

ULTRA MOD
AND THE
AGENTS OF DISRUPT

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for all the dreamers in the world

Scene One

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 video advertisement for MindNet plays across several of the facades. It's a brain-computer interface that connects your mind to the cloud.

The super-tall skyscrapers of downtown loom in the mist. Capped by a hologram of flaming red letters that spell its name, POWER 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 sidewalks as flocks of floating umbrellas tag along above their heads. A woman wearing three hats walks a two-headed dog on a single leash. A heavy man in a black trench coat stops at a food cart to inhale the aroma of simmering HappiCow vatmeat. The vendor hands him a sample on a stick.

Two skaters, a teen and a tween, wear mechsuits with inline wheels on their feet. Made of white graphene, 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 the girls 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. The two skaters wear stylish visors that superimpose virtual imagery on top of the real world.

They skate through an intersection into the next block where holograms of flying jetbikes, each shaped like a

dragon, race above the street in an endless loop. It's 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. 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. 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 the drones still streaming?"

"The sponsor wanted the full trip." Mod checks her stream in her visor's display. "Nearly a million followers. 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 parking garage entrance at the base of a skyscraper. There's a small logo above the ramp that matches the logo on their mechsuits' backs. Mod beams a smile. "We can't stay long."

The two skaters step up on the sidewalk and spin-stop near the little crowd, who cheer as several of them toss their own 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 her fans gather behind them. Mod turns her back toward the cloud of drones so they get a good shot of the logo on her back. "Big City Mechsuit Rentals, for the win!" Mod gathers the requests for a re-stream, then posts the link to the video. "That should get you a few thousand followers."

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

She 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 down the ramp into the underground garage.

Mod checks the clock in her visor's 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 mechsuits rental flashes red in her visor.

"No BeeCee, this is a sponsored event. Please forward this video link to my client."

"Transaction complete." The amount drops to zero and turns green.

Mod checks the traffic and steps into the crosswalk.

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

She waves goodbye to her fans as the two of them cross the street and enter Lowside.

Scout marvels at the underneath of the Topside platform. In some places, the older buildings were simply chopped off at the tenth story. In other places, the buildings penetrate 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 locals. "Just paying it forward."

Many of the Lowside pedestrians wear work uniforms. Some wear mechsuits, but others aren't people at all. A humanoid robot walks across the street with a gait that isn't quite as smooth as fully human.

Mod says, "The lifts are six blocks in. Let's make a run for it."

They both sprint deeper into Lowside.

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Mod and Scout are out of breath when they reach the elevators, caged behind a security checkpoint.

Scout groans at the line to get in. "We'll never make it in time."

Mod says, "Let's try something."

They stride to the head of the line. A few people grumble, but nobody tries to stop them. While they wait to get the security robot's attention, whispers run up and down the queue. Someone says, "Good luck, Mod!"

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

They lower their visors so the security robot's retinal scanner can identify them. It considers the input and says, "You're almost too late."

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

"Must be present to win."

"Can you get us up to Topside right away?"

"Second bank of elevators, last one on the left. I've notified your escort. Hurry."

Mod says, "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. I remember reading something about it in the signup."

"The one where you forged Mom and Dad's permission?"

"Yeah, well, we're all in a kinda desperate situation now. Right?"

Scout just keeps walking.

They find the elevator waiting for them and get in.

Topside, the games pavilion is a sprawling glass building with a flat roof where projectors send up giant holograms to advertise the games.

Inside the pavilion, Mod and Scout step out of the elevator into the main gathering space to join a large crowd. A galaxy of virtual stars swirls above their heads while random comets swoosh from one end of the ballroom to the other. Most people wear visors, but there's a healthy number who do not.

The virtual overlay in their visors also creates the illusion of strange creatures wandering through the room. Mouth agape, Scout is speechless as virtual children run and play, appearing and disappearing in a virtual fog, their laughter fading in and out of her earbuds. When she peeks over the top of her visor, all the effects vanish. She looks up at Mod and says, "Do you see all this?"

"I bet there's more coming."

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 a mindnet."

