

Jacked Up

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It was the sort of underground market the police used as an example when they wanted some more funding from the politicians. The average citizen would have been horrified by what went on there, by the sort of illegal acts and goods that could be gotten with enough credits.

Hookers swarmed you the moment you stepped onto the street. They were like small children begging for coins from the rich tourists. Their words soothed your ego and propped you up so that you'd throw a few credits their way for a moment of warm human contact.

Byron felt like he'd come home. He spent a moment with the first hookers that descended on him. A pretty little redhead with firm breasts and a prosthetic eye that glowed red stuck with him until he finally dumped her. Cost extra to get an eye like that, most people wanted a real looking eye after all, but when you were a hooker having something that made you stand out was worth a few credits.

As tempting as a real female body was to Byron after two years of prison it wasn't what he was looking for. He'd made himself a promise and he was going to keep it. His obsession with it had grown so strong he ignored almost everything else.

People walked past him, some openly carrying guns on their hips, others showing signs of drug abuse and failed experiments by unscrupulous doctors who preyed on the desperate for test subjects. There were limbs that looked like they'd been cobbled together from rusted scrap iron and recycled circuitry while some of the body modification entered the realm of disturbing with see through parts.

Businesses called for patrons with flashing signs that ran the entire colour spectrum. Bars that spewed out music even out to the street along with the drunks and people high on what ever drugs had been dealt inside. Parts shops that offered the full variety of legal and illegal chips, circuits and weaponry. Tattoo shops and doctors offices that were more likely to have you leave with less organs than you entered with. Artificial limbs and other body parts were on full display in store windows.

Given all the choice it might have been hard for Byron to decide which shop

to enter, but he'd been on the street before and he'd bought thing prior to being sent to prison. He hoped the old man was still alive and in the business. When he saw the familiar sign he felt a bit of relief. When he opened the door and entered the small store the familiar smell of oil mixed in with the occasion ozone stench from a spark of electricity hit him and made him feel all the more at home.

Shelves with torn out pieces of equipment and loose hanging wires lined the way to the counter. A familiar figure sat behind it and as Byron walked over the old man looked up at him.

A grunt was preceded by the words that followed. "So they let you out."

Byron grunted. "I served my time. Angers the people who follow the law, but they're the ones who insist on keeping to their silly rules."

"Right you are," said the old man and put down the small circuit board he'd been examining. "And the first thing you do is come here. What do you want?"

"You still selling e-chips?" Byron glanced around the shop. It had not changed much since his last visit. Some of the items were new, the kind he had not seen before, but it was much the same assortment of tech that had always been available.

"Sure do. Who are you looking for?"

"Amanda Parks."

The old man groaned. "You're still hung up on her? Two years in prison didn't do anything to make you better, did it?"

"Two years ago her scan hadn't been leaked. What else was I supposed to do to see her naked?"

The old man shook his head. "Spying on celebrities never ends well. You should have known that." As he talked the old man pulled out a drawer from under the counter and flipped through small, black chips that were neatly organized in small plastic containers. He found the right one and pulled it out and placed it on the counter.

"Should have, could have." Byron shrugged his shoulders. "Easy to say such things in hindsight." He grabbed the plastic casing and opened it. The small chip looked like nothing more than a piece of plastic on one side, but the other side had golden contact surfaces. It all looked to be in order. "Thank fucking god for

the engineer that leaked this.”

“Yeah, well, he's the one sitting in prison now,” said the old man.

The chip was very much illegal because of its content. It contained the full scan of the actress Amanda Parks. With it a realistic images of her could be reconstructed, down to the way she talked and moved. It was meant for use in films and other such productions, but in the wrong hands it could be used to create erotic scenes where fans could do to her what ever they wanted. And because of the personality matrix that was included her reactions would be close enough to the real thing that a casual person wouldn't know the difference.

“If only this had been out two years ago I wouldn't have had to make that trip,” said Byron and put the chip back in its casing.

“I'm sure she'd feel the same way,” said the old man. “I know she's upset the scan is out there, but it's got to beat a pervert recording her through her bedroom window.”

“How much for the chip?” Byron dug through his pockets and pulled out a stack of credits. Being in prison had not left him with much in the way of currency, but it should have been enough for what he wanted. There'd be plenty of time to find a source of income. Pleasure first.

“A hundred,” said the old man. “These things ain't cheap and you know the trouble you'll get into if anyone finds you with one of these inside your head.”

Byron counted out the credits and put them on the counter while stashing the rest back into a pocket. “I know.” He grabbed the chip and put it in another pocket.

“Be careful lad. The world has changed in two years. New drugs on the street that will rot your flesh away, new viruses that will fuck you up if they infect your neural system.”

