

SARAI FREDDY CLEVELAND

"Good morning, Sarah."

The man – the director of human resources for Metrozone-7 Sector 33-B – stared at her from across the desk. Every inch of him oozed Hypercorp sleaze. His hair shone with the plastic gleam exclusive to electrostasis strands, and an old man skull poked through his smooth skin in a way that made him look less young and more like the victim of some internal parasite. The dull underglow of his computer monitor only drew the sallowness of his face into sharper relief.

"Sarai," she said. "My name is Sarai."

She shifted beneath his gaze, kept her hands clenched between her knees.

The man glanced back at his monitor, narrowed his eyes for a second, and turned back to her.

"Of course, Sarai. My apologies," he said smoothly. He cleared his throat, "We here at Channing Robotics Corporation care about our employees. We care about you. We worry about you. We have the most comprehensive health care plan of the Seven Hypercorps."

Low bar to clear, Sarai thought, but she bit her tongue.

"It's come to our attention that you've been having some trouble with your hands," the director said, and he smiled, a flash of too straight, too perfect teeth.

And it was true. Sarai's hands had recently started trembling. The early onset arthritis that beset so many factory workers.

"Your health is of utmost importance to us," the director said, "but it would be irresponsible to mention your health without mentioning the potential loss in productivity your condition may cause."

"Are you...?" Sarai shifted again, trying to find a position that made her feel less like a specimen beneath the director's glare. "What are you saying? Am I fired?"

"Of course not," the director said. Another too straight, too perfect smile. "Our proposal – best for your health, and for the company – is to give you advanced cybernetic replacements."

A thrill of fear ran down Sarai's spine.

"Replacements?" she said. "You... you want to take my hands?"

The hands she had once run through her daughter's hair. The hands

which she used to press against her husband's chest, that used to make him murmur happily because they were always warm.

"We wish to help alleviate your condition," the director said, infinitely, infuriatingly patient. "We propose the CRC-ND-3s."

He swiveled his monitor towards her. A model of robotic hands – circuitry and cables encased in translucent plastic – rotated slowly on the monitor, with long columns of specifications in a font too small to read. None of the synth-skin or biotic nerve-links of the more expensive models.

"Why not just send me to a surgeon?" Sarai said, "Aren't there operations that can..."

"Would that I could," the director smiled. "But that specific procedure is proprietary to Han-Jeon Biotech."

Sarai could only stare at him.

"It wouldn't do for Channing Robotics to pay 5,000MU to a competitor, even for one of our valued employees. Han-Jeon has its solutions, we have ours."

He gestured towards the hands rotating on the monitor.

"And if I refuse?" Sarai said.

"It would be counterproductive to everyone involved," the director said. "And even so, I must remind you that the covenant you have entered with us stipulates that the company may offer whatever solutions necessary to maintain productivity."

Sarai stood, slowly.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"We've run the numbers," the director said. "This is the best option for everyone."

"I'm leaving," Sarai repeated.

She turned away, and before she knew it, her hand was feeling the cold of the doorknob, slipping from the sweat on her palm when she tried to turn it.

"Ms. Bellefonte," the director said, and for the first time his voice lost the gentle curb of rationality. "If you walk out that door, you have broken our covenant, and may I remind you that we will prosecute you to the full extent of the law."

Sarai opened the door.

"Security!"

Sarai ran.

For the past decade – maybe more, maybe less – she had spent thirteen hours of every day confined here. Two six hour shifts on the line, an hour's lunch in between. Thirteen hours of every day within the boundaries of these walls. The assembly line floor a boundary within a boundary. She had never spent much time in the administrative wing. So now, she ran, not quite knowing where she was.

A recessed doorway ahead. She pressed herself into it, and tried to

keep her breaths more steady. She listened for the heavy boots of the security team that must have been sent to pursue her. The footfalls were there – quiet, distant, but no less heavy, and when she tried to figure out the direction of their approach, it only sounded like they had her surrounded. She closed her eyes, breathed.

The footfalls crescendoed and faded, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Her hands trembled, from the fear or arthritis, she couldn't tell. She clenched her fists to try to stop them from shaking, and emerged from the doorway. She picked a direction and walked as swiftly and silently as she could towards what she hoped was the exit.

With every turn, and every hallway empty of security forces to drag her into the CRC's private prison, her hope grew. The director had overestimated how much Sarai needed the factory job – and underestimated how resourceful she could be.

She'd first taken the factory job for stability, for the promises it might have afforded, back when there had been others to worry about. A husband working his way out of a data piracy job, an infant daughter that needed food and clothing and an educational fund.

And then her husband had died in the crossfire of a conflict she didn't understand, and in the haze of depression and synth-stims that followed, her daughter had vanished into the foster care system. The job had become little more than habit.

After all that time, she had nearly forgotten the lessons she learned from her youth in the Undercity.

Never trust a Hypercorp.

In the Undercity, between dropping out of high school and starting a family, she had lived a different life, kept herself alive with her knowledge and skill with deepnet hardware. There would always be meathackers, circuit surgeons, datascape communes that could use her skill. For the right exchange, some back alley doctor could probably even fix her hands.

No more covenants, then, Sarai decided. No more body-mod clauses buried in the fine print, no more boundaries within boundaries. No more of these goddamned too bright, too perfect hallways.

