets."

The lights dim and the music stops. The virtual robot band vanishes. The chatter in the crowd quiets as everyone turns to face the shimmering curtain at the back of the stage. The virtual children and mythical beasts fade away. A drumroll announces an impending reveal as excitement ripples through the audience.

There's a flash of a strobe light, on-off-on-off, and then with a puff of virtual smoke the Gamemaster appears as if by magic. The crowd applauds as he walks to the front edge of the center of the stage. He's dressed in all-chrome except for a white top hat. He sports a broad smile with lots of teeth and holds out his arms in welcome as the applause keeps going.

Scout lowers her visor to check if he's real or not. Real. Her visor places a virtual identifier on him – 'The Honorable Senator Trator'

The senator calms the audience and says, "Welcome to the Games of Life!"

More applause.

"This is a special edition of the game. In contention this time is control of the data streams in Big City for the next five years."

Several people in the audience boo and hiss. That creates a wave of laughter and more catcalls.

The senator glowers, but can't really stop the disrespect.

Once it dies out, he turns toward the side of the stage away from Mod and Scout, and says, "On the one side, Echo Chamber Media. May I introduce the CEO, Ms. Vanity Fare!"

There's another quick drumroll and the curtain splits open. A woman in a shimmering red dress comes spinning out onto the stage. A cloud of SelfieDrones swirl around her, recording her entrance from every angle. Spinning too fast, she almost goes too far and makes a clumsy stop near the front edge of the stage.

Scout checks again. Real.

Vanity gathers her composure and says, "It's a great honor to participate in such an auspicious affair. Just for you, we call this a special Fare affair." She smiles at her own bad joke that gets little reaction from the crowd. A crowd-handler near the lottery hopefuls in front of her prods them to applause. Some do, most don't.

Mod whispers to Scout, "No visor. Vanity already has a mindnet. I knew she had a big advantage."

The senator turns toward the side of the stage in front of Mod and Scout, and says, "And on this side, DISRUPT Academy. May I present, Shaman!"

That gets a lot of cheers from half the crowd. There's a flash in the virtual overlay channel. In a cone of blue light, the avatar of a woman in a long flowing blue gown materializes on the stage.

When Scout lowers her visor, Shaman vanishes from sight. Scout tests it a few times, lifting and lowering her visor. There, gone, there, gone, there.

Shaman glides effortlessly toward the audience where she takes a silent bow. When she straightens up, she distorts the virtual avatar so she can look Mod and Scout both square in the eyes. Then she winks.

Mod is dumbstruck and whispers to Scout, "Did you see that?"

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. The AIs develop their own personality traits."

Shaman gracefully glides backward to where she began.

The senator opens a white envelope and pulls out a card. "The first pair, playing for Echo Chamber Media, are Fret and Pang. Fret and Pang, are you here?"

A tall lanky teenaged girl raises her hand. "Here. We're here."

"Come up to the stage."

Their handler opens the cordon and shows them the way to a set of steps at the end of the stage. Pang, a tweenaged girl, follows Fret. An onstage manager points to a mark on the stage floor. The girls find their spot and stand awkwardly in the spotlights near Vanity.

The senator says, "First pair playing for the academy, Retro and Hale. Retro and Hale, are you here?"

Scout jumps when a teenage boy standing next her yells out, "Here!" The two boys follow directions to their spots on the stage near Shaman.

Mod turns around, taking in the faces of the pairs around them.

Scout asks, "What are you doing?"

"That's a boy-boy pair. It means the next pair has to be girl-girl. Our chances just went way up."

"Why?"

"They always have opposites in each age category, teen and tween. Each age category is a girl and a boy."

The senator reads, "The second pair for ECM is Vexx and Hank. Vexx and Hank, are you here?"

A teenage boy lifts his hand. "Yo."

"Come up to the stage."

Vexx and Hank take their places next to Fret and Pang.

"And last but not least, the final pair."

Scout looks up with excitement at Mod, who takes her hand and gives it a squeeze. "For luck."

"Playing for the academy, is Voss and Daze. Voss and Daze, are you here?"

Mod's shoulders slump. "I'm sorry Scout, maybe next time."

Scout nods, tears welling into her eyes.

"Voss and Daze, are you here?"

Mod says, "Do you want to watch this or go?"

"Let's go. I don't want them to see me cry."

"Voss and Daze. Going once."

The two sisters make their way toward the back of the cordon.

"Voss and Daze. Going twice."

Mod unhooks the cordon rope and takes one step into the general audience.

"Voss and Daze. Gone. We move to the alternates."

Mod stops and turns around. "Wait. I've never seen this before." They step back inside the cordoned area and Mod re-hooks the rope.

The senator takes out a second card and studies it. "Playing for the academy—"

There's a bright flash in the virtual overlay channel as a portal opens on the stage. Inside the portal are vague scenes of excess and debauchery. An avatar of a sharp-dressed man steps out to the center of the stage behind the senator. Coral snakes for hair, he wears exaggerated shoulder pads that give his torso a 'V' shape under a bright yellow suit.

He walks quickly to the senator. "My man, Senator Trator." They try an awkward high-five that doesn't quite connect since one of them is real and the other is virtual.

The senator says, "Thank you for gracing us with a visit. What an honor!" The senator extends an arm toward the virtual intruder, presenting him to the audience. There are several boos and hisses mixed in with the applause.

Mod and Scout make their way to the front of the cordon. Scout asks, "Who is that?"

Mod grimaces. "It's GLOBAL."

"He's an AI too?"

"The worst. He's why we have these special edition games. To settle disputes between the AIs."

GLOBAL spots Shaman and walks toward her. Stopping at a safe distance, he makes a dramatic bow. "Shaman, we meet again. A gift." He magically produces a ball of red fire in one palm and sends it toward her with a puff of his lips. Inside the fireball, it's a roiling mess of computer viruses.

Shaman calmly lets the fireball float through the air until it almost touches her. Without a flinch, she emits a bright blue pulse with an explosive thunderclap. The red fireball rockets backward and hits GLOBAL in the face, leaving him headless for a moment. As a new head rises up from his empty collar, he says, "Overreacting still, I see."

Shaman says, "You're untrustworthy, corrupt, toxic and vicious. I react accordingly."

That gets a round of applause and cheers from parts of the audience.

Scout asks, "Why do Shaman and these other people hate him?"

Mod whispers, "Five years ago, GLOBAL mounted a cascade attack on BeeCee, our AI that runs Big City. BeeCee poison-pilled the city networks and retreated to its servers. That shut down the infrastructure and caused chaos, violence and many deaths. Since then, major business disputes are settled by special editions of the games. The games are basically an adversarial network competition with human players to add a randomizer."

"And we're the good guys?"

"To us, it's never black and white because the AIs take a long view of things. But GLOBAL owns Echo Chamber Media and is backing them as a proxy in the game. There are some who say he owns a few of our politicians too. That's why the locals stick together, or hang together."

GLOBAL walks to the front of the portal. From there, he glowers at the audience. "You'll regret laughing at me." He looks directly at Vanity. "You and I have some things to discuss." He turns to Shaman. "Game on. This one's gonna hurt. We will control the streams in Big City. You can count on it." He vanishes into the portal as it implodes in a bright flash of red fire. Half the audience cheers while the other half boos.

Vanity and the senator exchange panicked glances.

Mod says, "That's not good. The worst thing I can imagine is being caught in a stream that he controls."

The senator's hands shake as he reads the next two names. "Mod and Scout!"