“Used to be you could plug-in anything you wanted and not have to worry,” said Byron with a sigh. Those were the days. Before the government regulated everything to shit. Before the corporations realized there was money to be made and brought in lawyers that inevitably ruined everything with their cover-your-ass notices and agreements.

“You would stick your dick in a whore without rubber,” said the old man and

turned his attention to the circuit board he'd been working on earlier.

"Too true," said Byron and left the man to his work. Outside on the street he stopped for a moment to look around. His favourite motel had shut down while he'd been in prison. He didn't really know what a good place was these days so he picked the nearest one. The blinking neon sign welcomed him to the Rosy Beddings.

Byron suspected the place had never seen a rose much less smelled one.

The bored looking receptionist cashed his credits and handed a key-card to the room. It was a place that mostly charged by the hour do to the usual clients, but it also offered a day rent. Byron took the room for two days.

The place was decently looked after. Far from being a great place, but at least the carpets were clean and the walls weren't covered in graffiti like Byron had expected from a place like it. As he walked up the stairs and along the corridor lined with rooms he could not hear any sounds coming from them. Either they were empty or the place had invested in sound proofing more than others.

The door leading to his room had the number 3131 etched onto it. It slid open with a silent swoosh when Byron showed the key-card near the reader. It slid close behind him as soon as he had walked in. It wasn't a big room. There was a small bathroom off to the left and straight forward was the room with its double bed and a single window that offered a view of the street below. There was the old smell of smoke and the lingering sweetness some of the drugs left behind. Still, the room was clean and it looked like the bed had new sheets on it.

Byron walked over to the bed and dug out the chip he'd just bought. For a moment he simply admired the small black square. It was amazing how much information could fit into such a tiny thing. The complete image of someone's person, from the way they looked to the way they acted and thought. Small details might be construed wrong, but most of the time no one would notice it compared to the original.

Most who used the chip wouldn't personally know the recreations original.

His hands shook with excitement when he opened the plastic container and pulled out the chip. On his left hand he pushed a spot right on top of his wrist

and a small hatch popped open. There was space for several of the type of cards he held between his two fingers. Two of the slots were in use, leaving four more free. Carefully, he slipped the chip into one of the empty ones and pushed the small hatch closed.

Closing his eyes he could see the lines of commands run through. The chip was properly mounted, a scan for any viruses or malware was performed, the data loaded to the cache in his brain to ensure smooth operation. All of it took mere seconds despite the volume of data involved. Finally, the prompt to launch the program appeared and with a single thought Byron launched it.

She appeared instantly in front of him. The image of Amanda Parks.

She had a slim figure that the black dress she wore hugged. Her black hair shone even in the dull lighting of the room. Her pale skin made the red of her lips jump out at you and the small smile that passed them was enough to make Byron's heart skip a beat. She was the exact image of her, right down to the small beauty mark that teasingly peeked from her cleavage.

Byron reached out to grab her hand. Her skin felt smooth and the gentle strength with which she wrapped her hand around his was comforting. She smiled at him.

“You look like a lost sheep.”

“Your beauty would lead astray the most dutiful of shepherds.” The moment Byron breathed out the words he felt a sting of shame for saying such a corny thing, but she did not mind. She smiled and took a step forward. Gently, she pushed him back onto the bed.

“Flattery will only get you so far,” she said and let go of his hand. Her hands went to her hips and she looked down at him with expectation.

What she was expecting, Byron didn't know. The whole thing had started so suddenly and seemingly in the middle of some predefined sequence. It wasn't the free mode that usually came with such things. Still, he couldn't take his eyes off from her. For months he had stalked the real one. Peered through windows with long range lenses. Taken pictures and video of her where ever she went. Never had he gotten as close as now, even if it was only a bunch of bits taking a predefined form. Her touch was nothing more than his nervous system being

fooled. Saying it wasn't real was accurate, but when you felt it like she was there, did it matter?

"I don't know what you want from me," said Byron. "But what ever it is I will do it. For you."

Amanda smiled once more. It was an intoxicating smile that Byron had no defences against. When she walked over and climbed onto the bed, straddling him, which forced the black dress to hike up her thighs, all he could do was lay back and watch. When she leaned in he could feel her hot breath against his face and then the soft touch of her lips on his own.

Byron closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation. He could feel her weight over him. He could smell her. It was everything he had imagined it being.

Her lips parted from his and he opened his eyes. She was looking down at him with a mysterious smile. "Remember your promise."

"I will," Byron assured her. The feeling of satisfaction quickly disappeared when she raised a hand and he saw the large knife in it, coming down towards him. It was pure instinct for him to reach up and grab her by the wrist. He managed to stop the deadly weapon mere inches from his chest. He struggled to overcome her pushing down with all her weight.