Sarai found a stairway leading to the Assembly line floor, and as soon as her feet hit the familiar concrete, she ran again. Another woman was already at her old station, soldering the same bit of wire to the same bit of circuitry that she had for the past however many years. Sarai ran past her, towards the double door leading to the lobby, then outside – open air. It wasn't the open air Sarai was interested in, though.

Her goal was the nearest elevator leading down below the agriculture levels, to the perpetual neon night of the Undercity – to the Maw and the Belly districts close to the sunlit levels of the Overcity, to the deep dark of Deadend Drive, to the alleyways full of faces lined with dirt and oil. The luminescent tattoos shining through the smoke of street-food grills sizzling

with vermin meat seasoned to a taste that would put the best Overcity chefs to shame.

She burst out the door, blinked against the sun. A deep breath brought the crisp, scrubbed air of the Overcity rushing in, but it was empty, nothing, against the anticipation of the Undercity's smell. The dull mold that permeated everything, the sharp smell of cuisine and antiseptic cutting through it in intervals. The memory of the dampness, the permanent twilight of underpowered sunlamps hanging from the Undercity's vaulted ceiling – she could feel it. She wanted it.

Her first stop had to be her apartment a few levels above the Maw, to grab what cash she had, to stuff a few changes of clothes into her bag. That was all she would need to get herself started. She thought back to her time there – how long ago was it? Ten years? More? But she knew where to go, which streetshine bars typically hosted friendly recruiters, which areas were rife with organ harvesters and hypnotic predators. She knew the Undercity.

Five minutes, she told herself. In and out.

And then, whatever she wanted. It had been a long time since she thought about hiring a datascape sniffer to find her daughter, but she thought about it now.

Soon, she said. Five minutes. In and out.

The elevator descended quickly, and she made the journey through the nearly empty skywalks without incident. She slipped her key into the lock. The door swung halfway open before she turned the knob.

For a long moment, she was still. The wood around her deadbolt was broken, the metal reinforcements twisted out of place. From within, she heard footsteps – the soft scuffling of a group of people trying to be collectively silent.

Fuck.

Sarai backed away. Something hard and fiery smacked the back of her head. She stumbled forward and fell against the door. It burst the rest of the way open beneath her weight. Her vision flashed, swirling patches of dark and light. Figures rushed towards her, all of them impossibly tall from her prone position on the ground. Hands – cased in rough rubber that scratched and burned her skin with the force of their grip. Her biceps, elbows, wrists – immobilized.

"Is this her?" someone asked. "Sarah Bellefonte?" She didn't hear a reply, but the hands dragged her into her kitchen. She pulled against them, only for her forearms to burn when a hand dug into a pressure point.

"What the hell is going on?" Sarai demanded, but she already knew.

A push sent her to her knees – a dull crack against the linoleum floor and a spike of pain. Her head struck the edge of the table. In the long moment that followed, she was able to look around. The figures were dressed in white body armor, trimmed with blue – the colors of CRC's Private Security.

"This is my home," Sarai said, mumbling past a tongue thick with pain and fear. "You can't-"

"Prep her," someone said, and she felt hands forcing her arms behind her back.

With angry motion, the factory jumpsuit she still wore was wrenched down to her waist, and before she could even feel the fear, the rough rubber hands dragged her to her feet and hauled her up onto the table. The table's edge dug into her pelvis. For a moment, the thought she would be able to rise, before hands on her neck, her arms, her shoulder blades, turned every movement into useless twitching.

A bustle of activity she couldn't quite see. A sound of metal rasping against metal.

A different hand – gloved in violet rubber – reached forward, a swab of cotton pinched between two fingers. She struggled against the weight of the hands leaning down on her.

"Motherfuckers," Sarai said, the screech in her voice so humiliating that she felt her cheeks grow hot despite everything. "You motherfuckers!"

The cotton swab left a line of yellow disinfectant just below her elbows. She tried to buck away from the table, but somebody's foot was pressed into the back of her knee, preventing her from getting any sort of leverage. The violet hands produced two strips of electrostasis leather, wrapped them around her arms. With a jolt of electricity, the strips constricted, tightened until her skin was bulging and purple.

A flash of silver in the fluorescence of her kitchen's lights.

Throughout the whole process, Sarai had not stopped cursing or screaming. Her throat was raw – so raw that she thought she would gag.

The long knife sliced through the first layer of flesh.

She stopped cursing. The screaming continued until there was no air left in her lungs, and then she couldn't find it in herself to inhale.

The pain flowing from her arm – flowing, burning, all-consuming-all-enveloping – was something she couldn't even begin to comprehend. She watched it happen, watched it unfold, her skin peeling away from bone, blood leaking in impotent spurts past the tourniquet. Nobody spoke, no sounds except for the asthmatic, desperate gasps bursting in and out of Sarai's throat.

"I'll go back," she said, when the violet hands retrieved a second blade, short and hooked. "I'll go back, I swear."

But what sense did that make? They were taking her hands, whether or not she came back. It was purely punitive. No point to it except the pain. A lesson to anyone else who might refuse the promised mercy and kindness of the Hypercorps.

She watched through the murk of endorphins as the violet hands worked. By the time her skin was peeled away, muscles severed, tendons sliced, nerves cut, the pain was gone. Unconsciousness took her before they