Self-driving buffet bars 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?"

Mod smiles. "That's us!"

"Follow me." He leads them to a cordoned-off area below the front edge of one side of the stage and unhooks the rear cordon rope. "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?"

"Or cousins. It's part of the rules."

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

Mod takes a look. "We can beat 'em."

The lights dim as the music stops. The virtual band vanishes. The chatter in the crowd quietens as everyone turns to face the 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. With a puff of virtual smoke, the Gamemaster steps through the curtain. The crowd applauds as he walks to the front center of the stage. He's dressed entirely in 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 another, ah, for the next five years."

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

Mod whispers to Scout, "We gotta knock ECM off the perch. They're choking the independents with their access fees."

The senator glowers at the raucous audience, barely tolerating the disrespect. Once it dies out, he turns toward the side of the stage away from Mod and Scout. "On the one side, Echo Chamber Media. May I introduce the CEO, Ms. Vanity Fare!"

There's a quick drumroll as the curtain splits open. A woman in a shimmering red dress comes spinning out. 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, windmilling her arms to keep from falling forward. She wears garish makeup and too much jewelry.

One of her bracelets flies off her wrist and arcs above the audience. All heads turn as they watch it plop into a punch bowl on one of the buffet bars.

Vanity cocks her head as if that was intentional. "Ha!"

Scout lowers her visor to check again. Real.

Vanity gathers her composure and pushes her load of bracelets up to her elbows. "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 audience. A crowd-handler near the lottery hopefuls in the cordon in front of Vanity encourages them to applaud. 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. "On this side, Disrupt Academy. May I present, Shaman!"

Lots of cheers from half the crowd. The virtual overlay channel flashes. 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 her virtual avatar so she can look Mod and Scout both square in the eyes, and winks.

Mod whispers to Scout, "Did you see that?"

"What does it mean?"

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

Shaman gracefully glides back 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 teenage girl raises a hand. "I'm Fret." She puts her other hand on the younger player's shoulder. "We're here."

“Come on up.”

Their handler opens the cordon and shows them the way to a set of steps at the end of the stage. An onstage manager points to a mark on the stage floor. The girls find their spot and stand awkwardly in the spotlights near Vanity, who greets them with wide eyes and a big fake smile.

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 direction 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 on this team 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. As a greeting, Vanity tries to make her big fake smile even wider.

“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 move to the back. 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 steps into the general audience.

“Voss and Daze. Gone. We move to the alternates.”

Mod stops and turns around. “Wait. I’ve never heard of this before.” They step back inside the cordon, 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 overlay channel as a virtual portal opens on the stage. Obscure images of excess and debauchery fill the scene inside the portal. An avatar of a sharp-dressed man steps out to the center of the stage behind the senator. Writhing coral snakes for hair, he wears exaggerated shoulder pads that give his torso a ‘V’ shape under a bright orange suit.

He strides to the senator. “My man, Senator Trator.” They try an awkward high-five that doesn’t quite connect because 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 Power.”

“He’s an AI too?”

“The worst. He’s why we have these special edition games. To settle disputes between the AIs.”

“But why?”

“Five years ago, Power 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 lots of death. Since then, major business disputes are settled by

special editions of the games. The games are basically an adversarial network competition between the AIs with human players to add a randomizer.”

Power spots Shaman and strolls 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, then 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 Power in the face, leaving him headless for a moment with a comical wisp of smoke in its place. 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, “He’s the one that fills the zone with crap.”

“What?”

“The POWER corporation owns ECM and a lot of other media companies that flood the streams with anxiety and misinformation so nobody can be sure what’s true or not. It’s how they keep control. Some people say he owns some of our politicians too.”

“But you said you wanted to be like ECM.”

“Not like them. Just bigger. As big as them. Someday.”

A soft voice whispers into Mod’s earbuds, “Are you really sure you want to do the things it would take to get there?”

Mod turns to Scout. “What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Mod studies Shaman’s face. There’s a fleeting moment of acknowledgment, but it’s too subtle to be sure.

Power strides 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, and the mindnets too. 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 mindnet stream that he controls."

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