"What.. what are you doing?" Byron demanded through gritted teeth.

"You promised to do anything I wanted," Amanda said with that sweet voice of hers. There was no sign of the physical exertion she was doing. "I want you to die." The image of her started to distort. Her eyes sunk into her skull while her skin withered away. Her hair fell off and in seconds she looked like a mummy that had been dug out from a thousands of years old grave.

Byron screamed. Adrenaline pumped through his veins, giving him extra strength. He managed to push the knife to the side so it sunk into the bed. He rolled out from under her and turned the situation around. Now it was him pushing her hand down at her, the knife still in it. Her grotesque face distorted in anger and then pain when the knife sunk into her chest. She screamed like a banshee. Her body twitched and contorted in its death throes. Then she went silent. Her body limp.

For a moment Byron simply stared down at her disfigured body. Then he

stood up and took in heavy breaths. He'd killed her. He'd killed the woman he worshipped.

Byron shook his head and paced around the room.

No one was dead. It was just a simulation. A program running in his brain. The only thing damaged was the bed. The old man had sold him a bad chip. That was it. He brought up the controls for the program. It told him it was running as intended. He killed the program and watched a few lines run down his field of vision before the process disappeared.

But the dead body on the bed did not vanish.

“Fuck.” Killing the program wasn't enough. Maybe a hard reboot would be. With a shaky hand he opened up the small hatch on his arm and pushed the small button inside it for several seconds. His vision went dark and he let go of the button. The machine was integrated so thoroughly that shutting it down robbed him of vision and some other senses. The tight integration was what allowed such realistic projections to be produced. It only took a second for his vision to come back and the lines from the boot sequence to run up the side of his vision.

Byron let out a sigh of relief as he saw the body was gone. The bed was empty. He quickly pulled out the chip and tossed it away. “God damn piece of shit.”

Having spent a good amount of credits on something that could have killed him had him in a foul mood. He made his way to the bed and sat down. Burying his head in his hands let out some of his frustration. After a moment he took in a deep breath and looked up.

The shrivelled body was standing in front of the door. It looked at him with the sort of grin only a skull could manage.

“No. You can't be here. You can't.” Byron stood up the moment the figure moved. It had the knife in its hand again. The banshee like screech it let out as it attacked him sent shiver down his spine. Instead of slamming into him she kept her distance and swung the knife at him. Byron hopped and dodged the best he could, but one slice of the knife got through and made him yelp in pain.

The knife wasn't real. He knew that. His body did not and it reacted the way

it would had the knife been real. The pain signal shot through his nerves. The body expected the skin to be broken, blood to be flowing out, damaged tissue to be repaired. It sent everything needed for that to the area. Soon there was a painful lump where the virtual knife had sliced his skin.

A slice on his hand wouldn't be life threatening. It was a bit worse than a bee sting, but still an annoyance at most, despite the pain involved. At the same time he knew that if the knife got to his heart the outcome could be very different. His body would respond to the perceived damage. That could be enough to clog up his heart and make it stop.

That would be fatal.

He took a risk and moved in on her. The knife scratched his stomach, but it also gave him the opening to grab her by the arm. She was stronger than the withered look would have you think. Byron struggled to take the knife from her, but somehow managed it. He used it to stab her again and again and again. When he finally stopped the apparition crumbled to the floor.

Deep breaths made his chest rise up and down as he looked down at her. He had to constantly remind himself that she wasn't real. She was just in her brain. A program that had gone rogue. Byron glanced up. There she was standing again, on the other side of the bed.

“Fuck this. I can't deal with this. I need help.” Byron muttered to himself and turned to run to the door. It slid open quietly and shut after him. Byron ran down the corridor towards the stairs. One of the doors opened. Out stepped the withered figure of Amanda Parks. Byron wasted no time. She had not seen him yet. He ran into her with all the force he could muster and bashed her skull against the door frame. He could hear the crack. They both went down and he continued to smash her head against the floor until she stopped moving.

Byron didn't stop to think. He knew where he needed to go. He got up and started running again. Glancing back he could see her emerge from his room and turn to look at him. The grin on her withered face had grown wider. She disappeared from sight as Byron started down the stairs. He pushed past a couple of new customers who were making their way to their room. They shouted after him angrily. Byron paid no mind to them and rushed out onto the street.

It had gotten more crowded. Unlike the more upstanding commercial streets that started to die down during the night, this one started to come more alive. People in business suits passed by looking to score their fix for the night or a willing hooker to fuck away the stress of the day. They brushed past Byron barely noticing him despite his wild eyes and jumpy demeanour.

On that street he was nothing unusual.

The brief moment of disorientation the mass of people around him brought passed. Byron jumped to action and started wading through the crowd. He continuously looked around in case the virus in his brain decided to project another withered monster to try and kill him.

He pushed aside people, garnering protests and rude comments. Just as he was about to push aside another person he realized it was her again. Amanda, holding the same knife that had already cut him once. He didn't hesitate. He punched her in the face. She went down and Byron was on top of her in no time. He wasn't sure where he grabbed the fist sized rock, but he was more than happy to use it to bash her head in. He didn't pay attention to the crowd that had gathered around him, though most seemed happy to move around him. To them he must have seemed like a mad man, hitting the pavement with a rock, yelling for her to die.

She was dead again.

Byron stood up and let the stone drop to the pavement. He glanced around at the crowd. The amount of cameras on him was overwhelming. Most of the people weren't actually looking at him. They were looking at their phones and the image it was recording. He didn't have time to stay and give them the best shots possible.

He pushed through the crowd. Most gave him way without any objection, but some tried to grab hold of him. Byron shook himself free and as soon as there was room he started running. He hoped Amanda would stay away. He needed to get her out of his head. He soon had the familiar shop in view. He wasted no time entering it and slamming the door shut behind him.

"Back so soon?" the old man was still sitting behind the counter tinkering with a circuit board that was a bit bigger than the one he'd been working on

earlier.

“What the hell did you sell me?” Byron demanded as he walked the small distance from the door to the counter. “That chip wasn't right. Its infected me!”

“Impossible. I only sell quality goods.” The old man sounded genuinely offended that someone was claiming his goods had not been good.

“Then why the fuck is my mind creating a woman that tries to kill me?” Byron slammed his fist against the counter and turned to show the mark left behind by his body reacting to the imaginary knife cutting him. “This is what it did to me! I've had to kill her several times just to get here! Now you fix this or you're going to be the next one who dies!”

“Have you tried turning your implants off and on again?”

Byron groaned. “Yes! I cleared my cache too so there shouldn't be anything left to load from the chip but there it is. I took out the chip so it's not loading from that either.”

The old man put down the circuit board. “Well then. Seems we have a problem.”

“No shit,” said Byron. He heard the door open to the store and turned around. There she was a gain with knife in hand. “Not again.” He didn't waste time. He grabbed a heavy looking power source from one of the shelves and ran at her. She raised the knife wielding hand to meet him, but it was a poor attempt. The heavy metal box smashed against her skull with a loud crack and she fell to the floor. Byron kept bashing her head until screws fell out of the power source and she was unrecognisable. His breath went in heavy heaves as he stood up and turned to face the old man again.

“What did you do?” the old man demanded. He'd stood up and had pulled out a gun.

“She came again. I had to do it. She would have tried to stab me again,” said Byron and dropped the power source on the floor.

“You killed him!”

“What? Him? No. It's her. It's just in my head,” said Byron.

“God fucking damn it you shit head,” said the old man. “You just killed a man!”

“No.. it's her.” Byron started to doubt himself. He looked down at the body. It was impossible to tell from the head who it had been, but the clothes and the rest of the body build told the story. It had not been her. It was clearly a man. And he'd killed him. “No. It was her. I'm sure of it!”

“Get out! Out!” the old man yelled at him from behind the counter. His words were backed by the sound of him loading a round in the gun's chamber. “Out or I'm going to shoot you!”

Byron glanced back at him, stunned. The gun was pointed right at him. He figured it best to do as the man said. He stood up and glanced down at his hands. There was blood on them. Real blood. Stunned, he walked out the door.

“Freeze!” The command was followed by a bright light being shone at him. Byron lifted his hand to shelter his eyes. He was surprised to see a pair of police officers.

“I..”

“Get on the ground, now!” the police shouted, cutting off any protest Byron might have had. He was still stunned not only by the fact he had killed someone, but by the fact there were actual police on the street. His mind worked hard and as he glanced down the street, towards where he had bashed in the skull of the woman and people had videoed it, he saw the remains of a woman. A real woman. No wonder the police were there. They'd look the other way from lots of things, but a murder being broadcast would get them to move.

A maniacal laughter ran through Byron. “It wasn't my fault,” he managed to say and fell to his knees. He scanned the crowd. He spotted the withered figure of Amanda in there, staring at him with a grin. “It wasn't me!” he said with more force as the police converged on him and dragged him to the ground.

“It wasn't me! It was her! It was Amanda Parks! She made me do it!” Byron kept shouting as the cuffs were slapped on him.

All the while the grinning, withered figure of Amanda looked on from the crowd.